

BITS

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CHAPTER ONE

OPERATION SUNBURN - May 2021

La Paz, Mexico

As the first terrifying images burst into the healing oblivion of his slumber, Clayton knew they weren't real, but that knowledge was fleeting and quickly irrelevant. In the timeless slow-motion of imagination, the swirling phantasms sucked him into the rising tide of the nightmare. Even in his dream state, he tried to hold on to reason, tried to stay tethered to some remnant of his dissolving reality. His struggles only pulled him down faster until he was submerged in the dark waters of his merciless subconscious.

Completely immersed, he fought to regain his wits through the dreamworld's shock-induced haze. Coming slowly to his senses, he became aware that he was floating in the warm, salty water of some unnamed ocean, not knowing why he was there or even who he was. A gentle breeze carried the acrid smell of recent combat. Repetitive swells of a dozing sea alternately pushed under him, lifted him toward star-speckled darkness, and then let him slide into their troughs as they rolled on. Water washed over his face as he glided to the bottom of each descent, and when he licked his lips, he could taste the salt and the metallic tang of—blood.

The thick clouds that hid one section of the sky parted enough to unveil a full moon, and he closed his eyes against the unwelcome brightness. He rested that way for a moment, trying to pull some fragment of recollection out of the stubborn blackness. In the distance, he could hear someone crying out for help, calling his name. The panicked voice was female and even in its urgent pitch, familiar.

Something touched his cheek. Startled, he opened his eyes to see a hand floating by his face. As he looked at the moonlit water around him, he could make out other limbs, a leg, and another, and then another arm. He tried to raise his hand to brush the offending limb from his face, but his body did not respond. His brain commanded his legs to propel him away, but with no effect. Terror now became the current that carried him as he recognized the severed appendages as his own. The scream that began in the back of his throat was cut off as he slid into another trough. This time his descent

was unchecked and as the black water pulled him down, his final thoughts were of all the questions that remained unanswered.

Clayton cautiously opened one eye to the dim light of the room and took a moment to convince himself that he was still alive. The scream of a distant siren fused his nightmare to reality. He was wet with sweat, and his lips tasted of salt. The ceiling fan had delivered little relief from the warm, humid air in his low-budget La Paz hotel room. Tourists had air conditioning, but he wasn't a tourist. Encouraged by the mundane discomforts of the still living, he pulled himself from the damp, clinging bedsheets and sought rebirth from the hotel's tepid shower.

He couldn't remember the first time this nightmare, or one like it, had left him sweaty and shaken, but he knew the series of events that spawned the demon dreams of his troubled sleep. The evolving night terrors had become a surreal and frightening mix of bits of experience, smatterings of regrets, and dollops of grief. Each time, they became more detailed and more intense. Each time he felt them further erode the comforting boundary between dismissible fiction and disturbing recollection. Each time he stuffed them into his crowded mental attic with all his other demons.

He needed to find some coffee, but first, it was time for Clayton Rhodes to become Bill Crawford. Mr. Crawford had an important interview today.

Clayton looked at himself in the room's cracked wall mirror, ruefully noting the symbolic accuracy of the fractured image. With some effort, his careworn face took on a lighter, more relaxed aspect, and he looked younger, closer to his age. He hadn't shaved, and his two-day bristle contributed to the appearance of a subpar employment status. He stepped back, loosened his typically erect posture, a legacy of his military background, and relaxed into a more suitable slouch. Finally, satisfied, he donned a bright Hawaiian shirt, pulled his unwilling face into a roguish smile and Bill Crawford ambled out into the dull, red-hued, early morning light in search of coffee.



Calliope - Signing On

Three days before he was due to set sail, Hector Rojas, rumpled and sweaty, sat uncomfortably in the richly appointed salon on the 44-foot motor sailboat *Calliope*. Barrel-chested, and tall for his Mexican heritage, the impact of his physical presence was amplified by the close quarters of the space. Born as brown as the teak around him, more than four decades of sailing the Pacific coast had baked his face and powerful forearms to a dark mahogany. His physical size was well-matched with an outsized personality that, in any situation, left no doubt as to who was in charge.

He grimaced and scratched his face. Although usually clean-shaven while in port, his grizzled whiskers hadn't been close to a razor in several days. He kept his gray-streaked hair at shoulder length as some protection from the fierce sun. Proud of his position, he wore a visored nautical captain's hat whose original white color was almost indiscernible beneath the patina of sweat, soil, and sun. Missing a parrot and perhaps a wooden leg, he still looked as if, upon meeting him, one might expect "Arrr" to be his first utterance.

He had been hired to sail the *Calliope* back to San Diego, her home port, and had been working hard topside in the hot Baja California sun to make her ready for the trip. Now, he took his hat off and placed it on the table as a conspicuous reminder of his authority. He pulled a soiled rag from his back pocket, mopped his face and the back of his neck, and returned the damp scrap to its home. He was at once frustrated that he had to interrupt his efforts, appreciative of the break, and then irritated with himself for appreciating the break.

This was his second trip north with the *Calliope*, and he had taken several other boats back to San Diego for the same company, Baja Paraiso Charters. He needed an extra hand to round out the crew for the eight-day sail from La Paz, Mexico, north to San Diego. The *Calliope* was an easy boat to sail, in fit weather, but he planned to sail all day and night, so he needed a crew of three to fill in the watch schedule. Now he was sitting across the table from a man he'd never met, cautiously hoping this man would fill the open berth.

