



# A Season of Happiness

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## The Devil's Whelp

by

Vin Jackson

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### THE DEVIL'S WHELP

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The floating exploration rig, Olympian, is drilling for oil. It has a crew of 80 tough, no-nonsense oilmen capable of handling anything. So they think. But Scott Reef #8 isn't just a jinx - it will prove to be one hole too many.

There's something down there apart from sea and mud that seems to think they're here for fun. The rules of its game are simple - play or die; the prize for winning - Olympian.

The only one on board who understands the situation is the toolpusher, Del Presswood. With each new event the whelp is coming to know him, enabling it to stay one step ahead, ensuring his warnings about the dangers are ignored.

If Del doesn't do something, and fast, he is going to lose the rig and his entire crew. For their sakes, this is one game he has to win.

But time is running out!

The following preview of Vin Jackson's **The Devil's Whelp** has been extended to the **first three chapters**. This way you will be able to get a good feel for the book before you buy.

Although viewing of **Mature** reader sample pages is unrestricted, they may contain offensive language, violence and adult themes.

**Vin Jackson's**

# **THE DEVIL'S WHELP**

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**THE DEVIL'S WHELP by Vin Jackson****CHAPTER ONE**

## 1

She couldn't reach him!!

No matter how she tried it made no difference, and the trying was so desperate that her muscles screamed for relief. Something - a current, a force, she didn't know what - was drawing her back, preventing her from going to him, at the same time holding her close enough for her to see the agony of his contortions.

When she had first sighted him, he was just an unrecognisable shape in the distance. Her curiosity aroused, she'd swum in that direction, stroking through the warm sea, feeling the sun on her back, even this far below the surface. It was so dreamy, just her alone in her own private ocean with nothing better to do than drift along and be amazed by the wonders that surrounded her.

What was that strange thing in the water ahead?

Now that she had closed the gap somewhat, she could see that it was blue. It twitched and waved like a large piece of material, a beach towel maybe, caught at the junction of many currents which were fighting for possession of it. The movements were fascinating. She was captivated by the magic of this azure ballet, so much so that she was totally unaware of the diabolical, unseen force which had been watching her for some minutes already. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, it began to advance.

Suddenly, it swept in from behind, picked her up, and began to carry her with it. As if strapped to the nose cone of a rocket, she was thrust along so fast that her arms were pinned to her sides and her head and shoulders began to hurt from the pounding of the water through which she was being driven.

Surprisingly, though, she could still see ahead. The blue dancer was much larger. In another second it was bigger still. Whatever it was that held her captive was propelling her straight towards the strange phenomenon. She thought for a few anxious seconds that she would slam right into it. Then the force slowed until it had ceased altogether and she found herself treading water.

Confused and disorientated, she stole a few moments to gather her senses and just hung there. The blue image danced before her and now that she was close, she was able to identify it as a man, a diver of some kind. Her son, Eddie, was a diver. She realised it was a stupid notion, but she wondered if this diver knew Eddie.

In a moment, the idea had become totally irrelevant, not because of the odds against such an acquaintanceship, but because this was Eddie!!

She'd caught a glimpse of his face behind the clear panel in his helmet as he'd swung close. He was calling to her. There were no sounds, but a mother didn't need to hear to know that there was pain, terrible, racking pain, compounded within him now by her mere presence. He wasn't just pleased to see her - he was desperate to be with her, for her to be with him.

The instant she tried to go to him, the force stirred and began to pull her away. She thrashed and hauled, just managing to hold her ground, but no more than that. She was a prisoner of opposing energies - the unknown power which kept her from her son, and the deep, maternal love which refused to let her leave. She could only witness his torture, but could do nothing to release him from it.

She watched the lips curl back from gnashing teeth and the eyes rolling up in their sockets, all of this through the curved, plexiglass view-plate set in the front of that stupid hat they made him wear. A rat-hat, they called it, and now he was a rat caught in it.

Her heart ached for Eddie, her son, her only son, her wee bairn. Except he, was no longer a defenceless child. He was a man, for all the good it was doing him.

He continued to gyrate and lurch before her. When he wasn't cavorting in hesitant circles, he was turning turtle, his back arching like a whip about to crack, legs flicking uselessly up and over. His inverted body passed through the expended, rising air, shattering larger bubbles, creating a cloud of effervescent fizz which hid all but the blue of his body suit.

She hated that suit in the same way that she despised the rat-hat. Both were lines drawn between her and Eddie. While he wore them, he wasn't her son. He was an oil man.

He maintained he wasn't, that he was just a diver who happened to work on an oil rig, but she knew differently. Proper divers wore recognisable equipment. She'd seen Jacques Cousteau on the tele. He had a face mask and tanks on his back. He didn't need a rat-hat with pipes running from it to the surface to stay alive. If, it was good enough for him, then why not Eddie?

Because Eddie was an oil man, that was why! He wasn't normal any more. He'd become like the people he worked with. He was no longer satisfied to merely appreciate the undersea world for the miracle that it was. He had to corrupt it, to use it in the avaricious quest for oil. And that meant being like them, turning a blind eye to what was normal, sensible, perhaps disregarding these attributes on purpose to prove a point so obscure that she was unable to fathom it.

Why, oh why did he have to do it? Wasn't he happy with the Navy? It was a good, secure job with a future, and a pension. And he'd got to wear the same kind of skin-tight suits that normal divers wore, not the ridiculous, blue rags that he had on now.

They were hardly more than overalls, really. In fact, Eddie used the same kind of clothes when he worked on the car. If only he could be doing just that, right now. Please God, let it be so, she pleaded, and me watching him. She tried to clasp her hands in prayer and knew that unless she could perform this simple task her prayers would be ignored, but she couldn't do it and fight the current at the same time.

Eddie jerked and danced. The lines running from the back of his rat-hat to the surface looped and bowed. It was as if some invisible monster had hold of them and was bouncing her son around as if he were no more than a child's toy on the end of a piece of elastic.

She screamed in frustration and anguish. The sounds were in her head, in her mind, but all that came from her mouth was a rush of bubbles which obliterated her son's image. She stopped screaming. She had to, in order to see. Terrible though it was, she had to look!!

Eddie was screaming, too. His mouth was open wide, his throat a raw, yawning cavern. Folds of skin on his face became ropes straining to the limit. They would never hold. They wept for release as she did, as Eddie would be weeping, if he didn't have the need to scream in terror-filled silence.

Then luminous, violet milk was pouring into his mouth. That was what it looked like, a trailing, twisting, viscous stream that flowed around his body then curled up to his neck and under the seal of his breathing helmet. Once inside, it just went into Eddie, through his mouth and his nostrils, right inside.

She pitched and pulled, dragging at the water with clawing fingers, coming no closer, destined to witness the invasion of her bairn by this affront to both nature and God.

It continued to flow relentlessly in a never-ending stream, saturating her precious Eddie, bloating him until there was no more space left in either his body or the suit and hat which were supposed to have kept him safe.

The suit began to tear. Eddie's nose and lips pressed flat against the view-plate. His teeth gnawed involuntarily on the clear, plexiglass panel. Then it started to crack.

Her world began to come apart, everything did - the suit, the rat-hat, and finally Eddie. The sea before her exploded. Pieces flew, spiralling through the water, trailing millions of bubbles captured in spearing, violet jet-streams. Eddie was everywhere, and yet he had gone completely and forever.

Her anguish and fear had reached a climax. She was impotent. She had let her son die. She wasn't a mother. She was a weak, useless woman!

