The Denver Trilogy ~ Part 2 ~ Island of Bones

by GreenWoman

Summary

This story takes place in the TM7/ATF alternate universe.

There is some violence herein.

This story takes place in Maria Mogavero’s wonderful ATF/AU construct. It was written with intent to settle the lawsuit filed against me by the aggrieved patrons of the TM7 Fic List and, as demanded, makes reference to events in my tale "A Mile High in Denver" -- specifically, the paragraph reproduced herein.

With thanks and apologies to Walter Mirisch, John Watson, Trilogy Productions, CBS, Maria Mogavero, and Jimmy Buffett and Matt Betton, and proceeding under the assumption that forgiveness is easier to ask than permission....

08/12/1999

When Spanish explorers arrived in Key West in 1513, they found a shoreline littered with the sun-bleached bones of Indians and shipwrecked Anglo-Saxons. The Spaniards named the island Cayo Hueso -- Island of Bones.

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Open season on the open seas
And the captain says no prisoners please
Skull and crossbones on a background of black
We ain’t stealin' we’re just takin’ back

We ain't stealin' we're just takin' back
Very simple plan of attack

TAKE IT BACK ~ Jimmy Buffett & Matt Betton

TDS. Ezra had come up with several less than complementary acronyms for the initials of Titusville Diving and Salvage. The ATF team's undercover operation to bust the salvage company that specialized in smuggling and modern piracy had come dangerously close to disaster. Josiah's and Nathan's Boston Whaler had been sunk out from under them. Buck had taken the worst of a two-on-one fistfight that left him with three cracked ribs and a spectacular black eye, and JD had narrowly escaped injury in an underwater knife fight. Ezra himself had pulled Vin Tanner's near-lifeless body out of the water, then had to deal with the sight of Chris Larabee's anguished fury as the man watched his closest friend being taken off the dock in an ambulance, an oxygen mask over his face and a shallow but vicious knife wound slashed across his naked chest. After that, Ezra had decided that the closest he wanted to get to diving for at least a year was watching "The Abyss" on HBO, at home, alone, with a strong drink in his hand.

"A Mile High in Denver" ~ GreenWoman

Later, sitting alone on his hotel balcony and working his way through a series of whiskies, one moment remained crystalline in Ezra's memories of the hellish fiasco that the day had become. One moment when, for the first time in many years, he had felt that things were going right. When he had trusted completely the men he was working with. When he had felt complete confidence in himself and total faith in the successful outcome of his work.

At that moment, Ezra had stood on the deck of a boat in the Caribbean, smelled the salt air, felt the sun on his back and the wind in his hair and the smooth action of the waves against the hull and felt genuine peace and happiness. And thought, This is nice ... I really like this. After the operation is over, we'll have to do this again. Together, and just for fun.

Morning in Key West dawned clear and cool, with the blue of the sky meeting the green of the sea in a harmonious union of gentle breezes and calm waters. Chartreuse finches and emerald hummingbirds flitted through the branches of the ficus outside the hotel room window, and the soft clucking of the feral chickens who had the run of the Cuban district drifted up from the patio. In the yard next door, a woman was singing a lilting tune in Spanish, while further off, two men shared a heated conversation in an exotic and undecipherable patois.

A city boy, Ezra Standish found himself entranced by the small island town that was the base of operations for the bust of Titusville Diving and Salvage. The narrow streets, the lush foliage, the variety of people and languages and foods and historical buildings all enchanted him. To a young man who'd spent his life navigating through an odd assortment of worlds, always managing to blend in but never truly belonging, Key West seemed a delightful and seductive milieu in which he felt strangely and unexpectedly at home.

He dressed in khaki and cotton, much more casual attire than he would have donned if he were being Ezra Standish that day instead of Ezra Simoneaux. When he stepped out onto the patio, the Cuban woman who ran the small boarding house met him with a steaming cup of thick chicory coffee. "Gracias," he murmured, and inhaled gratefully before sipping the pungent brew, savoring its heady and exotic flavor. He drained the cup, then handed it back to the woman and headed for the
It was a short walk through the quiet streets to the small pier at the east side of the island, far from the Old Town docks crowded by tourists and the big charter boats. Ezra smiled and nodded back at the locals who greeted the young stranger with "buenos dias" and "mornin'" and "how ya'll doin'" as he passed their small but tidy yards. But his mind was occupied with reviewing the plan, checking it yet again for any flaw.