"Papá—", a youthful male voice cracking with adolescence called from topside.

"Estoy ocupado, Antonio. I'm busy." Hector's tone filtered any harshness from his reply.

This would be the first trip for Hector's sixteen-year-old son, Antonio. The boy had been pestering his father to let him make the trip for years and, finally, Hector reluctantly relented. Carlos, the third man he had used on prior trips and counted on, had developed appendicitis and had recommended Bill Crawford as his replacement. Pressured by a tight schedule and unforgiving bosses, Hector reached out to his contacts, who assured him that Crawford's background story checked out. From all reports, he was an experienced sailor from Seattle, not on any agency watch list, with a need to make good money fast—and a willingness to step over the line, if that's what it took.

Now, Bill Crawford sat on the plush, booth-like seat across the oiled teak table as Hector took in his appearance. The candidate's dark hair had started to gray. Life had chiseled his face, but his blue eyes still glowed with hints of unquenched fire. He was probably forty-something but trim and well-tanned, he could pass for younger. His brightly colored Hawaiian shirt, easy smile, and relaxed body language conveyed a casual self-confidence.

Hector slammed two empty glasses onto the table with a resounding thump. It was a conspicuously intimidating gesture meant to proclaim his authority. He poured a generous jigger of whiskey into each. Placing one in front of Clayton, he raised the other in salute and downed the brown, burning liquid with a slight twitch of his lips, followed by a brief smile of satisfaction.

"Drink." Hector's commanding tone buried what could have been a cordial invitation.

Clayton returned the salute and sipped at his glass, showing respect without submission.

Hector leaned back for a thoughtful minute. He believed himself to be a good judge of people and his track record of evading entanglements with the law gave credence to the belief. Years in the wave-reflected sun had creased and leathered his brown face and molded his eyes into a perpetual squint. Now they took in Clayton's every move as his mind parsed and analyzed.

Before speaking, Hector filled his glass once again, but this time left it on the table, rolling it between his massive, weathered hands. His eyes bore into Clayton searching for any clues that might help him weigh the value or risk the man might bring with him. Clayton met his gaze with disarming nonchalance. Hector's deep voice was imbued with a rich Mexican accent that could either be welcoming or threatening. Now, it balanced on the knife edge of the two alternatives.

"So, how do you know Carlos?" His tone was casual, but the question probing.

Clayton's response was casual in return. "We were part of a charter crew round trip from Seattle down to the Channel Islands a couple of years back." Clayton's eyes met Hector's challenging gaze as he spoke. "We both pick at the guitar and we would swap songs and jam during our off-duty hours. I like jazz and he plays blues, which worked pretty well together, at least the way we did it. We hit it off and stayed in touch."

Hector stared up at the overhead, seeming to revisit fond memories. "Sí, Carlos knows how to play. He can make that Gibson guitar of his sing." Hector baited the hook.

Clayton's relaxed response showed no sign that he knew he was being tested. "Ha, well Carlos talked about it but he never put together enough scratch for the Gibson. He's played a beat-up Epiphone for years." Thrust and parry.

Hector let out what was a reasonable facsimile of a sincere laugh. "Ha! You know, Bill, my memory is just not as good as it used to be. Too many late nights con mi buen amigo, Jack Daniels." Hector gestured at the bottle. "I know Carlos told me, but what was the name of that boat that you and he crewed?" Smiling, Hector leaned forward slightly, searching for any sign of discomfort.

"You mean the first time? That was the *Calypso*. She was a ketch-rigged Irwin 52."

"Ah, sí. I remember now, the *Calypso*." Hector leaned back a bit, satisfied with Clayton's answers. Now, more comfortable with Clayton, he got down to business. "Carlos told you about our cargo?"

"Some, but I don't much care," Clayton shrugged, glossing over the sensitive topic. "I've got a wife and daughter in Seattle. I had a good run at a bachelor's life, but that was then. Now I put food on the table and my daughter needs braces." Clayton leaned forward and took another sip from his glass. "Why don't you just tell me what you need me to know?"

"Sí, por la familia ..." Hector's voice trailed off. For just a moment he was distracted by his thoughts. Then he re-focused on the issue at hand. "The deal, for you, is \$15,000 US dollars, in cash, when we make port in San Diego. For now, what cargo we may carry is none of your concern. This money you are getting pays for your sailing skills and your lack of curiosity. I will need your help to transfer the cargo later, so I will give you more details when I feel it is time. Comprendes?"

"Understood. The money's good enough for me to know you're paying for more than a deckhand—enough for me to keep my focus on the boat, the wind, and the water, and enough for me to keep my questions to myself. I've done stuff like this before. I'm still in!" Clayton's response conveyed only an appropriate eagerness to sign on to a berth that would pay well.

While Hector continued to assess Clayton's responses and reactions, he was unaware that a team of agents was performing its own analysis courtesy of the wire Clayton was wearing. That Clayton's story checked out was less a verification of the truth and more a testament to the hard work and effective professionalism of the FBI. Bill Crawford was a fabrication, a mix of a real person, input from the flipped informant, Carlos, and the awe-inspiring ability of the FBI to make a fiction believable. After weeks of planning, Bill Crawford was born that morning when Senior Special Agent Clayton Rhodes sauntered out of the seedy La Paz hotel room.