

The Spirit of the Estuary

The illustration depicts a scene on an estuary. In the foreground, a man with a long dark beard and a wide-brimmed straw hat is seated in a small wooden boat, using a long wooden oar to row. He is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. In the middle of the boat, a young child with dark hair, wearing a white tank top and blue shorts, stands and points their right arm towards the horizon. The boat is tilted slightly as it moves through the water. The water is rendered with vibrant, textured brushstrokes in shades of green, blue, and white, suggesting waves and currents. In the background, a small town with several buildings is visible on the shore under a clear blue sky. Numerous birds, likely seagulls, are scattered across the sky, some in flight and others resting on the water's surface.

C. Descry

THE SPIRIT OF THE ESTUARY

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by

C. Descry

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**Well written! Well researched!
History and Mystery combined**

Meet...

Serina, a Seri Indian girl whose school was the Sea. Her experiences and observations picture the Sea of Cortez from the 1930's to the present, as man's impact destroyed balance and everything she loved.

Marbrisa, a loving daughter of the sea, caught between worlds. Innocent and spiritually free, she was in the way of progress, the victim of greed and evil.

Ter Martel, an expert on determining the feasibility of real estate developments, is called to Mexico to investigate a major development proposed for the bleak sand dunes along an estuary, he faced his most difficult challenge yet, and death.

Robert Meachington, an honest developer who wanted facts so that he could manage the corporation. One of his partners had disappeared at sea. The other was in bed with evil.

Margret Bridges, a beautiful young scientist who found her greatest contributions would come from helping others survive.

Dave Bridges, an educator who changed his life for the love of a woman, the deserts and Sea. He and Margret are dedicated to helping others understand the concept of sustainable resources.

Angel and Adolfo Ramirez, father and son who each loved deeply, but hid their love from each other until it was too late.

The Fowler brothers, political animals whose amoral conduct and rapacity allowed them to thrust themselves into positions of power.

**HOOVER DAM, THEN GLEN CANYON! FEW KNOW
THE HORROR AND SUFFERING THEY'VE CAUSED.**

**WE HUNGER FOR SHRIMP! OUR INSATIABLE
DEMAND FOR IT IS DEPLETING THE SEA AND ALL
LIVING THINGS THAT DEPEND UPON IT FOR
SURVIVAL.**

**AMERICANS HAVE LOST ACCESS TO THEIR
BEACHES. NOW, THEY WANT THOSE IN MEXICO. BUT
AT WHAT COST?**

Grateful acknowledgment is given the following:

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This is a work of historically based fiction set in and around Pto. Peñasco, Sonora, Mexico and Sedona, Arizona. Names and descriptions of humans and events are fictitious and solely the creation of the author unless they are references to actual people used with their permission. No connection to any other humans living or dead is intended or implied. References to public and private agencies and to orders and assemblies of people for government, religious or other means are purely fictitious. Geographical settings have been created to enhance this work of fiction.

Descry, Conun born: 1939

THE SPIRIT OF THE ESTUARY

- 1. Historically based mystery / thriller.**
- 2. Southwest adventure / suspense**
- 3. Mexico, Northern Sea of Cortez, Gulf of California. Pto. Peñasco.**
- 4. Action / Adventure**
- 5. Environmental issues**

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**Late, by myself, in the boat of myself,
no light and no land anywhere,
cloud cover thick. I try to stay
just above the surface, yet I'm already under
and living within the ocean.**

Jelaluddin Rumi 1207 – 1273

Prologue: 2002

Guillermo fought the big truck as the deep sand and raging wind dragged against its forward motion. He was past the place where they had put caliche on the sand to make a road. He was negotiating his way on packed sand now, the soft spots grabbing the tires and almost stopping the heavily loaded truck.

Straining to see through the pitted windshield and the blinding clouds of blown sand, he barely made out the crashing waves of the wind-whipped Sea of Cortez. He was near the mouth of the estuary. His destination was on the dunes, but he imagined what would happen if he got too close to the waves and the sand melted under the weight of the truck. He had never driven a big rig like this one before. He was afraid that it would get away from him and lunge into the sea or bury itself in the soft sand.

The 1988 Peterbilt 425 horse power Caterpillar diesel lugged down. He fought the stick to shift to an even lower gear. The gears ground and then, with a clunk, the truck jumped as if caught-short. He goosed the foot pedal and the monster ground its way forward through the windstorm.

His thoughts raced. What if someone else were here? What if someone recognized him? He shouldn't be here doing this, he knew that, but it had to be him. They had to know for sure...and they trusted him.

By now, if what he had been told was correct, those inside were dead---lying cold on the dirt floor of the shack. There was nothing he could do for them except---bury them deep where they would never be found.

He saw the shack like a ragged gray crate grounded on the wind-swept dune, a ghostly dark shape against the lighter sand and sky. It seemed deserted...he prayed to Mother Mary that it was. Not even an old truck, junked car or an outhouse sat by it now. They had taken those signs

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of habitation away, leaving only the *palapa*-shack and its macabre contents for him to bury.

He tied the bandanna over his nose, high enough, he hoped, to protect his eyes from the blowing sand. He could feel the vibrations and hear the crash of the waves at the mouth of the estuary. He could see the sea forcing its way far up the ancient drainage. He climbed down from the cab and held on to the edge of the flatbed as he made his way back to unhook the ramps. Ramps down and in place, he climbed up on the trailer and into the cab of the big Case backhoe. Its diesel chugged to life, the black smoke from the exhaust taken by the wind and wrapped around a million grains of sand. He got out of the cab and loosed the chains, unhooked them and let them fall to the trailer bed. Back in the open cab of the backhoe, he wiped sand from the corners of his eyes and caught his breath. He raised the bucket---thought better of it---let it down again and turned to raise the arm of the hoe until its bucket was up high enough to clear the ground when he backed off the trailer. Then he raised the front bucket and searched for the reverse gear. He gave the big engine fuel and let out the clutch slowly. The great steel beast, looking through the blowing sand and dim light like an oil rig grasshopper, came off the trailer and sought purchase in the loose sand. He changed gears and moved the machine toward the dilapidated ghost of the *ejido*'s remaining structure. He parked on a level place nearby and set the stabilizers. Then he remembered to set the brakes. He turned his seat around so he could operate the hoe's controls, swung the great arm out, its bucket hanging like a claw, then let it down slowly and began to pull it back towards the machine. In less than an hour, he had a hole about eleven feet deep, four feet wide, and more than ten feet long. A grave!

Guillermo had planned to push the shack and its contents into the hole and be done with it...but he had to be sure; they would insist upon his guarantee. He left the backhoe and fought his way against the wind and stinging

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sand to the creaking structure. Its door, really a splintered, peeling, weathered-gray sheet of plywood, hung open. The light was dim, but he could see inside. The two women lay side-by-side where they had placed them after the soft lead hollow point bullets had exploded inside of them, ripping their life forces out through their backs. He could see the black stains of blood on their chests...and their expressions. The old Seri seemed to be looking at him---confused? Surprised? He was sure she never knew how much trouble she had caused the developers. Damned Indian, she had stood against progress---jobs and opportunity for all the people. She had stayed to protect this damned estuary! This meaningless cut in the endless dunes that only had water in it at high tide. These dry, desolate, windblown dunes were only good for beach front houses and resorts that could be sold to the stupid, unknowing *Norte Americanos*. She had to die! She and the other leftovers from the days of the *ejidos*. Her kind never understood progress. Ignorance was their death sentence! No one had the right to stand in the way of progress: No one!

Sand had already filtered in and covered the bodies with a silken sheen. The old woman looked weak in death. Both were frail husks left over from another time, nothing more. They were ignorant. They contributed nothing. They had to be removed.

When he finished, the wind would cover all signs that they had ever existed; their grave. They would lie with that dilapidated *palapa*-shack forever. He guessed that was really what they wanted, anyway.

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Chapter 1

Serina...

If one knew her then, so many sun-circles ago, they would remember how her body glimmered in the sunlight reflecting off the waves. How, almost naked, she rode the prow of her father's wooden boat as if she were a nymph presiding over waters, holding onto the sisal rope, the conqueror of the winds. They would recall that her youth caused reactions in others that she could not yet understand. Most important, they would recall that her energy was fresh and new---and that it was the best time of her life.

Those with wisdom knew that in a few short years she would learn that her time of comeliness was the shortest part of a long life of hardship. They observed that it was especially true for those who live under the blazing desert sun and toil to pull their survival from the sea. Children, as she, are too soon lithe teens driven by blinding hormones. Then follows a tightening of one's skin from the elements outside. And inside? A tightening---a gross thickening of body and mind caused by suffering and hardship.

And what did they know of the woman she was trying so hard to become? That her comeliness would lead to generation and, as a result, maybe to a death like her mother's. Soon her body would be forced to generate other lives, at whatever cost to her. And then, in Nature's way, it was over. Reproduce, get the next generation started, and then dry-up and fall away.

The lithe and the quick---the clever---are the ones who hasten their own demise. Not from bad genes, but because of a special genetic spark within them. They are the ones who pay the highest price when "nature has her way." And it would be that way with her, they knew, although she would fight it. Of them all, she held the most

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promise and least deserved that fate... That was the sadness they lived with. It was their reality, passed from generation to generation.

And if the adult life she was growing into under that desiccating sun and a yoke of prejudice wasn't hard enough, human ignorance caused the heaping of even more hardships upon her. And so it was with Serina. Why?

Because! Because she was young. Because she was not fully of the Comcaac-Seri people. Because she had fine senses that fed her mind and made it quick and free... Because she observed her world and came to understand the depth of it... Because, in her time, those realities were the conditions stamped upon her life by ... was it God?

La Frontera del Norte, 1930-1970

SOMETIME IN A TIME Serina only knew was long past, a woman was taken to the silver mines in Alamos, Sonora. No one knew what people the woman belonged to, only that she was Mexican. Serina had learned that little bit about her grandmother from a story the old women of Teacapan told, which could have been a lie. They said that in Alamos, the woman had died giving birth to a child fathered by one of Spanish blood, and that *hija*, who would grow up to be Serina's mother, was being taken to San Blas to his family. But her grandfather was killed by robbers near Teacapan, and the child left to die by the side of the trail. She was found and adopted by a family who lived on the outskirts of the village.

Her mother's new parents and their three sons were a lonely family, struggling to learn Spanish and adjust to a strange culture. They were of the *Comcaac* (Seri) peoples and had been forcibly taken from the North and 'resettled.' They yearned to return to the land of their fathers although they knew that, due to the government's policy of extermination, there were fewer than two hundred of their people still alive.

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And so, Serina's mother spent five years in the tiny village of Teacapan, only to be uprooted when word came that the *Norte Americanos* needed workers in the fields near Los Mochis. The Seri family spent a year there, and then moved north again to Hermosillo. Her adopted parents were excited. They learned that they still had family along the coast of the Sea of Cortez, near Tiburón Island, where almost two decades before, in a battle near Kino Bay, they had been captured by the government. Her adopted parents and brothers were outsiders no longer. They were Seri's. She was not, and that was a problem.

At puberty, they married her mother to an older man, a lonely man who had lost his family. He was a Seri fisherman known as a great *caguama* (sea turtle) hunter. Serina was their first born, when her mother was just thirteen. He needed sons, but five more daughters followed, dying one after another, before her mother dried up and died. That left him only Serina, and other people's sons. To his great relief, Serina proved to be like a son to him.

Serina was different. She was treated as an outsider even though she had his blood. When her mother died, he took her with him each time he went out to hunt the sea. He knew that she was not safe from their prejudice if left alone in the camps. It was in her eyes, the strangeness they feared. She had light eyes, gray eyes; some thought evil eyes. But he was not afraid of her. He loved to look into those gray pools of light as he loved to look into the sea. He developed a special bond with her.

Then, when they were learning to hunt *caguama* and fish well together, something happened in the North. They didn't know that it was 1930, and the great *Americano* power was in economic turmoil, pulling Mexico and the world into a morass called a depression. They would not have understood the forces that drove men to covet the few things they needed to survive. All they knew is that now many others were hunting the *tortugas* and the great

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fish, the *totoaba*. It was becoming hard to find enough food to survive.

The green *tortugas* were scarce, even in the spring time the Spanish called *Marzo*, which they knew was the Moon of Many *Tortuga* Hunters. To survive, they were forced to move north along the shores of the Desert Sea until they came to the fish camps of his Seri people far north of Puerto Libertad. It was the farthest north he had ever been. It was a hostile coast for it lacked fresh water. It was a dangerous coast because his people were fierce and wild and spoke a different dialect. There was little vegetation, just endless sand dunes and bleakness. Luckily, the people of the north were always in need of providers with his skills. They welcomed him, accepted her, and made room for them in their camp.

Their new companions, who camped where the dry bed of the Rio de la Concepción flowed into the sea, had to carry their water from far inland most of the year. Life was hard and it was not a place either would have chosen to live...or that either liked. They survived there because there were only two of them. He went shares with others, who helped when the hunting was good, but normally Serina was all the crew he needed. It was miserable to be tethered to a desolate place by the availability of drinking water. They began to hope that they could find a better life.

Hope sprang up in their hearts when they listened to stories told by old fishermen. Many of the tales were about a mystical place far along the coastal dunes where a great red river entered the sea. A place where there was always fresh water, and where *tortuga* and *totoaba* were so plentiful that one had simply to thrust a spear into the sea to harvest all they would ever need.

Serina and her father survived along the desert coast because he taught her the names and habits of many different sea *tortugas*, and all that he understood about fish. She rode the bow of their wooden boat, holding tight to the rope when they crossed the waves. She learned to

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read the subtle changes in the color of the sea and the wave patterns that told of waters where green *tortugas* could be found. In the past, near Tiburón Island, they had been able to triangulate and find the best hunting grounds. Here, in this new region, they were learning to find the *tortugas* even though there were no landmarks.

Serina rode the bow of their dugout boat searching for sign. When she saw a green *tortuga* swimming, she would call back to her father. He would select a harpoon with a special point called a *Tis*, named for the catclaw plant, rest the oars, and trade places with her. She would take his position and attempt to paddle and row them close enough to the *tortuga* so that he could harpoon it. If she had read the sea correctly, and if she could get them to the place where a great *tortuga* was hunting, then her father never missed. Together, they would fight the creature into the boat and then fall back against the powdering old wood to rest. On a good night they could bring in three of the wonderful creatures.

By Seri standards they were wealthy. Their prize possession was a tin five-gallon water can that had cost him more than twenty *tortugas*, and which he had tied in the boat with pieces of net and rope he had found along the beaches. Next, was the wooden *falua* that had been carved from a great tree. It had been made far to the south, and he had traded a whole summer's work for it. The dugout boat was twenty-three feet long, once painted blue, green, red and yellow, but now well worn and no longer gay. It had a strong mast and cross piece that held their sail, a six by eight foot piece of heavy canvas that also provided shade. He had carved two long paddles from wood that had washed up on beaches. They each had a pair of pants, a shirt, and a blanket made of brown pelican skins for warmth. Serina prized a strip of woven netting that she used to tie her hair back out of the way. She needed little more. He had a knife, three spears of different lengths, and a fifty foot length of rope. Wrapped in a pelican hide, he kept his precious fire making kit: a fire

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board and a fire drill. A wooden box for food was built into the boat.

Her schooling was learning to read the sea's surface and to estimate the depth of the water and the types of life it held. She didn't know what reading was, or arithmetic or...much of anything except the vast environment they plied together and lived off of. The sea was her world, that and the dream they shared of finding the magical place the old fishermen told about in their stories. At eleven, she had no idea that forces were already forming in the great Sea of Cortez to make that dream come true.

The green *tortugas* were difficult to find, especially here in the northern gulf. Her father decided that they would sail and row far out to sea, farther than they had ever gone before. He was sure that the great green *tortugas* they depended upon were out there.

The night was very dark and, except for the phosphorescence that came from the waves at their bow and a slit of a new moon, there was only starlight. The hours passed and they sailed farther out onto the sea. Suddenly, her father grunted and she heard the sail snap full and the boat creak in an unusual way. She felt the wind on her side and the boat lean with it. A moment later her father breathed a sigh. "A strange wind! It came from nowhere. I don't like it!" He rested his paddle, the sail was slack, and the boat began to drift. She relaxed her back muscles and moved her head to ease the stiffness in her neck. "It was just a little wind, father."

He grunted and she heard the clunk as he opened their food box. "We can rest. There is still time to find another *tortuga*. Here, have some of this!" He handed her a strip of dried pelican flesh. These were the special times between them: floating in the darkness on the beautiful sea, the two of them together.

She hardly knew about time, except that the day came with the sun and the night came when the sun left. She knew about time at night when sometimes the moon was there in parts or full, or not at all, and when the stars told

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the age of the night. She knew about tides and that way of telling time. They always had all of the time they needed, and that was the significance of time to her.

Another fresh gust of wind came out of the black night and pushed at them. This wind was alone, as was the first, and cold! Her father tightened, dropped his chunk of fish into the food box, and loosed the sail. Then he grabbed both paddles and placed them in between the stubby locks, to use them like oars. "Hold on Serina! I think I know what is coming!"

She grabbed the edge of the seat between her legs, and held tight, expecting something from out of the dark. The stars where clear, there were no clouds overhead, just a line of lightning lit storm clouds to the east of them. The Sea was calm. The air was humid and warm. Her father was looking out to sea, back to where the last wind had come from. She could see the squall line far off in the distance, but it seemed too far away to bother them. She searched his face and then observed his body. He was still braced, prepared for...she didn't know what. "Father?"

"Hold on! The next wind will hit us hard!"

They could hear it coming, the sound like high pitched singing. Then it hit them. She held on now with both hands, and stared at her father who was putting all of his might into the oars; trying to hold the boat back so that they wouldn't overrun the crest of a wave and be lost. He looked up once and she saw terror in his eyes... "The edge of a *Chubasco!*" He yelled at her over the roar. "Hold on! Hold on!"

There was no way he could hold the seventeen foot boat back. He knew that if they went sideways to the waves the narrow boat would flip and they would be lost. Valiantly, he held the boat with the oars. "Tighten the ropes around the sail!" He yelled over the roar of the wind. She knew that their only hope was to hold back against the wind. She saw waves rising behind them, chasing them, the wind blasting spray over the stern and threatening to fill the boat with water. She wrapped the ropes tight and

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the sail no longer caught the driving wind. Her father rowed backward with all of his might, and yet the boat, unable or unwilling to sink, was driven on by the wind. They were raised up and then dropped time after time as the driven water passed under and around them. Her father hunched his body into the oars, a steady holding force that kept them from the full dominance of the waves.

Time passed, and she measured its passing by his strokes and the spray that misted over them. Once she saw the starry sky and couldn't believe it. This storm should have blotted out the sky, and yet it didn't. They were caught up in a force that was driving them across the sea. They prayed that they would not sink or be driven onto the land. The force of the storm seemed only to be where they were, taking them somewhere, threatening to take them to the depths of the sea.

In time, when the false dawn showed the horizon, the sudden storm began to abate. The wind still pushed them along, but thankfully, the waves had never risen enough to come over the stern of their little boat. They held the crests, staying out of the troughs, her father holding the boat back with the oars, head down, sweat mixed with salt spray, arms moving forward easy and then back hard. He was exhausted and at the end of his endurance, but unwilling to stop until they were safe. Finally, just as the sun sent feelers of red into the sky, the wind stopped and the sea calmed quickly. She stood on the bow and searched the horizon. To her right, north, she decided, she saw several small islands jutting from the sea. Her father smiled, too exhausted to talk, and stretched out in the boat. She lay down next to him and they slept.

The sun rose high enough to peek into the boat. Its first rays were mild and comforting. Then, it rose higher and woke them with its heat. He found the small *tortuga* shell they used as a cup and bowl, unscrewed the metal cap from the water can, and poured. "We must not drink much." He said as he handed her the vessel. She filled her

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mouth with the cool water and let it trickle slowly down her throat. He did the same. "I don't know where we are Serina. The wind came from the east and the south. We have been driven far from the places we know. This may be all the water we will have."

He showed her blisters that had formed under the tough calluses on his palms. He took the oars, grimaced, and sent them skimming toward the closest island. The sun was almost overhead when he put the little boat in at a place where there was a small crescent of beach. Birds blackened the sky, and their droppings had painted the rocks white. Sea Lions complained and moved into the water as the boat forced its way in. The island and the sea around it were teeming with life. Bird and animal sounds filled the air. "We can not stay here long, the tide is turning now. We must go out with it. There won't be any water here, no use looking. We need to club pelicans. You do that and I will climb up and look for land."

Serina found a stick jammed into the rocks by the waves. She tested it and decided that it was strong. The young pelicans were not afraid of her. She moved along the rocks, found them, clubbed five, picked them up by their long beaks and carried them back toward the boat. Their pelts would make clothing and sleeping pads. Their meat would provide food.

The sea lions weren't afraid of her. They were back on the small crescent of beach, surrounding the boat, nudging against it, scratching! She stood on the rocks, her feet covered with the white bird guano, and waited for help from her father. Thousands of birds circled overhead. Their cries were deafening. The dog-like lions made barking sounds and showed great, sharp teeth as they flopped around, over and on top of each other. She was afraid of them, and afraid that they would loose the boat or maybe even sink it. There were more sea lions here than she had ever seen before.

He clubbed two young brown pelicans as he climbed down to join her. "I have never seen so many living things!

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This is not a place where our people have ever come before. Nothing is afraid of us!”

“Papa, did you see...”

“Way off! Maybe more islands, but probably land. We must go!”

He started yelling and hitting the rocks with his club. The sea lions made complaining sounds and watched. He picked up a rock and threw it at one of the largest lions. It grunted in surprise, but didn't move. “Get on my back!”

Serina held her club tightly with one hand, the other around his muscular chest, her legs around his waist. He moved forward, aiming at heads and noses. The first sea lion he hit on the snout gave an awful cry, and the others, hearing it, joined in. He yelled and struck at another. His club connected with a thud. With a violent writhing of brown bodies and loud barking and yelping, the lions gave up the tiny crescent of beach and splashed into the water. He leaned over and helped her into the boat, threw the bodies of the pelicans in, then jumped in himself, pushing them away as he got in. He was smiling. “They were so surprised! If we were hunting them, we could have had them all.”

She took her place on the bow and looked down into the clear water. Everywhere she looked the sea was teeming with life. She saw rays in numbers she could not count. There were shadowy forms of sea bass, flat fish, colored fish, and clouds of sardines in great schools. She saw *corvina* and sea trout flashing by, sometimes jumping out of the water. Long pipefish flashed under the boat. Small *tortugas* swam alongside. The sea lions hunted around them and a pod of small porpoise played near the boat. Then she saw the shadowy form of a giant hammerhead shark, then more sharks than she could count, swimming under them. She had never seen so many living things.

“Papa, everywhere I look there are fish!”

“I see them. It is like when I was a boy. Then, at home, the sea was like this too. That was before...”

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“Papa, I see a white line... A beach ahead. It’s a long way. The wind is against us and the tide is coming out. Can we make it?”

He didn’t answer. He loosed the sail, unable to tack into the wind without a keel, and began to row again. She watched him and knew.

All the rest of the day he fought to hold their position. Hours passed, the sun set, and finally, they felt slack tide. Then a gentle breeze came from the sea and he untied the sail. In time, he let the gentle swell bring them to the beach. She jumped out and pulled with all her weight. The prow ground into the shell beach. He came forward, not willing to step into the shallow water for fear of rays, and got a foot on dry land. Together, they pulled the boat half out of the water. “The tide is going. We may need to get away from here fast. We must not beach her completely.”

“There was a time when I was a boy,” he said as they watched for the dawn, “when everywhere the sea was full of life like this. It is as if I have gone back in time to those days. Even as I remember, I am sure that at home it was not as abundant as this place. There are more creatures here than I have ever imagined exist. Yet we cannot stay here unless we find water. Today we will explore... Serina, do you want to go to the west along this coast, or back? The land the old fishermen talked about is probably to the setting sun...but it may be far and we have only a little water.”

She held her blanket closely about her, hiding beneath it from the cold tendrils of the night. “I want to go west. Father, we will find water...there must be some.”

“Then we go now!” He rose and folded his blanket. Their little fire blinked as sand filled its eye. The boat was damp and cold, but easily turned and launched into the black waters. He fought them out over the swells and then played with the sail. She took her place on the bow and stared into the waters. “Father, I see sand and then black

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patches of rock. Everywhere, I see the shadows of fish, there are so many..."

"Look for *tortugas*! We need a large green, for its stomach, food...and maybe to supplement our water."

The sun had no clouds to paint red this morning. Without a cloak to hide behind, it changed from an orange-red ball into a yellow sphere. Soon, its light was white and searing. She was glad that they were headed away from the rising sun. When she tried to look back, the reflections hurt her eyes.

The coastal dunes were covered with patches of brush. They looked the same as those she was familiar with, only wilder somehow. As far as she could see the coast was unchanged. With the help of the wind, they skimmed along, her father keeping the boat out where the rocky bottom turned to white sand. The sun seared them and the humidity made it hard to breathe. Serina trailed her hand in the water and noted that it was still cool. She put her wet fingers to her lips and tasted the water. It was very salty, more than she was used to, and that surprised her. This was the time of year when the water was still cool and refreshing. Soon, it would warm up and become tepid. She wanted to dive in, but knew that her father would not let her. Unlike her, he was afraid of the things that lived under the waters. He knew all about things that he could catch and pull out of the water, cut up and eat, but little about their habits and the environment they came from. Her quick mind knew his limitations without judging him. She had spent her days looking into the sea and she had learned something of what went on under water. She was not afraid, even if he was.

When the sun stood on top of the pole they used to hold the sail, she saw a break in the dunes far ahead. At first it looked like a place where the wind had blown the sand away. As they approached, she saw the black shapes of birds filling the sky over the place. Then, she realized that it was an estuary like the ones near home. It was a dry stream bed where, at high tide, the sea could

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flow far inland. The sky was black with birds. Gulls seemed to attack the water and then be joined by others to fight over pieces of food. Out past the mouth, pelicans flew in formations above the swells of the gentle sea. Then they suddenly broke formation and, one after the other, or sometimes dozens at a time, dove into the sea, caught a beak full of fish, and bobbed along as they turned their catch and got it down.

The sea boiled with life, fish and lion, *vaquita* and pelicans, gulls and...everywhere they looked, in the sky and on the waters, creatures were feeding. None noticed their little boat, or if they did, it meant nothing to them. "What is happening here, Father?"

"The little things are coming out of the estuary. Every creature is here to eat them."

"What little things? What do you mean?"

"These places are where the fish and crabs and maybe even some birds come from. They come from up there, inside, where they are born. I don't know how, but it is the place where living things are made from the mud. Way up at the end, where the water flows when it rains, we may even find sweet water for us. This is the place where life begins Serina!" He was standing in the boat shielding his eyes with his hand as he looked into the estuary, his face radiating his love of it all.

The force of the water flowing out of the estuary kept them from entering. Her father brought their boat in on a split of land that formed the lip of the estuary's mouth. She helped him pull the boat to safety, and then turned to watch the rushing water. She felt the wind as birds flew by her, and ducked, fearing that they would catch in her long hair. The birds filled the space from beach to sky, as the flashing fish filled the waters. She felt small and insignificant. Even with her father beside her, they made no impact, no difference. This was where the spirits made life. She had a powerful feeling that they belonged here.

They sat in the boat and ate their dried fish as they watched the whirling turmoil of competing birds. In time,

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the tide ebbed and only mud flats drained by narrow, fast moving streams extended before them. From the mud, bubbles and little squirts of water; from the streams, blue crabs marched back toward the upper end of the estuary, seemingly oblivious to the waves of birds attacking them. Other small birds ran on long, thin legs from bubbling mud piles to mud puddles, probing with long beaks and finding something to jerk out of its home and eat at every probe.

“We will go in with the tide and get to the upper end.” Her father explained. “Up there, we can set a camp. These pelicans need to be skinned, we will need them to clothe ourselves. Perhaps there is water there... Maybe this is the place that *tortugas* come from? If so, we will have all we need... But we will be alone.”

“I like being with you.”

“I mean alone! You don’t understand what that means. We Seri---all people---need others. You will come to understand, Serina. Even if we can stay here, we will get lonely and leave to find others of our kind. You will see.”

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Chapter 2

Serina thought he was driven by his need for others. She did not know he was aware that she was changing into a woman.

THEY CAME INTO the estuary on the night tide. The swift water carried them over the shallow areas at the mouth and around islands inside. In a short time, they were being washed along one of the wider arms of the estuary. Then, the water became shallow and the mud banks rose high above them. They had floated as far as they could. Her father paddled them into a narrow arm and she jumped out and pulled the boat until its bottom stuck in the soft mud. Crabs bit at her toes and she could feel the hard shells of clams in the mud beneath her feet.

"This is where I wanted to be!" her father said, pleased with their progress. "From here we can search for water and materials to build a shelter. If we find water, we can stay here until..." he didn't finish what he was going to say. She knew that he would start looking for other people. He did not like being alone, just the two of them.

They slid in the mud as they climbed out of the tidal area, stepping on clams like rocks in the mud. On the dunes, they could see for miles in every direction. To the south, the estuary shone in the starlight. The little slip of the new moon gave off an eerie light that showed the rolling land to the north and to each side of the estuary. In that light, the plants that clung to the sand looked soft and friendly. She knew better. Most of the desert plants had ways of protecting themselves. She knew to avoid their sharp spines, catclaws, hooks and barbs.

To their right, as they stood looking inland, they could see the coastal dunes marching away into the blackness. Behind the dunes, in a low, wide band, they could see thick brush. "Look father, it is almost like a forest behind the dunes."

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“I see it! It will be a good place to hunt. We can explore when it is light. Now, we need a place to build our shelter. See that long level place over there? Let’s go look!”

In the season when the wind from the land grew cold and there were no *tortugas* in the sea, she knew that the time had come that her father had warned her about. She knew that he was restless and that he wanted to leave.

He had found strange pieces of pottery near the place where a tiny trickle of sweet water flowed out of the sand at low tide. He knew people had been here in the past, and he knew that they were not his people. He suspected that they came here in the cool time, which was starting now. He worried that they would return and kill them, so he walked the dunes often, looking for sign of them. Now, the tiny spring had almost stopped flowing, and the cold at night was a warning. He told her late one night that he felt it was time to go.

She went around the tiny *palapa* they had built out of driftwood and brush, tucking a branch in where it had come loose, pushing sand up against the wall where the wind had blown it away. She said goodbye to her home, the first she had truly loved. He watched her, understanding. Their time here had been the most peaceful of his life. He didn’t understand the concept of paradise, but he now knew contentment and peace and the comfort of always having enough food to eat and water to drink.

“Serina, we will come back to this place. Maybe we can find others and they will come with us. I too feel this is home. We can call it the Place of Life – the place where fishes come from the mud. I think it is the center of everything. It is probably the place where all life begins, although, in the stories told by the old fishermen, there is a better place with more sweet water and life. We can find it, but we must go now!”

Serina thought that he was driven by his need for others. She did not know that he was aware she was

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changing into a woman. He understood she needed other women to guide her and---the thought made him sad and lonely---it was almost time for her to find a man of her own and start her life as a wife and mother.

They didn't talk. The boat floated out onto the sea with the morning tide and she stood in the bow looking back, trying to memorize each landmark that she could use to come home someday. In too short a time, the mouth of their estuary was only a low place in the coastal dunes. Then it was gone. She turned back, looking forward with her eyes if not her heart.

The sail caught the breeze and they skimmed along the coast. In the course of the sun overhead, they passed two more estuary mouths. She marveled that there were other places along this forbidding coast where life was born. Before it was time to come in with the tide, they saw the black tip of a distant mountain that seemed to jut out of the dunes. Her father put the boat in at a place along the sandy beach that had higher dunes behind it and looked protected. It was dark by the time he got a fire started. They cooked a sea trout that had jumped into their boat. The silence between them was not broken that night.

In the night, the wind had turned 180 degrees from the land. Now it was fresh and blowing with increasing force from the sea. The waves were showing the seas discomfort, and there seemed to be a contest between the land and the water. Serina watched as the waves broke on shore, pulling back with mouthfuls of sand.

"Look out there Serina!" Her father broke their agreement of silence. He was pointing to the sea, now lit by the full light of the sun. "The sea is red-brown!"

As they watched, the color spread to the waves at their feet. Soon, the whole sea was muddy; red-brown.

"Father, is it the waves? Are they stirring up the bottom of the sea?"

"I saw this once before, Serina, when I was a boy and we were hunting *tortugas* south of Guaymas. The Yaqui River was at flood and the sea was filled with mud. This

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must mean that we are getting near the place where the great red river flows into the sea.”

The storm lasted three days. They hunkered down between the dunes and waited, eating their fill and drinking sparingly of their precious water. Sometime during the night of the third day, the storm blew out. The wind switched around and came from the land again, cold and biting. Serina needed no urging to help get the boat turned and out to sea.

The black uplift of rock they had seen from a distance was strange. It was as if one of the islands where they had first stopped and hunted pelicans had drifted into the shore and gotten stuck there. The south side was steep and rocky; impossible to get close to. As they made their way around the rock, they saw a wide estuary and signs that others had been there before them. The beaches and little *palapas* someone had built there looked deserted now, but her father warned that there might be people here who would harm them. They approached carefully, slowly. There were no signs of other humans. Sea lions rested along the beach, and thousands of gulls and pelicans rested on the sand and rocks.

“No people here,” her father announced. “The lions and birds would not be so content.”

As they made their way into the shallow estuary, they came around a rocky point and each, at about the same instant, saw the rock-laid house. There was smoke coming from a pipe that jutted up from its strange roof. A large wooden boat was pulled up beyond the high tide line and there were dozens of empty racks built of poles and rope, the kind fish were dried on. The tide and wind were pushing them in, they could not turn back. The door to the house opened and a man came out, placed his hand over his eyes to shield his vision, and then waved at them. As they came in, he walked along the shore to a place where they could easily land and helped them pull the boat onto the beach.

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“*Señor, Señorita*, welcome to Whale Hill.” She understood his slurred Spanish and helped her father understand that the man had welcomed them.

“You are Seri people? I have never seen your people this far north. This rocky point of land is called Whale Hill, but I don’t know why. There are whales, but they seldom come to this far end of the gulf.”

Serina started to translate for her father, but he grunted and nodded that he understood. His Spanish was poor, he could barely speak it, but he could understand most of what was said.

“You understand me? You *Señorita*, you do, don’t you!”

She answered in Spanish and he smiled, comforted by the opportunity to talk to someone. He came close to her and stared at her. “Your eyes! You have the eyes of the sea. You are more than Seri. What is your name?”

Her father stepped between them. “Serina. She is only a young girl, leave her alone!”

The man acted hurt by his actions and words. “*Señor*, I am a gentle man. I am an old man. I have interest only in talking and sharing my camp with you. Do not think badly of my hospitality.”

“Her father nodded, and relaxed. “*Sí! Perdoname.*” He turned to Serina. “Tell him that your mother spoke his language. Tell him that you and I learned from her. Tell him that we accept his hospitality.”

The horrible smell that an errant wind blew into the small rock house made them gag. Her father grabbed her and led her back outside. Even there, the air was thick with the smell. Then the evil breeze was pushed back out of the way by a powerful one from the sea.

“It’s not as bad now as it was a few weeks ago!” Their host commented, as if he thought that the smell was tolerable now because it had once been worse.

Serina let the fresh sea breeze cleanse her body. “It’s dead fish!”

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“*Sí Señorita. Totoaba.* They are left over from many months of killing for the Chinese.”

She looked over at her father. He shrugged a signal she didn't understand, and saw that he was confused as well.

“You don't understand? Well, the Chinese want the *buche*, what they call the 'sin kow,' and the English speakers call the 'swim bladder.' They eat them! No one else wants the rest of the great fish, so they toss them back into the water. The waves put them on the beaches where they rot. Some are still rotting. That's what you smell.” He nodded in a friendly way, hoping they understood.

“Also, my friends, in the warmer times when the *totoaba* come in mass here and are easy to catch, we remove the *buche* and put it to soak in the tidal pools. Soon we have hundreds of *buche* soaking. When they are clean we cut them on the side and stretch them out. We scrape off the fat and flesh and the inner stuff. Then we must dry them. That's what all these racks are for. We turn them in the sun until they are dried out. We usually get 15 pesos a kilo. We have no way to preserve the meat. It's free to anyone who can haul it away. In Guaymas, it is only worth 2 pesos a kilo. Few eat it anyway, so it is better to leave it to rot.”