It was the first time Chris Larabee had put him in charge of an operation. A promotion borne of necessity; a wrenched knee (prosaically, the result of a nasty fall caused by tripping over Cuervo in the ATF parking garage), combined with an invitation to speak at a Department of Justice conference, had kept Larabee from becoming more involved. Cockily, Standish had assured the team leader that all would be well. He and his research assistant, Grace, had worked long and hard to amass the background information needed to justify and organize the operation, and Ezra, Josiah and Nathan had devised what they were sure was a flawless plan.

Titusville Diving and Salvage was smuggling guns into the country by loading them onto smaller boats from tramp freighters outside the three-mile limit, scuttling the carrier boats in the lower Florida Keys, and then running what appeared to be legitimate salvage operations to retrieve the contraband cargo. Ezra Simoneaux had ingratiated and intimidated TDS into allowing himself and his men to go along on the salvage run that would retrieve the guns he'd contracted for. Once the evidence was on board, Ezra, Vin, Buck and JD would commandeer the Devilfish, subdue her crew, and return to Key West. Josiah and Nathan would pose as fisherman and keep watch on the operation from a nearby craft, and Chris would wait on the dock, act as lookout, and call in backup when the Devilfish phoned him to announce its return.

The others were already on the dock when Ezra turned the corner onto the boardwalk. He could see Vin Tanner, Buck Wilmington and JD Dunne standing with the captain of the Devilfish, a battered forty-foot ex-sponge harvester that had been made over into a salvage vessel. Her engines were already fired up and idling, and the crew of four were making ready to cast off, clearing the lines from the cleats and coiling them neatly in place. Further down the dock, Ezra saw Nathan and Josiah, in straw hats and loud aloha shirts, stowing their fishing gear on a well-rigged Boston Whaler whose destination would not be far from that of the Devilfish. Chris Larabee, dressed in stained dungarees and a slouch hat, a bamboo rod in his hand, sat shoulder to shoulder with a handful of other fishermen at the end of the pier.

Ezra stepped easily onto the deck of the Devilfish and greeted Vin, Buck and JD with smiles and handshakes. Buck introduced him to the captain of the boat, Bill Sotto, a tall man with a face hardened by the sea and the kind of living he made from it. He met Ezra with a firm grip and a harsh assessment, then nodded and turned to climb the short ladder to the pilot's house. With a skilled hand, he eased back the throttle and the Devilfish parted company with the pier and nosed out through the buoys marking the large traffic lane and into deeper water.

The breeze picked up as they passed the last marker buoy and cleared the three small islets that sheltered the harbor. Sotto pushed the throttle forward half, and the big diesel engines roared into action. The Devilfish moved to the rhythm of the waves, unaffected by the chop, and Ezra saw the divers head for the forward cabin to get into their wetsuits. They would go down in pairs; Vin and JD, and Sotto's divers, Cozwell and Baum. The dive would be the diciest part of this operation. Ezra and Buck would be left topside with Sotto, Brown and Emerson. There were a dozen crates of illegal weaponry in the scuttled Conch Queen; once the first box was out of the water, on the deck and open, it was up to Buck and Ezra to take out the two crewmen and the captain while Vin and JD dealt with the divers. Ezra was not too troubled by the uneven numbers ... the crewmen, having to be prepared to enter the water at a moment's notice, would not be armed, and neither would the divers.
He and Buck, on the other hand, both carried concealed weapons and were decent hand to hand fighters. Besides, they would have the significant and important advantage of surprise.

Ezra settled on a bench by the transom and watched Buck climb to the pilothouse and join Captain Sotto at the wheel. Buck loved boats, and he liked people; Ezra knew he would be chatting up Sotto as much out of interest in the craft and boredom with the wait as to distract the man and put him off his guard.

The divers had been back on deck and suited up for over an hour before Sotto eased the throttle back and turned the Devilfish into the wind near a small orange buoy that marked the grave of the Conch Queen. Signaling Emerson to drop the anchor, the captain cut the throttle and shut down the engines, then came down to the deck. Ezra scanned the ocean around them. A few sailboats nearby, a Coast Guard cruiser on the horizon line, and a hundred yards away, a small white Boston Whaler. Ezra was glad to see Nathan and Josiah had made the rendezvous. He didn't expect trouble, but it was always good to know that your backup was there if you needed them.

Sotto's harsh voice cut into his thoughts.