Wailing bubbles, she tore at herself, raking her nails down her cheeks, forcing them to pierce right through and into her mouth, clutching the flesh in greedy palms and ripping it from her

face. Then she turned her rabid attention to her body. Her hands fought through the material of her clothes until the fingers were able to hook and drag great pieces of gory meat from the bones and thrust them in despair at the unnatural power which held her, making her final gesture of contemptuous defiance.

But the force which had been rushing like a stream seemed to have disappeared. The water was still, and so the chunks of flesh which she had torn from herself just floated away a short distance then hung suspended, seeping wispy trails of blood.

She had stopped, mesmerised by the phenomenon, a flap of torn stomach wall in one hand and a kidney oozing between the clutching fingers of the other. Blood trailed from both hands. It rose. Then there was more, and more, until it was billowing from the huge, jagged rents in her abdomen.

Just when the opaque cloud of red began to mask her view, she saw something, a dark shape at the periphery of her vision. The crimson screen became denser, and the shape moved closer, coasting gracefully. She recognised it by the way it moved. The name was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't quite recall it. Then the spectre changed direction suddenly as such creatures do and she was able to watch it circling, alert, deadly, the first of many sharks.

After all she'd seen, all the torture she had been forced to endure and had finally put herself through, it should have been over. No one person ought to be allowed to suffer more. Now this!! Couldn't she just have grieved in peace? She had loved Eddie and always would, but she had to be alive to mourn his passing.

They were circling closer, four, five, and more coming. The front runners were growing agitated, snapping and warning off those nearest to them, marking their ground, establishing a pecking order.

She turned and began swimming. The water was placid, no rushing tide, not even a gentle current, nothing to aid or abet her. No one thing that she could blame, or curse, or sacrifice her fate to. All that lay between life and death was her ability and determination.

And she did want to live. Now that Eddie had gone and there was nothing she could do to bring him back, she wanted time to grieve. She didn't want to die, not like this, not mashed and torn apart by....

One swam so close to her that she could have touched it. It seemed to be taking not the slightest notice of her and had almost passed. Then, with a surge, it jack-knifed and rushed at her. She churned water in a frantic dog-paddle, going nowhere fast.

She'd heard that you felt no pain when a shark attacked, just the impact - it happened so quickly. So why could she feel the teeth spearing into the flesh of her thigh? How was it possible that a person totally submerged in water could hear her bones snapping and splintering? And if she could feel and hear this, what would it be like when it started to eat its way up her body? God in heaven, why was this happening at all?

A terrible darkness engulfed her that was not merely visual. A dense, perceptual screen surrounded her, masking reason, defying logic. Agnes MacFarlane was alone within it. There was no more pain, not of the physical kind. But it hurt to be there, probably more so because nothing made sense any more. She had been swimming, yet she had never learned how. She was floating, but at the same time was sitting bolt upright. She had been drowning and thought that she still was; only the water was perspiration that streamed down her face like a river over the rocks of a waterfall. And the wet suit which she had never in her life possessed she now recognised as a flimsy nightdress which clung to her saturated body. And the sharks....?

She paused, frowning. Where were they? Fear caused a fresh outbreak of perspiration to well from her pores. They must be there still, lurking beyond the darkness, waiting to move in for the kill. She strained her eyes to look for them. The closest shape she could find was the silhouette of her arch-topped wardrobe canting harmlessly against the wall next to the window.

Her attention became fixed on the curtains. Light shone through them, accentuating the folds and threadbare patches. She wanted to get up, walk over to them and peer out, but she was

afraid that the dingy Glasgow back-street which ought to be there might not; and anyway, she couldn't walk - the shark had been feeding on her. It had taken her legs.

Oh, God, my legs!!! Panic snatched at her. She felt for them and they were there! The sharks were just imagination. Everything must have been. Then she remembered savaging her own body and thought that she might have done just that while in the grip of her terrible dream. Her hands frantically traced the contours, finding no rents or gaping holes, none at all. She was complete again, almost.

Only one thing was missing - her son, Eddie. He wasn't there. He was on the other side of the World - Australia. He was out on an oil rig, with his rat-hat, and his air lines, and his blue body-suit. He had all he ever wanted, all he needed, except for his loving mother. She was still here in Scotland, having nightmares about him, so afraid that he might never return.

In his absence, she did the only thing a mother in her situation could do for her son - she cried.

## 2

There were no distinguishing features. There was nothing out there but sea, mile upon mile of it. Except for the sun and stars which might be just another illusion, there was nothing to indicate that a certain point had been encountered before. It was an ocean that appeared to span the entire earth. Only circumnavigation could confirm or refute the hypothesis, and who would dare attempt a voyage of such magnitude? Who would risk years, maybe decades, of loneliness in search of that which might not exist?

Some might, if they were desperate enough. Men sufficiently greedy, or reckless, perhaps. Proud men. In fact, they were already there, in the midst of desolation, not sailing on it in search of home, but fossicking beneath for a jewel far more precious than mere land.

They already had a country, and a home. They couldn't see either, not from the middle of that vast emptiness, but they knew all those comforts were there, just a chopper ride away, so they didn't worry about it. Worrying was for wimps, and oil men were hardly that.

They were smart enough to know that it wasn't all the same out there. It might look it - to a wimp - but they weren't just there by chance, and it wasn't just any old spot of ocean where they'd set up camp. It was a particular one.

So that they could recognise it and return to that exact spot, they'd marked it with a buoy which was really a ship. At least, it floated, although God only knew why it didn't capsize with that enormous steel tower sitting on its deck. It had a name, too - Olympian - because ships were personal things and if no two were called the same, you knew which was yours.

Most ships were built to sail and in this respect she was no different to her sister vessels, but for now, Olympian was going nowhere. Heavy, steel anchor chains saw to that. They held her, all 17,000 tonnes, to a section of the ocean floor 200 feet below.

This, too, had a name. They called it Scott Reef. Most people had never heard of it, didn't know it was there, but the oil men appreciated the reef for what it was. It was so special to them that they felt a need to mark it for posterity, and they did just that in their own inimitable way - they drilled holes in it.

They had drilled seven, to date, and were in the process of drilling another. This one, they thought - they hoped - could be the one. Scott Reef #8 could bring it in for them. There was something about the feel of it that made #8 different to its forerunners.

Jack Pierce thought so. #8 was different alright and he wished to God they'd never started it, they being the operative word. It was their responsibility, not his. He was merely the diving supervisor. Each time they messed up, he had to send his men down to find out why, and only hoped he could bring them back up again alive.

He always felt this way, never took the job, or his men, for granted. Not even when he was asleep or on a break. Always on the ball, always worrying. Apart from diving, it was what he did best. He was doing it now. Damn them and their wretched oil!

Leaning on the rail, he gazed out over the sea. It was relatively calm now, just a few whitecaps, but that was a dangerous misconception. The weather off the northwest coast was unpredictable. It would be smiling one minute, then the next it could turn on you with all the fury of a rabid beast.

Sometimes it gave warnings. Like that, he thought as he noticed a narrow trough of wind cutting its way across the surface towards him. It might be nothing. At the same time it could be a precursor, a harbinger of the doom to come. You had to watch for these signs. Any thinking man would.

Pierce turned. His grey, worried eyes scanned the decks. Any thinking man. He looked for one. From where he was standing, he could see fifteen or so workers, all going about their business, hauling pipes, greasing machinery, walking from A to B. Not one seemed concerned about the weather.

Surely, there was someone? There were eighty men on board, give or take. Surely to goodness there was one who cared more for his own safety than he did for his ego?

He sighed and turned to resume his vigil. Another gust streaked in from nowhere. He followed it as it thrashed across the bow, feathering whitecaps, frosting the mirrored blackness of the ocean. It seemed to pause in a flurry for a moment before darting away into the oblivion of the Timor Sea.