“And the *totoaba*? They were everywhere when I was a boy. Now, they are only in the north.”

“I think some things are in such great numbers that no matter what we do, they remain. Perhaps the fishermen chased them up north here. Every year there are so many that the sea is full of them. God has provided these creatures for us to use. Taking them is our right as men.”

Serina accepted the man's wisdom, but a question nagged at her. “Where do they come from? I mean, there are little ones. Where are they born into the sea?”

“Nowhere. Everywhere! They are God's creations. He makes them for us.”

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She saw that her father was nodding his acceptance of what the man said. Still, she thought he was wrong... If not wrong, then only partially right. She had observed the way little things appeared in the estuary. She felt that fish, like people, started out as babies and... “*Señor*, we have heard of a place where a great river comes into the sea. Is that where the *totoaba* come from?”

“Yes,” her father added, “we are on our way to that place.”

“The place of red waters. I have heard so many evil things about it. You do not want to go there!”

“We have heard stories... None of them bad.” Her father was focused upon the man’s face. Did he lie? Why would he say such a thing?

“In the spring, when the great river flows high, at the time of the highest tides, the whole sea rises up in anger and destroys all of the boats on the sea. They call it the ‘*burro*,’ and those who have survived have told me about it. It is the worst thing they have ever experienced! It will come soon, in the next few moons. Even here, I have sensed its anger. The sea becomes so red that you can not see into it. Soon after, the *totoaba* come. Perhaps they come here to escape the *burro*.”

Her father studied the man and decided he was sincere. He turned to Serina. “Tell him we must go soon. If we go now, we can avoid the great rising water he calls the *burro*, and be safe.”

Serina nodded and told the man what her father had said.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “As you follow this coast, you must pass the place where there has never been any fresh water. Fishermen have told me that nothing lives in this place and that the sand kills everything. The currents and the wind are against you. To go there is... You could not survive!”

She translated for her father, although he had understood the man’s warning. He turned to the man.

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“*Señor*, others have made it. We have heard about the land of the Cucapá. They are the river people who helped our fishermen. How is it they made it to that place?”

The man scratched his head and hunched-up his shoulders. “Perhaps they did. I only know what I have heard. There are only two of you. Perhaps they had bigger boats and more men to paddle? But then, my friends, I must warn you that you can’t stay here---so maybe you can go back the way you came?”

“We can’t go back!” Serina answered. “Why can’t we stay?”

“The others will come back in a few months. They don’t understand you Seri. They would force you to do the worst work and... They would probably steal all you have and hurt you.”

“Why?”

“Because...you are Indian. They don’t like Indians, and they believe that you people are cannibals. You wear the skins of the pelican and... Believe me, they would probably kill you.” He paused and turned to look directly at her father. “*Señor*, you do not want your daughter here... Do you know what I mean?”

Her father nodded and sat down on the bench that ran along the wall. “I understand. We must continue to the river. Will you help us? We have *tortuga* stomachs that we can fill with extra water. There is much good wood here, I need to make new paddles that are longer. We need to have a bigger sail...”

“Little things. Take what you need. Give me in return the *tortuga* shells there in your boat. I can trade them.”

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Chapter 3

The Cucapá men surrounded her. Their leader, a tall man who resembled some of the Seri, looked her over and then crouched down, letting his butt rest on his heels.

IN A WEEK, when there was a strong wind blowing from the south, they left the protected estuary and began their journey into the unknown. Soon the rocky top of Whale Hill disappeared. They passed one last rocky point and another great bay-estuary. Then the coast seemed to flatten and turn white. They were now at the place where the great desert started, and its barrenness frightened them. For three days and nights the wind pushed them along the coast. Then, on the third night, the wind shifted around and began to blow from the north. Her father found them a place to land where a tiny indentation in the sandy coast provided some protection from the cold wind and blowing sand. They were trapped there for many days, wrapped in their blankets, hunkered down under the canvas of the sail.

The wind had blown from the land for three days. Then for three more days it was calm. Finally, during the night, the wind came fresh, warm and humid from the south. Her father woke her and they put to sea again.

Each day the sea became redder. As she rode the bow, she could not see into the water. The fish seemed to disappear. Her father could not see fish to spear, and there were no *tortugas*. As the sun set one evening, they realized that the coast had turned them and that they had been rowing west. They had passed the white sands of the desert and once again the coastal dunes had ragged vegetation growing from them. The wind favored them enough that even without a keel their sail could be used to help them along. With the oars and the sail they overcame the power of the current. Soon, they came to places where

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the muddy waters flowed around shallow islands of mud, under water at high tide, exposed for the birds and creatures to pick-over when the tide was out.

Serina tasted the water. It was salty, but not like the waters of the sea. Then, through the mud bars and channels, her father paddling and oaring their way forward, they entered the delta of the great river. After long days of paddling and dragging their boat upstream with ropes they had made from willows, the muddy water lost its taste of salt. Another long day, and they entered an area where the mud flats were covered with willows and reeds. Ahead and to the sides, they could see great trees, bare now in winter, and mesquite forests. Birds were everywhere. Her father said they would call this place the place of the doves, then he could go no farther. Weeks of hard work, little food, and fear had sapped his strength. He shook his head, tears rolling from his eyes. "I can't go on!" he sobbed. "We must stop."

They landed. The place was flat and the soil was dried mud, some hard and crisp, some fine and hard to walk on. The trees wore skirts of brush and debris around their middles, some as high as she could reach.

"The floods bring the water up." Her father said, pointing to the skirts of brush wrapped around the trunks. "This tells us how high. We must not be here when the waters rise."

She looked at the ground and saw tracks. Deer, raccoon, skunk, coyote...and then she saw a track she had no trouble identifying. "Father! Someone walked along here!" He didn't respond. He had covered himself with his soft pelican skins blanket and was sound asleep.

Signs of animals they could hunt were everywhere. She had to catch something for them to eat. It had been days since they had eaten the last of the dried fish they had traded for at Whale Hill, and almost a week since their bellies were full. Unless she could find food, neither would regain their strength.

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The greatest fear Serina had was of people. All the things of the sea, the sharks, the stinging rays, the scorpion fish and... None of these creatures or the great storms or lightning...none of these things put fear in her heart like the thought of others of her kind. She had grown up on stories about human cruelty and the suffering others caused. She felt a tightening in her chest as she looked at the tracks. She wanted to get back into their little boat and go... But they needed food and rest. They needed help in this strange new land.

The tracks led away from the water and into an area covered with willows growing head-high. She followed the indentations in the sandy soil and saw other tracks join the ones she followed. She was afraid. She knew she should go back, but...

Up ahead she could see platforms like the ones the Seri used for storage. She crept forward around a clump of willows and saw houses made of willows and reeds, plastered with mud. Thin tendrils of smoke came from unattended fire pits.

'Where are the people?' She thought. 'This is like our winter camps, but...'. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of something moving through the willows to her right. Then she heard sounds all around, and fear paralyzed her.

The Cucapá men surrounded her. Their leader, a tall man who resembled some of the Seri, looked her over and then crouched down, letting his butt rest on his heels. The others did the same. They were talking among themselves, pointing and laughing softly. Their leader motioned and four of his men came forward, helping her weak and confused father walk with them. The leader pointed at her father and began talking in a tongue neither could understand. Her father, his voice quaking with fear, looked down, smiled, and told them who they were in the Seri language. The leader shook his head. Serina gathered all of her strength and spoke softly in Spanish. The big man grinned and mumbled something she could

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not understand. He got up, motioned for them to follow him, and led them into the camp.

They were afraid, but the men had not hurt them or threatened them in any way. Several came close and admired their soft pelican skirts. One man stared at her, walked around her and then jabbered something at her. He examined her closely and seemed pleased. She shrugged that she didn't understand, her whole body shaking against her will. He laughed and made comments to the men. They looked at her and laughed, but not in a way that seemed threatening. They clapped the man on his back as if honoring him, and continued to tease him. Her father stood closer to her and whispered that she should stay close to him. They were both wide-eyed; quaking with terror.

In what seemed a long time, but was really only time for them to bring over a woman who lived in a hut across the camp, the leader returned with a thin, old woman. The woman stared at Serina's father, and then at her. In Spanish she commented. "You are Seri. But you speak the language of the Mexicans?"

Serina nodded, smiled, now controlling her fear, and told her that her mother had spoken Spanish. She told her that her father understood the language a little, but did not speak it well. The old woman smiled and turned to the leader. When she had explained to him who they were, she turned back to Serina.

"Many years ago, a man who worked for the people who had big boats, took me to Guaymas. I learned their language and then, in time, he brought me back here to get my people to cut wood for them to burn in their boats that go up the river. Did you come all the way from there?"

Serina told her about their journey. The old woman listened without questions, nodded when Serina was finally through, then explained what Serina has said to the crowd of people who had gathered around to learn about the strangers. The leader nodded, said something to the old woman, turned and left. "Serina, you and your father will

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eat with us and then..." she paused and looked around at the people staring at the newcomers. "I think you will have to leave. Our people are sick with the fevers and many have died. You will not want to stay with us."

They brought them hard chunks of bread made from the seeds of wild wheat that grew on the river flats, and the meat of fish boiled with chunks of plants, yurimuni beans and wild onions that she had never tasted before. A tall, friendly woman led them to a small hut where the air was still filled with dust from a recent sweeping. She babbled at them until she was sure they knew they were to stay there.

They had never seen a hut like this before. The floor was dug into the soft earth, so that inside they were almost half her height lower than the ground. Four upright wood poles with forked tops held up thick layers of willows and reeds. On top of that were willow mats that held a layer of soil. Inside, there was a very small fire pit, reed mats, and several clay bowls. Animal hides hung from jutting pegs. A piece of worn canvas, which might have been a sail in its better days, was the door. It could be tied to hold against the wind.

As they watched, four men came from the river carrying their boat, which they placed next to their own. The great hollowed tree looked strange next to the Cucapá's tule reed canoes and rafts. A friendly man brought them their blankets and pelican skin covers. Her father was weak, but wouldn't rest until he was certain that all of their gear was safe, especially their tin water can and his harpoons.

The man who had examined her, sat under a storage platform across from their hut. It seemed to Serina that he was guarding them. As she relaxed and let sleep take her, she studied the large clay pots and other objects on the roof of the storage platform. She slept with the knowledge that these people meant them no harm and that they had wealth beyond imagination.

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In the time the moon went from a crescent, through its life until it was a crescent once again, the river people began to ready their boats, pack their household goods on rafts, and prepare for the time of flood waters. Each spring, Serina had learned from the old woman, the waters came and covered the land. The brushy shrubs disappeared, and only the tallest trees, the mesquite, ironwood, paloverde and screwbean tops poked out of the water. Her mentor, who had lost her own daughters and family to the fevers, told her that each great flood brought muddy waters that all living things needed for life, and so it was their time of celebration.

Serina understood that the Cucapá were focused now on the powers of the waters. She understood their apprehension as they wondered if this was a year the incoming tides and the flood waters would meet. They knew the destructive power of a *'burro.'* They told her that there would be great waves and extreme flooding. The whole land would suddenly be underwater, and then, just as suddenly, the waters would flow away with great force, sweeping the unlucky miles down river and sometimes out into the sea. She found it difficult to imagine.

The spring flood would come soon. The Cucapá were prepared to move onto their rafts and start, once again, the part of their lives they loved the most. She also knew that the pain at the loss of loved ones from sickness was now behind them. They needed her father, and there was a man who said that he needed her. There was no talk of their leaving; they had been adopted by the Cucapá.

“Father, why do you look away from me? Do I make you sad?”

“We are Seri. When you marry, I can not be with you. I can not talk or work with your husband. We must forever be separate.”

“But... There are no Seri men for me to marry. And besides, that is a dumb thing to do.”

“It is our way. It makes things work.”

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“Then I won’t marry. I don’t want to.”

“The woman has talked to you? You know that your body is changing and that you are no longer a girl.”

“I already understood. But I’m not ready.”

“You are almost ready. It must be soon, before the hot weather time. The man, Catal has noticed you. Among his people he has spoken for you. He is respected. His family was taken by the sickness. He has no one. We would be his family if it is allowed by their ways.”

“I will not leave you father. We will always hunt together and someday we must return together to the estuary where life begins. That is our place. It is where I must live! Do the Cucapá believe that children must separate from their fathers when they marry like we Seri do?”

“I don’t think so. Men marry, and both families seem to work together afterward. Perhaps it is a better way. Catal has asked me if I would accept him. He is a good provider. I told him that you had hunted with me like a son and that you had a strong mind. I told him it was between the two of you.”

“He may not want a strong woman. When he knows about me, he will not want me. I am part of the sea. I am a hunter. Cucapá women do not hunt with their men.”

“Things change, Serina. What we want when we are very young is not necessarily what we should get. Let time pass, but be aware that you are now a woman, and you must have a man and start life.”

A man came to their camp just before the mud flats dried out, the time the wild grasses sprouted. He was strange but accepted by the Cucapá who had known his kind before. The man spoke a strange form of Spanish that was hard for anyone in the Cucapá camp to understand. He said he was German, whatever that was. He came in a wooden boat driven by a small thing that was attached to the stern and made a terrible noise. It smelled bad, and its smoke made them cough. It left a

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shining, bluish slick on the water which people stared at and knew was bad, like the oozing stagnant water in the swamps.

He told them something that was so unbelievable---seemed so impossible---that none believed him. He said that the *Norte Americanos* were building a dam to take the water from the river. When asked, he tried to explain that it was 1,500 miles upriver, a journey on foot of more than half a year. A distance none of them could imagine. He said that in a few years there would be no more spring floods, and that their land would dry up and turn to desert. They thought him evil, and asked him to leave. He said he was sad, but that what he said was the truth. He warned them to prepare for the coming end, but he didn't tell them how.

Now, as the spring flood waters receded, they left the rafts and started living on the flats again. Things were as they should be, and they laughed at the warning the German had given. The idea that anyone could dam a river as powerful and big as theirs was dismissed. Yet, following the German's visit, other people from the north had come to them with the same information.

Just before the cold winds from the north came, the Cucapá celebrated the joining of Catal to Serina. As thoughts dominated the camp about whether the '*burro*' would be a problem this spring, and as attempts were made to estimate the time of the flood and determine if it would come when the sea tides were high, she had other things to focus upon. Serina knew that, like her estuary and like this great red river, she had life within her. She knew that she would be a mother in the fall. She wanted to go out on the water with Catal and her father, but something inside of her had changed. Now she enjoyed sitting home with the other women and preparing for her family. She was happy and certain that life was her prize.

Her father had taken a wife. She was a tall, proud woman who pampered him and fed him until his belly was

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round. He seemed different, somehow, content and yet, even though he was slowly learning the language, he seemed isolated from the others and lonely. He told her often that he missed his Seri people and was sad because he knew he would never see them again. He came to her in the quiet of the evenings and asked her to speak with him in their language. She understood.

Years passed in that most perfect world. There was never a question of food, clothing or shelter. The delta of the Colorado River provided everything human beings needed. Each spring the great floods came and renewed the land.

She had learned so much from the Cucapá. They shared their secrets of planting, nurturing and harvesting. She and Catal had everything they needed. Most important was the amount of time they had together. They had time to walk and explore the great flats which abounded with life. She loved to sit near the marsh areas near the tule reeds they harvested for their rafts. The tule and cattails were so thick that only small birds and animals could get through them. When they walked out, exploring, she carried one child in a sling, a boy who everyone said looked like her father. Their daughter ran in front of them as Catal watched closely. They all loved to follow the small rivulets where water separated from the main river channel made its way toward the distant sea.

Everywhere living things filled the world around them. Catal pointed out sign of lion, and bobcat, bear, deer, javelina, raccoon, skunk, deer, badger, fox, mice, and voles. They sneaked up on ground squirrels, muskrats, beavers...and sometimes wild cows that had escaped from ranchers. The sky was always filled with birds: doves, blackbirds, thrashers, king birds, fly catchers and bunting, pheasant, quail, hawks and eagles...ducks, geese, avocets, pelicans and egrets... Varieties of fish came into the shallows and laid their eggs. Little fish and myriads of schools of aquatic creatures filled the water. Sometimes

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the blue crabs were so plentiful they couldn't fit into the waterways. They could easily be gathered by the basket full. Her new home was a paradise. She had known the paucity of the lands to the south, and had once believed that the sea was the only source of food. Now she had learned about agriculture and ways of life she had never imagined.

Serina should have been completely happy, but strangers kept coming into their camps to warn them that their world would soon be destroyed. She didn't know why, but she believed them. That had always been her way. She saw and was able to understand things that others seemed to miss. Catal laughed at her fear and, waving his arm in a circle about them, chided her. "Serina, nothing so vast and wonderful can be changed by man...especially men so far away."

A *Norte Americano* who called himself an anthropologist, came to record their ways. He told them that their way of life would end soon, and that he had come to make a record before it was over. He was quiet, tried to learn their language, and respected their ways. He seemed sincere, and she believed him. The Cucapá men listened to him. They met and discussed his warning and decided that like the warnings from the others, what he said was also impossible. Nothing could change the whole world.

The man advised them that the dam had been completed and that there would not be a spring flood. He called the time, 1936. He warned them that there would never be great floods again and that the lands of the Colorado River Delta would dry out. Tears filled his eyes as he told them that the birds and animals would die...that the fish and shrimp would not have a place to spawn. that the whole Sea of Cortez would change when fresh water no longer flowed into it. He told them that the Cucapá would suffer and be changed forever. He urged them to

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understand! They had no way of understanding. There was no way they could prepare.

That spring there was no great flood. Nor did the great flood waters come the next year, or the next or the next. The end had come, and the Cucapá people faced the end of their ways --- the end of their right to live.

Chapter 4

Finally, hot with fever, and then never warm again, they passed away into some imagined place where there was no dam and where the world had not been destroyed by evil done in the name of someone else's good.

AS THE LAND changed and four times the seasons passed, Catal dreamt that there were still animals to hunt and foods to gather in the north. Serina had discussed his dream with him, "My Vision," he called it, and she told him that it could not be so. He feared she was right, but could not get the vision out of his head. Finally, as he saw his people weakening and losing heart, he decided to head north. He wanted to see for himself if their whole world had been destroyed. He had told Serina that they would return within a cycle of the moon.

And so it was, that in the summer of the fourth year without spring floods, in desperation, Catal and five of the strongest men went north to explore. They kept to the eastern edge of the great flood plain where the land began to rise. They followed old trails that wound along the line where the desert met the flats. As they passed they could see that, without the flood waters to nourish them, whole manzanita and ironwood forests and the thickets formed by bushy plants and trees that had once provided their people with fruit and wood, were dead. Vast tangles of vegetation that had formed a rich habitat for animals of all kinds were now dead places where nothing lived. In places, fire had eaten great openings in the once impenetrable brush. As they traveled, they could see little mounds and white bones, the remains of the creatures that had once lived there.

Vultures and scavengers had prospered after the end, but little else. Everywhere they looked the desert had retaken the land. Except for the deep channel of the river,

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where water still flowed and an occasional little flood spread over the nearby flats, there was no sign of the wild grasses that, in years past, had covered the land. Except for the scavengers, there was no animal life. Although water still flowed in the main channel, and willows and reeds still lived near the river, everything outside of that strip was dead or dying. Even near the river, in the summer heat, the water in all of the smaller channels had become tepid and unhealthy. Thousands of fish had died in these 'dead water meanders,' fouling them.

After days of following the trails north, they came to a place where the flats pinched in toward the river. As the river valley became narrower, they met other people, most Cucapá, most recent refugees from the south. From them they learned that a short distance upriver strange men were building diversion dams which took water from the river and used it to irrigate fields. Catal learned that the great dam far to the north stopped the floods and the diversion dams built below it took most of the water. As more diversion dams were being built, it was only a matter of time before the great river would never reach the sea. Aware now of the magnitude of the disaster, and its permanence, they started home.

Catal stopped beside the main channel of the river and squatted down on his haunches. He felt dizzy and needed to rest. His friends sat around him, watching the water, searching its depths for fish. "There are many," Catal said, pointing to the water. "We can build a weir and catch some. The mullet still come from the sea. The chub and catfish have not all died. The crabs have thrived eating the dead."

Having eaten their fill of sucker and chub, they regained some of their strength. They had grown up on a varied diet and did not do well eating fish alone. Even when they ate regularly they could not regain the vigor they once felt. Each suffered gut aches and weariness. Their eyes watered and their noses and airways filled with matter which made it hard to breathe.

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When the wind blew, dust rose from the parched mud flats and choked them until they had to stop, lie down and place their heads under their blankets in order to breathe. Slowly, discouraged and almost defeated, they followed the deep channel back toward their camp and loved ones.

The Cucapás who had adopted Serina and her father, had wisely moved their camp south, nearer the sea. As a result they had fared better than those of their people who lived in the central regions of the delta. In the first years, their gardens near the channel got enough 'flood' water to grow and provide vegetables and some grain. They were luckier than most and Catal knew that now. He also knew that the little water still available was being taken away and that his people could not survive.

They traveled down through the heart of the delta. He led his party around villages where disease stalked the weak; where every dying thing spread sickness. They had seen camps where all of the inhabitants were dead or gone. Survivors who left those camps walked the flats and waded in the river searching for food. Some went insane and began killing everything they came across. Several times Catal and his men hid deep in the mazes of dead tule while crazed creatures, who had once been men like themselves, passed by.

The promise of the sea caused many of the lost and degenerating Cucapá from the interior to head south. Noting that gangs of deranged men were following the river to the sea, Catal and his friends became alarmed. What if they had been gone too long? Even though it was the heat of the day, they filled their water containers, shouldered their gear and, with hearts beating hard in their chests and tears filling their eyes, whipped their bodies toward home, not knowing that it was too late.

Of all the people of their camp, only Serina and her father knew how to survive when there was no food available on the land. Her father knew that to survive they

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would have to go back to the sea. Serina understood that he was right, but she was unwilling to leave Catal and the people she had grown to love. Besides, her children were Cucapá. They did not want to leave.

When the spring flood didn't come the first year, their boat had lain stranded with the Cucapá rafts and canoes, far from the channel where the waters still flowed. The swift and often narrow channel waters were not suited for tule rafts and canoes, and they were soon abandoned. Serina's father got men to help him carry their boat to the water. It was the only craft that could safely navigate the channel and go to sea, and he was the only man in the camp who was not afraid of the great waters. For the past four years, he and Catal, who was never comfortable with the sea yet willing to help, had disappeared for days at a time, to return jubilant with their boat laden with *tortuga*, *totoaba*, bass and even a shark or two. Now, as he returned from the sea, he could see the changes. The land was parched and those of his people who survived were rapidly losing their fight to live. He didn't know that the small floods that had kept their gardens alive, were now stopped by water diversion projects only hundreds of miles away. All he knew was that the end was near.

Catal, was her father's helper. Without him, her father could not go to the sea and hunt. The men left behind were either too old, too weak, or so frightened of the sea that they would not go with him. He sat, looking down the channel of what had once been the mighty red river. He became increasingly morose as each day passed.

It was summer time: hot! The heat withered their gardens and the grasses growing wild on the flats. The little moisture remaining in the soil was drying out. It was obvious to all that the squash and beans would not form, and even if little fruits and seeds formed, they would not ripen. More than a month passed. Serina and the others decided that Catal and his men were not coming back.

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The illness came suddenly. It infected the babies and the old people first. Their bodies dried out. Like the land, they lost every drop of moisture. Finally, hot with fever, and then never warm again, they passed away into some imagined place where there was no dam and where the world had not been destroyed by evil done in the name of someone else's good.

And there came a time when there were no children at all. None were left alive to play...or to hold, or to love. With them went the future. And in that same time the old were also placed underground, and with them went the past. Those who remained were dazed and suffering in ways that only humans can experience in hell. Serina sat stupefied by emotional pain, unable to weep. Her recently widowed father, tough because of where his knowledge of life had come from, led her to their wooden boat and forced her in with a promise that they would go back to their estuary and find happiness there. He told her that their time here had been only a dream.

That night, Serina and her father set their sail to catch the evening breeze. As they began making their way south along the coast of the Desert Sea, Catal and the others returned to find their homes fired, and their loved ones killed. Crazy men were roasting the remains of their stored food over the coals. In battle with those who had lost their humanity, Catal and his friends died---their essence and the pain of their last horrible suffering joining that of the others...and the animals...and the plants---all the creatures of their lost world.

The spirit-energy that rose up out of the delta of the Colorado River came together as a force of ethos, filled with the voices, hopes and dreams of once living things. It rose like an ethereal cloud up and over the north lands, a heaven of what was. And then, as if evil wasn't enough, it was captured by an alien force previously unknown. The ethos of the Cucapá and their lost world was caught by, and channeled down copper wires strung across the

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desert on ugly steel towers. It flowed along the wires to Los Angeles. There, it was directed to a string of street lights that lit a dusty city street. The lights surged bright and then, before dawn, the spirit and life energy of an entire ecosystem were gone. The street lights dimmed...and went out before dawn.

Strange Gods do not care!

Chapter 5

There is a beast out there!" he warned, his speech slurred and too soft. "We must...a beast out there...!" He collapsed, trying to slide down the paddle, but unable to hold on to it.

SERINA WAS FORCED to paddle and help work the sail as they fought their way out of the mixing currents where the river met the sea, and then east-south-east along the coast. She helped her father, did as he demanded, but her mind was blank; she had no heart.

He understood. Fear gripped him. If she gave up, and her mind went to that place where there is only darkness, she would die and then he would die. He wasn't made of senseless leather and bone, he was a man. A man who had lost wives and families... A man who had suffered the wrath of... God! He knew! He was old now, wise. His task was to survive the tearing away and the pain and get them back to the estuary. How could he get through to her and let her know that suffering and painful memories passed as time passed, as one became numb.

'Numb.' He thought, remembering. 'No one wants to hear that they will go on by forgetting the soft cheeks of their dead children, the touch of love...the everyday wonders of living and being with others who are now dead!' He sat up, stiffening his back, and let the blades of the oars drag in the water. 'Why live?' he thought. He didn't know. 'If I don't know, what can I tell her?' He sat, thinking. Long minutes passed. The answer wouldn't come to him. He didn't know why they should go on living. 'But...'

"Serina, listen! I need you! I need you! I am your father and I am here with you, as before. You need me. We have each other. Do not go away!"

She sat, her shoulders slumped forward to cradle her heart - her head too heavy with thoughts to hold without her hands cradling it. She heard him, he knew, because

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her tears fell, reflecting a rainbow, existing for only an instant before soaking into the gray, weathered wood.

And they made their way south, past the white coastline dunes of the terrible Gran Desierto de Altar, finding little shelter when the winds blew from the south. For days at a time their southerly progress was stopped and they hid from the blowing sand and desiccating sun under the sail tarp. As time passed, father and daughter braved elements that were harsh and deadly, yet kind compared to the suffering they had so recently known.

For a week they were stranded in a dry camp on the coast. They suffered winds greater than they had ever known. Both knew that their end was coming. They had only a sloshing of water left in the bottom of their rusted and dented can. It would not last another day. Serina smiled, a long and loving smile for her father. She refused to drink. He nodded, and pushed the can away. The end was near. It made no sense to prolong it.

At dusk the wind stopped. The silence was hard on their ears and left their minds empty. He rolled out from under the canvas, sand almost a hand's-width thick sliding back where it belonged. He squinted in the harsh light and looked around. Not far away, the only out-of-place thing besides them on the pure white dunes, was the dried and curled carapace of a leatherback *tortuga*; a blackened bowl full of sand. And in the sea, swimming sluggishly toward him, reluctant to give its life as charged, was a great green *tortuga*, evidently exhausted by the storm. He called to Serina, and told her that someone's spirit was with them and wanted them to live.

The *tortuga* did not want to die. He wondered why it should and not them? He killed it quickly, feeling guilt; cherishing life. He drained its blood into the carapace bowl, and waited patiently for it to settle; the blood-red, from the cream-yellow serum. Serina, weak and confused, stripped meat from the naked body of their savior. They

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sucked and chewed slowly, letting the life of it flow into them.

In time, he mixed the serum with the little water they had left, and they drank enough to regain hope. The rest he sealed in the can, a promise of time.

She remembered the great bay and pointed out the black rocks in the distance that looked like islands that had drifted into the land. He stood and shielded his eyes from the glare. The sight tied in to his memories of the time they had stopped to look back at the place called Whale Hill. It was still a long way away and the wind was rising from the south. "We must land here by the edge of this place where there will still be enough water to float the boat when the tide is out." They slid in to the shore, weak, but able to pull their boat up where it would be safe.

The wind had only been trying to scare them. After dark, it blustered and teased, coming at them from all directions. Then it ran away from the rising moon, out to sea.

They lay watching the moon rise over the land, its sheen dancing across and sparkling the sand. The tide went out, and the bay turned into a great mud flat that reminded them of the delta lands they had fled.

Early, in the time when the sun pretends it is rising, they heard a sound that sent chills through their bodies. It was like the cry of a wolf, not the call of a coyote. It continued longer than even the most powerful wolf could have held, and repeated itself over and over, sometimes pausing for a time, then, from a greater distance, crying out again, its mournful wail filling the air with terror.

Serina looked into her fathers' eyes and saw that the sound had made him afraid. Then she saw something else. His face was wrinkled and worn. His skin had lost the sunburned color of fine ironwood. It was gray, like the faces of the old ones she had helped bury. He stood, staying erect only with the help of one of the paddles. His

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hair was wispy...silver now, without a trace of black. He had lost the vitality that had always set him apart. He was an old man, and she could see that he was in pain again this morning.

"There is a beast out there!" he warned, his speech slurred and too soft. "We must...a beast out there...!" He collapsed, trying to slide down the paddle, but unable to hold on to it. His eyes were wide open and his wind escaped through a mouth he could never close. He was dead as he touched the ground.

It took an hour, more, for her to know that he was gone forever. It would take the rest of her lifetime to accept the fact that he didn't exist for her.

She gave him to the sea shell sand. He wouldn't have liked that, but alone, she could not paddle or sail the boat and get him far enough out to sea so that he wouldn't wash back. Hidden in the trough between rows of dunes, near a pile of shells not yet ground down, she dug a deep hole with a paddle. She lay him down, but couldn't cover him. When she did that final act, she knew that she would be absolutely alone.

She ate, drank, and after resting a long time, regained some strength. Then, with knotted muscles cramping in her thin legs, she began to drag their boat to his grave. She would hide it there, over him, for him, and go ahead on foot. She killed the boat by ripping out its mast and opening a hole in the bottom. Then she did what she had to, packed what she could carry, and found a faint animal trail that seemed to lead around the bay, toward the rocky point in the distance.

Serina looked down as she walked and saw that those taken by death were her companions on the trail. In her shadow, she saw the shades from the place where all the others had gone. She recognized each one, and talked softly to them. The heat was unbearable; she bore it as life. The trail led on around the bay, around a rocky

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outcropping and then on to another bay. She walked, letting her feet feel the way of the trail. She talked softly to her children and told them that she would soon join them.

At the base of a rocky outcropping, near the water's edge, not far ahead, was a fisherman's hut. Behind it was a larger hut built of stone, surrounded by little *palapas*. She heard a dog barking and women's voices. It was cooler now that the sun had set. Her traveling companions had grown tall and then been pushed away by the setting sun. She walked forward in her trance-like state, unfeeling, barely knowing. She let her body down against a boat pulled up on the sand.

The women sitting in front of the hut saw her then, and pretended that they did not, hoping she would go away. Their children foiled the plan. They crept close to the skeletal woman, intending to throw rocks at her and tease her to death as they did to all weak creatures they found.

Serina knew them, and reached out to them. Something about her made them change their plan. Out of the starved body shone gray eyes that intrigued them and captured them. Speaking Spanish for the first time in years, she said that she knew them, calling out names they had never heard, but responded to. Their fear left and they came close to her. She pulled herself up, and gave the leader her hand. She told them that she had returned.

"Go quickly and tell *El Gerente!*" The woman in charge ordered the boy who had taken Serina's hand. "Tell him that his search for another *puta* may be over." When she saw that the boy was running up the beach toward the big rock hut, she turned to the others, "That is if he wants an Indian...a skinny, wild one at that." She looked down at Serina. "So, *mujer*, what is your complaint against the world? Who are you and how did you get here? Never mind, I don't want to hear your problems, we all have worse! If we help you then you must agree to work for him. Do you agree?"

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Serina didn't understand. She nodded. She needed help.

Weeks passed. Serina regained some of the weight she had lost. Her hair, washed in the soft luxury of yucca root soap, shone once again. She stood before the small oval mirror that all the women shared. Her gray eyes looked out from a face she could hardly recognize as her own. Her youth was barely visible, veiled by thickened skin and a lack of flesh. She saw her father and her children's ghosts in the reflection and looked away, angry with herself for not being with them. She shook her head to clear thoughts clouded with grief. All she knew, and that deep within her, was that she had to get to her estuary... Every other thought and experience was anguish.

"I must go! I must continue my journey."

"You can not leave here! You are his now, and you will do what he wants!"

She couldn't understand. She tried, but she couldn't. The manager---*El Gerente*---said he owned her. How could someone own her? And stranger, he owned all the women and he sold them to men who came at night. Men who were building the railroad, or the highway to Sonoyta. Lonely men. Even some fishermen who came from the fishing boats anchored off the rocky point. All were strangers...men the women did not know. And these men used their...bodies. Paid to use their...and then went away. Why? She could not imagine why. She had nothing from her life experiences that would help her understand... And now, the manager said it was time for her to start working. He ordered her to come to him.

"What will he do?" She asked the woman in charge.

"Check you over. If you resist, he will have you beaten. Smile! Do nothing, whatever he does! He will... Well, we all have gone through this. He wants to know that you are fit to serve the men. He may try you out. Do not resist him! I am warning you! He will beat you and hurt you bad and

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then he will do what he wants anyway. Understand? Pretend that you are with someone you love... Don't be too good. Act a little bored. Then he won't want you again."

She entered the rock hut and stood, waiting for him to finish talking out of a rear window to one of the men who was always on guard. He turned. He wasn't much taller than she. He was lean and strong looking. His face was pockmarked and looked something like the skin of a puffer fish. She imagined, from the look in his eyes, that he was also a poisonous creature.

"Your name is Serina and you came from up north they tell me. Right?"

She nodded, studying him and trying to understand him.

"I have been very generous. You came here almost dead. I have spent much time and money saving you. You are now working for me! Understand Serina? You owe me and you will do whatever I tell you to do!"

She nodded, numb and confused, wanting to offer her knowledge of food gathering, cooking and...

"You will be good to the men who come here for...love! But... You are much too dark! These men don't want Indians. They want girls with light skin. But you are tall, they like that. You are scrawny and your body is hard. Do you have breasts? What do you have that a man wants...that I can sell? Open your blouse! Lift your skirt! Let me see!"

He obviously wasn't happy with what he found. "Not very good breasts! How many babies have you had? Stretched, didn't they. They'll have to do, but you show signs of wear... How stretched out are you?" He forced her legs apart and prodded and probed her with a dirty hand. "Tight enough I guess. You're well used... Them kids of yours, several I guess from the look of you, I don't what them around here! Understand!"

She wanted to tell him that they were dead; what had happened, but he didn't give her a chance.

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“If the customers are drunk enough they won’t care that you’re dark...that you’ve been around. You won’t do me much good, but... Well, I’m telling you this! Carlotta will teach you how they serve a man here. Now get out!” He started to turn away and then faced her again. “I get any bad reports from the customers and...or if you try to run, I’ll hurt you bad! Don’t ever think I won’t. I’m always watching, so are the guards...and the other women! They’ll never be your friends.” His eyes told the story better than his words. She saw his inanity.

From hell on earth, Serina’s mind escaped and went to a place of its choosing. It was driven there by spiritual grief...and unspeakable physical indignity. Too much had happened. Her quick mind and sense-charged spirit could not deal with it all, or part. Although *she* had to consent to his control, the part that became compliant was a zombie-like cadaver, buried under layers of undeserved pain laying over her true being---layers of dirt: her interment.

The special place where her mind fled was filled with dreams both ghostly and corporeal. The little *palapa* she had built with her father on the estuary became an abode that grew the flowers of her soul even in the darkness of her reality. She wandered there in peace while she was pawed and used, sold and resold as many as five times a night.