"OK, boys ... we've got a cutter out there, but nothing to worry about. We've got our papers, and we're known in these waters. Besides, Mr. Vindelia has a line on one of the Guard's brass. No problems there. Still, we want to make this quick and clean. Got it?"

The divers nodded and began to shrug into their scuba gear. They would have only forty minutes of working time before they'd have to make their way to the surface. With luck, that would be all that was necessary. Encumbered by their heavy tanks, the four divers made their way down the ladder to the diving platform, where they donned their flippers and facemasks and Vin pulled his long hair back into a ponytail. One by one they dropped into the ocean and slipped beneath the surface, leaving only a trail of bubbles to mark the place where they had entered the water.

Ezra and Buck stood by the rail and watched the bubbles move away from the boat toward the buoy, where the divers would follow the line down to the wreck. Buck looked at Ezra, and the younger man could see the worry in his eyes. Ezra winked, and Buck's mustache quirked in a grin. It would be all right. It had been carefully planned, and it would unfold as expected.

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After the longest twenty minutes of Ezra's recent life, an electronic signal registered on the console in the pilothouse. Sotto leaned out of the open cabin and called for the winches to power up, and the two crewmen hustled to the task. Weight wrung seawater out of the reinforced cables as they were stretched taut between the pulleys and their underwater burden. It took a spare five minutes for the weedy snood that held the first four salvaged crates to break the surface; with practiced hands, Sotto steered the crane over the aft deck and Emerson reversed the action on the winch, lowering the net to the deck. Brown stepped forward, unhooked the net, dropped the rings of a new one onto the huge iron hook, and Sotto swung the crane back over to starboard and lowered it into the depths to collect the second load.

Ezra and Buck walked over to the crates. "Open them," Standish said.

The two crewmen looked to the pilothouse and, at the captain's nod, stepped forward and lifted the crates from the net, lining them side-by-side along the port rail. Brown handed a crowbar to Emerson and drew a large knife himself, and the two men set about prying the lid off the first box.

With a creak the swollen boards released their hold on the nails and the lid of the crate pulled away from the box and clattered to the deck. Brown leaned forward and rummaged through styrofoam
peanuts until his callused hand found and clenched around his goal. With a grunt, he pulled a heavy plastic bag free. Ezra and Buck stepped forward and watched as the man used his knife to cut the strapping that held the bag shut, then cut again at the second bag nested inside the first. The acrid smell of gunoil wafted out of the plastic, and Brown pulled a piece of contraband free of its packing material and held it up for the buyers' inspection.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

Ezra reached for the gun, hefted it, checked it thoroughly and handed it to Buck. As the taller man's hand closed around the barrel, things went straight to hell.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ezra saw the glitter of the knife in Brown's hand as it came up toward Buck's right side. He didn't know until later that he'd shouted Buck's name as he threw himself into Wilmington's broad chest, slamming him into the deck in a move that saved Buck's life but knocked the air out of him, leaving him vulnerable, gasping for breath and too stunned to go for his gun.

Ezra kicked out at Brown, sinking his foot deep into the man's belly and slamming him into the cabin wall. He rolled away in a smooth movement that brought his hand to his ankle, allowing him to palm the gun he wore there and bring it up and level. But in the next second, the gun was skittering across the deck and Ezra's hand was stunned into numbness as a glancing blow from Emerson's crowbar knocked the weapon from his grasp. Ezra rolled away again, leaving Emerson to impale the crowbar in the heavy planking on the deck. Scrambling to his knees, Standish reached for the railing, tugged a gaff from its clamps, and swung it at Emerson. The five-foot pole gave him a serious reach over the two-foot length of the crowbar, and as Emerson danced backward Ezra pressed the advantage and sank the vicious hook into his opponent's arm, yanking him down and forward.

Brown, recovered and back in the fight, lunged for Buck and pinned him to the deck before he could get to his feet, or his gun. Wilmington could see a new danger, but was unable to do anything except shout his partner's name and point. Sotto stood in the doorway of the pilothouse, gun in hand, trying to steady himself against the roll of the boat and take aim. With a brutal jerk, Standish pulled the gaff hook from Emerson's arm and swung it at the captain; the hook sank into Sotto's hand and sent the gun spinning over the rail and into the water before Sotto could squeeze off a shot. Ezra ripped the hook from Sotto's flesh and turned to look for Buck.

It was then that things got even worse.