Under normal circumstances, Pierce might have watched it go as far as his eyes would see, but now wasn't normal, and something else had captivated his attention. It was below the surface, a faint glow, like a light of some kind. Then it had gone. Weird, he thought.

Just as the problems they'd struck with this latest hole were weird. The first day they'd lowered the bit and it had begun to chew its way into the reef, something had been wrong. Pierce had felt it, like a warning in the back of his mind, or an ache in his bones. He'd kept quiet, of course. No-one would have done anything, except perhaps poked fun at him for being the old woman they all considered him to be. For a few days he thought they might be right. Equipment did break down when it got tired. Incautious workers had accidents and it wasn't unknown for a freak storm to pop up out of nowhere once in a while, or two.

After a week he was already regarding the unusual number of incidents as a spate, and went back to trusting his own instincts. By the following Sunday the problems had reached glut proportions. At least, that was his opinion. To these worries, and others, he added one more - how to convince these blind, macho oil men that #8 was a jinx while at the same time reassuring his divers that it was not. He resolved the dilemma by concentrating on the second part and leaving the first to someone with a bit more influence.

#8 was in its twentieth day now and he had thought that sense might prevail. Some hopes. They were all edgy, snappy, but still they kept on, adding another section of pipe, driving the hole deeper into the ocean floor. It was down 1500 feet already and was turning into another bust, just like the first seven. But that was a defeatist attitude. If you quit when the going got a little shaky, you ought to get right out of the oil business. Some of them must be thinking along those lines. They must be. After all, beneath the grease and the hard hats, they were still human, but not one of them was prepared to admit his fears and pull the plug. So they all had to suffer.

From Jack's point of view, that meant eight long days, just over a week until he finished his 28 day stint and could catch the chopper that would take him off this crazy, floating time bomb. Maybe once he got home he would feel differently, perhaps be able to look back and realise that he'd over-reacted. It wasn't likely. The poison of Scott Reef #8 was already eating into his body and all he wanted to do was get right away from it and anything to do with oil. And he'd do it, he decided. He'd quit.

There - he'd said it. Not out loud, but it was the same thing. The decision was made, locked in. It couldn't be changed unless.... Jack stopped himself from inserting provisos into the formula, knowing full well that he might - probably would - resort to them in a moment of weakness. So, in eight days he would tender his resignation and that would be an end to it.

He felt a small surge of excitement. Like a tot of rum, it warmed his insides and supplied the boost needed to carry on. That was what he had to do - just take charge of the situation and do his job to the best of his ability. His men expected it of him. Right now they needed him, especially Eddie MacFarlane.

He looked around for the young Scot and found him outside the divers' shack on the main deck. He was like something out of a child's toy box, a raggedy doll in a blue clown suit with a mop of flaming red hair - Jack's toy.

Does little Eddie want to go for a swim? Is that what he wants? Here we go, then, on with the nice hat. Yes, you do look a bit like a spaceman, don't you? And you want to fly to the moon, is that what you said? Tomorrow, Eddie. Tomorrow you can be a spaceman, but today you're a diver. Today Eddie's going for a swim. Here we go. No, don't struggle it won't hurt, not a bit. What was that? You're scared? There's nothing to be afraid of, trust me. I'm your Uncle Jack. Would I let you down?

Would I?

Eddie saw the diving super looking in his direction. Jack had been really funny lately, nervous. Everyone was, but Jack seemed to be taking it to extremes. As the man with the qualifications and the experience, you should have been able to rely on him for reassurance, but when the boss was worried and trying to make out that he wasn't, then you figured that maybe you ought to start worrying too.

He turned his eyes away from Jack and they fell on one of the derrick legs. His gaze travelled up, way up into the complex network of criss-crossed steel towering above him. It reminded him of a shrine, but one honouring the devil rather than any God. Only the devil could be responsible for what was happening, what they were all waiting for.

It all began two days ago, just a slight tremor at first, enough for all those on board who weren't asleep to stop and say: "What was that? Did you feel something?" Then they shrugged and carried on. When another hit an hour or so later, they said: "Peculiar," and still went about their business. Just after lunch the whole rig started trembling, not much, but enough to feel through the plating of the decks. And it didn't stop until they suspended drilling and raised the bit.

He'd overheard the driller talking with Doug Bromley, the toolpusher. They didn't seem over-concerned and were confident they could discover a remedy for the problem. They tried numerous things, including increasing and decreasing the revolutions of the drill, but instead of improving matters, the shaking got worse.

Someone with nothing better to do had timed the disturbances and discovered there was a pattern to them. They were spaced eighty-two minutes and fifteen seconds apart - exactly! When this small piece of trivia was brought to their attention, those in charge had mumbled: "Interesting." It hadn't stopped them drilling, but they were at least doing it with a deeper frown than the one they'd worn before.

That was early this morning, six-eleven, to be precise. Eddie knew because, like many others, he had taken to checking his watch, just casually, of course. At seven thirty-three, Olympian began vibrating so much that the derrick was humming like a giant tuning fork. They decided to stop drilling. At eight fifty-five it happened again, only this time the drill wasn't turning. It wasn't even in the hole! Shortly after the tremors ceased, a damage report was logged - a leak had been detected on the stack.

Jack and Eddie often talked about the oil men and how they liked to make out that they were so different to ordinary people. Jack maintained they were. "They don't even speak the same language," he'd said, and the pair of them had gone through a list of examples and laughed themselves sick. Well, here was yet another instance that caused a special kind of nausea. Here, they were talking about a stack, not the chimney sort that climbed into the sky and belched smoke. This stack sat on the ocean floor, over the hole they were drilling, performing its function quietly and inconspicuously. Take it away and what have you got? A hole, that's all.



But that wasn't all. Without the stack it was the muzzle of a cannon with a breech-load of powder and the fuse burning steadily. The un-nerving part was that it was right below you. "Right under your little pink ass," was the way Clem Berry explained it to one of the new roustabouts who was being extra-cocky. Clem was the sub-sea engineer and the blowout preventer - the stack - was his baby. He had enormous respect for it and he liked everyone else to. When they didn't and Clem found out, they usually got a lecture.

"When she goes, boy," he'd drawl in his lazy Texan accent, "You better hope you done all your prayin', 'cos sure as shootin', ain't gonna be no second chance."

Clem hadn't needed to lecture Eddie. The young Scot already cared a great deal for his little pink ass and if Clem's stack - or blowout preventer, or BOP, or whatever else they wanted to call it - was going to keep him wearing it, then that was cool. And if he had to go down ten times a day to check that it was doing its job, he'd do it. He wouldn't necessarily like it, but he'd do it.

Eddie gasped as something touched his shoulder. He spun to see Jack Pierce standing by him. Jack's frown deepened. "Are you okay?"

Eddie produced a long sigh through his nose and nodded. "I did nay see ye coming, that's all." "You're sure?"

"D'ye ken, I'm fine, Jack. Is it time tay go?"

Pierce tried to glance casually at his watch, but the study was too long and nervous to be as indifferent as he would have liked it to appear. "We'll just wait until..." He stopped himself from saying that they'd wait until it was over, until the vibrations they all knew were coming had passed. "Until Clem's ready," he finished and was already searching for a topic of conversation which might take both their minds off the waiting. "You know what to look for?"

"A leak on the blue pod," replied Eddie, nodding.

Jack watched the red hair dance. The freckles on little Eddie's cheeks seemed to have multiplied since the last time Uncle Jack had looked. "It's probably nothing. Clem says he can still operate the valves, but he wants to make sure."

MacFarlane was fiddling with his rat-hat, passing it from one nervous hand to the other. "Have ye ever seen a blowout, Jack? I mean, from up close?"