She ate, worked, and drifted through the life forced upon her, hardly cognizant of the changes in the world around her. Then, after two years in bondage, with the coming of winter, with a belly swollen with life, he cast her out of hell and into purgatory---another layer of hell she had to remove herself from---without God’s judgment to help her.

Chapter 6

In the place where there is not supposed to be life, Serina drifted like a stunned fish floating on the undulating surface of the sea.

A CUMBERSOME BARGE with dredging equipment protruding from it like an insect's appendages sat at the mouth of the estuary in the shadow of Whale Hill. Grease covered, weary men, the type she had grown to know and relieve, serviced it and made it do their bidding. She watched from a rickety *palapa* that she had pulled together from old drying racks---the same ones she and her father had observed being used to cure *totoaba buche*, when they were going north over ten years before. Exhausted, she pulled her body into the shade and lay back. Waves of cramps hit her, and she knew that the baby was fighting to get out.

Big ships sat off the point, coming in on the tide to off load heavy equipment and gear. In the distance, the beast that she and her father had thought a wolf, gave a mournful cry. She had gone with other women to see the powerful steam engine arrive in Puerto Peñasco, as they called the station, and she had learned that its cry was its warning. Now she knew what it was, but not really what it was for, or why such a thing existed. She was too far removed from that culture to even wonder how it had come to be.

Time passed, and she realized that the baby would not come easily. She knew that without help, she would soon join the shadows of the ones she loved, and her heart argued that joy.

Dawn came. She focused to see three well-dressed men coming along the shore. One was Mexican---Hispanic, the other two had light skin and hair. They were speaking in another tongue. She pulled her swollen body

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back farther into the shelter of the makeshift *palapa*, reaching over as she did to hide the fish she had found washed up on the beach. The men stopped to look in, saw her, and began to talk among themselves.

"Pablo, damnit, you said this area was cleared. What's this woman doing here?"

"*Señor*, we did clear everybody out. She must have come in the night."

"Well, get her out of here! The dredge cables have to be anchored right here."

One of the foreign men came into the shelter and stood looking down at her. "Paul, this woman is about to pop! And she looks like she's having a hard time. Maybe she can't move."

The other two came in and stood staring down at her. Serina tried to push herself into the sand, certain that they would kill her.

The Hispanic gave her a contemptuous look. "Oh, *Señor*, its just an Indian. I'll have my men get her out of the way."

"Pablo, you don't understand. She's pregnant! Looks like she could have the kid any time."

"No matter, *Señor*. Indian women are *muy fuerte*."

"Looks to me like she needs help. Fred, what do you think? Think we can move her without hurting her?"

"If we had a stretcher, maybe. What about a doctor? I think she needs a doctor!"

"Doctor *Señor*? There is no doctor here. Besides, she's an Indian. Doctors don't treat Indians. These *Indios* are like the animals. They just squat and in a few minutes they are back doing whatever they were doing."

"Looks to me like she is too weak to... Damn it, she needs help! Pablo get her help!"

"My men will move her out of the way, don't worry about her. We will take care of her. Indians die all the time, it really is God's way and we are not to interfere."

"What the hell is he talking about? God's way? Fred, we've got to help her! Look Pablo, get your men and have

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them take her to our place. There's an empty room there. You get your wife or a woman to help her. Understand!"

Pablo shrugged and turned away. 'Stupid *Americanos*,' he thought, 'always poking into things that were none of their business. Damned Indian! Who needed her...or her kid. They were trying to get rid of the worthless Indians - not help them produce more of their kind.'

"When we came down here, I saw a door from one of the wrecked shacks. It's back up near the rocks. They can put her on the door and carry her. Hurry up! The equipment is almost here. We can't delay the men, they must finish before the tide starts back out."

Serina's pain clouded her mind. She imagined they would kill her...the Hispanic would, she could tell by the way he looked at her. His eyes were dead. The others talked in angry voices, yet their eyes were soft and kind when she looked into them. Waves of pain fogged her mind. She was so weak that she could not stay awake.

She felt the hard wood against her back as they placed her on the door. Then she knew she was being carried, jouncing and swaying in the air as the men walked. More terrible cramps hit her and as she pressed against them, trying to force the baby out, her mind went blank. Nature was life and death and the difference had meaning only to her.

In the place where there is not supposed to be life, Serina drifted like a stunned fish floating on the undulating surface of the sea. In the expanse of the dead, she became aware of a blinding white light and slowly opened her eyes to see where it came from. A glowing sun above her head was too bright to look at, yet it gave no heat. She felt the lack of warmth on her face. The place where she floated was surrounded by hard white surfaces. It was like no place she had ever been, or wanted to be. She sensed her hands again, and they moved and felt hard woven cloth. This was the land beyond! Hope flowed into her

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heart. Where were they? Where were her babies...her father?...Catal? Then she heard a baby's cry...

The cry came from far away. Something about it made her feel pressure in her breasts, and a constriction in her womb. She turned her head and searched the hard white surfaces of the place. Beyond her feet she saw the top of a door, and wondered why a door was needed. Her mind began to clear. She pulled herself up, bracing her upper body on her elbows. She was on a bed, in a room. The thing that glowed like a sun was a globe dangling from a twisted rope that ran to the ceiling and then across and down to a box next to the door. The door had a wooden latch. The cloth that covered her was white cotton. Then the pain came, and she knew that if she had died she had gone to a strange place.

She heard the voices first. Spanish...and a language that sounded something like the Deutche...the man who had come and tried to warn the people of the delta about the dam. The wooden latch slid to one side and the door opened wide.

"She's awake. Go get her baby!"

"He came in, talking softly. He made her know that his name was Paul. The Mexican woman came back carrying a blanket bundle with silken black hair protruding from its wrap.

"He smiled. "Ask her her name."

The woman stood, holding the baby and searching Serina's face. In soft, slurred Spanish she asked.

"Serina."

"Serina! Good...ask her where her husband is."

Tears came to Serina's eyes as she answered.

"He is gone...dead." The woman said without emotion.

"Ask her. Does she have family here?"

Serina looked down, her head moving slowly from side to side as she spoke. The woman shrugged. She didn't care.

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“They are gone...all dead. She has no one.”

“Ask her where she lives.”

Serina’s mind raced through her life, searching for an answer. The place she lived in her heart, that was her place.

“She says to the east, not far. Her home is on the estuary.”

“Can she go home?... I mean, ask her if anyone is there who can help her with the baby.”

“*Señor*, she says she had no family left.” As she spoke, Pablo’s wife gave him a look filled with contempt. “You have a problem now, *Señor*. She is your responsibility I think. You should have left her and not interfered with our ways.”

The baby had bonded to her long before it was born. It’s weak cries stopped as soon as the woman laid it across her belly. She touched its cheek and let it lock to suckle, knowing that it needed her essence...her life.

Serina didn’t know where she was or what had happened. She had not died...but she sensed that a terrible part of her life had. A wonderful friend came again from somewhere she had known, and lost. Love filled her heart and scars seemed unimportant. The baby held tight with its tiny hands, sleeping and awake, it wouldn’t let go. She held it, tenderly wrapped in a cocoon of need bound up by old pain which her love had turned into soft fibers of hope.

“It’s been a month Paul. The men are due here any time. We need the room. Don’t you think you should get her out and...”

“Where can she go? She seems stronger, but I can’t throw her and the baby out. I have a plan... We need someone to keep the place clean, right? She can do stuff around here. I can move her into that storage room...okay? Fred, that new engineer the Mexican navy is sending...We can talk to her through him. He can explain

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things to her. I'll bet she can cook too! Pablo says she's my responsibility. I'm not throwing her out."

"Look, I agree. But remember, there's a war on and we are here to get that estuary dredged out so that it can be used as a port...just in case the Japs succeed in closing the door on the west coast... You do what you like, just don't let it interfere with our job. Besides, she doesn't seem too bright. She sits and stares like she's been pole-axed. If you ask me, she has a dead brain or near to it."

"Not when she holds the baby. I see lights turn on then. I don't know what's going to happen with her, I only know I've got to help."

Serina sat, letting her mind try to make sense of the strange things that now filled her world. The tall man with yellow hair had somehow become her guardian. He wanted nothing in return...except that she clean the rooms and help Rosalita with cooking and shopping. The men went out early each morning and worked all day digging out the estuary at the foot of Whale Hill and building docks. He was their boss and, because of his position, the others gave her begrudging respect. The dusty town was filled with strangers from all parts of Mexico, and for the most part, a woman---even a tall dark skinned Seri woman like her---went unnoticed.

Puerto Peñasco was a world filled with strange equipment. Cars and trucks forced their way through the deep sand of the streets, kicking up dust for the winds to drive into every house and shack. The train came through, crying its wolf-like warning on its way north and then again, late at night, on its way back toward Hermosillo. It brought workers, equipment and food. Lately, she noted, it was taking more people away than it brought in.

Mexican fishermen and their families who had gradually trickled into town filled a sea of shacks that now covered the rocks above the small harbor. The dredge was gone now, and at high tide a few of the big fishing boats could enter the harbor and tie up along the docks.

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Occasionally, enormous gray military ships sat off the rocky point of land and sent men into town who were bored and looking for entertainment. She understood that game, feared that *El Gerente's* people who were out pimping would find her, and stayed inside when the ships were in port.

She was drawn to the fishing village. Whenever her work was done, or when the cook needed fresh fish, Serina wrapped her baby girl in a carry blanket and went to the docks or wandered up the hill to the tiny fish market. She got to know some of the fishermen and their wives. Because she worked for the *Gringo*---she always had his pesos to spend---she was welcomed.

Things end. While her friend Paul sat nearby coaching him, the engineer, Ramos Angel Vera, explained to her that the *Americanos* were winning their war with the Japanese and Germans and that they no longer needed a port for their navy on the Gulf of California. She vaguely understood the concept of war. She had no idea who was fighting or where or why. He told her that the engineers and harbor builders were all leaving Mexico...that they would be gone within the week. Paul would be the last to go. He would try to help her, but Ramos warned her that soon she must provide for herself.

Serina had observed that many of the men who had worked to build the road from Sonoyta had left to find work elsewhere. The men who drove the big tankers and hauled water from a well far to the north were also leaving. Now only one or two tankers came each day. The fishermen who depended upon the sale of their catch to the workers were also being forced out. Most had loaded their meager possessions and were gone with the tide. Fishermen and their families who had nowhere else to go, had to stay. To sell their catch they would have to transport it to Guaymas by boat or rail. However, the prices offered were so low that they would lose money. There was talk about plans to

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sell fish and shrimp to the United States but the market wasn't developed.

Those fishermen who stayed because they had no other place to go, had to become self-sufficient, bartering with each other to feed their families and get the basic necessities. Pto. Peñasco, which had never been more than a town of shacks and temporary shelters, was dying back into the desert sands.

“Ramos, ask her where she will go.”

Serina told him that she wanted to take her baby and go back to the estuary.

“Does she have title... I mean, does her family or someone own the land there?”

Ramos talked softly to Serina, explaining the concept of ownership and the need for a title to the land.

“*Señor*, she says ‘no.’ Not that it matters. It is located east of here many miles, and I think that land was a part of a land grant, made public in the days of the Constitution. It is considered waste land. Some individuals have bought parts of it, but I don't think anyone has claimed or bought the land she describes.”

“Ramos, I would like to see that she has some claim to the land. How can that be done?”

“*Señor*, I...I think... Well, *Señor*, she could get others and form an *Ejido*. In 1917 the constitution created three classes of land: private, public and social. The social class is land assigned to a cooperative called an *ejido*. It is a long process to set one up, but I know an attorney with contacts in Mexico City that can do it easily. I am the engineer who can verify it. It will cost, *Señor*, more than she would ever be able to pay.”

“Explain it to her. Tell her I will pay to have it done if she wants to do it.”

Ramos smoothed back his thick black hair as he explained the process to her. He was patient and knew the limits of her understanding. Finally, he looked back at Paul. “She understands I think. This woman is very quick.

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She has known nothing of our cultures before coming here, yet she seems to understand. She asks you why?"

"Why? You mean why do it? Or why am I willing to do it for her?"

"Why you? She says she gives nothing in return." Ramos had an answer of his own. The woman has a special energy--maybe it was the light emanating from her gray eyes, maybe it was the energy suggested by the lithe form of her body. Whatever it was, it had captivated the American and, he had to be honest with himself, her energy also pulled him in.

Paul saw Ramos hesitate and wondered if the engineer thought he was a sucker. That didn't matter. "Tell her, her need is enough." He paused, knowing how important that concept was to his relationship with God. "Can she do this alone...I mean without others in the cooperative?"

"No *Señor*. She will have to find others...probably ten. I'll tell her. We need to start this process right away."

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Chapter 7

She fell to her knees, calling out to the spirits she had left behind so many years before.

SERINA STARED AT the map Ramos had spread out on the table. It took her a long time to understand what it was. Then, in her mind's eye, she followed the coastline east from the great rocky point called Whale Hill. She recalled the coastline as she and her father had seen it so many circles of seasons before. "Not this one, past this one...this one! This is my home!"

Ramos pointed it out to Paul and they drew a box around the estuary shown on the map.

"Serina, you are certain that this is the place?"

"I have not been there in many years...your map is not like being there...but...?"

"Paul, to be sure of the right estuary we will have to go out there with her. The road follows the railroad tracks, but it is not good. We would never get over the dunes to the estuary and sea. I think it best if we go by boat. We can get a local fisherman to take us out there. We can set the boundary markers as required, and I can map them. I can certify their placement."

A safe launching or landing of a small boat in the Pto. Peñasco area was limited to the new harbor. The problem with a beach launching or landing was that the tides varied as much as 24 feet at the extreme, and averaged a differential of about fifteen feet. Most of the time a boat had to be dragged across the sand and rocks to get it to or from the water. Without the harbor, small boats launched from a beach on a calm sea might be unable to land if the wind came up and created waves. Once out, small fishing boats were at the mercy of the sea unless they could

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make the new harbor. For fishermen, this restricted access limited their opportunities.

Serina had not been back on the sea since landing with her father the night before he died. Deep inside, she was as strong as her dreams, but outside, physically, she had not recovered from her abuse or from the difficulty she had giving birth. Still, she insisted on sitting as far forward as she could wedge her body. Looking into the water, she was empowered by the knowledge that she still knew the sea. She let her mind tune to it, and bonded once again with the life within the world of it. A feeling of calm flowed through her. After all, it hadn't changed. It was still the same.

The powerful motor pushed them ahead into the stiff morning breeze. She remembered the dark patches of rock and the lighter patches of sand that formed the sea floor along the coast. It was as if no time had passed. They plowed their way along the waves and into the rising sun, causing wave-hugging flights of pelicans to boil up and over them as if they were a bubble in their course.

She remembered the coastline dunes and then the places where the dunes seemed blown away. Places she had learned were the mouths of the other estuaries. They passed the first and then the next. She looked back and saw Paul giving her an inquisitive look. She shook her head and pointed to the east.

The midday sun and high tide would stand together today. She sensed it from what she saw. As they approached the next opening in the dunes, she knew the hook of land at the estuaries mouth and recognized landmarks that were forever pictures in her mind. The tide was coming in, across a long bar where the waves boiled as they caught the sand. A bar the boat could not get through...not yet. She was standing now, hand shielding her eyes...really hiding her tears from them. She knew they saw her tears and was amazed that they didn't shame her joy.

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The water was flashing with the bodies of thousands of silver sea trout. Gulls were diving to harass pelicans for fish they lost as they came up from a dive with their pouches filled. Beneath the waves she could see small rays scurrying along the bottom, and the shadows of rock bass darting out of the rocks and then back into hiding. Tidal fish played just behind the breaking waves, swimming, flashing colors, mostly black and yellow, tiny fish that filled the shallows.

The fisherman held the boat out from the bar while Paul and Ramos sent heavy metal spinners out in search of hungry trout. Each cast was rewarded with a strike. Each strikes a shining silver fish - each fish longer than the length of her arm. Soon, the floor of the boat was alive with dying, flailing fish. They continued their sport, now catching and releasing the bounty. The idea of sport was totally alien to her understanding. The catching and then releasing of creatures that were not needed was a revelation to her. She watched, amazed that such ways could be.

Almost suddenly the rolling waters fighting to get over the bar had no opposition. The tide rose and the gentle waves seemed to fall into the estuary, chasing each other to their end. Their captain held the boat back until the bar was only a shimmering light beneath the water. Then he let the currents sweep them into the mouth and along the deepest channel. They grounded several times as they got ahead of the rise, floated again on the next swells, and gently made their way up and into the sea's secret womb. Serina pointed to a shallow arm that had an easy landing. The boat's keel was caught and sucked down by the mud.

Serina was out, slipping as she sidestepped through the mud and then on up the sandy slope. On top, they heard her cry-out as she disappeared across the dune. They climbed up, mud sticking to their shoes and cuffs. Their hands and knees were soon slick with mud as they slipped and caught themselves. Serina was standing beside a tiny, wind blown *palapa* with a caved-in roof. She

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fell to her knees, calling out to the spirits she had left behind so many years before. Her cries went right to the men's hearts.

“No doubt about it, *Señor*. She is home!”

The wind had blown for three days, hot and dry from the land. The few plants that fought for purchase on the dunes dried and became dormant. Serina was down behind the coastal dunes harvesting the seeds from early grasses when she saw him. He came walking through the sand carrying lumpy things in a sack hung over his back. He stopped and stood looking at her, surprised that any living thing was out here in the wilds. She climbed up and searched the horizon in every direction until she was certain that he was alone. He approached her. The wind blew his wispy dark hair out away from his round dark head, and the sun played through it. He wore glasses with thin metal frames. They reflected the light as stars. He came closer. Behind the lenses his eyes were dark and soft. She decided that he was past middle-age, but still had some youth left. His clothes suggested that he had been a fine dresser. His suit coat was dusty, the sleeves shiny with wear. His pants were worn thin in many places, and the fly was missing buttons to keep it closed. His pant legs were rolled up to his calves, the rolled material covered with spiny brown burrs. His toes were holding on to worn out leather sandals with broken straps. They looked as if they were more trouble than they were worth.

Serina motioned for him to follow her with a slight twist of her head. He nodded, smiled, and following closely behind her, trudged up the dunes as if they were the last he could ever climb. In front of her little *palapa*, he stopped, lowered his bag to the ground, and pulled a dirty piece of cloth from the pocket of his suit coat. After carefully wiping the dust and sweat from his brow, he stamped his feet, as if he could loose the caked soil.

“You look tired...hungry. I'll prepare food for you.”

He nodded, took off his glasses and searched under his coat for a clean piece of shirt tail to wipe them. “I have

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followed the railroad tracks for many days. I decided to come to the sea. I was not expecting to find such comforts." He paused and looked around, seeming to have a hard time seeing through the small lenses of his glasses. "You do not live here alone."

He was looking at Marbrisa's bed. "No, my daughter lives here with me. She plays along the water. She will be back soon."

"What is this place?"

"An *ejido*...The Estuary of Life."

"Strange name, what does it mean out here on this bleak and barren desert of worthless sand?"

"This estuary, not the dunes, is where life begins...that is what I believe, and why I live here. It is far from the village where you are going, if that is what you want to know."

"You know about where life comes from? You know about...those things? How could that be? I don't understand, tell me more." He wasn't critical, just curious to hear her answers as if her answers were important...maybe even more important than food or comforts, from the way he focused upon questions.

Serina ignored his questions. "*Señor*, there is water to drink in the *olla*. You can wash in the estuary. I will have food when you are ready." She watched him closely. The man was strangely preoccupied with things in his head...thoughts? Ghosts? He seemed unwilling to focus on physical things, as if they mattered only because they were interruptions.

Over the evening fires, she learned more about him. He carried books in his sack that he explained to her. He spoke a form of Spanish that was formal. He used words and expressions that were hard for her to understand, but he explained them and she was able to share his ideas as if knowing their names gave her handles to turn them in her mind. She learned that he knew a lot about the world: that he had gained great wisdom.

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He said that knowledge brought him pain. He explained that at the university where he taught, others grew tired of his constant examination of their ways, and that rejection forced him to wander in search of answers. "You will soon grow tired of me and I will leave. I am cursed, maybe insane. I can not turn my mind off. Not even with alcohol or..."

Marbrisa sat, always attentive as the stranger talked. Serina noted her focus and was pleased with her questions. Marbrisa's mind was quick. She was hungry to know.

His name was Stefano. He kept asking her the same questions, and she was forming answers in her mind. He wanted to know why she called this estuary, The Estuary of Life. One evening she knew she could explain it to him.

"Señor Stefano, when I was a girl I learned the sea... Not just the waves and surface, but what was in the sea. I came to understand that all things come from other things, their parents. When my father and I first came to this place, I saw that it was a womb where creatures started life... It is a place where life starts...where things are born, get strong or die, and then go to the sea. Without this place...these places, for now I know there are others, there can be no creatures in the sea. Then we could not live. This is where all life begins...and maybe where it will all end."

He looked at her. First anger and then softness shaped his features.

"All my life has been spent searching for what you learned as...as a girl...as an observer. I have come to understand that there is a complex plan... Can you follow this?" He paused, waiting for a sign from her. Marbrisa didn't hesitate to answer. "We will try Stefano, I think my mother already knows..."

He began, limited in his ability to communicate by his formal speech, knowing that his words and the concepts he expressed were often beyond them. It was difficult, but he tried to simplify his observations. "Most animals

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compete for life in a way that Nature lets work. Each has evolved so that all can survive...and all can check imbalance. You know, layers of habitats, every creature's needs met within bounds. A clever evolution where species exist feeding upon each other, but not wiping each other out. Only the dead-end branches disappear. The ones that do not fit should die out, but not the ones man destroys out of ignorance. Do you understand?"

Serina shook her head and smiled. "A little, I think. Go on." Marbrisa stared at him, not sure what she had heard.

"It has been a long evolutionary path confused by rare and random disasters, yet a path still dominant when balance was re-established after all seemed lost. That is the way of Nature during the past uncounted cycles on this planet...even now in our time."

Serina heard his words and thought she saw his picture.

"But," Stefano continued, "That same evolution produced a creature that conceived alternatives---oh *Dios*, you'll never get that! I mean, Nature created man and man did things because *he could*, not necessarily because he needed. Think of it this way! There came a time when man stretched his almost hairless body and raised his head to look around. He reached out everywhere and took or killed things because he could, and maybe for no other reason. From that beginning, we humans proceeded to break Nature's codes and force unnatural things to happen.

"We have created our own laws and worshipped gods created to justify our acts. Man has bred and spread and become a threat to every other living thing. To give ourselves peace from a strange inner conscience that we cannot explain, an awareness of our guilt, we have defined 'good' in ways that justify what we do wrong.

"But Serina, each one of us knows! That's the part that really intrigues me and keeps me focused upon this. At some level each human being knows what our kind has done and what we are doing. Therein lies mankind's beginning as an intelligent force...or, if we ignore it, our

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species end.” He paused, searching for words that they could understand, finding too few that he could use to share his discourse.

“We can correct our wrongs and repair the damage done...but what I have observed is that we humans are only interested in doing that when we have all we need and there is no wolf near our door. When men have fed and lie in safety and comfort, we may take time to consider our destructive side. Only then! Because of that limitation we are destroying the other creatures living in our world! We are destroying ourselves!”

He stared at the tiny embers and then at her. “Well, you have listened. Do you follow Serina?”

“What is evolution? Is all this” and she waved her hand across the sky, “Nature? Did you say we created gods, but have an inner voice that tells us when we are wrong?”

Stefano stared at her in wonder. “You know, don’t you! And Marbrisa?”

Serina smiled. “She has that inner voice... It comes from the sea. And here, like me, she has all she needs and can let it guide her.”

Stefano walked the beaches, helped when asked, and spent hours each day writing his thoughts in tiny letters across the pages of his diary. Serina sensed his focus and was amused. His world was one he created and carried around in his head. He touched the real world, but only when he was testing some idea. He spent long hours watching Marbrisa hunt the estuary and beaches. It was hard to determine which of the two was the teacher. Several times, when Stefano was too preoccupied to pay attention to the tides and got trapped on the other side of the estuary, Marbrisa had to wade across and lead him out of trouble.

It had been over sixteen sun cycles since Marbrisa was born. In that time, their only company had been other women, the ones she had recruited to sign their names as

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required for forming the *ejido*. Some still came out for visits. They brought them cloth and *ollas* and the few other vital things they needed from the outside world. They were all poor, and this *ejido* was the only thing they owned a part of, even if it was considered worthless. There was nothing for them to do on the land and the life Serina led held no attraction for them so, after visiting and sharing food, they did not stay.

Serina took Stefano in without thinking of the future or explaining the past. Her relationship with him was comfortable and natural. Neither felt surprise or shame or love as it became physical. Marbrisa accepted him as a father and teacher.

“If we had a boat, mama, we could explore, like you and your father did when you were my age.”

“That was a good boat. I placed it over his grave. I wonder if it’s still there? If we had that boat... Marbrisa, I want to go back to that place... Stefano, we could all go and you could see Pto. Peñasco.”

Stefano was acting strange. “What is it?” She asked.

“I am...I have a job...I am expected back at the university.”

“You are leaving?”

“Maybe. I will decide when we get to the village. I have been away almost a year. My writings... I need books... I will decide. If I am to share what I have learned, then I must go back.”

That was all that needed to be said. She had always known that he was passing through... Marbrisa would take it badly. Still, it was the way things were and she accepted it. He would decide and then... She shrugged. Life would go on.

He urged her to go the way he knew and follow the railroad tracks to Pto. Peñasco. She refused. Everything inland was hostile and threatening to her. She told him that

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they must follow the sea. If they left at low tide, they could walk on the hard packed sand. As the tide came in, they could rest if the going was too difficult. She had done the trek before and knew the way. He reluctantly agreed to go her way. She noted that he stuffed all of his belongings into his sack. She and Marbrisa slung woven net bags across their shoulders to carry clay *ollas* filled with water from the seep, some dried pelican meat, and cakes she had made from ground seeds as the Cucapá had taught her.

The coast was clear all the way to the base of Whale Hill. As they neared the hill, they crossed trails made by people coming to the tidal pools to hunt octopus and other creatures that lived there. Out on the water, Serina pointed out a big fishing boat, then, in the distance, another. They climbed the coastal dune that seemed to run into the side of the rocky hill and began to make their way around the point.

Sounds were the first indicators of man beyond the dunes. then smells. then the sight of shacks. then moving things...vehicles and people, dust and smoke. The noise and the smells were the worst.

The area at the base of the rocky point called Whale Hill was alive with activity. Big trucks, loaded with rock, trailing clouds of dust, were moving in a continuous circle from the hill to the harbor and returning empty. From where they stood, they could see that the rock was torn from the hillside and loaded into the trucks by a big orange-yellow machine.

A trail of dust kicked up by lines of vehicles led away to the north past the distant railroad station. As far as she could see down the road, the one she remembered had been used by the big tankers that hauled in water, trucks and smaller vehicles were moving.

In the harbor, a smoking, clanking dredge was bringing sand and rock up from the bottom of the old estuary and

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pouring it onto a flat barge. Beyond the mouth of the harbor, great gray ships and fishing boats rocked at anchor. Black smoke from the stacks of the gray ships formed wind-blown lines across the sky.

Below their vantage point, a jumble of shacks covered the sand in every direction. In the narrow streets between rows of shacks, they could see people moving---seething--occasionally being pushed aside by vehicles that forced their way.

The smells assaulted them. Marbrisa had never breathed the waste products of the industrial age. Serina had forgotten the acrid, burning stench. Stefano, who had lived in Guaymas which had long been polluted, took in the air and knew it contained the essence of these times and man's destruction of all that was pristine and pure.

Stefano knew that Serina and Marbrisa would never grasp the connections that were driving change in their world. There was no way he could explain things like atomic energy and the quest for electrical power. There was no way to explain what a *Norte Americano's* reactor core was...or why it had to be so big and heavy...or why it was necessary for the *Americanos* to move one across the seas and deserts of Mexico, so that they could install it far to the north, west of a place called Phoenix.

After a week camped on the beach near the biggest tidal pools, and wandering about asking questions...after a week observing, Stefano began to understand the complex connections that were changing the area. He began to understand the dynamics that had placed such unbelievable demands on the land and its resources. Changes being made to the estuary-harbor to allow a giant barge to dock and off-load a reactor core. A core that would then be loaded onto a flatbed trailer with more tires than one could count, and be dragged along the recently widened and strengthened road from the port, to Palos Verde, hundreds of miles away in Arizona. Connections that would result in a permanent harbor, a pipe system to

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bring water from near Sonoyta, a plan for a city with all of its electrical and disposal needs, all of its supply lines and...people to work, to govern, to police, and to consume. All of this was happening because Pto. Peñasco was the chosen location to bring in the *Americano's* reactor core.

Stefano knew that from this time forward, Pto. Peñasco could support a larger population---but only if the inhabitants pulled enough wealth from the sea to build the infrastructure, maintain the roads and harbor, pay the electrical bills, pay for their water, and buy food, clothing and most shelter materials from distant places. For humans to survive in Pto. Peñasco, after the *Americanos* finished their project and left, everything would have to be purchased with wealth from the sea. There could be no thought of consequences, no right or wrong, only taking and taking and consciously avoiding understanding.

Stefano knew that there should never have been a city here...and he knew that it could only survive as long as it drew resources from other places. He knew that a break in the water line---or worse, the drying up of the far off aquifer they tapped for water---would return the city to the desert in a matter of days.

But that was Stefano's curse; it always had been. He observed and learned and...knew things that others didn't want to discuss or deal with. He saw all life-systems interlocked and was forming ideas about the conservation of resources... Now, it was time for him to go back to the isolated life of an academic. Few would want to know what he had learned... Of those few, none would want to deal with his facts, let alone his hypothesis. He had to go back to a world where he was considered a troublemaker and spoiler. Back to a world... But he had to go back! He had to teach and write and...and maybe someday, after there was some hell to pay, they would deal with reality.

On their last night together, Stefano talked long past the setting of the new moon. He wanted to leave his

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observations about what was happening to this remote desert *frontera* with Serina. Observations and information that she could use to protect her estuary and her simple way of life...and maybe help Marbrisa understand the world she was growing into. He didn't take time to check to see if she understood him...for the first time since he met Serina he wouldn't do that. He believed that if their time together had been well spent, then she would understand some of what he lectured...and that was enough. She was a stranger in a land growing stranger. She should cherish what little time she had left to live on her estuary free of the corrupting disease called 'progress' that was spreading from the north. Maybe he was wrong...No, he knew it was just a matter of time.

Chapter 8

You know me in a thousand other guises. I'm everywhere. Call me 'middle management.' I'm the guy in the dark suit carrying their baggage.

"LOOK MAN, I don't know anything about Mexico or the Gulf of California. I'm from Colorado not California. How did you get my name, anyway?"

"The Governor's aide. He's had people watching you since you blew that Sedona thing wide open. He said you're the troubleshooter we needed for this job. You are an Arizonan now, right? Well, this project affects Arizona...the principals are from Arizona. You broke that Sedona thing..."

Martel interrupted. "I played a role...but I ended up working against the developer that hired me..."

"Shit yes, Martel! You proved yourself! None of us want rogue developers like Greater Development coming into *our* state and mucking up *our* playing field." He paused, collecting his argument --- feeling that he was winning. "Hey Ter Martel, you don't have to know anything about the sea...and we have lots of people on hand that have all the information you will need about Mexico. What we don't have, and that's why we need you, is a man nobody can connect to us who understands our business and can do the groundwork necessary to determine if we should be involved... Understand? We need you to look independently at the project...from our point-of-view of course...and find the flaws so we can deal with them up front."

"And run interference. You really want me because that's what I do best. You say your name is Meachington? What's your role and...what kind of development project are you talking about?"

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“Oh, a simple project on the beautiful Sea of Cortez. You know, clean stuff. Condos, homes, golf course...small marina. You'll love it. It's in Mexico, but believe me, it's American, for Americans, and the Mexicans will grease the political wheels down there and put up a share of the money too. Sweet deal all the way.”

“And that's why you want my company involved? Who's the opposition?”

“No opposition. Really, there isn't any, as far as we know! No opposition! What some of our investors are worried about...well, perhaps worried is a bad choice of words... What our investors want to know...really two things. How safe is this investment in Mexican real estate, and what are the constraints. All the GrandeMex people will talk about are the opportunities... Understand what I'm saying?”

“It may be something I... Listen, Meachington. I work alone. I contract with you for services. Contract covers time and expenses. Straight deal, three-fourths up front, one-fourth at completion. Adjustment if time and expenses exceed projections. But I'm not jumping in yet. We need to meet. I want to see everything you have about this project before I can honestly tell you if I can help...and what it will cost. I won't take the job unless I know you need me. And you haven't answered my question. Who are you and what's your role in all this?”

“Me? Oh, I'm just a worker, a company employee. I do my job... You know me in a thousand other guises. I'm everywhere. Call me 'middle management.' I'm the guy in the dark suit carrying their baggage. The principals are too busy and too visible to be out front on these things. I'm a guy with no political ambitions and high visibility.” From the quavering in his voice, Martel could tell that the man was working himself up.

“Actually, I do all the work and take all the shots.” Ter heard a catch in his voice that told him the man couldn't help ventilating his deep-seated anger. He thought he was being abused! “The high-borne, the rich and

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powerful...The Clique, they make all the decisions even though the records show that I do...that it's me. My neck is on the block. It's my head hanging over the basket! Not too impressive a picture. I'm just another corporate drone, at least that's what my wife believes, even if a lot of people think I have coat tails." He stopped talking. Martel had a mental image of a very unhappy, short, fat man wiping his pink brow as he let his breath out like a deflating lament.

"I know what you mean. If you're not in their fraternity, you can never be one of them. We serve at their pleasure. But Meachington, you get paid well for it don't you? It's really your choice...and I sense that you like the work." Ter knew from experience that the more he could draw the man out, the more he would learn about the project and the dynamics that drove it.

"Yeah. It's a trade-off. My wife will understand when I get mine and retire from this game. I don't mean to complain..."

'Then why do you,' Martel thought. 'Probably because the guys you front for are ruthless and you know you're their fallguy.'

Meachington cleared his throat, paused and continued. "Well when do we meet Mr. Martel? Are you coming alone? I see your company name is Ter Martel and Associates. You bringing any?"

"No. Just me. I gather associates after I know what the job entails."

Late summer heat radiated from the black asphalt of highway 89A in Sedona. The mixture of tar and gravel had turned to the consistency of playdough. The tires of the Jeep sank into the street as Ter waited for the light to change. It was hot. So hot that he was having a hard time breathing.

'At least it's one of the last hot days we'll have this year.' He thought. He felt an urgency...almost a survival instinct that drove him toward shelter. He had to get home.

C. Descry

The comfort of cooled air seemed like the most important thing in his life. Misty would have a cold one for him...and they could take a long, cool shower... The light changed. He felt the tires mush into the pavement as he let out the clutch. Arizona! What had ever possessed him to stay here in the summer.

Sedona waited for the rush of cooled air that swept down Oak Creek Canyon each evening. When it came, the temperature dropped and people came out of their air cooled caves and sat on porches. The air filled with charcoal smoke and the tantalizing smells of grilled chicken, fat sausages and hamburgers.

Misty had three pork chops ready to grill. On the bar in their tiny kitchen she had bowls of apple sauce and green beans. She was making an iceberg lettuce salad filled with fresh tomatoes and topped by her own spicy Italian dressing. The baby woke and she could hear him gurgling his music as he played in his crib. He seldom cried and seemed capable of entertaining himself for hours...if they ever let him alone that long. She wanted him close all the time. He was the depth of their bond and the source of the only really unconditional love either of them had ever experienced.

Ter came in with the chops balanced on a tiny saucer. "Ter, why didn't you take a plate out?"

"All I could find...Oh, I didn't look in the dishwasher. Here, done to a turn!"

"Get David, will you? He's awake and playing in his crib."

'Family is everything,' Ter thought as he savored the meal. And after, what he thought of as 'the lean-back time,' was the most perfect part of any day. Misty cleaned something off David's hands that he didn't want to part with. He fought her, making it hard for her to get the grease off one hand and then the other. Then, knowing what was coming next, he put his head down near the high

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chair table, making it difficult for her to get to his cheeks and mouth.

“He’s so difficult! David, I’ve got to clean you up. Stop it!” David looked around at Ter, crying “Dada,” hoping his father would intercede.

“Does he want more to eat?”