As Buck struggled with Brown and Ezra's attention was on disarming Sotto, Emerson had been forgotten. Somehow, the wounded man had clambered onto the outside of the pilot house and was hanging, the elbow of his injured arm hooked around a rail, his other hand aiming a gun ... no, not a gun, at least not a handgun ... a flare gun ... at something in the water. Ezra's eyes darted from the thick muzzle to where its target must be, and fear lanced through him as he realized that the man was aiming for a small boat.

A small Boston Whaler, slicing through the water toward the Devilfish. Josiah and Nathan, coming to help ... and about to die for their efforts.

Ezra could do nothing. He had no time to act before Emerson squeezed the trigger and sent a flaming projectile straight at the small boat. If he managed to hit the gas tank....

In the moment between the whump of the launch and the explosion of the phosphorous flare hitting its target, Ezra heard a cry for help. Buck? He looked at the deck and saw the big man still struggling with Brown, who'd regained possession of the crowbar. Wilmington was intent on the fight and hadn't called out.
"Help! Buck!"

It was a voice calling for Buck.

"BUCK!"

JD. Oh god....

A stunning blow sent Ezra to his knees again. Sotto; down from the pilothouse, behind him. Ezra didn't wait for the follow-through; fueled now by adrenaline and utter fear for his friends, Ezra became a mindless, reactive fighter. He whirled and swung the gaff and sank it into the side of Sotto's head. The man didn't even scream as the iron penetrated his skull, simply went crashing to the deck like one of the big fish that the gaff had no doubt dragged there many times before.

Ezra didn't wait to see him fall, stealing a precious moment to try to sort the crises out. He glanced again at Buck, saw that he was holding his own with Brown but that Emerson was scrambling down the side of the cabin toward the deck. Ezra couldn't bear to look at the spot where he'd last seen the whaler.

"Buck...."

The cry was weaker, and Ezra made up his mind. Buck would have to hold the deck. Ezra headed for the stern, and the diving platform.

JD was there, in the water, his eyes wide, his face pale with exhaustion and fear. His left hand clung desperately to the platform's metal grating, and his right arm encircled the chest of an unconscious Vin Tanner. The man's head lay back against JD's shoulder and his chin rested on JD's bicep, just out of the water. Water that was pink with blood.

"Ezra ... help...."

Ezra climbed down the ladder, knelt in the bloody water that washed over the platform, and reached for the unconscious Tanner. He slipped a hand under each arm and waited for the help of the waves to lift Vin's dead weight higher, then tugged the young man onto the platform. He looked at JD.

"Where are Sotto's divers?"

"They ain't comin' back up," JD whispered.

Ezra nodded in understanding. "Good work, son. But there's more to do. Nathan and Josiah need help." At least, he hoped they did.

"Wha...?"

"Their boat blew up," Ezra said tersely. "Port side, about ten o'clock, maybe twenty yards away. Where's your knife?"

JD's hand disappeared under the water and came back up with his belt knife. He handed it to Ezra, hilt first. Ezra took the blade, turned to the starboard stern cleat and stretched, reaching for the dock fender. He sliced the tie and tucked the fender under his arm, pivoted and cut the one from the port side as well.

"Use these as floaters. Try to find them."

"OK." JD nodded and unbuckled his scuba harness, shrugged out of it and let the tank fall away and
sink in the dark water. He took the knife and reached down to replace it in his belt, grabbed the fenders, and looked up at Ezra. His eyes were fearful, but he smiled reassuringly.

"Don't worry ... I'll get 'em." His voice was weary but determined, and it broke Ezra's heart. He watched as the boy pushed away from the platform, and then turned his attention to Vin.

The unconscious man lay half-on, half-off the rough grate of the diving platform, water washing over him. His mask was gone, and a bruise was darkening his left cheekbone. Ezra could see that his air hose had been cut and the respirator was missing. And, for the first time, the more serious wound was visible; a slash in his diving suit that ran from his left hip, just above his weight belt, and cut diagonally across his ribcage, skipping the place where the metal zipper had deflected the knife blade and then diving deeper into the softer flesh of his upper chest, ending at his right shoulder. Dear Lord, Ezra thought. He got to his feet and looked across the transom for Buck.

The deck was quiet. Emerson lay prone, his skull split by the crowbar and puddling dark brown blood and pink brain tissue onto the boards. A few feet away Ezra saw Brown, his own knife buried in his chest. Buck was down too, crumpled against the ladder to the pilothouse. Ezra could see blood on his face but no other injury. He hoped against all hope that Buck was simply knocked out and not....