Pierce tried a chuckle which died in his throat. He cleared it. "I'm standing here now, aren't I?" He shook his head, as if by doing so he could erase his poor attempt at a joke. "No, I haven't, and we're not going to see one. Everything's under control."

### 3

Like everyone else, Sam Gault was a little worried. But he was also the driller and there was a job to think about. Oil was in his blood. It showed in his tough, leathery hands and face, in the spiky hair of his bullet-shaped head and in the wispy curls sprouting from the scooped neck of his vest. It was even apparent in his movements, those slow, considered actions of a man not accustomed to making mistakes.

Sam should have been satisfied. The bit had been examined and it had checked out okay. Now it was back down and was circulating to keep the hole clear. Even if there was a tremor, it shouldn't damage any of his equipment. To Sam, however, being satisfied meant there was probably one more thing to do.

According to his watch, it was getting very close to that time again. He had been waiting patiently for the derrick man to finish the job of greasing the pipe racking gear. Paddy was still way up the derrick on the monkey board and was taking an age. In fact, he was only just starting up the ladder to the crown at the top. The casual way the Irishman was playing around, you'd think he was decorating a Christmas tree. It would have tried the patience of a saint, which, by any stretch of the imagination, Sam was not. He hailed the derrick man and called him down.

Paddy hesitated. He leaned outward and peered at the rig floor far below. Eighty feet was a long way to climb down, especially when he'd have to climb back up again to finish greasing. All this messing around for something nobody could explain and might never even happen. "Oi'll just be a few minutes, Sam," he called out, then turned back to the ladder and stepped up another rung.

Everyone on board must have heard Sam's bellowing as he ripped into the man far above him. "Get your stupid, Irish arse down here, Paddy, or I'll kick it all the way back to bloody Dublin!"

Con O'Reilly slammed a hand against the rail, shaking the entire ladder. "Alright, alright, Oi'm comin'," he shouted and began re-tracing his steps. He mumbled and muttered his way down to the rig floor, then hustled across to stand before the driller, wiping his hands systematically on a rag already black with grease. "Oi don't take koindly to bein' called stupid, Sam."

"Then you shouldn't use a brick to keep your ears apart," snarled Sam.

"Dere's noth'n' wrong wid moi ears, and fer your information Oi'm from County Cork, not Dublin!"

Gault's hand tightened on the safety railing beside him. "I don't care if you're from Afghani-bloody-stan, you shit-for-brains bog-trotter, when I give you an order, you either jump, or you're off this rig!"

"Dere you go again, t'rowin' yer weight around. Just because you're de driller...."

"Listen, you stupid Irish bastard," growled Sam, "I'm just trying to save your useless hide, although God knows why. I don't reckon you'd even notice. Now, put a sock in it and wait, will you?"

O'Reilly shrugged. "Well alright, seein' as you put it loik dat, but if Oi've come all de way down fer noth'n', Oi'll be havin' a few more words to say about it!"

Under normal circumstances, Paddy's and Sam's little one-act play would have had the men on the rig floor in fits. On this occasion, as a very minor comic relief, it raised a few smirks and the odd chuckle, but no more. The atmosphere was electric. Eyes watched seconds ticking by. Filthy or not, nails were being chewed, breaths held, and fingers crossed.

Pierce's hip had begun to ache. It did that when stormy conditions were on the way. He massaged it absently and tried to take his mind off the waiting by watching the sea. It hadn't changed, at least nothing visible had, but he could sense something approaching.

Eddie was thinking about his mother and home. If he closed his eyes, he could picture the grimy, terraced houses and the narrow streets. He could see the rain, feel the cold, hear the kids shouting as they kicked the soccer ball around and replayed last week's Celtic versus Rangers match. It was a strange term - home. You were supposed to feel alright there. It should have been somewhere you could go back to and know it was where you were meant to be. He hadn't left it that way. In fact, he'd been glad to leave the damp and the squalor and was beginning to feel more at home on the rig than he did in Glasgow. But now, at that moment, he wanted it all back. He wanted to be there because he hadn't taken sufficient notice of it. There were places he hadn't really seen, words had been left unsaid which his mother might never hear. He wished he could start over again, so that he could set that part of his life straight.

Lee Fong was on his way back to the kitchen with an empty bucket swinging from his hand. His English wasn't the best and sometimes it was difficult to understand what was going on because of the different nationalities on board. Slang made it worse. Nevertheless, he knew something bad was happening, or about to. It was his intention to keep a very low profile to avoid aggravating the situation and bringing down the wrath of these very large westerners on his very small oriental personage. He was succeeding in this endeavour, up until the time that he tripped and dropped the bucket.

In the relative silence, the metallic clash was like a thunderclap. Heartbeats were missed, men jumped, and heads jerked in Lee Fong's direction. He didn't dare return the looks because he didn't have that much resentment in him. He merely smiled a sheepish apology, retrieved his bucket and scuttled away.

Ten eighteen came and went. By ten twenty five the men were relaxing a little and a murmur of conversation had started up. By half past it seemed that what they had all been waiting for had decided not to call. Sam Gault turned to the derrick man. He indicated the tower with an upward glance. "On your bike, Paddy."

The Irishman stood for a long moment, his lips pursed and his face reddening. Finally, he could contain his anger no longer. "Dat's it! Dat's fuckin' it!" He threw the greasy rag onto the deck and set about stamping on it. "Up de fuckin' ladder. Down de fuckin' ladder. Up 'n down, up 'n down." He ceased his stamping to glare at the driller. "Dat's all Oi am to you, Sam Gault - a proize prick of a fuckin' yo-yo!"

Now it was funny. Now it was hilarious. Men cackled and guffawed. "You tell 'im, Paddy," someone yelled.

"Too bloody right Oi will!" O'Reilly snatched up the rag. Sam was leaning on the guard rail looking up at the tower. He glanced at Paddy, then back up to the monkey board. There was no need to repeat the order. "It's me job, an' Oi'll do it," said Paddy reluctantly. He turned and stomped his way across the deck to the ladder at the foot of the derrick. There he stopped and pointed at Gault with the dirty rag. "But Oi'll be seein' you later, Sam!"

A cheer broke out as he began to climb. Pierce was just about to enter the radio shack when he heard the applause. He looked back to see the derrick man climbing up and his heart kicked. Why was that? Nothing had happened. It was all over, wasn't it? Afraid to answer his own question, he ducked into the shack and pressed the switch on the intercom that connected him with the moon pool where his divers would now be waiting. Bill Rose, Eddie's co-diver, picked up the call. "Hold the dive," said Jack, trying to sound calm.

"Something wrong, chief?" Bill's voice came back hollow as if he was speaking into a can.

"Just..." Pierce began testily, then brought his agitation under control. "Hold the dive. I'll get back to you." He returned to the door and stood just inside, looking out at the derrick, massaging the nagging ache in his hip.

O'Reilly was part way up the guard tube which led to the first platform. He reminded Pierce of a termite, threading his way up his tunnel to the choice tucker at the top. Except he wasn't going to eat it, merely slap grease over the moving parts. The real eating went on far below. Oil men or white ants, there wasn't much difference. The end product of both was destruction in one form or another.

Unlike Pierce, the Irishman was starting to relax as the climb worked the stiffness out of his muscles. He had been pretty aggro a few moments ago, but taking his frustration out on his physical limitations had done the trick and he was even managing to smile about his altercation with Sam. He was twenty-five feet up the unguarded second ladder on his way to the crown and grinning widely when the shock hit. He lurched forward and his teeth crunched against the steel rung in front of him.