“No. He’s just being difficult!” The telephone broke into their life, startling them both. “Oh gad Ter, I almost forgot. Did you get that phone message? I wrote it down on the back of an envelope... Guy said it’s important, he’d call back tonight. That’s probably him.”

The phone call changed everything. Misty could see the change come over Ter as he talked. When he hung the damned thing back on the wall, Ter was all business. Their precious evening together was lost...

“What was it? What’s wrong?”

“Business, honey. Just something related to that job I was offered...you know, the one for the developers of the Mexico project.”

“But something is wrong. I can tell.”

“Yeah. Call was from some strange guy. Said that...well, he implied that my new ‘connection’ would put me on their list. Like it was a black carnation or something that would mark me. Probably a nut! Nothing to worry about.”

Misty gave him a wry look and turned to lift David out of the high chair.

What Ter hadn’t told her was that the man said he worked for “the company” and that he knew everything they did. He had warned him to be aware that this group didn’t accept failure... “If you give information and it costs us, then you can kiss your sweet ass goodbye!” Some message! A warning... Ter thought about it. One of the top dogs making certain that he knew the consequences of doing a half-assed job? But...he hadn’t said “incorrect information.” Realizing that sent a chill through Martel.

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I-17 brought him into a Phoenix that was evidently trying to raise itself from the ashes by highway improvement projects. The outside temperature was 122 degrees. The air conditioning in Misty's old Toyota was never designed for such extremes --- or for idling in line while workmen played with their toys and blocked traffic. The red Temp light came on just before the motor started chugging, trying to die. He kept it alive with one foot on the accelerator pedal and the other on the brake. Then, he saw a break in the concrete guard rail, swung out of his lane and down through the barrow pit, turning to pull up into the northbound lane. After a few minutes the red light went out and he decided that the car would survive. He got off at the next exit and started making his way across Phoenix, up Thunderbird Road and then 7th Street all the way to Washington.

The suite of offices he was looking for turned out to be in a five story bank building. Martel wasn't surprised. Developers believed that locating next to a financial institution gave them credibility. The foyer was cool and the elevator cold. He shivered under his damp shirt. He got off at the fifth floor and entered a plush reception area. There was a reception desk made from saguaro wood, manzanita and glass guarding what he imagined was the main office in the center of the suite. He saw hallways leading to offices on each end of the reception area. The walls were hung with art...Arizona desert scenes by artists whose names were familiar, and some black and white photos signed by Barry Goldwater. There was the mandatory large bronze and several kachinas.

The chair behind the fancy desk was empty. A smeared lipstick print on a tea cup with steam still curling out of it told him something of the chair's absent occupant. He felt awkward, wondering what he should do. Should he call out? Loud voices made the decision for him.

"I don't care what he told you! You work for me now, understand? Get it through your head, he's dead! I'm in charge now and what I want I get!" The voice was filled

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with ugly intonations and raw power. It belonged to the man who had called him and warned him not to screw up.

“But Mister Fowler. He said that those files were always to be kept separate. He... I know he’s dead, but I never had those files. He kept them with him or maybe he put them in his safe. He wouldn’t even let me work on them...except once about a year ago when he called from Mexico and had me look something up. He kept them in the third drawer of his desk, back then. That was before all the trouble... He took the key from me... I don’t have it anymore.”

Ter heard the splintering sound of a desk drawer being forced open. The woman with the thick purple lipstick was sobbing.

“Well, they’re not here! Where the hell is the safe?”

“I’m not supposed to know, but he left the carpet turned back once and I saw it. It’s over there by the chair. Pull the carpet back from the corner. It’s a floor safe.”

Martel heard them move the chair and then grunts, an “ouch” and Fowler cursing under his breath. “No combination, right?”

“None that I know Sir.”

“Shit! Now what? Okay damnit, where would he keep the combination. Knowing him, I can’t imagine he had it memorized. He wrote everything down...everything he ever did or thought.”

“Mister Fowler, there is a sealed envelope... I mean he had me mail a letter to himself about a year ago. When it came back, he had me hide it in my files.”

Martel moved quickly. He pushed the button on the elevator and breathed a sigh of relief when the door opened. No one had called it away. He stepped in, turned, and was arriving when the secretary saw him. Her greeting didn’t hide her irritation at finding him, and he knew why. She turned and in a loud but modulated voice told Fowler, “Someone is here. Just a moment Sir.”

“Hi. I have an appointment with Mr. Meachington. My name is Martel.”

C. Descry

She pretended to look at a day-timer on her desk, gave Martel a practiced smile and pushed a button on her phone. "Sir, your 1:30 appointment has arrived." Then she pointed down the hall to his left and motioned with her chin that he should go there.

Martel had formed a mental picture of the man he was meeting. He expected a rotund little man with a pink complexion and eyes too close together. The man who stood waiting for him was totally different. He was tall and athletic. Strong sharp features suggested power and leadership. He was dressed in a tailored suit that didn't come off the rack. His banded silk tie stated wealth and success. He held the door and motioned for Martel to enter.

"Martel. You're on time. Thank you. That's always a good sign." Martel recognized his voice and tried to clear the man he had imagined from his mind.

"Need anything. Coffee, tea, a glass of cold water? I can have Neidra get if for you."

"Water would be fine. I try to be on time. There was no name on the door... What's the name of your company?"

"Oh, 3152 Ltd. We incorporated when our offices were over on Camelback. Very confusing here, so we leave it off. No need for it anyway, We don't get drop-ins."

"3152 Ltd. is...is the corporation you want me to contract with?"

"Sure. What's in a name. I think Fowler will change it soon. He's in charge now."

"Fowler? Senator Nicklas Fowler?"

"No, his brother Peter, the one with even fewer brains. He and Nick Mercar founded 3152 ten years ago. Fowler was the lobbyist. Mercar raised money. You know about Mercar?"

Martel gave up on the water and looked around for a chair.

"Oh, sorry. Have a seat. I'll buzz Neidra and have her get your water."

"I don't think I've ever heard his name before."

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“Been on the news. Came up missing in the Gulf of California about six months ago. Never found his sailboat. Presumed drowned, him and his lawyer and two *business* associates, both attractive and under twenty five. Court just ruled him legally dead. Fowler’s been ecstatic. Now he’s in charge and I expect we’ll be called The Fowl Corporation soon.”

“I take it you don’t like him?”

“Oh, it’s not that. I always worked with Mercar. Fowler is different, he’s a lobbyist. You know, a completely amoral politico who will take any side, sell any product as long as he gets his. As far as I know, he has no values or, in fact, thoughts of his own. He steals his thoughts and issues from others and fools people. His political clout is legendary. Of course, it helps to have a brother in the state Senate and...and connections! He’s ivy league. His Yale brothers cover for him and run interference for him. You know how it works, they play off of each other.”

“And you? Fill me in Meachington. I’m confused.”

“Hey, call me Meach! I didn’t mean to unload all this on you, but I’m always up front. Listen Martel, none of this crap affects the business. I’m the one who really runs 3152. I put the deals together and manage them until all the dollars are extracted. Fowler doesn’t like that... He wants to be involved, but he’s not willing to do his homework or spend the time away from his buddies. So he’s starting to micro-manage me... Know what I mean?”

“Like calling people you work with and threatening them?”

Meach reacted like a dove with a breast full of lead pellets. “Oh no! He’s already hit on you?”

“Last night. Mysterious caller telling me not to screw up or else.”

“Sorry Martel. That’s Fowler all right. His way of protecting himself is a strong offense...as offensive as that is. It’ll get worse. He’s learned in politics that fear motivates. He’s probably right, but business is not like politics.” He paused, leaning over his desk like he was full

C. Descry

of lead. “Well, not the part I like. You are like him, aren’t you! You use fear and intimidation to clear the way. I’ve got to tell you that I don’t...use it I mean. I go for a straight, fair deal that sells itself.” He paused again and Martel had the sense to keep his mouth shut.

“That’s what’s wrong with the Mexico thing. Our partners are using those tactics on me! All the while, they keep saying this deal is perfect. That’s why I asked you to get involved. Why not let the deal speak for itself if it’s that good? What’s going on? I see red flags waving.”

Martel didn’t like being thought of as an intimidator. He wasn’t...well, not anymore. Not after what he had learned on the Prophet Canyon Project in Sedona. He couldn’t be ruthless ever again. “Meach, I’m more like you than Fowler. I get the information and I make my report. You decide how to deal with it.”

“Yeah, maybe... Look, I got this stuff together for you to look over. You want a contract? You look this stuff over and tell me what you can do.”

Martel’s instincts told him to run for the door. He was amazed that Meachington was so easy to read...or was he? Was his openness an act? Was he really the man who ran the corporation? Was the purple smear at the corner of his mouth an indicator of his power over employees? Was he “Mister Big” or... Was he a front man for those who really ran things and were wise enough to fear the light of day?

“Okay. I’ll look your stuff over. Do you have an empty office I can use?”

“Fowler’s old office is empty now. Sure, use it.” He punched a button on his phone. “Neidra? One tall glass of very cold water for my guest and... Set him up in Fowler’s old office. He has a lot of work to do.”

The aerial photograph showed a long coastline with an occasional uninteresting indentation, endless desert, and sea. Nothing spectacular, nothing even interesting. No vegetation, unless those little smears on the sand were

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some kind of bushy plants. Martel turned the photo over expecting to find a location on the Arabian Sea. Nothing was written on the back. He studied what looked like a recently built road, found a railroad track, and shaking his head, put the photo aside.

He dug through the stack of papers and found another photograph. This one had been taken from a much higher elevation...no, the other one was a blow-up of the east side of this one. He saw that the uninteresting coastline in the first photo connected to a developed area that ran toward the west. The tile roofs of hundreds of expensive looking houses sat about three deep from the beach. The houses ran along until they connected to a town. A grid of streets ran toward the top of the photo. The town, really an eclectic collection of shacks and small houses, sat at the base of a bleak hill with outcrops of black volcanic rock and signs of quarrying.

At the foot of the hill was a harbor and then a long beach flowing off to the northwest and a bay labeled Cholla. On the back of the photo someone had written "Rocky Point, Mex. 1999."

Martel put the photo down, disappointed. He had expected to see a tropical paradise --- A Zihuatanejo, a Puerto Vallarta or even a Cabo San Lucas. What he saw was a barren desert and...no paradise as far as he could tell. He cleared his thoughts and looked at the photo again. Why? Why a development in such a God forsaken spot? There was something else. The photo was obviously taken at low tide. All along the coast the sea had receded almost a quarter of a mile, leaving tidal flats---rock outcroppings interspersed with sandy areas. The big bay to the northwest of the point looked like a great mud flat. Even the harbor seemed shallow at low tide and five fishing boats, tethered by anchor ropes off the mouth of the harbor, suggested they were waiting until they could come in on the tide. What was going on?

Martel knew what seaside recreational areas looked like from the air. He'd flown over many. He'd studied aerial

C. Descry

photos taken all over the world. He knew how to spot marinas and fishing docks, boat storage areas and swimming beaches. He saw none of those 'indicators' in the photo. What he saw was a place where the desert met the sea. It was anything but a tourists playground.

The literature Meachington had provided was interesting. From a ground-level perspective one could see lovely homes surrounded with palm trees and restaurants that seemed to be jungle hideaways. A view of the town showed a neatly lined divided highway, a progressive looking downtown area, and a fair-sized stadium. Somehow the man-made environment must make tourists feel like the desert was of no consequence.

He rifled through the stack of folders, brochures and...a newspaper. The Rocky Point Times. Nicely done, full of ads and information that suggested that Rocky Point was like any other seaside resort town... Pto. Peñasco (Rocky Point) Mexico. Estimated population 30,000 to 50,000 thousand. What kind of nonsense was that? He found the Editorial page and started reading...

"Recently it has been said by many that Rocky Point will soon become one of the major resort areas in Mexico." The editor went on to describe big time Mexican developers and their plans for an 800 million dollar project with three hotels, two golf courses, condos and townhouses, private homes, swimming pools, tennis courts and..." Martel knew the lingo and the reality. He noted that the new developments were on the estuaries. "On one side is the view of the estuary and on the other side is the Sea of Cortez." He looked at the aerial again and tried to imagine a development that would attract tourists along that bleak coastline.

Reading on, he realized that he wasn't the first to ask that question. The Editor had asked his guide "...who could have possibly envisioned developing barren sands into a Mayan Island?" The answer he was given was, "Mr. Chavez. The owner and a great visionary." Martel put the paper aside and sat back. He knew a lot about visionaries.

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His experiences equated visionaries with... but it was too early to tell. Perhaps such a thing could happen if...*if* reality was dealt with. He picked up the paper again and scanned the ads touting other condos and townhouse developments. Some were already built... Others were under construction. 'Well, live and learn,' he thought.

Martel hadn't closed the door to the office. He was aware of movement in the foyer and the familiar beep and music of a Windows program being started on the computer. He imagined Neidra with her exotic purple lips and trim figure... He enjoyed the vision and relaxed. He was cool and in no hurry to get back out into the heat. He had some more material to go through, but had almost decided that this wasn't a job he would take.

He got out his small spiral bound notebook and wrote *Constraints* across the top of the first page. He thumbed down five pages and headed the sixth, *Opportunities*. He started writing under Constraints, and had almost filled the first page when he sensed that someone was standing behind his chair.

The feeling was like a pressure wave, a physical force that made the small hairs on the back of his neck tingle. His senses warned him in time to prepare himself...

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my office!"

Having been forewarned, he didn't jump or react. Fighting to remain calm and seemingly unconcerned, Martel didn't look up. He recognized the voice and knew who was standing behind him, even though he had no idea what Fowler looked like. Calmly, he put his pencil down and quietly said, "I beg your pardon. I was told to use this office."

The man used intimidation like Lyndon Johnson. He used his body and height to lean into opponents, and his booming voice to overwhelm them. It wasn't working.

"Goddamnit to hell! I asked you who you are!"

C. Descry

“You know. You called me last night and tried this same kind of pressure bullshit! Why don’t we start over. You come in, sit down, we talk.”

“You son of a bitch! You’re in my office... Oh, my old office. What are you doing?” He stayed behind Martel and Ter wasn’t about to give him the pleasure of turning around.

“I’m trying to decide if I want to work for you. So far, all I’ve learned is pretty depressing, including your way of dealing with people.”

“I didn’t ask you to work for me. Meachington is doing an end-run. I don’t need you to tell me how to do my business.”

“Fine. I’ll bill you for time spent and leave.”

“What’s depressing? You said what you learned is depressing. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Look Fowler. You just told me you don’t want my services.” He folded the cardboard cover back over the small spiral notebook, slipped the pencil in his pocket and started to push back from the table. Enough was too much!

“Yeah, but you know something!” He changed the tone of his voice and was trying to be nice. Martel was ready to push back from the table but hesitated. He didn’t want to bump Fowler. He didn’t answer.

Fowler came around to Martel’s right. He was big! He pulled a chair away from the table, spun it around and straddled it as he sat facing Martel, arms folded over the back of the chair. Martel was surprised that the grossness of his face matched that of his voice. His features were thick, his eyes were set deep into sockets separated by too much bone and nose. His black hair was thick...the kind a woman would kill for. “You don’t like what I do? You think I don’t know what I’m doing? You think you can come in here and look at a few papers and know more than I do? What the hell! You insult me!”

Martel connected the dots and knew more about Fowler in those few seconds than Fowler probably knew

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about himself. And something Meach had said... He had implied that Fowler wasn't too bright and that he didn't spend the time necessary to learn... It fit. Fowler wasn't bright... He went on the offensive to cover his own shortcomings. He was blundering his way, trying to convince others that he was on top of things.

"Look Fowler. It's obvious to me that you're not on top of this. Meachington manages with information. You don't. Guys like him win, guys like you lose. Now I have better things to do than sit here wasting your time." Martel got to his feet, nodded at the big man and started out of the room. Meachington blocked his way.

"Mister Martel, I'm very sorry. You're right about Fowler, and he knows it. I don't want to lose you. Please wait outside for me. This will only take a minute." He turned to let Martel by, closed the door and stood looking directly at Fowler.

"Didn't take him long to get your number! Peter, when will you learn that you have the communication skills of a hammer? That intimidation shit doesn't work outside of politics. Now listen! You lose me and you lose everything, right? You know you haven't the brains to run this company. You try to manage me and I'm walking. I'll take it all with me! We always had an understanding. Mercar, you and me, we played our roles...did our jobs and we were a team. Now Mercar is out...maybe you thought you were smart? Maybe it was an accident?" He paused, staring at Fowler, unsure whether Fowler had been involved in Mercar's untimely disappearance.

"We will decide! You and me. I need your contacts and I need your access to money. I run things and you stay the hell out of the business end of things! I know you've climbed into bed with some real losers on this Mexico thing... But this company isn't going bankrupt because you are too dumb to keep your tit out of the wringer. I need that guy out there. We need him or somebody just like him!" He stopped, his face red. He was shaking his fists to enforce his points. "Well?"

C. Descry

“You’re wrong Meach. I’m right up on top of my game! You insult me and... Okay, that’s just the way you are. I’ll go along, not because of what you say, but because of reality. I have my hands full. I can’t spare the time to do the chicken-shit little things you do every day. That’s why I have you. Your job is to keep us solvent. I’ll be the brains. I’ll keep the ideas and the money flowing. What I do is so much more important! You just remember that! I’ll clear out of here and let you push your pencil and play with...figures...that goddamned Neidra! But I’m telling you Meach. Your job is to make the opportunities I create work. I’m the visionary and I’m the money! You’re a chicken-shit accountant!” He got up, threw the chair back around and jammed it into the table. “I’m outta here! If that guy screws up this deal... Well, there won’t be any company!”

“You heard?”

“Nowhere to hide.” Martel was a little amused, but more concerned. Meachington seemed like a straight guy, one who did need facts. The reference to Fowler being in bed with some bad guys involved in the Mexico thing intrigued Martel. What was Meach up against? He thought of his list of constraints. The project they were involved in was up against reality... That was desert down there and there were no palm trees, marinas or... What else? Could a group of developers actually turn a vast stretch of desert into a paradise?

Martel waited for Meach to cool down. Neidra appeared with a tall iced tea, her pink tongue skiing on a field of purple wax. That helped. When she had gone back to her desk, Meach motioned for him to follow him back into Fowler’s old office. Martel had questions.

“Meach, are you connected with this Chavez fellow and the Mayan Palace development?”

“No! Hell no! That’s a whole other game and a... We are like sand flies compared to them. Although, honestly Martel, our guys saw what they were planning and put our

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thing together. Why reinvent the wheel? If they can do it, so can we.”

“Makes sense. And what about Fowler? From what I heard, there’s no reasoning with the guy. Is he...”

“In or out? That’s what I would want to know. It’s not that simple. When a guy raises capital he soon believes it is his...his to spend, his to use to gain power. The fact is that Fowler, through his brother and his tribe of brothers, has access to big money... Money that has to be placed, if you get what that implies? I can’t say more. He also connects with the lawmakers that grease the wheels of profitable projects. Oh, not for themselves, but for their wife’s companies or their cousin’s group or... You know the facades and the games.”

“Okay. That’s not new information. I know that’s how it works...always has. I stopped letting that bother me when I realized that you can’t change human nature. But...”

“Fowler is out of here, out of my hair and... I’ll deal with him. Martel, I have to be up front about this. He wants this project bad! Well, I don’t think it’s him. I think it’s his playmates. They are pushing him and so he was here trying to stop me from applying the rules of good business to this project. He didn’t want you involved because of something, I am not certain what, that he was afraid you would expose. Look, Martel. You come well recommended. I need you to run this thing and see if it flies. Simple. I’m also willing to spend what it takes to do this thing right. Money spent now may save us tenfold later. That’s the way I think. That’s just good business, and I know you understand that.”

“That stuff you had me read?” Martel looked straight at Meachington until the dapper businessman looked away and nodded. “Well, It blew me away. If you’re planning a project in that bleak desert, plan on paying through the nose. What you start with is less than any project I have ever been involved in. The cost of this development is... And then you have to compete with the Mayan Palace thing. Did you understand that they have Jack Nicklaus on

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line to do two golf courses? Where? Out on the desolate dunes?”

“Bothers me too... But there is other information that makes a difference. For instance, Pto. Peñasco is only hours away from the big population centers of Arizona... And it is the closest sea to millions from all over the west. And Martel, the airport is already being considered for International flights. And then there’s California. Man, ever see that commercial where a guy is lounging by the sea and a lady comes out on her deck and screams at him to ‘Get off my beach or I’ll sick my dogs on you?’ You have? Well, that’s America! In Mexico nobody owns the beach and water front. They’re much more civilized down there. A few rich Americans have most of our beaches...they own them. Other Americans are dying to get beach front property, but the cost is prohibitive. So, they come to Mexico where the beaches are public. All the people own them. Besides, coastal California is cold most of the year...and the ocean waters are always cold! Pto. Peñasco is only cold part of the year. And sometimes the water is too warm, really!”

“Meach, I’m sure there must be things that can go into the opportunities column. So far, I don’t know... I can’t imagine that there is a balance between opportunities and constraints. Man, if the opportunities don’t exceed... Well, you know! Don’t you?”

“So you’ll help me? I want you to start...well, now if possible. Let’s discuss terms... You are going to help me aren’t you? What if I beg?”

“I need more information. Frankly, I don’t know where to start. I know what to look for, but this is way out of my normal operating area. I don’t have contacts. If you do, get me connected!” He thought a few moments. “Listen Meach. I’ll get started. What say we have a contract for a week... At the end of the week, I’ll report back. At that time we can decide how much more help you need.”

“I can live with that. What will it cost us?”

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“Standard. \$2200 per week plus expenses. Terms as I noted earlier.”

“I can live with that. I’m going to make it easier for you. I’ll have Neidra give you a company credit card---American Express. Put all expenses on it that you can.”

“Thanks. Oh, and Meach. You will save a lot of my time if you get me those contacts.”

“Let’s go into my office.” He turned and walked down the hall and through the doorway. As he passed her desk he smiled at Neidra. “Honey, get me connected to the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, U of A, in Tucson.”

Inside his office, Meachington pulled his chair out from behind the desk and rolled it around front across from the chair Martel would use. Martel understood the gesture. He was telling him that they were equals, working together. There was nothing standing between them...symbolic, understood and appreciated.

Meach picked up the phone and identified himself. He explained that he needed to talk to someone who was connected with research near Pto. Peñasco. He held, smiled at Martel, and picked up a pen, ready to write.

“Yes. Hello Doctor. Do you have someone on your staff who has an understanding of the forces affecting the Sea of Cortez off Pto. Peñasco?”

“Pure research then...”

“U of A is involved in specific research projects.” He nodded as the person on the other end of the line answered. Martel could only guess at that half of the conversation.

“No, I need an environmental overview...someone who has been involved down there a long time and sees the whole picture.”

“Yes! Since 1974? Amazing! Is he at the university?”

“Prescott College? I know about it.”

“He is? Thank you! This Doctor Bridges sounds like the man we need to talk to.”

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“Yes. We’re studying the feasibility of a development...”

“Yes sir. That’s why we need a man like the one you suggested.”

“Thank you Doctor. I appreciate your warning. Facts are what we are after.”

Chapter 9

In those days, no one imagined a sea filled with tourists screaming their throats raw, riding on inflatable caterpillars pulled back and forth by *pangas* with hundred horse power outboards.

MARTEL LEFT PHOENIX with a check in his pocket, a no-limit credit card, and two solid leads. It was after 3:00 and seemed hotter than when he had arrived. Prescott was only sixty or so miles from Sedona. Nice! He had resources near home that he could tap before going to Mexico. He was tempted to take the Prescott turn-off, thought about Misty and David, and kept the Toyota headed for Sedona. He had time. Work was no longer the most important thing in his life.

“Tell me about Prescott College.” Martel held a cold beer in his left hand as he jotted notes with his right. He held the phone cheek-to-shoulder, uncomfortable, but functional.

Doctor Fielder laughed. “I think you could compare it to dynamite! I mean, its small and packed with power. It’s a little college with a big impact. Long on quality, short on funds. In a way, it’s the academic essence of what a lot of us wanted education to evolve into back in the sixties. When I first came here as medical examiner, I served on an advisory committee. I’ve kept in touch with folks there. Why do you ask? Going back to school?”

“No. I’ve taken a contract to do some research for a group that wants to develop a resort in Mexico. I was told that a professor... Doctor Ted Bridges, is the man who has information I need.”

“Bridges! If he doesn’t, then nobody does! I’ve always been amazed that the college could get and hold men like him. He runs a field station near Kino Bay... He’s ‘Mr. Sea of Cortez.’ You’ll like him.”

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“Doc, have you ever been to Pto. Peñasco?”

“Rocky Point. Cholla Bay. Sure, lots of times. Friends have places down there.”

“Why do you go there?”

“You mean other than being invited by friends? Well, the sea I guess. I also like the town... Well, not so much anymore now that it's losing its Mexican flavor. We drylanders have to get to the water now and then. Rocky Point is close. The fishing is fair. Lots of windy days, not really warm in the winter, but... June and I have a timeshare down at Manzanita. It's tropical and has all the amenities. Warm in the winter, too. That's what we want when we go south. We go to Rocky Point because it's close.”

“Ever think of buying into one of the new condo developments?”

“Yeah, we did...think about it that is.”

“And?”

“We would use it on holidays. But no one our age wants to be there on holidays. Its the destination of high school and college kids blowing off tensions. They take the place over. Drunken, wild kids everywhere! A world of noise, hormones, barf, broken glass, fireworks blasting you out of your sleep at all hours, streets filled with... Not our style!”

“But that's changing. There are millions going into the place to make it a destination resort area.” Martel was fishing for more information.

“So I hear. What do they plan to do for a marina? Boating is really a big part of resort life. Rocky Point has only one small harbor---a commercial harbor at that. From what I know, there's no other place to build a harbor-marina. Tide varies too much. No, I don't see the destination resort picture.”

“Thanks Doc. Are you going to Colorado?”

“We are. Arnie and Susan Cain have invited us to spend a few days on lake McPhee with them.”

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“We got an invite too. Maybe we’ll see you there. That would really be fun!”

“Oh and Ter. One other thing. Every time we’ve been there we’ve had water problems. Places have cisterns that fill when the city water is on. But when the cisterns don’t refill, as has often been the case, folks don’t have water.”

“You mean the city shuts the water off?”

“I don’t know. Maybe there were breaks in the water lines. Whatever, you should check into it.”

Martel had formed a picture in his mind of how he thought Doc Bridges, a marine biologist, would look. When they met, he felt he already knew him. If they had met on a stretch of sandy beach, under the blazing sun, Martel would have known his worth from his energy alone. Some people are so much a part of what they do that they take on the characteristics of their work environment. Bridges had become, Martel decided, a reflection of the eco systems he studied.

Their meeting had lasted longer than the half hour Martel had asked for. After almost three hours of intense conversation, Martel grasped Bridges’ hand, thanking him and agreeing to another meeting---hopefully in Pto. Peñasco. He drove out of Prescott with his head filled with visions of the drama playing out near the desert sea.

Bridges had been an engineering student in California. Although he had grown up near Palo Alto and knew and loved the ocean, he had never imagined that he could spend his life near the water. Engineering challenged his quick mind...but something was missing: a chance trip to visit friends in Arizona changed all that. His friend’s father had a trailer at Cholla Bay near Pto. Peñasco and they were heading that way when Ted arrived. He went along for the friendship, never knowing that his life would be changed forever.

The University of Arizona had a field station at Pto. Peñasco where they were involved in a cooperative program with the University of Sonora. Bridges’ friend

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knew some of the students who were staying at the University's Garcia House, near a shrimp, aqua-culture station. They got together and Ted met some of the brightest and best students in marine biology and what was to become the field of marine environmental studies. He was so impressed by their research projects and their love of the sea that he decided, then and there, to move to Arizona and change his major to marine biology.

That was in 1974. He completed his doctoral work in 1979, having had the opportunity to record the demise of the starfish population in the upper gulf. He had witnessed, with anguish, the regional extinction of a species. He developed models that could be applied to the study of other sea creatures.

Martel listened as Bridges talked of his good fortune in being at Pto. Peñasco at the right time. For reasons he knew existed, but couldn't completely explain, there are times when exceptional people are brought together in a place. He gave credit to Doctors Thompson and Hendrickson, and several other university scientists who attracted the best and brightest students. As he thought about it, Arizona was the last place one would expect to find marine studies. Martel assumed that the best institutions for study of the oceans and seas would be located on the coasts, not inland on the desert. The fact that Arizona spawned such programs and so many students who had gone on to make significant contributions, amazed Martel.

"When I came here, Bridges explained, "One of the dynamic young people I met had been a math major from Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. She had met a professor that was into biology. He was focused on the Okefenokee Swamp area of Georgia. He turned her on to biology and she decided to change her major. He had a younger brother studying marine biology at the University of Arizona, and she learned about the program from him. She pulled up her roots, changed her major, applied to the U of A, and was completing her undergraduate degree in

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marine biology. Her research area was in the tidal zone near Pto. Peñasco. Her name was Margaret Scott, and she was hooked on biology and committed to scientific research on the little known Sea of Cortez.”

Martel asked, “Why the Sea of Cortez? Was there something special...I mean, why not Monterrey where the aquarium is? Why not the coast off Virginia?”

“Because there was almost no information about this sea, and it was believed to be the second most prolific sea on earth.”

“No one had studied there before?”

“Sure. The Mexicans have programs, like the ones out of the University of Sonora. Americans were involved in it. But they have only scratched the surface... Science knew almost nothing about the sea, and we all sensed that the sea was changing. For one thing, we knew about the destruction of the delta region of the Rio Colorado. Remember, the initial damage was done around 1935 by Hoover Dam. Then, in the ‘60s, we built Glen Canyon Dam and filled Lake Powell. That finished the destruction of the greater delta, and the spawning grounds for untold species. We knew that fresh water didn’t flood into the gulf as it once had and we suspected that salinity was increasing. We knew of... well, we wanted to record things and get a baseline for future studies. We felt needed and connected. Besides, we had great professors. We were motivated!”

“You mentioned shrimp.”

“Yeah.” He paused and Martel sensed that the subject was not one that Bridges felt happy discussing.

“The northern part of the fault that formed the sea was filled up with the rich soil washed in by the Colorado as it dug out the Grand Canyon and cut its way down through the continent. In the northern gulf the sea is shallow. Usually less than forty feet deep. The bottom is a perfect habitat for shrimp. The water gets very warm in the summer... There are estuaries where the shrimp can spawn. The shrimp are near the bottom of the food chain

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that supported uncounted numbers of other species. Then..." He had paused. Martel was thinking fast, but couldn't imagine what was coming.

"Americans and Japanese and... All decided that they wanted to eat shrimp. Suddenly, the greatest predator of all wanted all the shrimp Mexico could produce, regardless of the cost to the eco-system. The rush was on!"

Cooperative programs were started between US and Mexican Universities to find ways of providing shrimp without having to go out and net them. Some research projects were aimed at hatching shrimp and letting them go in the sea. But then, diseases and political problems stood in the way of the research necessary to create shrimp farms. The whole project died."

"But the shrimping didn't stop did it?"

"No. In fact, hundreds more shrimpers appeared and began dragging the bottom of the sea with their heavy net sleds until the habitat was severely altered or destroyed. Then, of course, the whole economy crashed. The natural balance had shifted. For every pound of shrimp, they had destroyed maybe five hundred pounds of 'worthless' fish. Then they decided to keep the fish and make fertilizer out of them. That lasted for a while. Then, they were forced to save most of them for food, because the species they had fed upon were gone. But it was too late. The once prolific sea had been changed.

Man had proven his potential for destruction, and damn anyone who would point it out. Everyone blamed someone else. It was the fault of the Japanese, or the Norwegians or someone who, the story goes, bribed the Mexican officials to let them pull nets, stretched from coast to coast, and take all living things." He paused, as if he were reliving what had happened.

"In fact, it was the destruction of the habitats... the constant weakening of the resource by hundreds of shrimpers and thousands of individual fishermen using gill nets from their *pangas*. It was the misuse of estuaries where the shrimp bred, the demise of the delta... Martel, it

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was all those things, not one thing. That's hard to explain, but there are many who are coming to understand the 'whole systems' approach now. We are part of a new science, called conservation ecology."

"And all of you young scientists knew that? That's why you made a commitment to save the sea?"

"Not hardly! We were trained as scientists. We looked intensely at our transects and studied one or two species. At first, we didn't get it. When we started to get it, we realized that to change everything and save the sea, would require a major international educational program. A program that would be considered politically incorrect at that time. Change seemed impossible. There were major markets demanding shrimp and fish. No, none of us believed that anything positive could be done... Well, that's not exactly correct. There were a few people who were willing to try." Bridges paused again, searching my face for my reaction. I communicated that I still wasn't sure I got it.

"Martel, it's like the drug problem. There wouldn't be supply if there weren't demand. The US demand for drugs creates the whole problem, right? Well, the demand for shrimp and fish overtaxed the supply and almost destroyed the resource. It's all about bucks! There were no limits because demand and supply created wealth and people ignored the consequences. But of course, it couldn't last. The resource was being depleted. When supply dwindled, that got everybody's attention. Then, when there was a crack in the wall, some people started to listen to marine biologists and the 'hated' environmentalists."

As he drove back to Sedona, Martel thought about the answer the professor had given him when he asked what he thought about development.

"At first, people who wanted places down there seemed to be willing to live in harmony with the harsh environment and the lack of services. Families came and

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their children grew up near the sea, learning about the creatures in the tide pools, doing a little fishing and basically soaking up the natural environment. Oh, of course there were guys who came only to fish. But mostly, the area attracted families who loved the solitude and spent quality time.

“In those days, no one imagined a sea filled with tourists screaming their throats raw, riding on inflatable caterpillars pulled back and forth by *pangas* with hundred horse power outboards. Or idiots riding jet skis back and forth, and back and forth, making noise, endangering those in the water, ruining the fishing, and polluting the environment every way possible.

“Back then, folks enjoyed the town because it was a functioning Mexican village. Then came the dune-buggies and three-wheelers to destroy the few plants that could live on the dunes, and everyone’s solitude. Then mobs of kids started coming here...doing things they would never do at home... And people came who just wanted to take from the place...to be entertained because they believed that they were owed a great vacation.”

“And now?” He had asked.

“Now? Those who have taken over see a way to get rich leasing the sea coast to Americans...They promise that they can create a paradise. Maybe they can... It’s beyond my comprehension. Meanwhile, the unique and beautiful tidal pools are filled with expended husks of fireworks, plastic, trash and broken glass. Mobs of people trample the tidal areas, rolling rocks over to expose and kill the tidal creatures. The area’s vital role in preserving the ecosystem is ignored...considered expendable... you know, Martel, it’s called progress. I’m a scientist and would like to keep my head buried in my science. But as you can hear, my work is endangered by issues that sociologists need to work on. As a scientist, it really gets to me. Thanks for letting me ventilate my frustrations.”

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'Constraints,' Martel thought as he turned out of Cottonwood on the last stretch to Sedona. 'I have pages filled with constraints and almost no opportunities...well, except one. *Demand*. There are hundreds of Americans who will pay big bucks to lease property there.'

And Bridges had told him something else. The young student named Scott was still there, and a significant force for positive change, from what he implied. And she was related to Ted somehow. He made a mental note to call her and arrange a meeting in Pto. Peñasco. She would be the perfect guide!

Interesting, he thought, his eyes on the road and his mind processing. Investigative work is networking. That's really all it is. He had new leads, thanks to Ted Bridges, and he was certain that in the next few days he would get all of the information Meachington needed.

On TV, he mused, people watched as investigators ran the sides of the Karpman Triangle: Rescuer, Persecutor, Victim - everyone competing to be victim... everyone changing positions and nobody winning. That was great for TV plots. The only way to win in real life was not to be caught in the triangle, and that rule was the one that guided him. He wasn't involved to rescue Meachington, to persecute Fowler, or to be the victim of either. His job was to remain objective. No one needed to be the victim... Just then a bullet ripped through the window, showering him with tiny fragments. He saw that it had exited through the windshield. The black car he had assumed was just passing, was now trying to force him off the road. He pulled over until his right tires were kicking up gravel, hit the brakes hard, waited until the other car was past his front bumper, then accelerating, he cranked the Toyota's steering wheel hard to the left. The front left tire grabbed the pavement and the car spun around. He kept it floored and the rear came around, skidding sideways on the gravel shoulder.