The southerner pushed the thought away. He knelt on the platform next to Vin and quickly unbuckled the scuba tank, pushing it into the water, then slipped his hands under Vin's shoulders and struggled to lift his dead weight, bracing him against the transom. Vin's upper torso dropped through the ladder opening and onto the deck. Ezra pushed upward and lifted the rest of Vin's body through the opening, then scrambled up the ladder. He leaned forward and put his ear to Vin's chest, heard the shallow gurgle of his breathing, turned the man face up and began CPR.

Vin began to cough; Ezra rolled him on his side and held him as he vomited seawater onto the deck planking. Ezra was relieved to see there was no blood. Vin took a long ragged breath and vomited again, water and bile, and gasped. His eyes opened wide and he began to struggle against the hands that held his shoulders.

"Vin ... VIN!" Ezra held the struggling man in place. "Settle ... it's all right. It's all right."

"JD...."

"He's fine." Ezra hoped it was true. "Just be still. Don't move." Ezra fixed him with a brief, threatening glare and Vin, suddenly weak, nodded in acquiescence. Semi-confident that Vin would remain where he was, Ezra got to his feet and went to Buck.

He was breathing, and his pulse was strong. The head wound had bled profusely, but didn't seem serious. Ezra pulled the big man away from the ladder and laid him out flat, checking for other wounds, but could find none. Deciding that he was stable and could be left alone until he came to, Ezra stood, holding onto the ladder for a moment, and took a deep breath before he finally turned his eyes beyond the decks of the Devilfish and to the place where he had last seen the Boston Whaler.

A fire burned on the water there. Gasoline from the Whaler's tanks, Ezra knew. He searched for bobbing heads but saw none. Where the hell was JD?

"Ezra!"

Standish walked unsteadily to the transom and looked down. Thank god. JD and Josiah clung to the grate, Nathan supported between them. All three looked exhausted, and Nathan's face was twisted in pain, but they were alive. Ezra climbed down to the platform and helped them out of the water; first
JD, then Nathan, who groaned and had to use his hands to pull his left leg out of the sea. Ezra's stomach did a slow roll at the sight of a six-inch piece of fiberglass embedded in the agent's calf. They managed to get him to his feet and JD helped him up the ladder, while Ezra extended a hand to Josiah and pulled the last of the team on board.

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Ezra punched the buttons on the cell phone with dispassionate precision.

"Larabee."

"Standish here."

"Tell me."

Ezra was too tired, too despairing to embellish.

"We got the guns. Radio silence was maintained ... TDS won't know until we get back to port. Sotto and his men are all dead. Vin's got a bad knife wound. Buck has broken ribs and a possible concussion, and Nathan's leg got sliced open. All OK, I think, but we'll need medics waiting." Ezra winced at the mental image of Larabee's face at this news.

"What the fuck happened?"

"I was in charge, Chris," Ezra said wearily. "I'll give you the full report when we get back." He didn't wait for a reply before he cut the connection and slipped the cell phone back into his slacks. There was nothing that Larabee could say to him that Ezra hadn't already said to himself.

Fool. Failure. Fuckup.

Fired.

He looked around the deck. Josiah stood at the controls in the pilothouse, guiding the boat back to Key West. Fortunately, salvage work being a dangerous undertaking under the best of circumstances, the Devilfish carried a well-equipped first aid kit; Vin and Nathan lay in the sun on the deck, under blankets, bandaged and medicated and sleeping. Buck sat propped against the wall of the cabin next to them, a bandage around his head and a torn sheet wrapped around his shirtless torso. JD, exhausted, lay with his head pillowed on Buck's thigh and the big man's arm draped protectively across his shoulders.

Buck looked up from the boy, met Ezra's eyes, and smiled wearily. His expression told Ezra that all was okay, that everything would be fine.

Ezra didn't believe it for a minute. His mood was as black as the drying bloodstains on the deck, and his future as dark as the stinking hold below, where the bodies of Sotto, Emerson and Brown had been dropped and forgotten.

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Frantic activity greeted the arrival of the Devilfish. But Chris Larabee stood motionless on the dock, his blond hair whipping his cheeks in the stiff ocean breeze, his eyes as dark as Ezra's expectations. He glared at the southerner with a ferocity that would have chilled Ezra's heart, had not that heart already been rendered invulnerable to such things by hopeless apathy and bitter self-recrimination.