Olympian staggered. Jack Pierce clutched at the door frame. He heard his elbow click as the force wrenched at his straining arm. That was the least of his worries. He was more concerned for what had been lurking in the back of his mind, the warning that even he had been too afraid to believe. Now, it could no longer be ignored.

He knew it! He knew it would come! It had watched and waited, had noticed them checking their watches and it had held off, just long enough for them to believe in their stupid, tiny little minds that it had gone away for good. Then it had returned, bang, when they least expected it, when their guard was down.

Pierce was shocked at himself. Was he so terrified that he was starting to believe in the bogeyman? A trembling hand moved up to his face and felt the perspiration. Yes, he decided, he was.

Con O'Reilly preferred leprechauns, and he too might have been terrified, if there'd been time. Ten seconds, however, was barely long enough to realise that he had lost most of his front teeth and that the force which had smashed them into his bleeding mouth was now in reverse and thrusting him backwards.

Con's hands were big and strong, but they were also greasy. He clenched them as hard as he could around the ladder and actually felt the steel tubing pressing between his fingers and palms. Then his hands just plopped off to become empty fists and he was falling.

He tried to cry out and managed a faint gurgle through the clog of blood and shattered enamel at the back of his mouth. Even that small effort was terminated abruptly as his head glanced off a steel cross-member.

Sam was clinging to the safety rail surrounding his equipment. It was like a massive earthquake. Everything shook. Unsecured steel tubing rolled and clanged. Men shouted and tumbled. He thought for a moment that the derrick was going to fly to bits and come crashing down on them. He clung tighter, his arms aching with the jolting, his hands numb from the vibrations passing through the steel tubing. He watched open-mouthed as his derrick man bounced off one more strut before hitting the monkey board with a sickening thud.

A second or two later, the shaking ceased.

Sam didn't notice at first. He pushed off the rail and hurried in the general direction of the ladder, all the time looking up. He couldn't see O'Reilly's body, just part of his arm dangling over the edge of the walkway above. Then Sam's feet went from under him and he was airborne. It wasn't until he had slammed down onto the rig floor and was laying flat on his back, refilling his lungs that he became aware of how calm and peaceful it was.

The realisation was a passing thought. Then he was on his feet and running once more. Someone was already at the foot of the ladder. In too much of a rush, Sam failed to put a name to the face. He simply growled at it and flung the man aside, then started up.

By the time he was climbing out of the guard hoops onto the walkway, he was puffing and wheezing. Paddy was laying half-way along the platform face up, his eyes closed, one arm beneath him and both legs bent at impossible angles. A few short paces and Sam was kneeling beside the derrick man, fumbling for a pulse with a trembling hand. "Don't you die on me," he gasped hoarsely. He couldn't find a pulse. His head went down on Con's chest. "Don't do this, you great, stupid Irish bastard. You don't die until I tell you."

Sam pushed himself up and turned the big Irishman on his side. Plunging fingers into the lacerated, bloody mouth, he tried to clear the air passage. When he had scooped out what he thought to be all of the broken teeth, he rolled the unconscious man onto his back. He hit O'Reilly's sternum with a clenched fist and proceeded to pump the chest rhythmically with both hands and all of his weight. "One, two, three.... Come on, shit-fer-brains, come back." He dived for Paddy's mouth. Holding the nose, he tilted the head back and blew hard into the mouth. Through the blood he could taste liquor. "You sneaky bludger," he panted and went back to the external heart massage. "Drinking on the rig. You could lose your job for this. Come on, come on!" He blew into Con's mouth again, then, went back on the chest. "I'll make a deal - come back so's I can kick your fat arse and I won't say anything. Tell you what - I'll even buy you a drink when we get back to Karratha. Hell, I'll buy you a bloody case. Now come on, for Christ's sake! I'm doing all the work. You could at least help."

Sam was lowering his lips towards the Irishman's mouth for the third time when he felt a waft of warm air rising. He tried again for the pulse. It was there, only faint, but it was there. He sat back on his heels, breathing heavily. "You bastard, O'Reilly." Sam felt both exhausted and elated. He shook his head and chuckled. "You big, stupid, beautiful...." Emotion choked off the rest of his words. He smiled as he watched the steady rise and fall of Paddy's chest. Tears

began to roll down Sam's cheeks. He hadn't cried for a long time. Considering the relief he now experienced, he decided it had been too long.

## 4

Work did not re-commence until they had brought Con O'Reilly back down and the medic had performed his hasty examination. He discovered a broken arm, two broken legs, a possible fractured pelvis and numerous lacerations and contusions. There was, he said, a good chance of cracked ribs, maybe a pneumothorax, then threw in concussion for good measure. The broken teeth were so obvious that he didn't bother to mention them. When asked if O'Reilly could be expected to live, Jerry Dennis had shrugged and said: "He's a mess, that's all I know."

Along with the rest of the crew, Jack Pierce watched as Con was carried to the sick bay. As the small procession moved out of sight, he made his decision and went below. He knew he'd find the Company representative in his office: whenever there was real trouble or responsibility to shoulder, that was where he ran to hide. Pierce walked purposefully to the door and went in without knocking.

Les Meyer was in his chair with his back to Pierce. He didn't bother to turn at first, although he must have known he had a visitor. He was probably contriving the expression of a man about to make a momentous decision. The fact that he had never made one in his life, spoke well for his powers of imagination. Pierce had stopped beside a metal filing cabinet. He pulled out the top drawer a few inches, then slid it back in noisily to announce his arrival. "I didn't see you on deck," he said woodenly.

Meyer's chair turned slowly. His fingertips were together as if in prayer and he touched them to his full lips. "Nothing I could do, Jack," he said quietly through the fingers. His eyes were partially closed and because of this he appeared bored, but he always looked that way. The corners of his mouth curled up slightly. It was hard to tell if he was smiling or sneering.

Pierce studied the face and shuddered. He had heard once that Meyer's ex-wife had put a private investigator onto him. When asked for a description of her husband, she'd replied: "He's a lousy, insipid, selfish puss-bucket," which just about summed him up to a T. Having failed dismally as a husband and lover, he was now trying to reach the pits in his professional career, and was succeeding admirably. It was unlikely that a company drilling superintendent had ever been as useless, despised, and ignorant of his own incompetence as Leslie Rudolph Meyer. He started to rise out of the chair. "I suppose you're ready to dive?"

"No," Pierce stated categorically. Meyer froze statue-like and Jack began to wonder if he'd over-estimated his own determination. It was true he was scared and the O'Reilly incident had compounded his fear, but the way he felt was only responsible for what he was about to say; it wasn't a sufficient justification of it. "I'm calling the dive off."

Meyer jerked upright. "Like hell you are!"

Pierce looked away momentarily, re-building his composure, trying to find an objective excuse. "It's too dangerous right now. The yellow pod's secure..."

"For how long?" Cut in Meyer. "What if it happens again? What if that gets damaged too? I want the blue pod repaired and back on line before the next tremor hits."

"It's my diver's life you're talking about." Jack was starting to plead. He could hear it in his wavering voice, and that wasn't good because it gave the advantage back to Meyer. "You can't just go on as if nothing's happened. There's one man in the sick bay and..."

"Christ, Pierce!" Meyer leaned heavily on his desk and glared across it into the diving supervisor's eyes. "This is the oil business, not some bloody geriatric rest home! We're sitting on top of a powder keg and the stack's the only thing keeping the lid on it! If you refuse to send a man down and the yellow pod gives out as well, we're up shit creek! We've got no backup, nothing!"

Jack could feel the heat rising in his face. "Clem says the blue pod's still working, it's just that...."