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Both front tires bit into the pavement and the Toyota leapt forward. Martel let it gain speed as he steered into westbound traffic. He let out his breath with a sigh of relief as he matched speed with the westbound vehicles. Luckily, the cars were not close together.

The whole thing happened within seconds. Particles of glass were still falling from the side window, and a spider web of cracks was spreading across the windshield from a hole big enough to poke his pinky through..

He knew what he had to do, and do soon. He had to assume that the other car had also changed direction. He slowed, letting a pickup truck pass. The eastbound lane was clear. He slowed even more, and then accelerating, pulled a squealing U. As soon as he was headed back in his original direction, he began to search for his attackers.

He saw dust ahead, and as he approached, he slowed. Taillights were flashing on several cars ahead of him. A black Chevy Lumina was on its top in the barrow pit. The driver's door was open at an odd angle, and Martel realized that the car had rolled, mashing the open door. He pulled off the highway and parked in back of three other vehicles that had stopped. An old rusty-gray panel truck that had pulled over regained the pavement and was moving away toward Sedona. He got out, cautiously. No one noticed him or the bullet damage to the windshield. The driver's side window was completely gone so there was nothing there to attract attention.

A man in a uniform was looking into the car. "Stay well back, people! Gas is leaking! This could go up at any time!"

"Officer," a man standing on the pavement called. "Do you need any help getting them out?"

"There's no one in the vehicle! Keep back!" Martel saw him reach in and remove a pistol from where it had fallen onto the headliner. Then the officer moved back away as fast as he could. He was searching the desert, looking for the occupants of the car. Martel's eyes were also

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scanning... Not a sign of movement and no place to hide. Strange!

The car lay dead with its wheels in the air, dripping gasoline and engine oil into the red soil. In the heat, the whole area reeked of gasoline. Martel decided that the car probably wouldn't burn, not now after it had come to rest. The chances of electrical shorts or an explosion caused by a hot manifold lessened by the minute. He hoped it wouldn't explode. There must be evidence in there...

The policeman asked if anyone had a cell phone. "I'm off duty. Just happened to be going...home," he said under his breath. He looked down the row of parked cars, and stood staring at the dark gray Toyota. "That's what I thought I saw!" he observed, talking to himself. A woman handed him her cell phone.

"Listen folks, I'll call this in. Please don't any of you leave. I need some information and... I'll be quick and get you safely on your way."

Like most cops, he was polite and disarming... 'Disarming,' Martel thought. 'He saw them shoot at me! He has the pistol.' Where had they gone? There were at least two of them in the Lumina... One driving while one leaned out and put a bullet through Misty's car, barely missing him...certainly not missing him on purpose.

The patrolman started his questioning at the first car that had pulled over. "What did you see?" Martel stood to one side and listened.

"Lots of dust. I saw that car pass a smaller gray car. Then, he... Well, he kinda spun around and rolled. I think the guy in the truck ahead of me helped them, but I had to get my car stopped and off the road...and the dust! I was afraid I'd get hit." The patrolman turned to the next driver.

"Nope. Didn't see nothin' but dust and the car was in the ditch. That's all I seen, officer. Can I go?"

The third driver had seen a gray Toyota spin around and jam its way into the westbound lane. Then he had been forced to stop when the cars ahead of him slowed

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down. That's when the dust cleared and he saw the car on its top.

The Patrolman turned. Martel nodded and gave a little sweeping motion with his head. The cop understood.

"Okay folks. I have your accounts and your vitals... I don't think you want to stay around here any longer. Thank you!"

He turned to Martel. "I know you...or I should."

"Name's Martel. I live in Sedona."

"Marshal Cain, right? You were with him when they removed the body of the accountant from the canyon. More than a year ago, but that's right isn't it?"

"I was. I remember seeing you there."

"Start at the beginning... I saw most of it."

Martel told it like it had happened. The Patrolman, Sikes, his name tag said, gave him a look that suggested that Martel was not telling all.

"They tried to kill me. I can't believe it was a drive-by. I honestly don't have a clue as to why. I think they had a backup... A panel truck, the one that pulled out just as I drove up."

"I saw the truck, and I caught a glimpse of three men standing near it. I told dispatch when I called this in. They should be able to apprehend them in Sedona."

"Son," Patrolman Sikes reached over and squeezed Martel's arm. "That was no drive-by! Where did they pick you up?"

"Sounds dumb, but I was processing information from a meeting I just came from in Prescott. I wasn't paying attention."

"The panel truck... Backup I think, in case the first guys missed. The wreck changed their plans. That doesn't mean they won't try again. Martel, you must know why. Why not tell me and let us help protect you? You have family? Think about them!"

Martel was thinking of his family. He was almost petrified with fear for them. "I need to get home and..."

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“You honestly don’t know...or are you thinking you can do this by yourself?”

“Officer, the only clue I have, and that is faint, is that this connects to a job I recently took on, a development project in Mexico. I can’t imagine that it...” He paused, his mind starting to work again. “Were those men near the panel truck...”

Sikes cut him off. “Mexican? Maybe. They were of medium height, darker complexions... dressed as laborers would be... That’s as far as I can go.”

“You mean because you can’t profile?”

“No. I mean because that description fits a lot of people. They could have been Italians...Vietnamese. You understand? Anyway Martel, they’ll have already apprehended them. There’s no way they can get through Sedona.”

‘Not unless they know the back roads,’ Martel thought.

Martel used his ‘lean back time’ to make plans. The panel truck had turned up well hidden behind some junipers on the Red Rock Loop Road not far from Red Rock Crossing. There was sign that three men had gone up Carrol Canyon... If so, they would have come out in Sedona not far from the trailer park where laborers gathered waiting for odd jobs. They would have melded into Sedona’s work force.

There was no doubt that someone wanted him dead, and the would-be killers were free and wandering around town. But who were they? If they worked for Fowler or some of the ‘bad elements’ Meachington had referred to, why wouldn’t they wait until he was in Mexico? From what he surmised, it would be a lot easier to “off” someone there. The fact that they hit him here... Maybe it had something to do with the Prophet Canyon Project? No, no one wanted him; he hadn’t been that visible. If someone wanted to get even for that bust-up they’d go after Arnie Cain. He was the marshal that busted them. A light went on in Martel’s head. ‘Arnie and Susan. Good idea!’ He

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went into the bedroom and sat in front of the desk he used as an office, picked up the phone and dialed.

“Susan! Listen...” he kept his voice as low as possible. He didn’t want Misty to know he had called the Cains. “I need a favor. I need to get Misty and David out of here for a week or so. Fact is, I’m working on a project and I fear that the opposition might harm my family. Understand? I don’t want to scare Misty. Can you... Will you invite her to Colorado... Call her. Make up some story. Tell her you need her now! Get her up there, like tomorrow?”

Chapter 10

She came out of the water, swirling her hair about to shed the water, her body lithe and full, her breasts as round and voluptuous as the moon in its present phase.

THE WIND BLEW cold from the land. The water she had put out for the stray dog that had adopted them froze solid in the shallow dish. It was cold and very dry... It had been for a long time. The storms that brought moisture in the winter months --- the moisture that replenished the little seep where they got their drinking water --- had passed, leaving only a powder of snow across the dunes. Lack of moisture was hardly noticed in this desert. Things looked the same, but Serina knew they were not.

When the tide was out and the estuary mud glimmered with the reflections from a thousand little pools, she made her way down the dune to the seep. Water still oozed from it...not enough to fill her *olla* before the tide returned. She stood, easing the pain in her lower back by placing both hands on her hips and pushing into the soft tissue with her thumbs. Looking around, she observed that everything looked the same as it had the day her father and she had first come here so many sun circles ago. Everything was the same...but without water they would have to leave.

Marbrisa came across the dunes carrying a woven basket full of clams. Serina smiled and felt the warm comfort of love. Marbrisa was as wild and free as any human could be. She had never known pain or great hunger. The worst thing she had dealt with in her life so far was when Stefano left. She had moped around for a long time. When that passed, she seemed to be unchanged. But Serina knew that being alone without a man was unnatural. Marbrisa was older now than she had been when her father died... How could that be? What was time, and how could it make her forget? She wondered if

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her father's spirit was still near the dunes... When they had gone back looking for the boat, she could not find the place. The boat was covered with sand or...someone had taken it. Her father lay... No. He was with her and she sensed his presence and support. What she had buried was not important.

"The clams over on that side are big!" Marbrisa announced as she sloshed them in sea water to get the mud off. "Do we have enough fresh water to purge them? If not, I'll go down and get clear water from the estuary."

Serina shook her head. "The seep won't provide for us until it rains again."

"We can carry water... I mean, we can go to where they are building those houses and fill our *ollas*."

"And then? We would have to do that often. It's a long way, and why would they give us water? They have to have it trucked in." Serina felt the cold of an old enemy, fear, in the pit of her stomach.

"If we don't try... We will have to move into town."

"We... The *ejido*. If we leave it they might take it away from us. The attorney Ramirez said somebody had to live here all the time. We must meet with the others and see if they can help."

They had gone from house to house locating the women who were part of the *ejido*. There was nothing anyone could do. Then, one of the women remembered seeing the man, Angel Ramirez, who had helped the engineer set up the *ejido*. He had an office near the Catholic church.

"Yes, *Señora*, I do remember you! And this young lady? This is your daughter...who has benefited from the passing years more than either of us has." He laughed and lowered his head. His hair was gray and the years had pulled much out of him. He remembered Serina's gray eyes and... He had always been attracted to her. There was something...

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“This is a dry time. The water we use is not enough until it rains again.” Serina wasn’t sure he understood. “We will have to leave the *ejido* if we can’t find a way to get water.”

“*Señora*, the land is becoming valuable. You see the houses they are building on the dunes west of you? Some say that the dunes will fill with houses all the way to... Even past your *ejido*. I don’t know... But if you leave, then others can take the land. You must find a way to keep someone there all the time...and you must let others know that someone is always there. There must be a record. I’ll help you.” The thought of having her around to observe was pleasing to him.

As he started to explain what they needed to do, a young man came into the office. He was straight and thin, resembling his father. Serina smiled at Ramirez. “Your son is you again.”

“He is my son! You see the resemblance! Adolfo, these are women from the *ejido* way out past the middle estuary. I helped them once...”

Adolfo was staring at Marbrisa... She stood and couldn’t keep her eyes from his.

“Adolfo? Son? I’m... Marbrisa, forgive his manners. Marbrisa?” He was aware that the two were not listening.

“Serina. It seems our children are...”

Serina had never seen Marbrisa act this way. She sensed the energy of their mutual attraction and smiled.

Adolfo broke away and turned to his father. Only minutes had passed since he came into the room...he felt his life had changed. “Papa, sorry. Her name is Marbrisa?”

The old attorney was not amused. Adolfo had run with a wild crowd and he had feared that he would lose him. Now, he had his son back and a promise that he would have a partner. More than anything, he wanted grandchildren. But... His son should marry well, marry up in class. An attorney needed the right connections. This girl was not right for his son. She was part Seri and...she would never know her Cucapá father. He knew nothing of

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Serina's years as a slave. The girl was beautiful in a wild and hungry way, like her mother. Serina still had that special look... He felt his own blood stir. 'My God, more problems?' He thought. Adolfo was focused on the girl. His father winced.

"Serina, you will have to buy water. No matter where, it is not free. To buy water you will have to earn *pesos*. I have a friend who needs vendors. On the weekends and on holidays you walk along the beach and sell things to the tourists. You can make a little money that way... And then you can buy water and carry it back home with you. You and Marbrisa can take turns selling... That way you will always have someone at the *ejido* and I can record that."

"They speak American. How can we sell to them?"

"Don't worry. The man I know will show you how...He'll teach you both."

"Papa, they have to buy from the vendor...they must first buy what they sell."

"Usually. But I can handle that. He... I'll handle that!"

"They play rough! The work is hard, trudging along all day in the deep sand under the hot sun. They must carry big loads. It's very hard work!"

"Adolfo is right, Serina. It is very hard! But is there any other way you can earn what you need? I don't think so."

When they were back out in the cold wind and dusty streets, Marbrisa came close and hugged her mother as they walked. "He is handsome, don't you think?"

Serina knew in her heart that she should keep quiet. Yet, a parent must warn her child... A parent has obligations. "Marbrisa, he is from another world. He will be an attorney like his father. You can not be the wife a man like him needs. You have met so few men... There are others you will feel as strongly attracted to."

"No!" It came out more like a cry. "I don't think so... This is something... I have one chance to find true love, mother...and you know that there is only one chance for me!"

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"I don't know that! What I know is that his world is beyond you. Let it be!"

They walked on, without speaking. Marbrisa knew that her mother was right...and then the pain came again. The emptiness of all those years alone. The sense of loss. It made no sense, but she wanted to see him again and find out what those feelings meant. She knew...but she didn't. She ached with feelings she didn't know she could have.

"I don't know why I feel this way Serina." She called her mother Serina when they talked as equals. "Did you and Catal...was it like that for you? But you had me, and that made it easier, right?"

Serina looked down and took a deep breath. Marbrisa had always assumed that Catal was her father. "Not at first. Then... Well, yes. But when I knew he would not come back...that was when I felt as I think you do now."

"But I don't feel a loss... I've found something I need."

"No. It's the fear of loss that is the same... Marbrisa, you met him and what is driving you is the fear of losing him."

It took awhile, but she understood. "It's awful. But Serina, what can I do?"

"It is already decided... You are committed to finding out. I think he is too. His father is a good man, but he is not your friend. He sees reality and he wants something else for his son."

"I felt that. Adolfo won't look for me. He knows that I don't fit into his world. I don't like it! It hurts, but I understand." Her voice was filled with sadness. "I'll be with you and we'll keep the *ejido*." She laughed, a silly, hollow laugh. "He made me tingle... All over even... You know?"

"Know that for what it is! That's nature's way of making it easy for us to reproduce. I want you to know it! To feel it! I want you to have a man, children. A man who can love you and be with you. Now that we must come to the village, you will meet many men."

C. Descry

They were too weak to carry loads of blankets. Pepe loaded them and watched them try to walk. “No! No! You’ll have to sell trinkets and... Here, carry these!” He thrust a basket full of objects wrapped in newspaper at Serina. “See, each is a plate or a thing to hang from the ceiling. These are little puppets. This goes around a wrist. Look over here! These are carved by the Seri from ironwood. This stuff is what you will have in your baskets. Here, you must learn these prices! That’s what they cost you! Then, you sell them for more... That’s what you keep. *Comprende?*”

He went through the articles and had them each say the price until he was certain they understood. “This is what you will take! This is what you owe me...he wrote a number down in a ledger. You are very fortunate to have such a good friend as Angel Ramirez. But you must pay me this amount! Sell these things and keep your share...if you are clever and learn to work the tourists. Always I must be paid!”

At first Serina believed that her life of freedom was over. She imagined that every other day she would trudge the miles to the tourist beaches and then walk up and back in the sand selling things she could not imagine anyone would want. Then other vendors explained to her that the beaches were almost deserted when the weather was too hot, late *Junio, Julio, Agosto, Septiembre*, or too cold, late *Noviembre, Diciembre* and *Enero*. In the between times, the tourists came on weekends, which she didn’t understand, and holidays.

The vendors were preparing for the coming month, *Marzo*. “The campgrounds and the beaches will be full of people who come here for spring break,” a vendor who sold heavy blankets told her. She didn’t understand, but she and Marbrisa prepared themselves. One of the women who had signed the *ejido* papers agreed to stay out at the estuary while they worked. They would sleep near a deserted concrete shrimp tank back on the dunes where

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they had buried dried fish, bread, blankets, and an *olla* they kept filled with water.

In *Abril*, after the Easter break, Serina decided that there was no need for both of them to work each weekend. She worked Friday, Saturday and Sunday, then, after settling with Pepe, she left the unsold goods at his store and trudged home with as much water as she could carry. The next weekend, Marbrisa did the same. The most difficult part for each was the nights alone near the tank on the dunes.

Marbrisa was making her way along the beach, her headstrap tight with the weight of the net bag. It contained ceramics and puppets, trinkets and, this week, lacy table covers that came from the south. The wind had kept people off the beach and the opportunities she had to stop and show her goods were limited. Her feet hurt... The sand worked its way into her sandals and wore sores under the straps. She looked back when he called. Adolfo was hurrying to catch up with her.

“Will you sell a poor man some carvings?” He was smiling, obviously pleased that he had found her. “I came last week and the week before... I don’t know where you were.”

“She was so happy to see him that she stopped and let her burden fall to the sand. Her forehead was marked with a red welt from the strap. Her hair was windblown and unkempt. She smoothed the worn cotton blouse, tucking it into her pleated skirt.

“Why would you look for me?”

“Because of the way you looked at me. Why not?” He paused and their eyes locked. “You bother me... I want to find out why.”

Marbrisa felt her heart pounding. The wind was cool, but her face...her whole body was hot. “You should not be here. Your father...”

“He is a wise old man. Once I ignored him... Now? I must listen to him. He wants what is best for me.”

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“And I can not be...” she paused, barely able to think the words let alone say them, “what is best for you.”

“In that part of my life, no.”

“And is there another part?”

“We could create one... I have, already in my mind.”

“You would walk the beach selling with me?”

“No. Of course not! But we could have a place to meet and...be friends.”

He helped her to her feet. “Marbrisa, all I think about is you. Do you think about me?”

His speech was awkward and he seemed shy. He stared at her, never turning from her eyes.

“I’m a woman who is part of the sea, only that. I do not understand your world and I don’t think I want to. But...”

“My father has received my promise that I would not visit the place where you live. I want to, but I cannot.”

“And your mother?”

“Dead. A long time now with God. I still miss her.”

“You are all he has?”

“An only child. You understand why I must not hurt him.”

“I would not hurt my mother. I understand. So we pass on the beach and you buy a trinket to remember me...”

“I have *pesos*. Here!” He dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of worn notes. “I’ll buy them, but I want you to take care of them for me... Will you?”

“You don’t have to give me anything. Your *pesos* are water, that’s all.” She could tell he didn’t understand. “Walk with me and talk about your life. You do things I can not even imagine. Tell me about Adolfo the Attorney who will marry well and become powerful and famous.”

“And you? Can you tell me what it is to live so close to the sand? So close to the sea? Are you also close to God?”

He reached over and put his arm around her waist, pulling her toward him. Their eyes locked again until he was too close...their eyes closed.

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“You taste salty and fresh. You smell of the sea. Your hair...” He tensed and pulled away. “I can not take this!”

She could see tears in his eyes as he spun away and crossed the sand to a wall where he turned, blew her a kiss, and disappeared, over and away.

The afternoon passed too slowly. Marbrisa trudged down the beach and then back again, unable to sell anything to the few people who braved the wind. The sun was setting and far across the sea she could see the mountains of what they called Baja. It was almost evening when she let her burden down on the sand near the tank and fell to her knees next to it. Why? Why had he come when he knew there was no way they could ever be together? Her heart was heavy. She was so alone, so tired, so...she needed comforting: the waters of the sea. Standing, she peeled out of her blouse and let her skirt fall around her feet. It was twilight now, almost dark. The glow in the east told her the moon, not quite full, would rise soon. The high tide was lapping at the shell beach. She walked into the water and let it soothe her body as it eased the terrible loneliness that numbed like dread. The waters cradled her and waved her body with gentle motion, loosening it. She almost slept, but knew better. The water pulled the heat from her and she felt her skin tighten with the chill.

The moon was peeking out from under the sea, its glow more white than silver. The rolling water fractured reflections, and the eddies made by her passing looked like a sea-bound milky way. She came out of the water, swirling her hair about to shed the water, her body lithe and full, her breasts as round and voluptuous as the moon in its present phase. She heard him gasp, and smiled as if she knew he would be there.

Time passed, as if that mattered. Mother and daughter took their turns walking as vendors, for water. The time the Americans called Thanksgiving came with its crowds and

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passed with cool windy days. Black clouds formed off to the northwest. And then it rained for two days, a hard, driving rain received like it wasn't wanted. The dune plants turned dark, their stems black with soaking. The dunes themselves darkened, and passed the rain through.

It was cold inside the little enclosed *palapa* where Serina and Marbrisa huddled close to a tiny fire whose smoke did not want to go outside. It curled into a cloud that hung between their heads and the old corrugated steel panels that formed the roof.

Few people would be on the beaches now until the time called Christmas. There would be no need to trudge and sell if the little spring started to flow again. Serina should have been happy about that... But she would miss her secret time with Angel. He needed her, and she knew she needed him, although there was no way they could ever be seen together.

Pepe rented Angel a small room that Angel fixed up with furniture and a soft bed. She would arrive to pick up the burden of things to sell that Pepe selected. Pepe would send word to Angel. If Angel could get away from his office, he came, or he sent word back arranging a later time or conveying an apology. Pepe offered her coffee and small cakes while she waited. He was deeply into Angel's debt, and truly cared about the old attorney. He told Serina that she was the best thing that had happened to him since his wife died. "Serina, he will live a long time now!"

When Angel came, they would shut themselves into the room and renew their friendship, talking, grooming and petting until they succumbed to the pleasures they found in each other.

She could never tell Marbrisa about her time with Angel, because Angel had forbidden any relationship between Adolfo and Marbrisa. And although Marbrisa seemed to have forgotten Adolfo, and he her, the parents knew that a forbidden love is never forgotten. So, in secret, they met often. When he finally slipped back to his office to catch up with his busy schedule, Serina would

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come out to find that Pepe had lightened her burden and that she only had a few things to sell as she ran the gauntlet of tourists.

“Marbrisa, even if the spring flows, I plan to keep working for Pepe. Do you mind?”

“Marbrisa let out a sigh that was obviously relief. “Serina...Mother... I have some things I want to buy. I was going to ask you if I could keep working.” In her mind, she pictured Adolfo standing waiting for her in the tiny house he had found for them. She could never give him up... and now, she didn’t have to. “I don’t mind selling things to the Americans. Not all of them are mean. I would like a dress and...”

“Sandals. You must take better care of your feet!”

“Angel has gone to Mexico City,” Pepe announced. “He was called away and had no choice.”

“How long?”

“A week....more. There is much that he must do while he is there. Those in the capitol are looking at the *frontera* now. Sonora is gaining population and there are many resources.”

The burden was heavy. Pepe had more ironwood carvings than he could sell in the store, and he hoped she could sell them. He lowered the prices and told her to get rid of them. She went back and forth along the beach between the rocky point and a new trailer park named Playa de Oro. The beach was crowded and she was able to sell most of the carvings. Tired, she dropped off the remainder at Pepe’s and started the long walk home, head down, legs cramping, her spirit low. She had counted on being with Angel. His unexpected absence troubled her...nagged at her as if some message was trying to get through.

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Chapter 11

And do you think the sea is dying? Many marine biologists believe that it is too resilient to die.

AMERICANS WERE BUILDING houses along the coast, changing the dunes. Now, she thought, the dunes with lines of white houses looked like a jaw. The empty lots were missing teeth. The area was called Las Conchas. Far down Las Conchas, on the rolling dune, she could see the white walls of a building that looked tall and important. It was a landmark that she and Marbrisa used as their quarter-way marker. She was still miles from home. There were a few places past Las Conchas where roads had been cut in and people were building along the edges of other estuaries and the sea. She recalled Angel's warning that soon others would covet their estuary and the *ejido* land.

The tide was going out. She could walk easily on the packed sand and rocks. Now that the rains had fed the little seep, she wasn't carrying the usual burden of water back to their *ejido*. Yet, she was tired. She knew she had to stop and rest, but trudged on, anxious for Marbrisa's company.

Ahead, Serina saw a human shape crouched near a glimmering tide pool. She stopped and studied it, walked closer. Stopped again. The shape moved and she could see a woman moving slowly along the edge of the pool. She imagined it was someone she knew, hunting octopus. As she came closer she realized the woman was young...a stranger. The way the woman was dressed suggested she was not Mexican.

The woman hadn't seen her... Serina thought about leaving the packed sand and passing above, but curiosity made her continue on her path. As she approached, she observed that the young woman had long dark hair tied

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back exposing a sunburned face. She was wearing pants with short legs and a pull-over faded cotton poncho like the tourists bought. Serina stopped about ten feet from the woman---really a girl about the same age as Marbrisa. The stranger was so focused, staring into the depths of the tidal pool, that she had no awareness of Serina's presence. Serina had never seen anyone but Marbrisa study the tidal pools that way. She watched the stranger reach into the water and remove a...a snail, which she held gently, turning it and studying it. Some people ate snails, but this girl wasn't gathering, she was studying... She made a soft noise, deep in her chest. The girl started.

"*Señorita!* I did not mean to startle you."

The girl looked up, carefully placed the snail back into the water, and stood. Serina noted her beauty, her figure, and the blush the sun had left on her face.

"I don't want to buy anything right now. Have you walked all the way from town? Are there people who you sell to out here?" Her Spanish was good, but her speech had a soft, slurring rhythm that Serina couldn't identify.

Serina smiled. "No. I am not selling now. I'm going home."

"To the east? You live...?"

"A long way. On the Estuary of Life, still a long walk from here. You were looking at a snail...why?"

"I'm studying them... Two kinds. I want to know about them. I'm from the University of Arizona. I'm here doing research." She watched Serina's face to make certain that she understood.

"And you look into the pool like...like we do?"

"It's full of life! If I had time, I would study every creature that lives in there."

"Why?" Serina was intrigued.

"I want to understand the sea, I guess. I am getting a degree in marine biology--sea life--living organisms... sea things." She noted that Serina seemed to understand. "I'm recording what I learn so others can know..."

"Why?"

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“Because we don’t know much about this sea...and, well, it is changing. Things are happening that are changing the sea, and little things like these snails? Well, we don’t know what will happen to them because we don’t know what part they play.”

“And you think it is important that people know? They were here long before people came.” There was a suggestion of incredulity in her voice.

“Oh yes! Because we ‘people’ are changing the sea.”

Serina stood staring, processing her find.

“I’m Serina. I have a daughter about your age. Her name is Marbrisa. We are part of the sea... We study it like you do, I think.” She smiled and looked down. “It is changing! I have seen it change. The *totoaba* are gone. The green turtles are gone. The shrimp are fewer. The little friends...the *vaquita* have almost disappeared. Once, a long time ago, I lived where the red river flowed into the sea. Then the Americans built dams...I was there when the whole area dried up and...my family...my children and my husband died as a result. My father and I fled...Do you learn about that?”

“We have, a little. I would like to understand a lot more. Right now, I am supposed to study snails...until I get my degree.” She paused and smiled at the tall lithe woman with sea-deep gray eyes. This woman was friendly...she had information... She had suffered? Lost her family? No, she knew nothing of that, but she felt deep empathy.

“Serina. What a pretty name. My name is Margaret. Margaret Scott.”

Angel stayed in Mexico City for a long time. He wrote Pepe and told him to explain to Serina about politics and delays. Pepe simply told her that Angel Ramirez could not come home until his work was finished.

Without Angel, there was no reason to go to town, so Serina decided to look for Margaret Scott, who she knew was staying at the big white building. The young woman intrigued her as Stefano had. Both were hungry for

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information about life. Margaret was not married, and like Marbrisa, she would rather spend her days looking into the water and writing things down in her notebooks than going into town or laying on the beach sunbathing for men.

Margaret asked her why the estuary she lived on was called the Estuary of Life, and Serina explained. Margaret sat staring at her, nodding and thinking.

“You have described something that many scientists are not yet able to see. You know that the estuary is where life starts and that each season brings new creatures to spawn...”

“The estuary and the sea are connected. The estuary is like a woman’s womb. The sea is male and female. In its parts, it is what is necessary to make life.”

“And the *vaquita*? Do they come into the estuary to breed?”

“I have never seen them breeding but, in sheltered places where the water is deep, I have seen them with their little ones. They do not come from eggs, they are born alive. The fishermen call them harbor porpoises. They eat the little fish that come from the estuary. Now, the only ones we see are dead---drowned by the fishermen in their nets and thrown away to wash up on the beach.”

“And the *totoaba*?”

“They are gone! When I was a girl, many people came here and killed the *totoaba* for the *buche*, the swim bladder. They had been doing that for many years. They left the rest to rot. In the place where the red water mixed with the sea, we saw many of them spawning---so many big fish! That place is gone now...”

“And the birds?” Margaret asked.

“The pelicans are dying. Look along the beach. Many dead birds wash up. Once, there were so many pelicans that the sky was black with flights of them. There are more gulls now, many more than I can remember, but they will eat anything.”

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“They say it is because of the weather... I mean the temperature of the sea caused by weather. That change kills the fish the pelicans feed on, they become weak and die.”

“The weather changes, but birds can fly to other places... I think it is because man takes their food... Or the food something else eats and that causes...” She paused, organizing her thoughts. It had been years since she expressed herself in her discussions with Stefano. “Margaret, what Marbrisa and I know is that all things are connected. You cannot lose one and keep another.”

“And do you think the sea is dying? Many marine biologists believe that it is too resilient to die.”

“The changes are for all to see. If it changes too much, then we die.”

“Are your people trying to stop the damage?”

“My people? I have no people. Those who live here are not connected. They come from all over. They believe the sea will always provide. Until it stops providing, they will not listen.”

“That’s the problem! Listen to whom? There is no one who really knows what is happening. No one to tell them... And, there is no hard information... Serina, I mean what we call ‘scientific proof,’ that this is happening. You understand? --- information from years of observing and recording everything from sea temperatures to fish counts. No one is trying to get that baseline information and protect the sea. No one is talking to the fishermen and getting their observations down as a record. No one protects the estuaries and the spawning beds. No one wants to admit that the American dams have destroyed so much, not that they would do anything about them now. No one wants to deal with this, so everyone ignores it.”

“Then, it is like my friend Stefano said. We will destroy so much that we can not recover.”

They shared Margaret’s lunch of *tortillas*, beans and eggs, and talked about creatures that few knew existed. Margaret told her of research projects that were underway.

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More than anything, she was in awe that this uneducated, sheltered Indian woman knew so much about the sea, and had such a good grasp of what scientists are only now labeling the 'whole systems approach' to scientific studies.

They met often after that, until it was time for Margaret to go north again to the university. Angel was still in Mexico City. He had been gone more than the cycle of the moon, and Serina feared the loneliness that would follow Margaret's leaving. For their last time together, she brought fresh clams and strips of salted sea trout. Margaret met her on the beach by the biggest tidal pool and they sat on barnacle encrusted rocks and ate together.

"Margaret, you will leave and forget about this place."

"I have no choice. I must finish my graduate work and find a job. I would love to stay here, but for me, it is not possible."

"But you will come back. These people at the white building, what you call the Desert Development people... Why can't they help you stay?"

"Because I must have money... If I am to do what I want, I must work in my profession and write papers and..."

"And not do what is in your heart?"

Margaret looked down at the tiny shells in the sand. "Even if I had all the money I needed to live, there is no way one person, especially a woman from another country, could change what is going wrong here, or even start. It would be like moving a whole world over the objections of those who refuse to understand."

"They would oppose you?"

"Some would be so threatened that they would attack what I was doing and drive me out."

"If you weren't alone?"

"Maybe then...but Serina, what man would understand? The way I feel---the commitment I might make is not one anyone in their right mind would share."

C. Descry

Chapter 12

Just then the plane dropped about three feet into a small air pocket, jerked up again as the surfaces bit in, and continued on its course. Martel looked over. Meachington was out cold! "Men don't faint," Martel said, bewildered.

TER MARTEL LOADED the diaper bag into the rental car and slammed the door. He would soon be separated from the two people he needed most in the world and he would be alone again. Misty came through the house and into the garage.

"Ter, open the garage door! It's hot and dark in here."

He nodded and smiled. "Okay, let's say goodbye first."

She wasn't buying it. "Who are we hiding from?"

"Nothing gets past you. Okay, this Mexico thing? Well, there is someone out there that doesn't want me to do it. They know where we live and... Honey, I may be overly cautious but... I don't want them bothering you. I leave for Mexico later today. Thank goodness Cains called and want you in Colorado. Now I won't have to worry about you. Besides, I'll join you in a week. Ready to go?"

Martel looked both ways down and up the street as he opened the garage door. The police car was in position near the corner. Another car that he knew belonged to the police was in a driveway at the other end of the block. If anyone was watching the house... If anyone tried to follow Misty's rental van, the police would know and deal with them.

Misty backed out into the bright sunlight. She blew Ter a kiss and was off. Ter closed the garage door and leaned against the interior door jamb. The feeling of emptiness was debilitating. He shook his head and walked quickly into the living room, pulled the curtain back and looked out the window. The street was empty, all three cars were on

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their way. The unmarked car would tail Misty until they were certain she was safe.

Martel had some serious thinking to do. They had tried once and failed. 'An attack would come suddenly,' he thought. 'They would be effective only if they could get in, get him, and get away fast. That approach had failed on the highway, but not by more than an inch. Two inches closer and it would all be over... 'All what would be over?' he thought hard. 'Who were they? The police didn't have a clue, and they believed that he was withholding information. What information? What did he know? Why was he a threat? Because he was going to list opportunities and constraints for a development project in Mexico? That couldn't be it...' He went into the bedroom and picked up the phone.

"Meach. Yesterday some Mexican guys took a shot at me... You know anything I don't?"

"Oh my God!"

Martel filled him in on the details. He never mentioned Misty. "So why hit me here? Why not wait until I got to Mexico?"

"Probably not Mexicans... Nationals, I mean...if you say they looked like Latinos. Ter, ever wonder where the money comes from?"

"I assumed that... Meach, I just started on this. Fill me in!"

"You think banks and finance companies, right?"

"Sure."

"An international investment? An investment in Mexico? How do they get their money out if the thing goes belly up or politics change things?"

"No way! Of course! The money has to come from people who can protect their investment...right?"

"Fowler's strange bedfellows have that kind of money. Don't ask me anything more about them because I really don't know. All I know is that they have money they can invest---hell, want to invest---out of the country."

C. Descry

“And I could mess that up for them?”

“And they kill people that get in their way! At least we can now assume they do.”

“So, the solution is easy. I’m off the case! I don’t need this...this kind of shit! Sorry, but I...”

Meachington interrupted him. “You’re not out of it! Think about it! The word is out on you. They have already committed their troops. In or out, you’re a target.” He paused and came back easy. “Man, I never dreamed... Please understand that I never imagined that you would be in danger. I thought I might be, but... But you?”

Martel held the phone away from his ear, thinking. Neither spoke for a long minute. Then Meachington’s voice blasted through the receiver.

“Martel, I have a plan! I just figured one out and it’s a doozie! Can’t tell you over the phone, not secure...We need to meet! Listen, you come here... No, not here, to Phoenix I mean. Call me from wherever you feel is safe. Call me at this number... No, it’s not safe to call here. I’ll call you at... Why don’t you stop by the Sedona police headquarters. I’ll leave a number for you there. I’ll call from a pay phone and give them the number for you to call. Then, call me when you get into Phoenix. I join you and...and I have a plan that should get us clear of all this.”

“Meach, this sounds like a Ludlum plot.”

“Just do it Martel! I need you and you need me to get clear of this thing.”

Martel was shaking. He knew it was a normal reaction to fear, especially his wrenching fear for Misty and David. He let himself get angry. He had learned that anger made him effective. It got him separate from emotions that sapped his energy and paralyzed him. Anger was good! Anger pushed things away to where he could look at them objectively. He used his fear to feed his anger. Then cooled, and got effective.

No more drive-by opportunities for them! He called the glass company to see if they had repaired the Toyota and

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found that they had to order the glass. He needed wheels to get to the Sedona airport... He punched in the number of the Sedona Police Department, identified himself, and got the number Meachington had called in. Then he talked to the detective working his case, told him that he needed to get to the airport, and suggested that they could talk on the way.

He called the airport and reserved a 172. Renting the plane was easy as he had an account. He flew often.

The Cessna was older, well maintained, familiar. He did his walk around and went through his check sheet, then breathed a sigh of relief. No one had followed them up the steep hill to the airport, and no one suspicious was around.

He would fly into Phoenix International --- 'No,' he thought, 'that's what they would expect---if they even know I'm flying.' He formed a plan. 'I'll call Meachington on my cell phone before I land and have him meet me in the terminal at Scottsdale Airport, because...?' He thought hard. 'I'll tell him that I don't know Phoenix well...that the airpark is easy to get to from Sedona and that it is a very public place. Good!'

"It will work!" Martel said softly, complimenting himself on the plan. Meachington would not know how he was arriving, or that he would pick him up and their meeting would take place high above the desert. If Meachington did know he was flying and not driving, then Martel would know who his enemy was... If everything jived, he could drop Meachington off at an airport of his choosing. No one following either of them would know where. It seemed like a good plan... He hadn't counted upon Meachington's reaction.