The Devilfish nosed up to the pier and thudded against it. Josiah throttled back the engines and Ezra,
standing at the stern, threw a line to one of the waiting men. At the bow, JD did the same. It was the last moment of reflection Ezra would have for hours. Determinedly expressionless, the young agent watched as Chris limped awkwardly onto the deck, favoring his injured knee. He was trailed by paramedics and ATF and Coast Guard and Key West Police Department staff. Larabee lowered himself carefully to the deck at Vin's side, pulled the blanket back, and drew his breath in sharply when he saw the bandages already seeped through with blood. He reached out and put his hand on Vin's unmarred shoulder.

"Vin," he whispered, "you with us, buddy? Vin?"

Vin opened his eyes. "Hey, Chris," he said weakly, and grinned. "We got 'em."

"Looks like they got you," said Chris, trying hard to grin back.

"Yeah ... well ... you should see ... the bad guys...."

"Move aside, sir," said a paramedic, "and let us see to him."

Chris moved away from Vin's side, allowing access to the medics but not relinquishing his contact with his friend. Vin groaned as the bandages that covered his wound were pulled away, and an oxygen mask was strapped over his bruised face. Chris squeezed his shoulder. "Gonna be okay, Vin," he said, looking at the medic. The man smiled and nodded; it hadn't been a lie, and Chris took a deep breath and repeated it. "Gonna be okay." Two men carrying a stretcher arrived, and the paramedic nodded to them.

"We're gonna take him now, sir," he said to Chris.

"Right. I'm coming with." The paramedic helped Chris to his feet and returned his attention to Vin. Chris glanced around the deck, taking in the conditions of the other men. Nathan, too, was being placed on a stretcher under the watchful eye of Josiah. Buck was leaning heavily on JD's shoulder and feebly swatting the medical personnel away as if they were flies.

Ezra waited as Chris swung his head around, searching, and found the southerner; the concern on the team leader's face reverted to the anger that had been there when Ezra had first seen him standing on the dock. The young agent stepped forward without hesitation.

"Go with him," he said to Larabee, nodding at the stretcher on which Vin lay. "Go with them ... I'll take care of things here, and meet you at the hospital."

Larabee opened his mouth as if to say something, then changed his mind. Tight-lipped and wordless, he nodded curtly and turned his back on Ezra. Standish watched as his teammates were taken off the boat and loaded into ambulances. Standing in the middle of the chaos of activity, Ezra suddenly felt very much alone.

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It had taken long hours to deal with the aftermath of what had happened in the Caribbean waters two miles southeast of Key West on that brilliant, bitter morning. The questions....

Yes. The bodies in the hold are the captain and the crew. There were two divers as well. They never surfaced.

Yes. Self-defense.

Yes, four crates on board. Should be another eight still in the wreck.
Yes. The marker buoy is still in place.

Where? I don't know ... I'm no boatman. There's probably a chart in the pilothouse....

Yes. I'm fine.

Finally, all the representatives of the various law enforcement agencies involved were satisfied, at least for the short term, and began to disperse. Ezra stood on the dock and raised his fingers to his temples, rubbing them.

"Excuse me, sir?"

He opened his eyes and saw a small woman who looked like she was playing dress-up in her KWPD uniform.

"Yes, ma'am ... what is it?" he asked wearily.

"Would you like a ride to the hospital? Where they took your friends?"

My friends.

"Yes, ma'am. That's very gracious of you to offer."

"No problem, sir. My squad car is over here."

Ezra felt a gentle hand on his arm, and was suddenly overcome at the emotion the sympathetic touch of a total stranger awakened in him. He let the woman lead him to the car and slumped, exhausted, in the shotgun seat for the short ride to the hospital.

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The small window in the door to the waiting room framed Josiah, his shoulders drooping, his head down, one hand rubbing the back of his neck. He still wore his damp and bloodstained fishing clothes, and Ezra suddenly realized that he, too, was dressed in the tattered, bloodstained and seawater soaked remains of the cotton shirt and khaki pants he'd put on that morning. A few hours and a lifetime ago. He noticed the blood under his fingernails as he reached out and grasped the door handle, dismissed his appearance, tugged the door open and went inside.