"It's pissing hydraulic fluid all over the bloody ocean," Meyer interrupted again. "That's what it's doing!" His eyes narrowed to mere slits as he grated: "Make that dive, Pierce, or by God I'll have you replaced and see to it that you never work in oil again!"

Before he knew what had happened, Jack was on his way to the communications shack. He couldn't remember whether he'd replied to Meyer's ultimatum, only that he hated the man enough to wish him dead. The main reason for his hatred was probably because the arrogant incompetent was right for once - the leak on the pod had to be fixed.

He was almost at the shack and still fuming when he noticed Eddie MacFarlane sauntering towards him. The young diver should have been waiting beside the Moon Pool for his instructions. Jack scowled at him. "Where do you think you're going?"

The edge on Pierce's voice stopped the young Scot in mid-stride. He shrugged. "Just coming t'ay see what gives, Jack. We figured ye'd call it a day."

"Well you figured wrong. You're going down! Do you have a problem with that?"

"I dinnay ken wha...," Eddie started, then, thought better of it. He shrugged once more and pulled a face instead. "Ye're the Chief." He turned and began retracing his steps to the ladder he'd only just climbed. The head of Bill Rose appeared at the top. Eddie gave his co-diver an almost imperceptible nod. Rose answered with an upward flick of his bushy eyebrows and began to ease his way back down to the moon pool.

Whenever Bill made this same journey, it always disturbed him. It was stupid really. He was a diver by profession and he liked the job. Even with all its dangers, the sea had never worried him. He knew enough about it to respect its power and its moods and never took it for granted. But most divers went to work over the side, beneath a sky that gave them warmth and light, lowering themselves into water that they recognised as a creation of nature. They didn't climb down into the belly of a ship where the sun never shone, so that they could jump through the gates of hell.

He stepped onto the catwalk and turned. There it was, the moon pool, a rectangle of black liquid that was really the sea, but Bill had never quite managed to convince himself totally of that fact. He remembered a teacher in primary school showing him an open box of matches. The teacher had closed the box and asked: "What's inside?" Bill told him. "Can you be sure?" the teacher prodded. "You can't see them. How do you know?" Bill was adamant to start with. The matches were in there before, so they must still be there. Even so, despite what he knew to be true, he'd opened the box, just to make sure.

The moon pool was like that. You went into it and out through the bottom of the ship, knowing it was the same sea that Olympian was floating on. It must be - you'd seen it topside - but when you were there, down beneath the rig floor and you couldn't see outside anymore because someone had closed the lid of the box you were in, you began to have doubts. It was as if you were passing through a secret door into a world of foreboding, an eerie, supernatural kingdom of childhood monsters and Herculean trials. It caused you to question your own courage to survive within it, and your ability to escape its clutches.

The odd part was that this was the feeling you got when you were on the catwalk, as he was then, looking down into the pool. It was ominous and you'd do almost anything not to pass through that terrible door; but when you were actually in the water underneath, you kept looking back up at that gaping hole in the bottom of the ship with longing. And when you'd finished the dive and were coming up, that same square of surface water which had looked so terrifying from above, suddenly appeared friendly and welcoming. You were glad to see it. Sometimes, if the dive had been a hairy one, you were ecstatic. It was a case of: Thank Christ, I've made it. Just a few more metres and I'm home free. One last flick of the fins and an upward thrust, up through the rippling mirror to safety.

You felt good when you were out of it, dripping water through the steel grating under your feet. You truly appreciated being alive to feel anything, for a few minutes anyway, and occasionally longer. Then the discomfort began to seep back into your gut again. It was like a vacant space where something was missing, that void which would fill up with the same tight ball that always

formed there when you knew you had to go down one more time. At the moment, the space in Bill's stomach wasn't full. A few knots had collected there, but only a few, because he wasn't making the dive - Eddie was. Unless something went wrong, Bill would be up here, high and dry, keeping the door open for his partner.

Then MacFarlane was by his side. "Stupid name," commented the youngster.

The sounds of Eddie's voice seemed to echo right around the catwalk before finally returning to Bill. He couldn't make sense of the words. "What?"

"Moon pool," explained Eddie, pointing with his rat-hat, first at the water, then to the underside of the rig floor above their heads. "Ye cannay see the Moon at a' fram here."

"That's 'cos it's quarter to twelve in the morning, you bloody Galah."

"I did nay mean..."

Rose cut him short. "I know what you meant, Eddie. Now, are you going down, or do you want me to?" Another knot appeared in Bill's gut and he caught himself mentally crossing his fingers.

"I can manage very well mah sel', thank ye kindly, and I dinnay need a Sassenach tay hold mah hand."

Rose covered his relief by shaking his head in mock despair. "You can't even talk bloody English, you wee Scotch bogon."

"Scottish bogon, if ye don't mind," Eddie corrected. "Now quit blaytherin' an' hook me up, will ye?"

In the shack above, the diving super listened to the knocks and scrapes from the intercom speaker as Eddie secured his hat to the neoprene seal around his neck. Pierce adjusted the microphone stalk on his headset. "As soon as you're ready, son,"

"On mah way, Jack." Eddie's voice blared around the room.

Jack wondered whether he ought to switch off the speaker to keep the conversation a little more private. He decided against it, for the time being. "Give me a commentary on the way down, Eddie. Anything unusual, no matter how small, I want to know." He paused with his mouth open as if unsure whether to say what was on his mind. He shrugged off the thought: if Eddie started talking crazy, he could always shut him down.

His eyes flicked to the other two in the shack. Meyer was hovering buzzard-like in the background, no doubt keeping his options open for a full-frontal assault of interference, or for beating a hasty retreat should something go wrong that he couldn't handle. Clem Berry was standing between Meyer and Pierce which was advisable in all respects: Clem was both huge and laid-back, a gentle, Texas giant. If anyone on board could pour oil on the troubled waters that were Les Meyer, Clem could, and from a great height.

When he began to feel his earlier hatred for Meyer returning, Pierce went back to concentrating on his equipment and his diver. Eddie's hollow narrative was drifting through the speaker, losing itself in the space of the room. He was just talking his way down, telling of things they already knew. Jack was never bored by it. As long as he could hear the commentary, no matter how routine or mundane it might seem to an outsider, to him it meant that his man was okay and functioning as normally as anyone could under the circumstances.

MacFarlane's voice stopped. Pierce's hand flew to the switch and cut off the intercom's speaker. He realised too late that it was a mistake he would probably regret and was aware of movement as Meyer shuffled closer. "Eddie?" Jack enquired casually, as much for Meyer's benefit as the young Scot's.

"It's okay, Jack," Eddie returned almost immediately. "Just having trouble clearing mah head." He paused for a few seconds. "Alright, now. Going down again."

Pierce signalled to the two behind him that all was well. The room darkened suddenly and he glanced at the door to see why. Doug Bromley was standing there, blocking the sunlight. They all knew where the toolpusher had been - in the sick bay with Con O'Reilly. It was typical that it would be Clem and not Meyer who asked: "How is he?"

Doug half-turned to face Clem. "He should make it, eventually." He shucked his head to indicate Pierce. "What's happening?"

Meyer was annoyed that Bromley had not addressed the question to him. "Nothing yet," Les drawled sourly, "MacFarlane's on his way down."

Unable to hear the young diver's commentary now, they waited in relative silence, Bromley and Meyer re-asserting the extent of their individual authority over each other with their eyes, Clem recording points scored with casual interest. At least, he seemed indifferent to their silent feud, when, in fact, he was more than a little concerned by it.

Really, they were two chiefs scrapping over who should lead the tribe. That was okay: as one of the Indians, Clem took orders and didn't pay no never-mind to who was calling the shots just so long as they were the right ones and only one chief was doing the calling. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case in this particular instance. As the drilling superintendent responsible to Denoco Inc for expenditure and results, Meyer figured he was Top Gun, only he didn't know a rat's ass about drilling for oil and even less about how to handle people.