He made his way into the terminal and saw Meachington coming toward him.

"You made good time Meach," Martel said as they shook hands. "Were you followed?"

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"I honestly don't know. I did some turns and stuff... I parked in close and... I don't think so, but..."

"Let's go!" He turned and headed back the way he had come, Meachington close on his heels.

"What's out here? Where are we?"

Martel decided that the man didn't know he had flown down. Good! "My plane. We're out of here!"

Martel had never seen a man become airsick before entering a plane, but Meachington was suddenly green and dripping sweat. He made his way to a nearby trash can and retched into it, his head below the rim. He retched again, and pushing up with his hands, stood, and fished a white handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped his mouth as Martel stepped back, grossed-out.

"I...I. Well, you see, I don't fly. I'm afraid of flying..."

Martel was stunned. He studied Meachington long enough to know that this was no act. Then, looking away, he caught sight of two Latino men dressed in jeans and patterned shirts coming their way. Meachington had been followed!

"Meach, you were followed! Those men... Let's go!"

He climbed into the 172 and ordered Meachington in. The man hesitated, looked around and saw the two Latinos coming up fast, got in and fumbled with the door latch.

Martel was focused on getting the plane turned and away. He saw the two men running toward them, put the wind in their faces, and got the plane onto the taxiway as he thumbed the mike and requested takeoff clearance from the tower.

"Behind my seat. There's an airsick bag. Use it!" Meachington got it just in time.

"That's Cave Creek down there."

"I can't look!"

"We're safe! Relax and enjoy! There's no danger and you can get through this."

"I've never been in a plane before... As a kid, I always had this... What's that vibration?" He grabbed the seat

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between his legs with one hand and the door strap with the other.

“Nothing that shouldn’t be there. He reached forward and adjusted the fuel mixture. The engine changed pitch and he went to level flight.

“My God! Don’t stop the motor!”

“Listen! Everything is fine. Get hold of yourself! We are much safer here, now, than we would be back there... Or in a car, for that matter. Relax your body and overcome this!”

Meachington’s reply was lost as he retched into the bag for the second time. “Dry heavens...”

If he could get Meach talking... Get his mind off his fear. “They followed you! Were they after you or me? I think they would have taken you out someplace else, or before you came in. That means that they used you to get to me... Or maybe they want to take us both out? Without you, whatever I do is meaningless.” He held the plane as still as he could and thanked his stars that they hadn’t hit any turbulence...or one of the air pockets that formed on hot summer days.

The man didn’t react. “Meach, if we were in a car, you would feel every bump in the road and every turn... Think of this as like being in a boat... You know? We hit waves and we slide through turns...”

“No, I can’t...that makes it worse!” His voice was weak, a whine.

Martel knew when he was licked. “Okay, we find someplace and land. Any suggestions?”

“Martel, I can’t... I can’t take it! Land? What’s that like...what if...? Oh my God!”

“If you stay loose, it won’t be bad.” Just then the plane dropped about three feet into a small air pocket, jerked up again as the surfaces bit in, and continued on it’s course. Martel looked over. Meachington was out cold! “Men don’t faint,” Martel said, bewildered.

C. Descry

Martel pulled the plane off the taxiway and cut the engine. The airport was busy. Most of the planes landing and taking off were ferrying skydivers. Several pilots were doing touch-an-go's, and a blue, World War II Navy Corsair came in behind him. He reached over and poked Meachington in the shoulder.

"What? Oh my God! We're down? We're really down?"

"I can't get out until you do!"

"Out? Really?" He fumbled with the door. Martel reached across and opened it for him.

"Martel, well, I'm sorry. I never flew before. Really, that wasn't so bad!"

"Of course not! Meach, I think you should wait awhile before you go up again." His passenger paled and reached for the bag.

Martel secured the plane and closed his flight plan. "Let's go over to that little place..." He pointed to an area with vending machines and several picnic tables.

"I can rent a car and get back?"

Martel almost laughed. "You can? Yeah, that's what you should do. But first, I want to hear your plan."

They sat in the shade and tried to ignore the heat. Meachington slowly regained his color and composure.

"Look Martel, what do they fear?"

Martel started to answer...

"That you will show that their project is a...is not feasible, right? Then their whole scam would come unglued...Right?"

"So?"

"You write a good report. You know, all systems go!" Then I get the company clear somehow and convince Fowler that the deal is bad. We're out! It's over!"

"I lie?"

"No, you just say that seaside developments are desirable... that houses and condos are nice... That there is a demand for these properties... You don't lie, you just leave some things out.

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“That’s a lie...omission with the intent of deceiving.”

“So? That’s what they want. That’s what it will take to get them off our backs.”

“And?”

“That’s my problem. I hired you. I want that kind of report. You... You can’t do it, can you? Ethically, I mean. Well, what if I still want your full report? What if I need it to convince Fowler that the deal is cooked? What if...”

“You’re talking before you think it through. Ease-up man! Look, I can give you my list of opportunities. It’s not complete, but I can work on it. Then I keep digging and let the facts fall where they may. I could do that. If you want to release my opportunities list...get them off our backs, then good. You release it, but don’t imply that there are no problems. That might work... You understand, I’m either out or ethical! I do it all, just as you hired me to do.”

“Okay. Get me the list. I’ll show it to Fowler and I won’t tell him anything except that it came from you. Martel, I don’t like a lie, white or any other kind. Only, if there were another way... Think of one and I’ll go with it. You know I always try to be open and up front. This is an exception and I don’t like it any more than you do.”

“The problem is, my list of opportunities contains only one. *Demand*. Let’s think this thing through... If you show Fowler something, it should contain a list of positives, right?”

“Hey, that’s not hard. I can rattle them off.” He sat with his back straight, focused, seemingly recovered from his phobia.

“It’s good for the local building industry. It will create jobs for Pto. Peñasco residents. It will help defray the costs of building and maintaining the infrastructure, you know, roads, electricity, telephone, water and sewer. It will bring tourist dollars into the community. It will be a model for other developers. It will help support the International Airport. It will stabilize the dunes and help reduce beach erosion. It will provide year-round recreation... How’s that for a start?”

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"I've never been there and I know all you say is true. I'm writing."

"Oh," Meachington continued. "Taxes will support the schools and city government. Sound development will increase Mexico's credibility with international investors. Research will help determine the feasibility of de-salinization plants. The landscaping plans we develop will help establish plants that can thrive on sea water. Hey, and best of all, this will be a family resort, supporting family values."

"I've got writer's cramp! Meach, are you sure you need me? Isn't this stuff too generic? Will anyone believe it?"

"People hear what they want to hear... Sure, and the test is, is anything you've written down a lie?"

"No..." Martel looked back through the list. "Well maybe. That stuff about beach and dune erosion?"

"Leave it out."

"So what do you plan to do now Martel?"

"I have a call to make to Prescott. Then, I'm heading to Mexico. I'll need a car... I'll get one here... I'll need to buy one, cheap but dependable. I don't want a rental record...and I've been told that getting a rental into Mexico is hard. I can have the plane ferried back to Sedona. Cheaper than letting it sit here for a week or more."

"I'll get this list typed up and to Fowler today. Pressure should be off by tomorrow or the next day... If this works."

"Meach, is it drug money?"

"I don't know. There's lots of money washed out of businesses they own. Money that can't show up in the US... It's always been around... Been a problem the Feds and the IRS know more about than we ever will. But... well, maybe they are part of the problem."

When Meachington found a bus that went into the city, and was off in a cloud of black diesel smoke, Martel found a phone and called Doc Bridges in Prescott. Luckily, it was late in the day and he caught him at home.

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"Ted. Martel here. Listen. You mentioned a woman name of Scott. Tell me more about her."

He stood in the heat, first on one foot and then on the other as Bridges talked.

"Really? Your brother?"

"When were they married?"

"1985... At the Biosphere near Tucson. Wow!"

"Oh, so Margaret Scott, now Margaret Bridges had been working for the group out of the University of Arizona since 1980? And..."

"The university hired Dave---your brother---to work on the halophyte project? What in the blazes is that?"

"Plants?"

"Oh, tolerant of sea water. So how did he know about the sea?"

Martel moved about in the hot phone booth trying to get comfortable. Bridges had so much information he needed.

"So he had read Rachael Carson and..."

"Yeah, I understand. Like you, he loved the sea---the oceans."

"He was a teacher in Kansas?"

"You mean..."

"Oh, he joined the Teacher Corps. and served in rural Kansas. I know about it. So..."

"Then he was the Headmaster of an alternative school in Alabama? Okay Ted, you've got me. How did they meet?"

"Really! He came to Pto. Peñasco to see you..."

"I understand, head-over-heels in love."

"She was?"

"And he saw what she was doing and agreed to help her?"

"Sounds like an amazing combination of talents...It's a story like you read about in the best novels."

"Yeah, I'm on my way to Mexico now."

"What's it called?"

C. Descry

“IDS? The Institute of the Deserts and Sea. Okay, thanks. I’ll go there.

Chapter 13

You have nothing and everything... I think you will help us all.

SERINA WALKED HOME, certain that she would never see her friend again. Margaret was on her way back to Arizona and a life Serina could not even imagine. When she got to the estuary, she knelt down in the sand and watched the water stream by as it chased the low tide running back into the sea. It was the time of many small fish. A time when the estuary spilled them out across the sand bar and into the deep.

She lay on her side near the water, letting her hand touch the current. With her eyes closed, she imagined she was one of the fish... Then her awareness extended beyond her body and she felt connected with the sea. In her thoughts, she felt her way down the dry and hostile coast to Tiburon Island. Then turned and went out across the sea, floating with giant sea rays and schools of beautiful fish, easing her way across the great fault to its western shore.

She came to Baja, turned north and explored that desert coast until finally, she sensed the sands of the ancient delta of the great red river she had once been a part of. She felt her heart pumping and knew that her blood coursed like the water, and like the sea, carried the essence of life.

Her joining cleansed the loneliness from her. She knew her father's love and sensed the spirits of her children. They were all part of it...not really gone at all. She rolled over so that her face could touch the coolness... She could breathe the water in and become one with it... She felt peace and then...the water had run out of the estuary! She sat up, knowing how close she had come to joining those who had gone on. She realized that Marbrisa, Angel, and maybe Margaret, were the current of the life she still

C. Descry

had to live... The others were safe in forever and it was not time to join them.

Angel returned from Mexico City, filled with anxiety. She sensed his pain and waited for him to share his thoughts and feelings. He had been with men he despised. She knew that. They had wined him and courted him for his insights and connections. Few men knew the legal state of the *ejidos* on the northern frontier of Sonora as Ramirez did. Few men had the means to help the strangers take the lands away from the people... Few men could be used so easily.

"Adolfo is not happy in his marriage. It is my fault. Maria is spoiled and wants to live in Guadalajara or Mexico City. She demands fine things...things an attorney out here on the *frontera* can not give her. She threatens to take their children away with her. Her father---he's the reason I was in Mexico City---has told Adolfo that he must earn more or move to the south. He has many connections, evil men like him. He uses Maria, his own daughter, to force Adolfo and me to do things for him that we do not want to do."

"You knew he had to marry well. Perhaps he married too well?"

"It wouldn't have mattered, I know that now. Those in power are corrupt. It is our way...always has been. It is the curse that keeps prosperity from us all. It is the brutal side of the beast in each of us. Adolfo is an undemanding, loving son. I pushed him because I believed that... I thought it was right. I knew how they used their power, and I wanted him to be part of it. Instead, they use him and through him, me. I have hurt my son. He has never known true love. He has never been at peace...like you and I have found together, Serina. The commandment we are given is to honor thy father. But I have not done honorably by my son... Now he is at their mercy, and they have none!"

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Serina held him as tight as she could until she felt him relax and let the tension pass out. "You have done nothing but good. So much happens as we try to do what is right. Do men who don't try to do good...Angel, do they suffer too?"

"I don't think so, Serina. I don't know. Perhaps we suffer from doing things for or to, not with...know what I mean?"

She was certain that she did, although she had never been faced with that challenge. She tried to imagine doing something for or to Marbrisa and not with Marbrisa... That was not part of the way they were together. She held Angel tighter. In his world, that is the way things were done. How could he blame himself for being the way they were?"

Something was bothering Marbrisa. Serina sensed it one evening as Marbrisa came trudging through the sand, making her way home after a weekend selling on the beach.

"What's wrong? Did you sell many things today?"

"Enough. I'm just tired."

But the tiredness didn't go away. Marbrisa seemed sad and Serina found her sitting, staring into space.

"Marbrisa, I know something is wrong. Are you going to keep it from me?"

"Serina, I am almost forty years old, aren't I?"

"I think so. They call this time the '80s. You are in your thirties. Not forty yet. So what? Does it make a difference? Are you feeling bad?"

"I'm an old maid...that's what they call me. I have never been married and I have no children... I'm almost past the time of having children."

"Then you must find a man. You must know love! In the town...don't you meet men?"

"Some. But none who would live here... They would want me only to come and keep their houses and take care of their children. That's how old I am... The men are

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all married. Some have lost their wives. They look for someone to take care of them, not to love them... If I could.”

Marbrisa let sadness mantle her. She couldn't tell her mother about Adolfo, not even after all these years. Now, Adolfo had told her about Maria's demands. If she took the children and moved south, she knew he would follow. It was only a matter of time until Maria or her powerful father forced Adolfo to leave Pto. Peñasco. He knew it. She knew it. The sadness was devastating to both of them, and their time together was dulled by their impending separation.

Serina knew what she must do. “Marbrisa, you must move to the town. You must start a life of your own, away from this place. You must meet people and... Find a way to have a baby, the right way, through love.” She paused and reached over and placed her hand on her daughter's head. “It is past time... I have kept you here too long. I did it for good, but... I have thought about that. It is not good for you. You must go, I won't be far away and we will see each other often.”

Marbrisa sat, unable to reply. How could she find another man? Adolfo was everything she needed and wanted...but could not have. What if he left? He was leaving! She sensed it. Then?”

“Serina--Mama, let this time pass and then, I will think about what you say. Just not now...”

And time passed cloaked as seasons. Marbrisa saw it hiding in the wrinkles on Serina's face. And hiding in time, things happened.

They had come up from the seep, *ollas* filled with fresh water, when Marbrisa saw someone on the far beach walking toward the estuary. They took the water into the *palapa* and waited. Serina's eyes were no longer as sharp as Marbrisa's.

“It's a woman... I think she is alone. She stops often and looks at things.”

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“The tourists come from where the road ends and they park their campers.”

“Mother, I think it is the woman you know...the American student who lived in the big white building.”

Serina strained to see... “I’ll walk that way. Maybe she has returned.”

The tide was turning, and the waves were trying to get over the sandbar at the mouth of the estuary. The sky was filled with gulls, and dozens of small birds that searched the mud for food. Blue crabs were spidering their way up the estuary, ahead of the water.

The woman saw her and waved. She came closer and Serina’s joy came welling up from her heart. “Margaret... You did come back! Welcome to the Estuary of Life... Come, we will share some food and cool water. Marbrisa is here with me and as usual, she has many questions.”

“But what will you do here?” Marbrisa asked. “There are few jobs and you can not walk the beach and sell things.”

“I have some help from my family and friends, enough for now. They believe I can do something, start something, but no one knows what, exactly. If they will let me, I will go to the schools and teach the children about the sea. I will keep the field station open so that more scientists can come here and study. I can talk to fishermen and learn what they know... I don’t know, I can tell people the sea needs them... And that they need the sea.”

Serina smiled. “You have nothing and everything... I think you will help us all. Where will you live?” She wanted to ask Margaret to live with them.

“At the field station. That’s what I will be paid to manage. I want to continue my research. I want to be a scientist and make a contribution, and after a time I will go back to school and get my doctorate... That’s a high degree that says you have accomplished something for science.” She could tell that Serina didn’t understand.

C. Descry

“And you found someone to help you? Are you doing this thing alone?”

“No. I have good friends who will help, but no special one... You mean a man, right?”

“Marbrisa is also looking for a man. Maybe the two of you can go looking together.” Serina was pleased that she had the idea. Two women would feel safer... Marbrisa frowned at her.

Chapter 14

Marbrisa, the more dependent we become on supply systems and the farther we are removed from the sources of food---from the land and from the sea---well, if something should happen...almost all of us would die.

“THIS *EJIDO* DOES not make money... It can not support more than us. There is another *ejido*, down in the estuary of the wrecked boat, that is planning to raise oysters. It is closer to town and now there is a road that goes to it. The women who operate it believe that they can make an oyster farm. I talked to them... If they succeed, then maybe we can raise oysters here too.”

Serina talked as she filled another *olla* at the seep. She had observed so much that she wanted to share with Margaret.

“Look here Margaret! These little things in the water. There are so many that they cover the bottom. They are shrimp, only tiny.”

Margaret knelt at the edge of the water and studied the creatures.

“Listen, Serina. Do you hear that snapping noise? We call those tiny ones Pistol Shrimp. And these... You are right. They will go to the sea and grow into the shrimp that almost every other creature eats...the same shrimp they harvest with the big net draggers.” She looked into the water and then up, at Serina. “Every six hours when the tide changes...all of these creatures synchronize their lives with the tides...the tides bring food and take away life that is ready for the sea. The tides wash nutrients into the estuary, and keep the earth muddy where the clams live. There is never a time when life is not moving and changing here. Those of us at the top of the food chain forget that everything is dependent upon everything else. We catch shrimp, something else misses a meal. We dredge an

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estuary and untold millions of things die...and then, as far as we know, all the creatures that would have come back to spawn, die. There is a multiplier effect...Things are gone that are necessary for other things... until man finds that the creatures he eats are also gone... That's what is happening now,"

"But the sea is so big... How can one estuary make a difference?" Marbrisa had joined them. Sometimes she wondered how man could do things along the shores, or with his little boats, that could change the vast sea.

Margaret didn't have an answer. "We don't know, but the shrimp fishermen are complaining that they can't catch enough to support them. Most who depend on the sea are now eating shark and what they once called trash fish...because the fish they once ate are no longer plentiful."

She paused, thinking as a scientist must. "I wonder how many spawning places there are? Now that the delta of Colorado River is changed, how many estuaries and shallow bays does it take to replenish this sea? How many species depend on fresh water to spawn? How does salinity effect these species? Those are the types of questions a marine biologist must ask..."

That night, under a haze of soft starlight, Serina and Marbrisa asked Margaret about her world...

"You don't belong to a place... I mean, you Americans are always on the move aren't you?" Marbrisa had talked with many people on the beach, and wondered why they were not at home. She would never leave home because it had everything she needed and loved.

"You mean like you belong to this estuary? Then, no. Most American's do not live in harmony with the land... They live in cities and around cities. They are attached to their house or apartment, but not the land beneath it. They don't get their food from the land...most have forgotten how to get their own food and water...or clothing

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or...everything! Many have no idea where the things they need come from.”

“So, if the food and water is not brought to them... What would they do?”

“Marbrisa, the more dependent we become on supply systems and the further we are removed from the sources of food--from the land and from the sea--well, if something should happen...almost all of us would die. Our civilization would end in a very short time, probably no longer than a month, if that. That’s how far removed we are from the food we must have, and the water, and the fuel and electricity we need to operate our machines.”

Serina gave her a strange look. “But Margaret, we would survive because we don’t depend on those things.”

“You might, but most people wouldn’t. If one cold winter day in say late January, when everything is frozen up north, some force knocked out the electrical grid systems all across the US, and as a result the pumps don’t work...and the water lines freeze... And communication systems break down... The resulting chaos would result in millions competing for what little food and fuel was stored in the cities. Mobs would form...some people would try to migrate...as they moved across the land they would kill others to take their stores... In a few days our whole way of life would end. We’re that vulnerable! Some of those mobs would come here to take what you have... I’m not sure that anyone would survive.”

‘So, it’s like nature. Their fates...our fate is locked into the destiny of the whole system. I have a friend who believes that. His name is Stefano, I told you about him. He’s with a university.”

Marbrisa had never felt vulnerable before, and, as there was nothing she could do to change it, it was reasonable not to think about it. “I don’t like to talk about this! I agree that if the sea can not provide, then we can not live. She waited a moment to think and then tried to change the direction of the conversation.

C. Descry

“Margaret, if you are trying to save the sea and deserts... Then how can you? I mean, you’re not Mexican...part of this country. You’re young and... The people who have the big boats and who take the shrimp...they would never listen to you. You’re not a sea person, you are a woman and you’re not... you have no power!”

They sat quietly, letting Marbrisa’s questions lose their sting. Serina understood that there was more.

“Margaret, you have more power than they know...you’re good with people. Because you are right, and because they are beginning to be aware of problems. Stefano believes, and Marbrisa and I do too, that inside each human there is the voice of what is real. Margaret, there is a voice inside us all that you can reach. And there are others, like Stefano. You are not alone. What will make a difference now is that most of the fishermen know that they must do something because the sea is not providing like it did.”

That night Margaret lay under the blanket of star-lit haze, unable to sleep. Her worth and her feelings of personal power grew smaller and smaller as she looked outward. What she really wanted was time to study marine creatures. Time to understand the complex networks of life. Time to define conservation ecology. Since changing her major and moving to Arizona, she had formed visions of becoming a marine biologist on the staff of a major university... Or perhaps the director of an aquarium or... pure science was attractive. Her mind pointed her in that direction. And now this! What had she gotten herself into?

There was no moon. The haze from the sea caught all of the starlight and turned it into radiance. There was no wind. She could hear the waves breaking far away, and in her mind’s eye she pictured the waves breaking on the beach as they had since time began, long before man came along and interfered.

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She felt the pre-dawn dampness on her face... She was wide awake, her mind racing. Her life was at a crossroad... She knew it, and would rather have avoided it... She had to decide! The path into academia...? She should follow her dream and become a great teacher and a research scientist... Or, the other path. The impossible path that would take her away from science... Well hopefully not altogether. The path that led to things that she found distasteful and had no knowledge of...

She would have to learn the politics, not just in one country, but in Mexico, where she barely knew the language and where she didn't know the culture and the rules... And the US, where she knew the rules were complex and made to insure that each step forward was difficult... Could she balance the cultures and needs of two countries? Countries with such diverse values? Their corporate structures? Their tax rules? The different values that motivated scientists at their universities? No way! The answer was simple, NO, she could not! Too hard! Impossible! Too full of wasted time and heartbreak. She wasn't a manipulator and she did not want to be a leader. Yet," she let another emotion guide her. "if she decided to try to educate...to change people's ways of looking at the land and sea? What then? Would time spent building an international organization and doing all of the things necessary to organize people from both cultures to share research and... No! that was not her nature, not something that she could imagine herself doing.

But, what if she could help others do research? What if she could learn how to do all the things she imagined were distasteful, and get results? What if? She turned onto her side and tried to relax and stop worrying the problem. She didn't have to make a decision now, she could go on and... then realization came to her. She had already made the decision. Somehow, she was going to try to change things... "Not try, I am going to change things!" she told the dawn.

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But it was the morning light that brought realization of the problems ahead of her. She didn't know the complex and almost secret systems required to build an organization in the US. She had heard her father and others talk about how the IRS, a faceless government bureaucracy, determines what is charity and what is not. She knew that for a fee, if you fill out all their forms correctly, the IRS will grant charitable status to an organization. That is, if you hire a specialized attorney to wend the way through complex forms and obstacles and give you the buzz words they red flag and tell you about pre-existing conditions and... it was a maze that only a few could run. And that was just a start. Then you had to deal with the state and go over their hurdles. Then there was the bookkeeping and the budgeting, the fund raising and the... Desert Development Foundation would do all in their power to help her... But... after that, she would have to create and deliver the program while raising funds to support it. Impossible!

The whole area of organization made her numb. It seemed insurmountable...and that was just the US side. She couldn't imagine what it would take to set the same structure up in Mexico. And how many things would require cross-border planning and sharing? Had it ever been done before?

Well, her friend Nick shared the dream. She relaxed and thought back. Nick's brother had introduced her to science and biology... That seemed so long ago, in Mississippi, in another life. Now Nick and her friends had hired her to run the field station. She was here, ground zero! She had dared to dream and chosen the impossible path.

If only she had known then that it was the right path for her, she would have had a weapon to use against the uncertainty and the fear of the unplumbed darkness. She would have seen the light at the end of the tunnel instead of having to go through and light it.

Chapter 15

He was headed south, sure that he could disguise himself with the old fisherman's hat and sunglasses he had found in a storage bin and cross the border without being recognized.

MARTEL WAS RIDING the transit bus, studying Apache Junction car lots as they went past and trying to decide what type of vehicle to buy. When he saw the modified Dodge van with \$5995 painted on the windshield he knew it would be perfect! The car lot it sat on looked as seedy as the name on the peeling paint sign. *Honest Fred Friendly Motors, Ltd.* His thoughts raced. A camper...less chance of being seen. They wouldn't think of looking for him in a vehicle like that. He could camp wherever he wanted, and he'd blend in with the hundreds of other weathered RV's that he was sure he'd find in Mexico. He wouldn't have to leave the vehicle to get to the back. He needed it! He wanted it for this job and then, he'd have a camper! He'd always wanted one and now he could justify it. He got off the bus at the next stop and walked back to the car lot.

"Owned by a man who had to give up the RV life. Knew this vehicle when he bought it. Always serviced...always used preventive maintenance. Prostate cancer, I guess. Hasn't used it much these last few years--did at first tho', that's why the high mileage."

Martel looked inside. The unit was compact, well arranged and didn't look the worse for wear. He decided to buy it and started the bartering process.

"Well, I don't think this one will do... Do you have another one? I'm certainly looking for a camper like this!" He could see that this van was the only one on the car lot.

"Well now, wait a minute! What's wrong? Don't let the faded paint bother you none. Arizona sun does that to every vehicle. Got to look past it! Look, see!" he kicked the

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panel at the bottom of the door and then went forward and kicked the metal at the back of the front wheel well. “No rust! And look at these tires! Almost...” Martel was enjoying the game.

“But the tires are sun-checked! Probably rotten.” The tread was good.

“Son, that’s ozone! Arizona again! Not dry rot...but you know, if everything is okay by you, I could get you some new rubber. I don’t have much margin on this... Had to give the man top dollar ‘cause I wanted this vehicle. But...”

“That mileage! I’ll bet it goes through oil... I had an old Dodge once. It used so much oil I had to carry oil with me.” He lied.

“Look, pull that hood latch and I’ll show you... Dodge makes a motor that will run forever, you take care of it... First, go back and look at that exhaust pipe. See any oil? See too much carbon? I’m telling you, I know this vehicle and the motor is good. Probably uses a quart every five hundred to a thousand or maybe even fifteen hundred, like it should.”

“What did you do, steam clean it?”

“We detail all the vehicles that come in... We go completely through them before we put them on the lot.”

“Really, I think this van has had more use than I can handle. How are the brakes?”

“Certifiable! State law. More than half there... We don’t fool around with safety or the state.”

“Can you start it up? Does it start?” He saw the man cringe at the insult, and watched as he got in and turned the key. The motor responded immediately. Martel watched the exhaust pipe. Not even a puff of smoke. Good sign.

“Funny little noise... What’s that?”

“You mean that iiechi iiechi iiechi sound?”

“Sounds bad!”

“No! That just the alternator. Normal.”

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“Sure it isn’t the transmission? How would I know if the transmission was going out... Sorry, but that’s what I mean by too old a vehicle.”

“Automatic. Okay, here’s what I do. I step hard on the brake. Then I give it gas, then I drop it into drive.” The van’s brakes groaned, but the transmission didn’t jump or slip. “Now reverse!” There was a loud clunk and the vehicle sat down in back. “Clunk is just the drive shaft...ya know. Tells us the U joints is okay.”

“You sure you can’t get another, newer one?”

Martel was getting attached to the vehicle. “Hey, I want to camp in it. How do I know if the stove and everything works?”

“Guaranteed! You check everything out. If it don’t work, we fix it. That’s our guarantee.”

“Look, you’re a good salesman. You understand that I need a vehicle that won’t give me trouble. I would pay cash... Only this is not really what I want. You must have connections? Another lot? A newer van?”

“You’d pay cash for a newer one?”

“Within reason. I’ve seen some much newer ones priced about like this one.”

“I can talk to the boss and get you a deal on this one. You know it’s a good unit, unusual! We don’t see them like this one very often. Make an offer and...”

“You mean cash? I won’t do the deal until I know everything works...and everything we agree to is in writing.”

“Offer him \$500 less. It’s been a slow month, and this is the end of the month. He’d probably take a loss on it just to move something. No warranty, you know. Not on this old a vehicle. And let me tell you something my friend...something that I wouldn’t tell anybody but you. I want this sale! I want you to have this vehicle! You see, we have a secret. A vehicle this old probably won’t pass the emissions inspection. You understand? You live in Sedona... You don’t have to have it inspected up there. You make a hell of a deal and you get a good vehicle

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because we can't sell it to anyone who lives in Maricopa County or Pima either. License tax is low too... Great all the way around."

"Listen, I'll tell you what. I believe you...I trust what you say is true about this old van. Maybe it will work." He took out his check book. "Maybe I should call my bank and get a blue book on it."

"Okay, you try, but I'm telling you they don't have blue book on vehicles this old. It's all by value, up front! I'll tell you what. You look this van over real close while I go see how the boss is feeling today. Drive it! Like I said, some days he deals, you know what I mean? You came at the right time."

Martel checked everything from the propane tank to the sink drain. The unit was in good condition. The seats and bed...the drapes... He flipped the electrical switch and tried the overhead lights. Another switch turned on the purr of the water pump. The radio didn't work!

"Bad radio. Did you fix any of the other problems?"

"Look, we can switch-out the radio...got a guy who does it fast. The Man's in a dealing mood... Now is the time to make an offer."

Martel hesitated and then pulled out his check book. "I'll write a check, you take it to him." He wrote a check for \$3900. The salesman nodded, looked sad, and said he'd try. He was gone only long enough to enter the hut, refill his coffee cup, turn around and come back out. He was the Man and he worked alone.

"Won't take a check without a guarantee card. Been screwed a few times, he just won't."

"Okay, I can go to the bank and get cash. He'll go the deal? You fix the radio, put in propane, and make sure that this baby is ready for the road. I'm going to the White Mountains to try her out. I got three days don't I... I mean to change my mind if I find too many problems? Go ahead and write it up...all the repairs we talked about too!"

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The salesman smiled a weak smile that told Martel a lot. He was sure that other little things would be fixed. The tires were okay, and he decided not to push that issue.

Getting cash was another complicated game. He wrote a personal check on his account and got the money. In the process, they gained every number he was known by, his mother's maiden name, his e-mail address, his medical records, a profile of how he spent his money, and he guessed, enough about his credit history to profile him and sell the results to marketing companies. Well, he thought. That's how the system works... It's all for them at the expense of the little guy. Pity the poor soul who hasn't learned about them.

Martel called his insurance company from the *Mexican Insurance Here!* office in Ajo, Arizona and had the van added to his policy. Then he bought a year of Mexican Liability Insurance for \$60, because he asked the right questions and didn't get screwed paying ten dollars a day, minimum eight days, for a special visitor's package.

He laughed as he put the papers in the glove box with his new bill of sale. He had beaten their systems...was legal, and ready to go to work. By dark he had stocked the van with food and drink, silverware, pots, an Italian coffee maker, a sleeping bag, and a paperback about *The Spirits in the Ruins*, Ute Indians, and the illegal antiquities trade, by his favorite author, C. Descry.

He was headed south, sure that he could disguise himself with the old fisherman's hat and sunglasses he had found in a storage bin and cross the border without being recognized. He knew they would be there, it was the only place they could be sure to pick him up again, and he hoped to spot them. "Know thy enemy!" He said, tuning a Mexican station on the radio and marveling that they had replaced the broken AM radio with an AM-FM, plus tape deck.

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'Mexico,' Martel thought as he drove. He had learned the systems that got him what he wanted in the States... Complicated games that had to be played to get anything...or do anything. Games some learned well... Those who didn't learn the systems were the victims, usually from the lower classes, or teachers and government employees who traded everything for security. He'd been lucky. He grew up around people who talked about the systems...explained how to work them to their kids.

Learning to master systems got him what he wanted and made him effective at his work. Now he was going where all that he had learned could only get him into trouble. How could he ever hope to learn the games necessary to get things done in Mexico? He didn't even speak the language. All he knew was that he didn't know anything about how to function down there and that he had to get help from someone who did.

The sign said that the border closed at midnight. He wanted to cross, thought about driving in a strange country at night, and pulled into a lot which overlooked the crossing. Signs warned him that there was a fine for camping here, and a fee for overnight camping around back. He wasn't about to get out and chance being seen as he paid the fee. He decided that after scouting the place, he would go back and find a road someplace where he could pull off and sleep.

From his van, he could see the open US crossing. He watched as cars moved out of the US and into Mexico without being stopped. Based on Meachington's information, he assumed that anyone looking for him would be on this side of the border. He looked for a place where they could observe without being conspicuous, and realized that he was parked in it. If they were waiting... Three cars down, he saw two men in an old, sunburned Chevrolet. One had binoculars and seemed focused upon

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each car that went into Mexico. The other man's head was back. He seemed to be sleeping.

At midnight the border closed. He sat low in his seat, his old fisherman's hat pulled down to hide his face. The man with the binoculars got out of the car and stretched. Martel saw his face clearly under the bright mercury vapor light. Then the driver's side door opened and the other man got out. As he looked around, Martel studied his face. Both men were Latino...or Mexican...or Hispanic... Chicano. Martel wasn't sure what they were. He watched as they went over to the border fence and stood, relieving themselves. When they got back to the car, Martel knew he could identify them anywhere.

The driver reached into the car and took out a cell phone. He stood talking, seemingly reporting to someone. He snapped the phone shut and said something to the other man, who shrugged his indifference. They drove away, never even giving his van a second look.

Martel was one of the first vehicles in line as the border opened. No one was interested in him on the US side, and as he rolled his window down and stopped at the Mexican station, a guard approached, asked him where he was going, and waved him through before he finished saying Pto. Peñasco. There was no sign of the old Chevrolet, the two men he believed were looking for him, or anybody else suspicious.

He was in Mexico, marveling at how things looked different and... He felt an empty, scared feeling as he left behind the protections he had assumed were his inalienable rights.

"Get over it!" He said to his reflection. He had to face his fears and focus upon the opposition. They would have a back-up plan in case they missed him at the border. Where would they place men to pick him up in Mexico? There was only one road in. If he were setting it up, he'd have a way of observing each vehicle as it came into town... He assumed that they were at the airport and the

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bus station. They must have the place where the development was planned staked-out. They had the advantage... but did they know about the Institute of the Deserts and Sea? Would they know that he was going there ?

Martel got two other faces to remember as he slowed for the Cruz Roja workers who were collecting donations just outside of town. Two men stood behind the collectors, studying each car. They were dressed in jeans and patterned shirts as the others had been... Martel pulled the hat down, and donned the sunglasses. He didn't want to stop... What would a curmudgeon, an old fart driving a worn out van do? He slowed, but had no intention of stopping, and rolled the window down so that he could yell at them as he passed.

"I gave already! I comes through here and I already give you all my change! Stop them tourists, not me!"

In the mirror, he could see the two men. They seemed unimpressed with his passing. As he entered the town, no one followed. Then a chilling thought came. Why was he here? What could he do here that he couldn't do in the States? If he saw the development site, would that give him more insights into the opportunities it provided or the constraints? He had to assume that the men he saw at the border and the ones at the Red Cross stop were looking for him... Why? What did they fear from him? What could he discover... How could killing him forward their cause? It didn't make sense... What had he missed? What would he find?

Chapter 16

“And when they are finished? What will be left?”

“That depends... Maybe, if we run out of water, rows of ruins being taken over by the sand.”

SEÑOR ANGEL RAMIREZ, *abogado*, pulled his feet back from under his desk, turned in his squeaky chair, and faced his son.

“Adolfo, you have to go to Mexico City! They want you there so that they can control me...us.” His voice was low, full of regret and sadness, but firm. “This will be a great move for you... You will come home someday a wealthy man.”

“Maria has taken the children as her father ordered. But I will not accept this! They use you and the good works you have done to...to destroy others. You know what it will mean, Papa! They will use you to get what they want... So what if I say no?”

“They will destroy you... More, they will still get their way because I can not let them do that. We have no choice...except what I can do to slow their progress.”