Buck and JD were sitting side by side on the waiting room couch. Buck's makeshift bandages had been replaced by standard emergency room issue; Ezra realized that the fact that Buck was sitting there probably meant that he wouldn't be kept overnight. The look on Josiah's face as he turned to greet Ezra told him that Nathan probably would be. And the fact that neither Chris nor Vin were there told him to be afraid. He was.

"Ezra," Josiah came forward and unabashedly took the smaller agent into his arms in a fierce hug. Ezra stiffened and the big man felt it; he released the southerner and stepped back, but his huge hands held Ezra's shoulders in a vise grip and his deep-set blue eyes showed real concern. He knew what the problem was, and he did not mince words as he attacked it.

"Ezra, it wasn't your fault. Nathan told me when we got into the boat that he thought someone on the dock made him ... a fellow he took out of the game about three years ago. We didn't have any way of telling you. It was chance ... plain bad luck. Nothing you could have prepared for. It happens."

Ezra heard the words and dismissed them. "Nathan?" he asked. "And Vin?"
"Both fine. They're keeping Nathan overnight, Vin maybe a day or two longer. Nothing serious. A few stitches and antibiotics and they'll be good as new."

Ezra dropped his head to hide his face, but it was futile. Even JD noticed the emotion there and, being JD, tried to make things right.

"Hey, Ezra, we did good, didn't we?" he said encouragingly.

Standish looked at the young man and smiled tightly. "You surely did." He walked over to JD, reached out and took his hand and squeezed it. "You, JD, did splendidly. I'm sure Chris will be very proud."

"Vin was asking for you, Ezra," said Buck. "He's right down the hall. Chris is with him ... JD can take you there."

Standish's shoulders slumped, and he dropped JD's hand. He walked to the door and paused there, looking disconsolately at the three men.

"Tell him I dropped by. Nathan, too. Tell them both ... thanks." He left the room abruptly, letting the slow whoosh of the pneumatic door arm say his goodbye.

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The manager of La Casa de Cayo Hueso met Standish on the patio. Even in the twilight, Ezra's beaten appearance and tattered, bloody clothes were apparent. Unfazed, the woman smiled at him and asked what she could do. Ezra dug in his pocket, pulled out his wallet and handed her two bills.

"Whiskey," he said.

"Si, senor. Pronto."

"Gracias."

Standish walked to the back of the little hotel, slowly climbed the stairs to his room, unlocked the door and stepped into darkness. He undressed, gathered up his ruined clothing and threw it in the corner to be discarded later, and headed for the shower.

The hot water sluiced sea salt and blood from his hair and skin, but did nothing to cleanse his soul. Ezra left the small and steam-filled bathroom to towel off in the bedroom beneath the ceiling fan, his skin raising small goose bumps in the breeze of the blades. Draping the towel over a chair back to dry, Ezra pulled a pair of shorts from the battered dresser and tugged them on. He walked to the door and opened it. The manager had seen to his request; a bottle of whiskey and a small tupperware container of ice sat on the doorstep. Ezra brought them indoors, poured a drink, took the glass in one hand and the bottle in the other, and walked out onto the balcony to settle in a rattan chair.

Night had taken the island. He could see the ocean from where he sat; a black expanse even darker than the sky. It was flat and calm and swallowed the stars, but reflected the light of the moon in an unwavering path that led straight to the horizon.

Cayo Hueso. Island of Bones.

Not this time. Not for the men he worked with. But only due to the mercy of sheer luck, he thought bitterly. He drained his drink, and poured another.

What had he thought, only that morning, standing on the deck of the Devilfish? When the sun had
been shining, expectations were high, and he'd still believed that things would turn out as planned?

This is nice ... I really like this. After the operation is over, we'll have to do this again. Together, and just for fun.

Ezra Standish fell asleep in the rattan chair, an empty bottle on the porch floor next to him. The moonlight caressed his bruised face, but did not bring light or peace to his troubled dreams.

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Epilogue

On the next day, Nathan Jackson was released from the hospital.

On the day after, Vin Tanner was also released.

On the third day, six of the seven men in Chris Larabee's ATF team rented a boat and cruised the waters around Key West, relaxing in the sunshine and doing a little fishing and telling JD to turn the goddamn radio down already. At the same time that they were drifting in the small cluster of islets that lay to the north of the Old Town harbor, resolutely keeping melancholy thoughts about their missing partner to themselves, Ezra Standish was in Miami, boarding a plane for Denver. Alone.

There was, after all, a report to be written.

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