Then there was Doug Bromley - the toolpusher. Now, the toolpusher worked for the drilling contractor - in this case, International Exploration and Drilling (Australia) Ltd - and, by virtue of the fact that 98% of the crew did as well, he really ran the whole shooting match. He was like the sergeant of Clem's platoon in 'Nam. He was the one who fought the real war. The officers gave the orders, but it was Sarge Paxton who made it all work. The big difference between the officers and the Sarge was that, for him, the guys always came first.

That was how Bromley came across. He was a good toolpusher who knew his job and wasn't afraid to take calculated risks to bring it in, but the bottom line was always the safety of his men. That was how it ought to be, but Meyer couldn't see it. Bromley saw the danger and said: "No." Meyer counted the dollars and said: "Go." In the final analysis, a toolpusher like Bromley who had experience and the respect of his men - and that meant the entire drilling crew - could pull the plug in a second. But it wasn't likely to come to that because Meyer would get in the last word, and if he did that, considering his connections, Bromley would be labelled as black as a Little Rock night and would wind up picking cotton till his dying day.

"He's at the top of the blowout preventer," Pierce announced, breaking individual trains of thought. Three very long minutes passed, then Jack turned to the sub-sea engineer. "He's ready and waiting, Clem. You can change over now."

The big Texan was glad to leave the claustrophobic atmosphere of the communications shack. Now he could get back to doing what he was paid for. Before going to his control panel, he paused by the TV monitor to take a quick look. The camera was down below, trained on the stack. That was how he'd seen the leak in the first place. There was no sign of Eddie, but the camera couldn't see everywhere at once. He was around somewhere.

Clem went to the panel and switched from the yellow pod back to the blue, then returned to the screen. If anything, the water around the stack had become even more cloudy. He didn't think it was caused by the leak which he could see quite clearly and, in his opinion, wasn't big enough to have made such a difference in so short a time. Anyway, this wasn't hydraulic fluid, he was sure of it. This was more milky and it had a kind-of glow to it. He panned the camera and watched for a minute or so. It was probably spawn, or something similar. He'd report it as a matter of course, but it was most likely nothing. After a final check, he turned his back on the screen and retraced his steps along the deck.

Cooking smells drifted on the wind. Clem was able to pick out onions and the distinctive aroma of chilli. It was his favourite and under different circumstances a single whiff would have made him feel hungry. But not now. Now he didn't know how he felt, but it sure wasn't hungry.

By the time Clem Berry was entering, the air in the communications room was so heavy it could have been cut with a knife. Pierce was waiting. Clem couldn't see his face but even a



blind man would have been hard put to miss the build-up of tension within the diving super. Doug Bromley was close by. His expression was strained and the way his eyes flicked quickly from Clem back to Pierce was another sign. On top of this, and the daddy of them all, was Meyer. He didn't appear to be breathing and the dead give-away was his hands. They were jammed into the pockets of his jacket. You could see them working beneath the material, nervously clenching and unclenching. It was making Clem jittery just watching him, so he turned his attention to the man with the radio.

Pierce had been listening to static. For some reason Eddie had stopped in mid-sentence. Thinking his diver might be affecting some awkward manoeuvre, Jack had waited. Then he could hear breathing again, but it had become heavy and erratic. He waited a further ten seconds, counting down mentally. When MacFarlane still hadn't come back, he pressed the talk button. "Eddie? Is anything wrong, Eddie?"

Stupid question. Then something really weird came through. Jack could feel the hairs on his arms beginning to tingle. What was that sound? It was like gurgling or slurping. His mouth was open in dumb surprise and had gone very dry. "Eddie?" More slurping. "Eddie, for Pete's sake, talk to me!"

Pierce's hand dived for the switch that would connect him with the speakers in the moon pool. "Eddie's in trouble. Get down to him, quickly!"

Bill Rose had been chatting to Kenny Pratt, one of the other divers. Their conversation was drowned out by the static-laden gabble coming from the speakers. Bill hurried over to the intercom and spoke into it. "Say again, Jack."

"Eddie's in strife." Pierce's voice repeated his message, with more control and precision the second time. It was laced with concern that he apparently wasn't even attempting to disguise. "Go down, Bill, but do it right - no risks. Do you copy?"

"On my way, Jack." Pierce heard the scrape as Bill picked up his rat-hat, then his breathing as he put it on. "Jack?"

"Receiving, Bill."

Pierce's acknowledgment of the simple communications check filled Rose's helmet. "Got you too, Jack." Rose was already on his way to the ladder that led down into the moon pool. The ball in his stomach was there. It seemed to be bigger than usual and was making it hard to breathe.

Pierce said: "How's your air?"

Rose inhaled as deeply as the tightness in his gut would allow. "She'll be right." He was descending the ladder and the water was up to his waist, then his chest. Suddenly he could feel it around his neck and he had a terrible premonition that it was about to fill the rat-hat. He watched it come up the outside of the visor until the surface was just level with his bulging eyes. Thank God, it had stayed out.

He was starting to breathe easier, but not much - he was too intent on catching one last glimpse from the reality side of the moon pool mirror. Releasing the ladder, he was through the secret door, looking back up at the lights shining beyond the surface and wanting desperately to break through and see them once more. He gathered his senses and thought about Eddie, only Eddie. "Going down, Jack."

Pierce double-checked the air controls while listening to the mixture of sounds being fed through his ear-phones. Bill was still talking his way down, but Eddie's slurping - if it was Eddie's - had been replaced by something he couldn't discern. "Bill," he said as naturally as he was able, "Can you hold the talk for one?" He listened. Before he could stop himself, he said: "My God, what's he doing now?"

It was barely a whisper, but Meyer's ears were like radar dishes when there was something around he wasn't supposed to hear. He pushed his way past Doug Bromley and leaned over Pierce. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

Pierce didn't even hear him. His finger was trembling as it pressed the talk button. "Eddie." His voice wavered too. Would his divers be able to detect that? If so, it was no good. They

were relying on him to be calm and rational, supremely confident. He tried again: "Eddie?" That sounded better. "If you can hear me, Eddie, just take it easy. Breathe easy. Save your strength. Bill's on his way down. He'll bring you up. You're going to be alright."

Eddie was whimpering.

"There's nothing to worry about, son," coaxed Pierce in the most confidence-boosting tone he could muster. "Hang on for a few minutes longer and....." Pierce staggered as a terrified scream exploded inside the ear-phones.

Clem saw it and frowned. He'd been thinking about the cloud of sediment he'd seen on the monitor, wondering if it had anything to do with what was happening and whether he ought to say something to Jack about it. The last thought was a passing one only - Pierce had enough troubles already. In fact, Clem felt pretty useless like so much dead weight, and there was enough of that around the place already. He put out a massive hand and touched the toolpusher's arm gently. Bromley turned. Clem made a hitch-hike thumb back over his shoulder. "I'll be at the stack controls if I'm needed." He caught Bromley's nod and left.

Clem Berry wasn't the only one to feel useless. Jack Pierce was babbling away into the microphone stalk, but there was no way of knowing whether anyone had heard him until he released the talk button. When he did, he was still none the wiser. First there was cackling, then a series of hysterical shrieks, followed by what sounded like gargling screeches. If he didn't know better, he would have said that MacFarlane was drowning in his own blood!

"Jesus!" Bill Rose's voice was a metallic, but welcomed rasp. "He's...."