“My children are almost grown... I won't stay with Maria when they are gone... It's only a few years. Then I can return...and Papa, my heart is here! More than you know.”

Adolfo knew he would hurt Marbrisa...that he would probably lose her. He had no other choice and that pain cut his soul. Besides his children, he loved two people, and to help one, he could destroy the other...and either way, himself.

“As is my heart, my son. Adolfo, we are doing the only thing we can do. This matter is beyond us. If we want to live, this is the course we must take! I am getting to be old...an old man, who has only his son and his two grandchildren to hope for.”

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'And the love of Serina,' he thought, "but for how long?'

"I am glad you will not be here to see the pain they cause. Don't blame me, ever! Know that I will fight them in every way I can... People we respect will blame me. There will be much hate directed at me. You will know the truth. Forgive me!"

"I am not packing any of my home... Not the furniture or even clothing. I will let them provide everything... If I am to be a hostage, then they will be responsible for everything..."

"I understand. Adolfo, maybe I can visit you in Mexico City? Maybe this will all be over in a year? Certainly not more than two...or? Take their resources! Pretend to be in their debt! Undermine them if you can without them knowing, and then you will get free. As soon as they get what they want, they will have no use for either of us...they will cast us aside."

"And you know what they want? I mean, besides land? But why land? They are not developers!"

"The land---the development---is necessary to hide the money. It's a screen, only a screen. It hides the money that comes from the north, the money they will take as 'profit.' They do not intend to invest their own capital, so they need a legitimate project as a front. They don't care about anything except the flow of cash into their pockets."

"And when they are finished? What will be left?"

"That depends... Maybe, if we run out of water, rows of ruins being taken over by the sand. Maybe they are right about unlimited water, and nobody gets hurt... There is no other use for the land, so perhaps resorts and seaside homes are the highest and best use for the coast. Nothing is all bad... Perhaps, to make sure the government thinks they are legitimate, they will do as they say...but knowing your father-in-law, they will do it the easiest and fastest way!"

"Do they know that you oppose them?"

"No. Only that I told them I could not undo the *ejidos*."

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“And?”

“He laughed at me! He knows I can. There are holes in every agreement. There are those who will sell... There were times when those who ran the *ejidos* didn't live up to the requirements. As you know, there is always a way.”

“But Father, in Mexico there are the rights of those in possession... If they are there, and living up to the law, then no one can remove them. I know the law!”

“That is the one weapon I have and can use. I can not stop a sale or a long term lease, but I can make certain that the people cannot be removed and the land taken if they refuse to sell. I have the records...they will not easily find those individuals who are the cooperatives. Enough! You should know no more than that!”

“Be very careful, Papa. I need you alive and well!”

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Chapter 17

There is another thing, and don't get mad at me for asking It is something I must ask. Would you ever lease land?

"SERINA. DO YOU remember years ago when the engineer put in the markers at the corners of the *ejido*?"

The afternoon was very hot. Their little nest was too warm, but neither complained or even noticed. Being together was like that. Lately Angel seemed troubled. He never talked business when they were together...

"Yes. They are still there, although buried in the sand."

"You must do something... I mean it is time to do something important. You must show the markers to an engineer I will send out. He will verify them and... It is important that...well, that we do this every few years."

She sensed that there was something more, but let it pass. "Whenever he comes, I will show him."

"And there is something else. I will have a friend of mine go through the papers we signed and the records of your use of the land. He will ask you to verify that they are correct... He will make sure that all is in order."

"I will do that if I can... Is there something wrong?"

"Not if we do what I have said. Serina, you know that the road to Caborca is paved now, and that there is a road across the dunes...almost in to your *ejido*. People are interested in the land... I am protecting you." He wanted to add, 'at great cost to myself,' but thought better of it.

"People come now. They drive to the head of the estuary. The signs you had me put up do no good."

"I understand. Once there is a road, many people feel free to use it. There is another thing, and don't get mad at me for asking It is something I must ask. Would you ever lease land? I mean so that people could build on it like they are doing west of you?"

She came up on one elbow and stared at him as if he had asked her to forget the sea. "No! The estuary must

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remain as it is. It's where life begins! You understand, don't you Angel?"

"I do, Serina, I do with all my heart."

C. Descry

Chapter 18

Of course! He would have to know 'who.' That was a problem, if not *the* problem.

MARTEL NEEDED TIME to orient himself. He drove past the statue of Benito Juarez and swung around to the right, heading toward the old port area. He passed fish markets, hotels, and dozens of curio stores, did the loop and was headed back toward the town. At the statue he turned right and followed the road over the dunes toward the sea. As he topped the highest dune, he saw the Sea of Cortez for the first time. It was beautiful...seas always were.

He went by a big RV park and thought about pulling in. He decided to keep exploring. The road passed another big RV park. He decided it would do, and turned in. After registering, he found his assigned space and backed the rig in, as he saw was appropriate. He found the electrical jack and a bib for his water hose. Within minutes, he was connected and... Hot! He couldn't stay in the van, not in this heat. He wasn't sure what he should do. Looking around he saw a group of fishermen... Well, they looked like they fished. They were rough and worn, old men, sitting on a wall overlooking the sea. The shade of a *ramada* built along side one of the big trailers, protected them from the wrath of the sun. He rubbed his three day beard and grinned. He could talk fish with the best of them, and they hadn't missed his well-used vehicle.

In the course of the conversations, Martel learned about living in Mexico. Life was great. For the most part, the local government left them alone. Services were cheap, retirement dollars went "not as far as they used to," and the weather was hotter this year than last. Gas was too expensive, and several of the men argued liters to gallons and cost per, without ever coming to agreement.

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“What’s that IDS place all about?” Martel asked, after swapping lies and making sure that he had been accepted into the group.

“Them? Well, what I think they done that is great is help get them mosquitoes under control. Used to be that the swamps bred as vicious a crop of mosquitoes as you ever had bite ya.”

“That’s fer sure. And that group, they’ve done a lot about the trash situation around here. Even get the school kids involved. Was a time, not many years ago, when the wind blew, there was more paper and plastic bags than sand.”

“And the fish... I don’t know for sure, but them folks helped get the fishermen together and helped them set some of the limits... Like where not to fish and when not to. Needed to be done, fishin’s changed from when I first come down here. Only catch Pig fish...you know, triggers, and a few rock bass *cabrilla*. Used to be this time of year you even saw bills and sails... Not any more.”

Another man chimed in. “You can go out there, you know. They give a tour and show you around if you’re interested. Wife goes all the time and takes guests.”

“Who runs the place?”

“Well, I don’t rightly know. They have a staff...but a man and a woman... Must be Mexicans. From what I hear, they’ve been here awhile.”

“Yeah,” a man with a hat almost as old and creased as Martel’s added. “They speak American too! You can talk to them about lots of stuff you’re wondering about down here. They know more about stuff than anyone!”

The sun was blistering hot, and the sea breeze had died. Martel wandered into the park office. It was hot, fans kept the air moving making it feel hotter.

“If you no have reservations, I no have space tonight.”

“I’m staying here. Just dropped in for a map... You know around here?”

“You mean the town?”

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“Men out there were telling me about a place called IDS. I never heard of it.”

“IDS, Si! Margaret came to my school and taught us. That is almost twenty years ago. I know what they do... My father’s a fisherman. He’s *muy* superstitious. But there is a man at IDS, Felipe. He was my father’s Captain once. He is the only man my father ever listened to about the sea...he has great knowledge...is a teacher. He made my father understand that I should work for tourism. That’s why I’m here and not like my brothers, starving.”

“Who is Margaret?” Martel knew what Bridges had told him, but he wanted a Mexican’s viewpoint.

“A woman who is American---but really Mexican I think. She started it when I was in school. Then she married the big American, tall, *grande!* They live there. They do many things that have made our lives better. Someday, I will work there.”

Martel knew he had picked the perfect way to hide from...he didn’t want to think it! ‘The killers!’ But why would they be after him? Meachington had hired him to check the project out. Standard operating procedure. SOP! Fowler got upset and threatened him... Then Fowler and Meachington had confronted each other...then two men took a shot at him. And Meachington? He was scared too...or was he? Yes, he was, Martel was sure of that. So now, they were looking for him... Why? To kill him...because? Because he was doing what anybody with basic investigative skills would do? No! What was he missing?

The same question came up each time he tried to figure out why they would attack him. He sat back against the camper wall and felt the heat... He would only know if he kept gathering information... And maybe Meachington’s plan would work. Maybe Fowler would buy the opportunities he listed and pass the word along that there wasn’t a problem. But to whom? Who wanted him

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stopped? The question went around and around in his head until processing gave him a sense of powerlessness.

Martel awoke to the sounds of the sea. He slid out of bed, reached for the coffee pot, and got some brown soup brewing. When he got back from the john, he realized that his subconscious had been gnawing away at the quandary and may have solved it.

There was only one reason they would want to stop him. His investigation---a standard investigation---was what they feared. Not something he had done, but something he would do. Like? Like verify land ownership, make certain that the property was owned or leased by the developers and that the papers were in order. Like check surveys and maps, verify easements, utility corridors, right of ways---and any encumbrances on the deed. He stopped and thought about making a list, but his subconscious mind prodded him to continue. He would have to verify funding or financing... Were the necessary funds available? How were they to be dispersed? Who was in charge of releasing funds? Who... Of course! He would have to know 'who.' That was a problem, if not *the* problem... They did not want their identities known. But would they kill him to stop him? Only if life was cheap and they thought they could get away with it. Their first attempt had failed, but they were free to try again. As far as he knew, the police had no way of catching them. He sat back and nodded his head in agreement with his realization. To people in their business, life was cheap and...they knew they could get away with it! If he continued with the investigation, it was only a matter of time before they would have to stop him.

C. Descry

Chapter 19

“To me the observation is not will things change for the better, but wow!
We can sustain our course for a while longer before we crash.”

HER PROFESSOR WAS in his 70s, older, wiser...still as caring as he was when he taught at the university. Margaret had know him since she was a student at ASU. He had the weathered look of one connected with the sea, the sun-aged skin and brown-splotched hands like farmers had...and fishermen. He carried himself well, although it was obvious that he had pain in his lower back and a stiffness she recognized in people who had led physical lives. He greeted her and they shared knowledge about mutual friends and what each had been doing. He talked of his career as a marine biologist. He asked questions that let her talk about her research and her dreams.

“What you talk of doing is...well, it is like deciding to build the Empire State Building with a shovel and bucket. You are young and idealistic... You must not waste your life...” She seemed to know that he left the last part unsaid. ‘like I wasted mine.’

“Stay with science and make your contributions there where they count!”

“I will do what I can.” She answered after thinking a moment. “That’s better than nothing... Isn’t it? I’m already making progress... In time, I can go back to research... Professor, you were one of the ones who inspired me!”

He ignored her compliment. “Like a spit in the ocean you are making progress here. You need to know that you will have the impact of a bug farting in the jungle! I know that’s crude, but I’ve been a scientist for many years. I know the damage done when idealism is stilled. Long ago I decided to mentor you and keep you from...” he paused and stared at her, “from running so hard into the wall that you would never recover.”

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"I know there's a wall...everybody tells me it's there. Only, I haven't run up against it yet. If I do, then I can decide to stop... But so far, there's no indication that a wall is there...unless you count the people who keep telling me I'll hit it!"

"The wall is so big you cannot see it. It's made up of layers and layers of complexities. You push against it and it seems to open... Really, all that is happening is that you are taken in. To do what you dream of doing...well, in this complex world no individual really makes a difference. You want to think you do...you can, but you can not. No single organism can comprehend, let alone change complex systems. You work your life away thinking you have made a dent...then even before you stop, everything is back the way it was, like a giant sponge that you push into until you leave and it pops back exactly as it was."

Margaret searched his face and saw the pain etched there. "You worked your life away... What did you do? What happened?"

"Nothing! And that's why I want to help you, now, before it's too late. I believed reason would prevail. That economics would dictate something other than the demise of species... You know, profit motives would help people change their ways...things like that. I believed in all of that... I really did, and emotionally, I guess I still do."

"You mean things would come into balance because there were natural laws?"

"Something like that. It seemed absolute to me when I was young. The syllogism was: Men hunt whales for oil, if they kill too many whales they cannot get oil. Therefore they will stop killing too many whales."

"Why doesn't that make sense?"

"Man doesn't make sense! That's why. A new syllogism I was unwilling to consider: All men deplete resources, men are able to move to new resources, therefore, man always has resources to deplete."

"That seems like a description of all creatures who hunt, or of slash-and-burn agriculture."

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“Probably, but what if there is no place to go? Then what does man do? You would say man learns to conserve... That’s what I believed, and I believed that it was only a matter of teaching and helping my fellow man to manage... But then, I was as naive as you are now. I didn’t know about reality, and I discounted the obvious. Man breeds and increases his numbers. When he can’t move on, he puts more pressure on his environment until...it is destroyed.

Everything we humans touch we turn to desert. History has recorded that; but, we scientists believe in what we call ‘natural laws,’ kind of ‘the supply and demand laws of balance.’ I got caught in that logic, and I wasted years pushing string. You, Margaret, don’t have to relearn what I’ve learned. You don’t have to start at the bottom of the ladder as you are doing. You can climb up to where I stopped and... Don’t you see. There is another reality! And sure, I know it seems unacceptable, but it is our inherent destiny...as a species with a deadly flaw!”

Margaret didn’t like what Doc Edmunds had concluded, yet he was the voice of experience. “Been there, done that,” described him best.

“So Professor, you’ve given up!”

“Hell no! I’m still the idealist...only my idealism is different than yours. To me the observation is not will things change for the better, but wow! We can sustain our course for a while longer before we crash.”

“You have given up! Tell me, if you were my age and just starting out...and still had ideals, what would you do?” She paused and saw that he was trying to restate his premise. “I mean, there must be a way to bring about conservation and balance.”

“There is. Nature’s way! Disease is a good way, better than war I think. I often debate whether a dictatorship that forces sterilization and limits population is better or worse than disease or war. What do you think?”

“We can do it ourselves...”

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“Haw! That’s the idealistic bullshit I warned you about. Listen Margy! You will know what I say is true. India now has over a billion souls. China, a billion four hundred million! The rest of the third world is breeding at a rate that exceeds carrying capacity... Sure, and don’t give me that crap about women’s lib and how it will change things. It will, but not quick enough. The earth does not have the carrying capacity to handle ten billion, let alone fifteen billion souls. Now tell me, what are you saving this sea for? For starving Mexicans to eat, right? Or for starving Americans? Japanese? Let me tell you. What you save now will feed starving Chinese in twenty years. The sin of it is that we don’t eat our fellow man for dinner---well, not at the present time anyway.”

Instead of collapsing under his argument, Margaret relaxed and gave him a warm smile. “Professor, I don’t buy that! That’s why my time here is well spent. Given all the walls and pitfalls, man has something that other out-of-balance species do not have. Man has the intelligence to project and the will to survive. Man, given the right information, will change things!”

“Man is twelve meals away from becoming a roaring savage. The masses respond to bread and bread alone. Hungry fathers, knowing that their children are starving, don’t give a rat’s patutie about conservation or management or planning or... Get it! When the hungry masses hit the shores, they take it all.”

“Then we move faster! We use our skills to communicate...to get the systems stabilized and avert the crisis.”

“Woman, God’ll get you for trying, but the battle is lost before you begin.” His tone was belittling.

“Then you have given up? You decided that if you can’t see the sun rising on the other side, there is no other side. You decided that nothing will happen... Even things like war and disease and...maybe even populating space? Maybe new types of foods? *Maybe* is why I decided to try... *Maybe* is a powerful concept. I like it!”

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"I can see you do! Well, I was just testing. What I do best is get idealistic student's feet on the ground. If you weigh your chances, you will have the strength to go forward in the face of the insurmountable."

"Don Quixote you think? No, that's not me. Deep down I have a feeling... I can help change these patterns."

"Careful of those feelings, girl. Modern medicine is wonderful, right? Without it we wouldn't have overpopulation. The Brits still blame our medico-Christian influence for India's overpopulation and suffering. When should a baby suffer and die? After birth, right? When should the old survive? When they are sick and unable to care for themselves, right? You know the ethical questions, but you also know we won't face the truly ethical answers."

"I know that here, I can be part of something... You know, Professor, I have a friend who does have the answer. She's a woman who is part of the sea. She sees things that most do not. Her name is Serina and do you know what she believes? He shrugged, obviously irritated. "I'll tell you. She believes that within each of us there is the knowledge of what must be, an inner voice. She pointed that out to me and I have to agree that I have never met anyone without that voice. Have you?"

He shrugged again, and looked down. "I'll have to think on that one... She says everyone has it? Nonsense. Only about twelve percent of the American populace has what we would understand as empathy. Most people have their noses so deep into the mire that all they care about is... Hell, I don't know. Their mind's are blank or full of rutting and stuffing!"

"I don't think so. All I have to do is provide information that is heard by each inner voice. Not an impossible challenge for a teacher...or even an idealist like me."

"And do what? Get them to go hungry and love it! Get them to pack it in and give up sex? Get them to starve today and live for tomorrow? Get your feet on the ground lady! Get real!"

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“You live in the middle, but you think in the extremes. I’m talking about the way you live, and I live... We would both say that my friend Serina is right, we have the inner voice. My *maybe* is based upon that...”

“Sure, Margaret. And who put that damned inner voice there? You know and I know. We were programmed. Check it out! You are the sum of the tapes they set to play in your head. So am I, but I know it now. I learned the hard way. Besides, starved babies grow up damaged. The chemical connections aren’t there. There are no lights to turn on.”

“Some probably are damaged beyond reach. I don’t know. Man is a complex creature. But what I do know is that the people I meet and work with are not damaged. Their lights are on and they understand what it takes to survive. Survival is a strong---maybe the strongest---instinct. I think we can speak to that and they will work to insure survival, if for no other reason.”

“Okay, so give it a year, you are bent upon hitting the wall! You will see that what I have learned is true... Just learn the lesson about human nature quickly and then get on with your life. Enjoy your tryst with idealism, for this window of opportunity...this time...will soon be over. You are the creation of a society that has learned to exploit everything and you feel guilty. Our culture cannot last! Have fun here, and then -- go home and enjoy the final days.”

Margaret met with the professor on several other occasions before he left to go back to the states. Each time, his message was negative and depressing. She noted that it wasn’t unlike the warnings that almost everyone “who knew” gave her. She would hit the wall and nothing would change. She was wasting her time.

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Chapter 20

She asked questions and in their answers they found answers...

MARGARET DIDN'T THINK of herself as a change agent. What she wanted to do was share information. In her mind, being a conduit for information was more important than being a pied piper. In fact, she never thought of herself as a leader. She was certain that her time would be best spent learning and sharing. The research part of her challenge was to get accurate information about what was happening and what was needed, and to share that information with the people on the line...the people who would understand what their options were and make the changes necessary. It was an immense undertaking, and at times, usually at night as she lay awake processing, she almost lost her courage and her convictions; she knew fear.

The hardest part was stepping off the normal paths walked by other young women, young scientists, people her age. She was vital and very attractive. She could have it all...all of the good things: a position in a university or with one of the new bio-tech companies, a fantastic apartment, travel, clothes...and the part that hurt most, she could have a life! A husband, kids... Women her age were free...and yet, she had chosen this course, in this desiccating region, near this sea and some of the most extreme deserts on earth. She had chosen a life with these struggling people who held values she was only now beginning to understand. She had chosen a life outside her native country, always fearful of being a stranger in their land. And the Young Turk had thrust her course into the unknown, seemingly impossible new territories of science and education. She was thought naïve, and many, not just the Professor, took pains to tell her so.

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She filled her days with work and her nights with dreams. People who really cared, who understood...supported her. Others wondered at her mania. Some Mexicans feared her, a woman alone: a woman with knowledge. They feared judgment...and had had their fill of judgmental critics. Churning inside them were frustrations without handles...fears and observations mixed into a confusion of helplessness, resignation caused by disorder and lack of information.

When they listened to her, some things came together. She had information, neutral, non-judgmental, not threatening. She asked questions and in their answers they found answers... She was easy to talk with, warm and nurturing. One after another, locals came to accept her presence. After all, she was helpful, but the ideas were theirs, and they were in charge.

Some people explain the joining phenomena as part of reincarnation. Souls come together time after time, incarnation after incarnation. Others imagine a powerful current that attracts one to another and brings them together. Still others believe that certain harmonies resonate on special frequencies and attract one to another. No one knows why some energies click and others are neutral or even repel. And no one would dare to guess why people thousands of miles apart, carrying reservoirs filled with different experiences and feelings come together. The only answer is that there is need and it is filled. On the desert, in the deserts of their hearts, they made an oasis around a well of dreams, not far from the Estuary of Life, in a place where it was likely that a path toward man's survival would be determined. And the wonder of it was that they were two parts of one soul... Two complementary parts joined as if by design.

And the complementary part was that Dave was also a teacher---a man who understood that teaching is drawing out, not putting on. He believed in information and knew ways to share it that let it be a tool in the hands of those

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who must apply it. He knew instinctively what Margaret was doing. He had administrative skills that he had gleaned as a principal. Together, they faced what others called the insurmountable mountain, as if it were a valley to be filled. Their joining changed the odds against change. Their work together, created a powerful new force and began to tip the scales in favor of man's ability to change and survive.

Out of the Desert Development Corporation and the love and support of many, rose their dream, a new organization that spanned the region, just as the research and education charge they shared spanned all fields of human endeavor. The Institute of the Deserts and Sea was born. It had a foot in two great nations and existed as if borders were simply man made lines. With admiration, friends called it I.D.S. By early 1987, there were focused programs designed to serve, and a pair of committed idealists with a shared agenda and strong hearts.

Things started coming together in ways that made sense. There were those who realized that a positive model for change was being developed. Many noted that new terms were coming into common use --- sustainable resource, conservation ecology, bio-diversity, eco-tourism, recreation education --- terms describing concepts that people understood when they were associated within their range of knowledge and understanding, linked to their survival needs, and applied to the solution of their problems.

Gradually, as the Bridges were able to clarify their vision, they bonded with others with similar goals. Under the direction of Margaret and Dave, IDS slowly moved through its infancy and took on a life of its own. Like a slowly awakening force, IDS began to be greater than its creators and greater than any set of ideas. It was poised for great things.

IDS grew, but no faster than its parents could master the complexities of organizational structure and politics. It

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was bound by the time it took them to learn the complex systems of business and organization---not in one nation, but in two. At times it seemed that all the organization did was eat time and money as the internal structures, funding and logistics were developed. There were no models to pirate for information. IDS was breaking new ground.

Luckily, Margaret and Dave were quick learners. IDS survived because they would do any job, anything necessary to keep it alive and vital. They did what was necessary, often with only a skeleton staff, too often with their own resources, to keep the doors open, the school programs going, and the networking systems operational. When they weren't facilitating field station research, booking tours or teaching, they were active on levels that required intensive grant writing, effective politicking, and positive attitudes toward negative misunderstandings. Because of their total commitment, every day and night, every week, every waking hour, they grew the dream.

Margaret matured from an idealistic Young Turk into an effective leader. She never stopped believing that there was no wall, no impassable hill, just a valley that needed to be filled with options.

Sound groundwork paves the way for great advancements. Conservation programs that reached thousands of local children helped a whole community understand the importance of the UNESCO designated Biosphere Reserve, and the setting aside of the whole upper gulf region for protection and effective management. IDS's mission reached across the sea to San Felipe, and took in El Golfo and other communities faced upon the sea. The Parque Natural Del Gran Desierto Del Pinacate grew out of many efforts, and IDS deserves much of the credit for making it acceptable to the people of the region. People from both nations honored Margaret. She received the Margarita Miranda Mascarenas Foundation's International Award for Excellency in the Border Region for promoting and developing programs of intercultural cooperation for conservation of the region.

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There came a day, perhaps an exact pinpoint in time, when the first casual observer learned about Margaret and Dave's work with education: IDS's mission, and said: "So what? What's so special about that? Everybody knows that stuff, so what's the big deal?" Success comes on those wings, and goals are accomplished only when people understand the concepts so well that they believe they have always been known.

Chapter 21

The burly thug heard their greeting, couldn't conceal the look of disappointment on his face, adjusted what Martel guessed was a gun tucked into his belt beneath his loose shirt, turned and went back out to rejoin his accomplice.

MARTEL AWOKE, HOT, sweating, miserable, trapped in the tiny interior of his camper. He lay still for a few minutes, trying to clear his head, sure that something had awakened him. Then he knew. The wind, which had blown continuously since he arrived, had stopped. The constant hissing and the flapping of canvas was gone, and it was so quiet outside that he could hear waves breaking on the beach. He was safe, they hadn't found him. Then another thought came through. Everyone he contacted for information would be in danger. He had planned to go to IDS and... And do what? Bring the bastards down on them? He believed that his presence was unknown now...his 'good old guy' image was working. But they knew he would surface for information... They would wait, and he would come to them!

How could he contact IDS? They had to have someone watching the place. It was obviously one of the area information centers... Did they have his photo? Could he slip in and meet the Bridges? He lay, miserable physically and mentally. What in the blazes was he doing here? He didn't have a clue where to start.

The problem was solved the next morning when he learned that a group from the RV Park was going to an open house at IDS. A woman, who seemed to have the same genetic codes as a fireplug, stopped him on the way back from the showers and gave him the word. They would leave at 1:45. The tour started at 2:00. Perfect!

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He ate breakfast in a little café attached to a store and searched a fresh issue of the Arizona Republic for news articles they had cleverly hidden among advertisements. Sure that he was current, he headed to the beach, passing the same group of men he had visited with when he arrived. Another beautiful, hot, humid day like the days before. 'Ah,' he thought, "life in the slow lane."

A kid told him to watch out for the jellyfish, and that the stingrays were through nesting, but were still lying on the sandy bottom.

"Shuffle your feet mister or you'll get stung!"

The water was warm, like an over heated pool. He swam out beyond the swell, and rolled over on his back. Floating, he sensed the magnitude of the sea, and wondered why it seemed so familiar. His pilot's understanding of the air connected him to the water. His thoughts ranged from Misty and David, now safe in Colorado, to his own insignificance. 'What strange creatures we are,' he thought. 'we are formed of the same elements as everything else and somehow we have become dangerous to everything else.' He drifted on the tepid sea, alone, physically insignificant, full of the power of God; connected to everything. He was, in his whole, every part of every other creature... The product of a mysterious intelligence. The beast and the breast... And, with others of his kind, the God that ruled Earth.

They all crammed into two vehicles. Martel found himself in the back seat of a Crew Cab Chevy, absorbing perfumed-cloaked body odors from two sixtyish women who still giggled a lot. One had his arm locked within hers, and the other seemed to think there was something on his leg that needed squashing. Luckily the trip was short. They untangled as they off-loaded, and stood in the glare of the punishing sun waiting for the others to gather. Then, en mass, they rushed the strange building called an Earthship, built out of concrete, old tires and enough pop

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cans to build a space station. The building was pleasing to look at, inside and out, and cool enough to ease their pain.

With his escorts, he was just another senior citizen killing time. He regretted that he hadn't bought a jumpsuit, as it was obviously the uniform of the day for the best dressed male. As he looked around, he saw what he had feared. In the shade of the big building, two men were paying too much attention to them. He didn't see them holding a photo... Did they know what he looked like?

Even from across the lot, Martel could sense that the two men were evil. It was something in the way they stood, the way they moved. It wasn't his imagination, the men were dangerous. Just then, a car turned in and parked in front of the building. There was no doubt that the creeps were staked-out. They turned and focused upon the car, pulling back into the shadows as the passenger got out. The man slammed the door, bent under the blast of searing air, and headed for the building. The two men agitated around, too obviously ready to pounce. Then one, Martel had not seen either before, moved around the building and went inside. 'Poor guy,' Martel thought. 'They think he's me!'

He stayed with the gaggle of visitors and paid attention as the tour progressed. He was anxious to get into the main building, but well aware that one man was still standing in the shadows, searching the group for him. When, as a noisy, happy group they followed the guide into the main building, Martel saw the man who had driven up, and nearby, pretending to read inscriptions on wall tiles, the short thick body and pock-marked face of the stake-out. As they were seated for the program, Martel saw a big man come out of a door marked 'Office,' and cross the courtyard. The visitor greeted him, and they clasped each other in bear hugs. He heard the big man say, "Doc, thanks for coming down early. We can get the lab set-up before your students get here."

The burly thug heard their greeting, couldn't conceal the look of disappointment on his face, adjusted what

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Martel guessed was a gun tucked into his belt beneath his loose shirt, turned and went back out to rejoin his accomplice. Martel breathed a sigh of relief. He was inside, and he could contact the big man, whom he assumed was Dave Bridges, without being seen.

The two men were working in the lab, fitting pipes to fill one of the large glass-sided tanks. As the man named Felipe finished his introduction to the area and IDS, Martel eased his way out of the group and into the hallway that led to the labs. No one called out to him so he assumed that none had seen him leave the group. They were headed back to the gift shop, and Martel judged that he had about fifteen minutes.

“Mr. Bridges? Can you help me for a few minutes?”

Dave turned away from the tank and smiled. Few people refuse a request for help.

“You are Dave Bridges, right?” Bridges nodded. “My name is Martel. I’m an investigator. I work for developers. I’m here because there is a development proposed that may not make sense...What I mean is, my job is to list opportunities and constraints.” Martel was talking fast. He had to hook Bridges and get him on his side. “So far, I have a long list of constraints and few opportunities. Right now, I am very concerned that my employer is being taken for...well, let’s say the deal is being misrepresented. I also need to tell you that there are people who want this development to go at any cost. They have tried to kill me... They do not want me to give my employer correct information.”

Bridges stared at him, amazed. He had to think... “Look, what development? Who do you work for?”

“They propose a resort on an estuary east of here. I haven’t been out there, but I have located it on aerial photos. They’re patterning it after the big Mayan Palace development... I know very little about it.”

“My God! I’m not surprised. In the last few years, this area has been targeted for development. We had hoped to

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be involved...We have a lot of information. Several developers have contacted us, but what they want is a blessing, not facts." There was something Martel had said... "Martel, they tried to kill you?"

He told about the attempt near Sedona, the men at the border and the two men outside.

"I wondered who they were. Those two have been hanging out here since yesterday. Said they were waiting for a ride to a job... I didn't know they were here again today."

"Who do they work for?"

Martel shrugged and looked down. "I don't know. I wish I did. I only know that someone wants that development in a bad way. I thought you might know."

"No idea. What you said, about constraints? I don't think you will find many good reasons for a development out there...really, anywhere along this coast. This whole area is fragile...and where will they get the water? Desalinization is difficult here because of the high salinity. No one knows the extent of the aquifer we now tap. What about that? What do they say?"

"That's why I'm here. The developer who retained me wants answers before he 'does the deal.' But..."

"Damn, I hope so! We know development is going to happen. With planning and attention to the environment and basic survival issues, perhaps some of this coast can be developed in a way that doesn't destroy what is here, and which won't crash and burn in a few years, leaving a ghost town here. If you can help that happen, we'll give you all the help we can. How will you proceed?"

"Frankly, I don't know how to proceed in Mexico. They must have every place covered, looking for me or anybody trying to check up on them. I don't know the ropes down here, or the language or the customs---anything! I need help! There are areas I need information about, like how they are funding the project and..."

"Martel, you are the first person connected with these big developments that has asked for information. We have

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years of data ranging from sea temperatures to artisan fisheries. We have climate data. Tidal fluctuations. Beach erosion patterns... We are collecting data about the estuaries and the vital role they play... Martel, I need to ask Margaret, maybe we can connect you to a local who has access to the other information you need. She's not here now, she had to go to Hermosillo to a meeting of Pro Natura. She'll be back late tonight. How can I contact you?"

"I'm hiding out... Really! I'm at the Playa de Oro RV Park in an old Dodge camper... If they find me... Well, they want me stopped! You cannot be connected to me, okay! These guys are dangerous, and from what I have already learned, what they propose is even more dangerous. I came in here with a tour group so they wouldn't know I contacted you. I need to get back with the group before they come looking for me. Dave, I can call you at noon tomorrow and get a name and a meet time if you can set one up. Will that work for you? I also need information from you, but that can happen later."

Martel left by the north door and passed in back of the two men. Outside of the rest rooms he joined three men from his tour and walked to the truck beside them. A sideways glance told him that he hadn't been made. ??? seen?

"Martel, Margaret and I had a long talk about the information you gave me. We both knew that something was happening out there, but no one here knows anything about it. There is a man, a friend of a woman Margaret knows...a woman who lives on an *ejido* east of here...who is an abogado...down here, that's an attorney. He's been here a long time. We think he can help you... His English is not great, but it's adequate.. I called him. He'll talk with you. You're to meet him at the curio shop near Jim Bur Market. He will find you, I gave him a description... I told him men that were searching for you... He will make the

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meeting seem unimportant. Follow his lead. Oh, his name is Ramirez. Angel Ramirez.” He paused and thought a moment. “Oh, and Martel? Can you come back here? I’ll show you how to get in without passing those thugs. You need background! I have back issues of our publication---our newsletter---that you should read. Then you will understand this area, its history and ecology and our work much better. Margaret and I can spend some time with you and help you.”

Martel couldn’t believe his good luck. “You bet! Show me how to get around those guys and I’ll start as soon as you’re ready to help me.”

C. Descry

Chapter 22

“The mike...the one you had me place in Meachington’s office? It well, like, in a big way, it paid off!”

NEIDRA LOOKED INTO the tiny bathroom mirror as she spread thick orange-red lipstick over her bottom lip, curled her top lip down over it, pressed her lips together and then stood back from the mirror to see how it covered. “Great!” she exclaimed to her image. Then she smacked her lips together twice, as if setting the thick wax. She knew what thick red lips implied, and laughed at the thought. She had great lips, and Meach... Well, he was all that mattered---at least right now.

Her desk was cluttered with forms the government demanded. She hated the forms but acknowledged that she wouldn’t have a job if it weren’t for government red tape. 3152 Ltd. paid her, but she spent most of her time reporting 3152 to the government. She bent over, feeling the uncomfortable pinch at her midriff where the full body support bra caught her flesh. The uplift cups didn’t hurt, but they sure were uncomfortable, like a man’s thumbs when she sat down on him. Her feet hurt! Besides, the damned panty hose worked their way down until she had to take shorter steps. So much for beauty... When she took it all off at the end of the day, she imagined that she expanded to twice her width... Oh well, in the right mood, it didn’t matter.

Neidra hated Fowler. He gave her nasty looks and once had pinched her butt. Thank God he had moved back to his other office. He had torn up Nick Mercar’s office... Nick was dead, lost at sea, but Fowler still acted like he was trying to one-up him. What had he been looking for... Some file? She had told him about the envelope that Mercar had left, but then that guy came in, the one Meach had been waiting for. Fowler had found the

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locked cabinet behind Mercar's desk, and was splintering it to pieces like he had the desk drawer. Inside, he found the photographs... She had almost forgotten them and was surprised that Mercar had kept them. It had been a fun trip. Bermuda had been everything she imagined. He had his Polaroid and... Well, it had seemed exotic at the time.

Fowler gave out a loud hoot, loud enough to let her know what he had found. He sat behind Mercar's desk, studying...her...but she remembered that she was much trimmer then. He evidently forgot the letter she had told him about. Then, he had gone into his old office and gotten into it with that Martel fellow. Meach heard the uproar and settled things. Fowler told her to forward his mail and stormed out.

"Meach," she leaned into his office and gave him a warm smile. "Mercar left a letter... I hadn't thought of it until Fowler was here the other day. Do you think it's important? I can get it for you."

"Might be honey. You finished with the quarterly reports? Why don't you bring Mercar's letter in... Then let's take a little break, we've been working way too hard."

She found the envelope where she had hidden it at the front of the file drawer. She hadn't noticed it then, but there was a key or something inside. She walked into Meachington's office and handed it to him.

"Mercar gave you this to...do what?"

"Hide. At least that's what he said."

He slit the top with his letter opener and turned the envelope upside-down. A long flat silver key with a number stamped on it fell into his hand. He perused it and shrugged.

"Any ideas?"

"Well, he had a safety deposit box. I think it's at Bank One. What does the letter say?"

Meachington pulled the paper from the envelope and leaned back in his chair as he unfolded it. He read aloud... "It's addressed to you, Neidra."

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Honey, in case of my death or disappearance, use this safe deposit box key. Don't let Fowler know you have it or you'll be where I am. I think you can trust Meachington, but be careful! Don't trust anyone but the AG. Get the packet of information to the him, not the police. Understand? Do not call the police.

Nick

"Meach, honey, did he know he was going to die? You worked with him for years. Why didn't he talk to you or give you the letter?"

"He always trusted you, Neidra. You were his friend for a long time."

"He never trusted Fowler. I never did either. Do you think Fowler was... I mean, did Fowler kill him?"

"No, but if Nick was killed... Well, the people Fowler is connected with may have done it. Actually, we have no proof. A boat lost at sea with all hands leaves no evidence."

"Honey..." Neidra came around the desk and put her hand on his shoulder. If they got Nick... I mean, are you safe? Am I?"

"I didn't tell you, honey. They tried to shoot Ter Martel, the guy I hired, you know, the investigator that was here? I don't know where he is now, Mexico I think...and I only imagine that he's still working for us. No, we aren't safe if they think we know something, which we really don't. We're safe for now, but be careful!"

"George, for Christ's sake what's so urgent that it couldn't wait?"

"The mike...the one you had me place in Meachington's office? It well, like, in a big way, it paid off!"

Senator Paul Fowler stood up, came around his desk, and closed the office door.

"I knew it would! Okay, it's safe to talk now. You should have waited till the door was closed!"

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“Seems that Nick Mercar, well, he like left the little present he boasted about in a safe deposit box at Bank One. And man, he like gave the key to his secretary. Your brother would have had it a few days ago, but like, you know him, he didn’t think it was important. Anyway, Neidra had it and a few minutes ago, like she digs it out and gives it to Meachington.”

“Damn! I told Peter to search the place! My brother’s my worst nightmare! We even had a guy toss the safe last night. Nothing! And all the while Neidra had a key...”

“Key and letter. Letter said in case of his death that she was to give the contents to the AG, like not the police. He knew about the police? And like he didn’t trust Meachington either! And didn’t the AG swear to get you?”

“Nick Mercar knew everything, including our police protection... It cost him, George my friend, it cost him! Did they head to the bank?”

“No. Like there are dozens of Bank One offices. They were going to try to find like, which branch.”

“And?”

“But like they decided to get it on first. I wanted to stay and listen to the huffing and puffing...”

“Good thing you didn’t. Can you take it from here? I want them out and I want the key... And I want to know which branch... Wait, think about it! No one with just a key can get into a box. They can’t get it... Neither can we. So...” The Senator leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. “Got a tape running?” George nodded. “Okay, we let them figure it out...listen until we know the branch and... Hell, you know that stuff may be safer in that box than anywhere right now... In fact, I could use it as insurance. Only if they get too close to it, then we stop them. Okay?”

“Sounds good Senator. I have like only one little suggestion. What if I like, you know, kinda switched keys on ‘em? I mean, all safe deposit keys look the same. I could switch ‘em...give ‘em one that like wouldn’t even lead anywhere.”

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“George, you do earn my respect! Make it happen! If I can report to my people that we have Mercar’s stuff contained, then... Hell man, then we will get those bastards to pay off even bigger!”

“Oh and Senator? Meachington said something about that investigator guy like being in Mexico...but he wasn’t sure he was like even working for them anymore.”

Neidra’s lipstick was smeared, making her lips look like a clown’s. Meach was trying to wipe his off with a towel, but it left an orange-red blush. She collected her clothes as he watched. In the john, she found her cold cream and started putting things right.

“You know honey,” Meach said, “That key won’t do us any good. Even if we find the right branch they won’t let us in.” He came into the small washroom and squeezed around her as she leaned over the sink. “You know what I think?” She had the water running and was wetting another towel. Meachington flushed the toilet. All George’s mike picked up was water noise. “I think I’ll send the letter and the key to the AG. Ask him to check into it. Tell him the box may contain evidence that could expose a money laundering scheme and possibly clear up Mercar’s death. What about that?”

“Honey, you always know what to do. Now that I know what Nick gave us... Well, let’s send it today. I don’t think it’s safe to have around.” She turned off the water just as the toilet stopped filling. “I’ll do it! I feel much better now Meach, how about you?”

“Yeah, great!”

George smiled, thinking they were complimenting themselves on great sex.

Neidra went over and sat down at Meachington’s desk and pulled out a piece of his stationary and an envelope. “Here, use this!”

“What Branch? Do you have a clue?”

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"I'll go through his stuff. Maybe I can find out. We just don't have that information now."

Meachington finished writing. "How's this?"

Neidra read it. "Direct and to the point! You always get right to the point!" She looked up the AG's address in the government section of the telephone book and addressed the envelope.

"It's ready to go."

"Okay, you going soon?"

"No, I need to finish the quarterly reports, gotta have them postmarked tonight."

"Okay, I'll take care of it. Thanks Neidra. Thanks for being warm and wonderful!"

George listened to the tape and heard nothing important. He shrugged, and began making plans to trade safe deposit keys. He assumed that Meachington would keep Mercar's key in his desk. What he didn't know was that Meachington kept the corporation's safe deposit keys in the top drawer. He had taped one of them under the tray in case he lost the other.

George smiled as he took off the earphones and reset the recorder. He rolled his chair across the room and, opening his briefcase, took a cell phone out and punched in a number he had memorized.

"George here. Oye! This message is for Señor Chione." He paused and waited until a familiar voice came on the line. "Thanks to me, Senator Fowler will have the key to Mercar's safe deposit box. Like he should have it tomorrow. Contains, like everything you wanted. He'll need like help determining what branch the box is in---Bank One. Not my problem, like someone you have knows how to get in, right? Okay, I did my part. Settle with me like real soon, I'm stretched out. And if you still want me like in with the Senator, keep my name out of this!"

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Chapter 23

The realization hit him and took what energy he had left. Before he passed out, he shuddered from the awful truth...they were going to destroy everything he loved...

MARTEL WENT TO the sea to escape the heat and humidity. He lay in the tepid water, floating on his back, wondering what he was doing in Mexico and how he was going to get out of Mexico without being killed. He imagined what would happen in his meeting with Ramirez. He had to assume that everyone in the small town of Pto. Peñasco was connected. He had to assume that those in power held that power through a network of players. A lawyer...what was it Dave had called him, an 'abogado,' would be well connected... Or maybe there was an opposition party? The guys out to stop him were powerful and corrupt; perfect politicians.

He floated and assessed his position. Dave had showed him how to drive to IDS, park his rig near the beach and come in through the back of the building. He had spent hours reading and chatting with the Bridges. He had imagined that the research would be boring---perhaps even tedious. In fact, he became intrigued with the organization. For the first time in his career, he had found an organization and an approach to conservation education that worked. It made sense to him. He knew that IDS would be one of the few causes that he would support as long as people like the Bridges were in charge of it.

He paddled his arms and focused on his immediate problem. Maybe the opportunities list he and Meachington had prepared for Fowler had worked... He couldn't assume that it had, but there was a way to know. If he wasn't considered a threat, they would pull their thugs off. So far, they still guarded the parking lot. It hadn't worked!

Maybe he could hire this attorney to gather the information Meachington needed... That would be perfect!

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Then he could finish the overview and get back to Arizona. He rolled over and swam back to shore. Ramirez was the key.

He parked in back of the shopping center, along the side of the market. There was a passageway that led through to the front. He eased his way between the buildings until he stood where he could peruse the front of the stores. He saw no one who looked like a stake-out thug. He pulled his old hat down over his forehead, hunched his shoulders hoping to look older and, shuffling his feet like a recovering stroke victim, made his way to the front door of the curio shop. Inside, he had to stop to let his glasses lighten and his eyes adjust. There were several women, obviously tourists, systematically examining every cast plaster religious statue on the shelves. On the far side of the room an older man was leaning on the counter, half asleep and bored. Martel decided that he was the clerk. No one else was in the shop.

The clerk passed the women and asked them in broken English if they needed help. They ignored him. He shrugged and came toward Martel, studying him.

“You are looking, no?”

“Nice shop.”

“Did someone send you?”

Martel knew that the clerk was Ramirez. “Yes. You are Señor Ramirez?”

“I am listening. Talk slowly, quietly. Tell me what I must know about your problem.”

Martel didn't like that. “*Señor*, If I tell you, then... How do I know that you don't work for...them?”

The old man hunched his shoulders and gave him a sad look. “I have no interest in harming you. If I can help, I will. If I cannot, I will tell you... But no one else will know of our meeting.”

Martel let out a little hangman's laugh. He had no other options. “I understand. Sir, I want to retain you... I want

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your professional services. I don't know about Mexico, how you do things here, but there must be lawyer-client confidentiality?"

"If I agree to work for you. But first, what is your want?"

Ramirez stopped him often and had him clarify points. Martel laid it all out, including that he suspected a money laundering scheme was driving the development. The *abogado's* eyes told Martel a lot about the man. He paid attention and he cared...

"Well, I'm a threat because when I gather the facts... Well, Sir, their little project will be exposed. No one legitimate would back such a development."

Ramirez turned and walked over to the check-out counter and carefully wrapped two religious statues the women selected. He ran their credit cards, bowed and thanked them for coming in. When they were out the door, he looked around and motioned for Martel to come close.

"I will get you the information you need. *Señor*, you must know that I can not be connected with this...you, or this information! I will not give it to you until I trust."

"I understand. How will I get it?"

"*Señor*, you leave that to me. It will take me time. Then, where are you?"

"I'd like to be back at my home..."

"No. I think you are safer here! Here, you are one of the tourists. Where can I contact you?"

"Playa de Oro RV Park."

"Good! Now you must leave!"

"*Señor* Ramirez, we have not discussed payment."

"It will be fair. First I must know what I can do for you. You trust me now, so trust me in this. I understand that you are spending time at IDS and learning about this area and its history. Good! Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Well," Martel hesitated. "I need to buy one of those jumpsuits the old men wear... You know?"

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“Sí!” He laughed. It is the uniform American’s wear when they retire. I know! Not far from here, in the downtown. Look for this store!” He wrote a name and address on a card and handed it to Martel. Good! You have an expression I like. Blend in!”

Angel Ramirez suddenly had the whole world on his shoulders. The American had laid it all out... Fowler and Meachington and who else? Who were the other men on the US side doing this development thing? Who were the Mexicans connected with Adolfo’s father-in-law?

He hadn’t understood that the development of land was only a front for laundering money skimmed illegally from...from businesses they operated and from drugs. He was sure they had drug money. The ex-President’s own brother had been involved in drugs... He knew deep down that Adolfo’s father-in-law was involved in drugs... He would stop at nothing to make money and gain power... Drug money was easy and... He was tired, he had to rest. He was in the middle now, if they knew, they would kill him...and Adolfo. They would wipe out everything he loved.

So, what they were doing was creating a front organization in Pto. Peñasco, an easy place to access from the US. An easy border to smuggle money across. Millions could be channeled through a development... All they needed was the land, and to get land from the *ejidos*, they were using him, forcing him to find ways of declaring the *ejidos* null and void. And he had to do it! They had taken Adolfo hostage... And as if that weren’t horror enough to deal with, a piece of the land they wanted was Serina’s estuary.

Exhaustion weakened him and he sat heavily in his chair. He had made certain that Serina’s *ejido* was legal and in compliance with all laws. He could show them... He would pretend to be frustrated because he was unable to find a way to dissolve the *ejido*. He would recommend another *abogado*... He could convince them that they

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could not buy, lease or take the *ejido*. He breathed a sigh of relief. At least he had protected Serina and the land she loved.

But the other land... The people who believed it was theirs, what of them? It was all dunes and beach. The realization hit him and took what energy he had left. Before he passed out, he shuddered from the awful truth...they *were* going to destroy everything he loved... They had to have the estuary! He didn't sleep, he simply shut down as his old body began to recover and give strength back to his muscles and brain.

Chapter 24

He had to select those cases that furthered his party and his cause. Didn't they know that? All these people who believed that he was on their side? He represented the Republican Party and the State, not the people. How could they be so ignorant!

THE LETTER WAS thrown into the 'IN' tray where it sat for several days. The secretary, tired of so much mail, spent time each afternoon going through the stacks. Letters marked 'Personal' were put into another tray marked "AG IN." Every time she had a break, she took a handful of the personal letters and evaluated them. Lots of losers out there thought that marking mail 'personal' meant that it got special treatment. Well, it did. She evaluated each envelope looking for a return name and address she recognized. If it came from someone important, she opened it and decided whether or not the AG should see it. Most went into the circular file.

She didn't know Meachington's name and was about to toss the envelope back into the 'IN' tray when she felt the bulge of the key. 'Something's in this one...' She shook it. 'Something like a key.' She ran it through the opener and turned it upside down. The safe deposit box key fell into her hand. 'Interesting,' she thought, 'No one sends a safe deposit key!' She pulled the letter out and read it. 'Interesting! Mercar! He may want this... He'll be mad as hell if he doesn't... but, a safe deposit key?'

If there was anything the AG didn't like it was other people, people with their own agendas, trying to structure his time. What made them think that their problems were more important than the ones he was working on? Damn them! Every dumb shit out there was trying to get the AG to fight with somebody they didn't like. It was a game, the *Let's You and Him Fight*, game. He was too smart to play.

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His desk was covered with files and demands... Demands from the courts, from the prosecutors, from the defense. Demands from the research teams who were supposed to support him! Everybody wanted a piece of him... And his priorities were already set by what he had to do, not what they wanted him to do. He had to set the right political course if he wanted to be governor. He had to select those cases that furthered his party and his cause. Didn't they know that? All these people who believed that he was on their side? He represented the Republican Party and the State, not the people. How could they be so ignorant!

He didn't have time, but he had to at least look at the mail Alice had screened. There might be something from someone he could not ignore. He was right. The first two letters he read needed immediate attention. The chairman of Republican Party got whatever he needed. The Rep from Northern Arizona had problems... He'd get someone on that.

The third letter held a safe deposit key. Strange! He knew Meachington...actually, Mercar. Nick had been one of his strong financial supporters, especially after Senator Fowler came out opposed to him. Well, his election committee knew Meachington and he supposed that he owed the man a favor. He... He read the letter. Wow! This case could be important! He needed a big win. A case involving skimming and money laundering --- probably drugs! Nick Mercar's murder? He imagined the headlines... This could be very important! He shook with excitement as he called in Bob Villa, his aide.

"Bobby, get on this, would you! It may require some special access to the banks, you can handle it!"

Chapter 25

Deep on the sea bed, a hurricane driven current stirred a long, dark shape.

MARTEL HAD NEVER felt so useless. He was unable to do the work he specialized in...he was trapped. Days passed. He explored the town, tried different places to eat, shopped in the friendly little markets, learned when the fresh bread came out of the ovens, and generally bummed around. He stayed on the beach until the wee hours, trying to survive where it was cooler. His camper was an oven, day and night. When he couldn't take it any longer, he decided that he should at least see the estuary they were talking about developing into a marina.

"Hey, any of you guys ever fish the entrance to an estuary?"

"Great for sea trout! Yeah, I think we all have. You haven't?"

"Not in a long time. But I want to real bad! You know, I heard that there is an estuary east of here... Locals say it's the best fishing around this time of year. My boat's down. Any of you guys going out. I'll go gas."

They left as the new dawn broke. Martel had a map. They were a little more than a mile from their launching site when the wind turned.

"My God, it's black out there! We better get back. They predicted a hurricane down south, but it wasn't supposed to hit us until tomorrow!"

Guillermo felt the wind increase, if that were possible, as he used the bucket to smooth over the grave and blade the entire top of the dune clear of vegetation so that it all looked the same. Driven sand stung his face and hands. Visibility was almost zero. He turned the big backhoe and headed it toward the trailer. The sand he had loosened was blowing so hard now that it was taking the paint off

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the truck. He loaded the hoe and, fighting the storm and blinding sand, did his best to chain it down. It was hard to breathe, and it was dark.

The truck started with a puff of black smoke. While it was still light he should have turned it around and parked it facing away from the sea. Now he had to back and get turned around. The wind was picking up sea water...or maybe it was rain. Gray muck made it impossible to see out. The wipers streaked, but left a line he could peer through. Above the pitch of the wind he could hear the waves crashing into the estuary.

He got the truck turned and searched for the road he had come in on. Visibility was limited to a tiny spot on the windshield, although all he could see through it was blowing sand. Guessing, he forced the truck down the dune, unsure where the road was, but certain that if he kept going he would find it. The wind shifted for a few seconds and he guessed that he was going too far to the right, down the steepest side of the dune. He turned the wheels and gave the diesel more pedal. It responded slowly, but luckily did not bog down. He cranked the wheel further to the left. The engine lost RPM's, lugging against the sand. He imagined that he felt the weight of the trailer and hoe behind him, pushing... The truck's front wheels dug into the soft sand and the weight of the trailer was pushing! He felt the drive wheels spinning in the sand and the trailer pushing from the uphill side. Then slowly at first, as if the rig was rising out of the sand, the rig jack-knifed, rolled over on its side and slid to the bottom of the dune. As the sand came up and broke through the right hand window of the cab, the giant Case backhoe came loose and crashed, bucket first, into the soft metal of the Peterbuilt cab, slicing through metal, glass and Guillermo. Then the hoe rolled onto its side and sank into the soft sand.

The truck and trailer lay in the deep trough between the dunes. Within minutes it was half covered with sand. In

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two hours, as the storm raged, the dune moved north, and there was no sign of man or machine.

Deep on the sea bed, a hurricane driven current stirred a long, dark shape. The thing, barely visible in the dim light, groaned and began to float. As it came over, belly up, the great lead weight of the keel broke its retaining pins, ripped out of the center of the boat and fell to the sea floor, freeing the boat. The aft compartment, which contained four badly decomposed bodies, hands tied behind their backs, held a bubble of trapped air. The sailboat's fine woods and sandwiched foam hull had not yet waterlogged. Life vests and other things that were lighter than the water fought to get to the surface. The great sailboat began to float free of the bottom, was caught in the current as it rose to the surface, and began its journey of revelation.

The hurricane hit Central Baja and careened around, seemingly trapped in the great water-filled fault. It raged for two days and three nights, like nothing man had seen before. The sea, driven into a rage by the winds, formed a great swell that moved north towards the head of the gulf. Riding belly up on the '*burro*' and pushed by the relentless winds and the high tide, the once proud sailboat dug its splintered mast along the bottom until it broke free. Then, wind howling agony over the risen dead, the broken sailboat was driven over the sandbar and thrust deep into the Estuary of Life.

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Chapter 26

Adolfo stood and called out across the clean-swept dune, "Marbrisa? Marbrisa?" he paused. Tears ran down his cheeks. "I love you! Know that I love you!"

NEIDRA GAVE MEACHINGTON a 'told-you-so' look, with her lips pursed as if she were sucking lipstick off her teeth. "It's him! I told you to stop worrying. I knew he would call, you owe him money."

Meachington picked up his phone, a smile on his lips for the first time in days. "Martel. We thought you were lost."

"Hi Meach. I have been. I think the pressure is off...at least it looks like they pulled the thugs off that were looking for me. Is it safe to talk?"

"I guess it's safe," Meachington said. "If they do the development, they won't do it through us. 3152 Ltd. is out of the game," he paused and Martel heard a sigh, "thank God!"

"Then you don't need my report?"

"I still need it! The deal cooled when the Attorney General got involved. My partner, Mercar, the one lost at sea? Well, he left a packet of information and somehow," he grinned at Neidra, "It got to the AG. When news got out that he had the stuff, the guys pushing Peter Fowler's buttons seemed to lose interest in being connected with us in any way. They want to distance themselves from Peter Fowler and his brother, the illustrious Senator. For some time there's been a battle raging between the AG and Senator Fowler. Something tells me that the file Mercar put away will blow that feud sky-high."

"Interesting. That explains why they pulled the guys out that were looking for me. When they found the 3152 east of here...in the estuary, I knew that it must be your partner's boat."

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“What? What the hell did you say? Oh my God, you’re saying that they found the sailboat?”

“I though you’d heard. There was a terrible storm. People were talking about a boat driven into the estuary by the wind...everyone was driving out to see it. When I learned that it had a number, not a name, I went out there myself. It was the 3152. When I got there they had just finished removing the remains of four people... All murdered, hands tied behind their backs.”

“My God! No one knows that here! I need to call the AG and tell him. Martel, I think it’s safe now. I need your report... I need it to put distance between myself and Peter Fowler! Understand?”

“I do. Good luck! I have a few loose ends to pull together here. It shouldn’t take me more than a day. I’ll call when I get to Phoenix and we can meet.” He paused, worried. “Meach, I think this is too easy. The money’s still there... The development is still a good way to wash money... I wonder, how safe am I?”

“They have a lot to do right now. I don’t think you figure into their plans at this time. I think you’re clear, but be careful Ter. We don’t know what Mercar put in that safe deposit box, and we don’t know how many of the crooks the AG will have the political clout to take out.”

Martel had to find Angel Ramirez. He wasn’t at his office---at least he wasn’t answering the phone. He called IDS. Dave had no idea where he might be. Martel decided to drive to the office and see if anyone knew where the *abogado* was. He knocked on the door wishing he could see inside. He knocked again, harder. No one.

“*Señor?*”

Martel saw a middle-age man getting out of a VW bug that had just parked at the curb. The bug was packed full of boxes and clothing. “I need to find Señor Ramirez.” Martel said.

“*Sí*, do I know you?”

C. Descry

“Never set eyes on you...but if you can help me find him...”

The slender, well dressed man reached back into the VW and grabbed a fat briefcase, slammed the door and started toward the office. “I am Ramirez!”

Martel saw the resemblance. “You are his son?”

“I am Adolfo. My father, Angel. I have just moved back here from Mexico City. I hoped my father would be here.”

“Thanks, I need to find your father. He was helping me.”

“You are the American who wants to know about the development east of here?”

“He talked to you about me?”

“Sí! He told me...I talked with him yesterday. He was very distressed. I am worried about him. That was a terrible storm!”

“Lots of beach erosion,” Martel said. “About two dozen houses undermined and, from what I’ve heard, whole beaches were scrubbed clean of sand.”

“And the boat that was washed into the estuary? Was it the Estuary of Life? Do you know?”

“It was. I went out there yesterday. The development of that estuary is why I’m here doing a feasibility study. Your father was helping me get information.”

Adolfo paused and leaned against the VW. What did you see? Did you see the small *palapa* where the women lived? The women of the *ejido*?”

Martel thought back over everything he had seen. “No. The entire area had been hit by waves... There was no sign of a *palapa*. Nothing but sand. The whole area next to the estuary had been swept clean...not even brush...no vegetation, just barren sand.”

Adolfo let his heavy briefcase fall to the sidewalk and bent over as if he had been hit in the stomach. He wiped tears from his eyes, a broken, weak man in pain. “That’s what he meant! He told me that people we knew had been swept out to sea...and I feared...” He began sobbing, unable to control his grief. Martel stood next to him,

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wondering what to do; knowing that those the hurricane took were loved by father and son.

Adolfo got control of himself and found his key to the office. "Come in, *por favor*. Perhaps my father will return soon. Maybe he went out to the estuary. Maybe he left a note. He knew I was coming home. He should be here, he was expecting me."

The office was dark and cool. On Angel's desk was an envelope addressed to Adolfo. Adolfo tore it open and read the note. Then he moved slowly around the desk and let himself down into his father's plush leather chair. He reread the note and then looked up at Martel.

"My father's secret love was Serina! All these years, since my mother died, he has loved her. He has gone out to walk the beaches...to find her."

"He is old, we should go find him," Martel offered.

"Marbrisa! All of these years, secretly, I have been in love with Serina's daughter, Marbrisa. Papa didn't know we saw each other...that I loved her with all of my heart. I didn't know he loved Serina. We were such fools!" He put the note back into the envelope and let warm remembrances smile across his face. "They may have survived. Will you help me look?"

They found Angel Ramirez where he lay near a small seep at the head of the estuary. From the mud and dust on his clothing they knew that he had searched for many hours before he had stopped to rest. There, he went to join Serina in the only way left for him. From the contented look on his face, Adolfo knew that he had found her.

Adolfo stood and called out across the clean-swept dune, "Marbrisa? Marbrisa?" he paused. Tears ran down his cheeks. "I love you! Know that I love you!"

Martel sat quietly while Adolfo talked gently to his father, promising him that he would never let anyone use him again. Praising his father for being a great father. Telling him how much he missed him now and would

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always miss him. Martel knew Adolfo's anguish. He didn't understand Adolfo's Spanish, he didn't have to.

"Señor Martel. I have lost my father, my judge. Who now will care about the type of man I am?"

"Adolfo. The women may have fled the storm. They may be alive, in town."

"No. There is a powerful feeling I have here...Papa had it too. They are also dead. I know that as sure as I know that my life has lost its purpose. Papa and I had a plan... We tried to save this estuary so that the developers couldn't desecrate it, and so that the *ejido* would always be here... We tried to save it for the women we loved, even though we were too foolish to share our innermost happiness with each other. At least Papa will never know our failure. The sea took them... maybe to prove that concealing love is wrong.

Epilogue

ANGEL RAMIREZ STOOD, amazed that his muscles moved so painlessly. He brushed off his trousers and stepped back away from Adolfo and Martel. As he did, he looked down and saw his body, stiff, face gray like clay, on the bank beside the seep where Serina's broken *olla* lay. He reached out to Adolfo. His hand went through his son... Realization came to him. He was dead! He remembered.

He watched as Adolfo turned and climbed partly up the dune, calling, "Marbrisa? Marbrisa?" Angel saw the tears running down his son's cheeks and knew of their love for the first time. "I love you! Know that I love you!" Adolfo sobbed.

Angel stood and focused all his love upon his son. Adolfo came back down to the seep and knelt before his body. Adolfo was talking quietly, gently, promising him that he would never let anyone use him again. Praising him for being a great father. Telling him how much he missed him now and would always miss him. Then, even though Angel cried out to his son, Adolfo couldn't hear him! There was no way he could let his son know that he was standing beside him. Adolfo turned to Martel.

"Señor Martel. I have lost my father, my judge. Who now will care about the type of man I am?"

Martel answered. Angel could see his lips moving, but couldn't hear his words.

"No." Adolfo said. "It would do no good to search for them. There is a powerful feeling I have here...Papa had it too. They are also dead. I know that as sure as I know that my life has lost its purpose. Papa and I had a plan... We tried to save this estuary so that the developers couldn't desecrate it--so that the *ejido* would always be here. We tried to save it for the women we loved, even though we were too foolish to share our innermost happiness with each other. The sea took them...maybe to prove that concealing love is wrong. Then Serina came back and

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took Papa. They're together now, and...and maybe Marbrisa will wait for me?"

Angel watched as they covered his body. Martel said something and then climbed up and walked away across the dunes, evidently going for help. Adolfo sat, holding the hand of what had been, sobbing questions that God could answer. Angel tried to touch him; reach him. He calmed his heart and knew that he could not. Emotional pain blinded him...then he accepted his death. He stood and looked around. The dunes were swept bare. All that had been there was gone. He didn't want to leave his son. He lingered, wondering why he was being punished in this way. Was this the purgatory the Priest had talked about? In time, Adolfo got up and climbed the dune. Angel followed.

The estuary's arms were reaching, glimmering appendages reflecting the late afternoon sun. The black, wooden remains of a once proud boat washed in by the storm, lay partially buried in the sand. Gulls were finding things of interest on its whale-like cadaver. The tide was coming in, hungrily probing with tendrils like an octopus. Far away he saw that Martel had found others, and they were waving at Adolfo, who waved back. They began hurrying toward them as if his body were important. They would remove it... Did he have to stay near? Would they take that husk and leave him out here alone? He heard Adolfo's deep sobbing, the sound of the waves and the wind...then, in the breath of the wind, someone was calling his name.

He turned away from Adolfo. The wind directed him... He saw her then. She seemed to rise out of the dune. His heart sang with the wonder of it. She was walking toward him, smiling. Behind her he saw Marbrisa rising out of the sand as she had. Serina came to him and he reached out for her...fearing that he couldn't touch her apparition. He felt the power of her energy. He dropped his gaze from the sea of her gray eyes and hugged her close.

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Marbrisa joined them and they held each other for what seemed eternity, but was really only the beginning of it.

At the cemetery, Adolfo collapsed. They took him to the hospital. There was no one to care for him so the Priest came late that night and sat with him. The Priest told the nurses that the doctors were wrong. Adolfo would not recover. Somehow he knew that Adolfo's spirit was already in another place.

Marbrisa sat alone in the wind atop the dune where the *palapa* had been, aware that her mother and Angel needed time without her. She cried-out, What is this existence? Does it go on forever? Will I always be alone? Adolfo!"

She felt him even before she knew he was sitting beside her. He put his arm around her waist and hugged her close. "Marbrisa, I heard you calling. I'm here."

"I heard you calling me. You said you loved me. That's why I stayed. Your father's here. He and Serina love each other, have for a long time. I didn't know. She called him to her... We're all here, but I don't know why."

"I do!" Serina was next to them. "It was my wish! There was so much unfinished. Our love, the four of us! The dream Marbrisa and I shared with Margaret... I prayed for more time, and we are here!"

Angel was looking at her in a strange way. "Time! I understand that. But...Serina, we are no longer able to touch this world...are we?"

"We are here, at the Estuary of Life. It is damaged now and soon it will be gone forever as they build here, destroying the womb. Marbrisa and I...we believe that just as I reached out to you, Angel, and as Marbrisa was heard by Adolfo, we can reach out and guide the others we love. I know too little. Angel and Adolfo, you know so much. Together we can help Margaret and Dave and all of the others who want to save the sea.

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...and there is a wind that always blows across the coastal dunes. It comes from the sea and in its journey it is laden with sea. As the sun sets and mirages form reflections of what could be, those who know the sea and deserts watch the lovers playing in the tidal flows, kneeling at the edges of tidal pools, and laying back on the shell beach watching the sky. The wind speaks. You've heard it if you love the sea. The music of it is Serina's voice...

"Margaret! What happened? What's the matter? You almost jumped out of bed!"

"Listen!"

"It's the wind...but..."

"Remember Serina? I had the strongest feeling that she was here." Dave sat up, looking out the window toward the sea.

"How could I forget her! It's the wind, but...You know, I have that feeling too."

Margaret relaxed and eased her body back down onto the bed. "Dave, what are we going to do? Are we really making a difference or are we just fooling ourselves?"

"Honey, you know, there was a time when I didn't believe that man could get out of the mess he is making of the world. I mean, things we've experienced here...everything I've read...like the cutting down of the rain forests, global warming, toxic pollution, the population explosion, species going extinct...everything can seem so black, so impossible to change. And we're in a place that many environmentalists have written off. Once the government designated it as an "official" tourist area, its fate was sealed. People from the States want someplace where they can go to blow off steam. They have no intention of giving anything back. They believe they are owed the good life, and they want places to go to satiate themselves.

"Margy, it is depressing! In fact, if it weren't for our kids, I probably wouldn't give as much thought to the

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future. But... When I look back over our twenty years here, I realize we are making a difference. It seems to take forever, but we are making progress. Deep down I believe that man can change. People like us who aren't part of the clique in power---don't want power---can redirect the future. We humans don't have to poison our world and die-out. There is another way! Thanks to you and your dream, and thanks to people like Serina, we are developing a model for change." He looked at Margaret's face and saw that she was crying. The wind sang around their home.

"Dave, our success is also a curse. We have children now, and we need some time to be a family. To get that time, and to grow the organization, we are bringing in others to share the load. But the people we bring in are not necessarily in touch with the dream. It's easy for newcomers to discount knowledge gleaned from the ground up.

"The way we humans operate is we institutionalize organizations... That process is deadly! Do you know what I mean? IDS is small, personal, vital! Working! Then, as others get involved, they might depersonalize the organization and petrify it, as if stamped in place it will still be effective. By our very nature we are multifaceted people who don't fit in a box. Our job descriptions are so complex that they cannot be understood by managers and accountants. What the new powers may want are single-task people, doing predictable things, with limited but measurable results. What if "growing" means there is no longer room for our gut-feelings or that dangerous enemy of institutions, idealism...no room for risk and experimentation. In order to institutionalize, well-meaning employees and boards of directors could end up killing creativity and limiting the successful approaches that first attracted them to our organization."

"You know," she continued, "that's going to be the great challenge ahead for us...for IDS. I wonder if the new employees, boards and funding agencies will let those of us with proven instincts and approaches lead the

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organization into the future. Will they value our insights and broader vision once we are no longer involved in day-to-day maintenance jobs?"

"And Margy, we just have to go forward. If those of us who understand can't stop the rape of resources or the deadening effects of institutionalization, then that will mean that there is no hope... Man's ignorance and greed will stifle all of the creative energies that we must have if we as a species are to survive."

They sat on the bed, listening to the wind and letting their thoughts roam with it.

"Honey," Dave asked, after long minutes of troubled realization. "Won't the developers and greed-driven overrun all other interests? We Americans covet the shrimp and the coastline, and Mexicans need the employment...it may already be too late!"

"I have to believe there is a chance, even though the rape-rip-and run mentality still rules. There is hope, I see that so clearly now. There is a magical potion, a word with power that Serina understood. That word is *maybe!* Maybe if people understand how it effects their special interests, then, just maybe... *Maybe*, is the feeling of hope we get from our inner voice when we are touched by *The Spirit of the Estuary*." They paused looking out, seeing the moonlight on the waves. In their hearts they knew there was a future for their children! Outside, the wind laughed.

Ter Martel's Notes

Dear friends, when Meachington hired me, I had no information about the Sea or the deserts of northern Mexico. I scrambled for information. These publications and sources helped me understand and fall in love with this remarkable area.

Ter Martel

The CEDO News. A journal of the upper Gulf of California and the surrounding Sonoran desert. Contains articles written in Spanish and in English. Published seasonally since the mid-1980's. One of the most valuable sources of information about the Deserts and Sea available. If CEDO can get the funds to do it, all issues will be compiled and made available to those of us who want an accurate data-base and greater understanding of the Upper Gulf region. Join CEDO and receive the Journal. In the U.S. P.O. Box 249 Lukeville, Arizona 85341.
[Http://www.cedointercultural@prodigy.net.mx](http://www.cedointercultural@prodigy.net.mx)

Articles from **The Rocky Point Times**. Specifically the October 1999 issue. A vital and useful source of information about Rocky Point (Pto. Peñasco.) Mexico. [HTTP//www.rptimes.com](http://www.rptimes.com).

Richard Felger and Mary Beck Moser. **Peoples of the Desert Sea**. University of Arizona Press. 1985. One of the great books I read.

William K. Hartmann. **Desert Heart**. Fisher Books. 1989. This is one delightful work! It helped me understand the entire region. Great text. Amazing photographs.

Prescott College, Environmental Studies Program. Dr. Ed Boyer.

The University of Arizona. Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. Tucson, Arizona.

About the Author

Descry was born in Colorado and grew up exploring wild places in search of pre-historic peoples and the wonders of nature. In his twenties, he was captured by the magnitude and magic of the Colorado Plateau and melded his life into that region.

Descry's work emerged out of one of the most exciting and mysterious regions on the Planet, the American Desert Southwest. His works are filled with vivid descriptions of real places and events. His writings explore possibilities that are so plausible that the reader has a difficult time separating truth from fiction.

Descry and his family live, depending on the season and their whims, in Sedona or Prescott, Arizona, and Cortez, Colorado. They also spend time near the Sea of Cortez and are avid supporters of the Center for the Studies of the Oceans and Deserts. He is actively involved in education, archaeology, environmental issues, and business. In his writings, he shares his insights and love of the land and its peoples in a way that charges one with awe.

The Spirit of the Estuary, is Descry's third in the Spirit Series. It is a history-mystery told through the life of a murdered Seri Indian woman. It is set in the northern Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California) region of Mexico.

The Spirits in the Ruins, is a history-mystery that challenges the reader's detective abilities as Arnie Cain attempts to solve the century old murder of a Native American leader. Descry provides insights into the illegal trade in Anasazi grave goods, and a previously untold history of the Ute Mountain Ute Indian people.

The Spirit of the Sycamore, is a tantalizing and complex history-mystery that explores discord and harmony in Sedona, Arizona, which is one of the Planet's important spiritual energy centers, and one of the Earth's most beautiful places.

What readers are saying...

***ANGRY, ELOQUENT,
DELIGHTFUL!***

Webster's review

A KEEPER!

Sagacious!

DESCRY DOES IT AGAIN!

A Reader's Choice

UNFORGETTABLE READING!

Books to Love