"He's what?" Beads of perspiration were running down Pierce's drawn cheeks in never-ending streams. "What's he doing, Bill? Bill, what's wrong with Eddie? Bill!!!"

Rose's eventual reply was squeaky and disbelieving. "He's gone bloody troppo!"

"Okay, Bill, steady. Just tell me what's happening."

"Eddie's dancing!"

"What do you mean? Is he having a seizure, a fit, what?"

"He's dancing, I said! He's doing a fuckin' jig!" Rose was panting. "And there's stuff all round him."

"What kind of stuff?"

"I don't know. Like phosphorus, blue or purple, it's hard to tell the bottom's so stirred up. Oh, Shit! It's inside his hat! I can see the face-plate glowing. The hat must have flooded. I've got to get to him!"

"Hold it, Bill," Pierce cut in hastily. "Stay where you are."

"But he needs air, for Christ's sake!"

"Wait!" snapped Pierce. "You don't know what that stuff is! Just wait a moment." He wiped angrily at the sweat that was stinging his eyes. "Eddie, listen to me, Eddie. This is Jack on the Olympian." Pierce felt utterly helpless. Talking to the boy was just a waste of time - MacFarlane wouldn't be able to reply, not with a flooded rat-hat! No wonder he was gurgling. The poor kid was choking on sea water! But if he didn't try to get through to Eddie, maybe get him to swim out of the phosphorus, or whatever it was, then Rose would have to go into it and the same thing might happen to him! "Eddie, move away from the stack. Try to swim away, Eddie."

"Jack?" wailed a pathetically weak and terrified voice.

"Was that you, Bill?" asked Pierce hurriedly.

"Not me, Jack."

"I thought you said he'd flooded?"

"Jack?" wailed the voice again. "Help me!"

"Sorry, Jack," said Rose. "It just looked like..."

"Eddie," cut in Pierce, "Listen to me. We will help you, but you must listen."

"Oh, Jack, please! Jack!"

"Okay, Eddie. We're coming. Now, remember where you are. You're two hundred feet below us, but you are not alone. Bill's there, very close to you."

"Oh, Jesus, Jack! It's inside me!"

Inside? What's inside? Every hair on Pierce's body was standing bolt upright. Get a grip on yourself, Jack, he warned. For Eddie's sake, don't go to pieces. He's just rambling. He's scared, that's all. "It will be alright soon, Eddie. Bill's coming. Bill will help you, Eddie. You have to come up to the surface. Do you understand? You must come up. Bill will help you. Don't try to do it on your own. Let Bill bring you up." Pierce was running out of breath. "Eddie, you must come up. There's nothing to be afraid of. We're all waiting for you topside. Come up with Bill. He's down there with you. Do you understand? Eddie? Eddie, talk to me."

Eddie started whimpering again, then, the pathetic sound cut off and was replaced by a hiss. Pierce cocked his head instinctively. The sound faded, then came again, louder, clearer the second time. "Jack ... anyone!" MacFarlane's voice was becoming more distraught, if that was possible. "For pity's sake, he-e-lp mmeeee-eeee....!"

Shivers ascended Pierce's spine and lingered at his neck. He was vaguely aware that his eyes were bulging. "Bill?" He gasped out the name. "Bill, what's he doing now?"

"Nothing," Rose came back incredulously. "Just standing."

"Okay, get over to him."

"On my way, Jack."

"Listen, Bill," added Pierce hastily, "Take it easy going into that stuff. If you start to feel anything - light-headed, burning, anything - just get out. Leave Eddie and abort the dive."

"I'm nearly there, Jack," panted Rose. "A few more feet. I was right - it's a sort of purple colour. I'm just touching the edge of it. There's only a tingle like a small electric current. I think I'll be okay..."

"Get out, Bill!"

"But it's just a ting..."

"Abort the dive! Right now!"

"I can't leave him, Chief!"

"You do as you're damn well told!" Pierce was yelling into the microphone stalk.

"I'm almost there. Reaching out."

"That's a negative, Bill. Do not, repeat: do not touch him!"

"It's alright, Jack I'm there. I've got him. It's okay, Jack, we're ....ooomphhh!"

"Bill?" It sounded as if Rose had just lost all of his air in a single rush. "Bill, what happened? Are you...?" A peculiar cry reached Pierce. The unearthly wail rose in key and volume until it was a high-pitched whistle. It continued to slide up the scale until it surpassed audible reception, at least of any human ear.

Rose cut in as the sound faded. He was gasping, fighting for air. "Jack\_\_ He's gone\_\_ up." He continued breathing deeply for a few seconds. "Sorry. Not making much sense. He hit me. Fetched me a beauty. Knocked me silly and just went. He's going up, Jack. Don't know if I can catch him."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I can manage, but Eddie...."

"Leave him, Bill." Meyer was almost touching Pierce. He had only been subjected to the same level of suspense as Doug Bromley, but the one-sided conversation was apparently too much for Les to bear. He reached over the diving supervisor's shoulder for the switch to the speaker button. Jack Pierce slashed the hand away. "Let him go, Bill. Let him come up."

"I don't think he'll stop, Jack. He took off like a cruise missile."

"Don't worry about Eddie. The chamber's ready. We'll put him straight in as soon as he surfaces. You just look after yourself. Are you alright?"

"Bit winded. Jeez, that little Scotch bastard packs a wallop. But I'm okay now. If you want, I can have a sticky-beak around the stack, see if I can find out what made Eddie...."

"Negative, Bill!" barked Pierce. "Forget the stack. Just get out of that stuff and come up."

"It's gone Jack. As soon as Eddie went, it kind-of disappeared."

"Come up anyway. Make your ascent steadily. Observe natural decompression, but if something else happens, something peculiar - anything, Bill - just come straight up. You can keep Eddie company in the chamber. And talk to me all the way. All the way, do you copy?"

"Five by five, Jack. I'm on my way. Moving up past the blue pod. I can see traces of hydraulic...."

Pierce was listening to every word, but he was more interested in the tone of Bill's voice than in what he had to say. Still listening, he spoke to the standby divers waiting beside the moon pool, giving them just enough information, but no more. Then he returned his attention to the two men in the room with him. He looked at them, at their faces. Bromley was genuinely concerned. Meyer looked like a father who had received news that his kid had crashed the Volvo. Top of his list of phone calls would be the repair shop. Somewhere in the rest was the hospital.

Pierce spoke directly to the toolpusher. "Eddie's had a spot of trouble. We don't know what it was yet. Maybe we'll find out when he comes up." He paused, listened to Rose's commentary for a moment then continued. "He seems to be in shock, so he won't be observing the usual decompression stops on his way up. You heard me organising the chamber. As long as we get him straight in, he'll be okay."

6

Usually when a diver was coming up it was necessary to retrieve the air-line at a rate compatible with the speed of ascent, giving consideration for decompression stops. Also, bubbles preceded him into the moon pool, announcing his arrival. In this instance, however, Eddie came up so fast that even the escaping air couldn't keep up with him. If anyone had doubts that his achievement was physically possible, Eddie laid those doubts to rest when he hit the surface.

The moon pool exploded. It was like the after-shock of a depth charge. A surge of white foam heaved up in the centre of the pool. A retrieval diver was already in, treading water near the edge, waiting to catch Eddie as soon as he surfaced. The wash hit him, slamming him against the steel plating of the side. Then it drew him back and he was spluttering sea-water.

Those standing around on the catwalk caught their breaths in surprise and a moment later felt spray on their faces. Kenny Pratt recovered quicker than the others. He looked for the retrieval diver and saw him floundering about half-way to the centre of the pool. "Angelo! You okay?"

"Shit!" spluttered Angelo, then: "Yeah. Where is he?"

Kenny looked and was unable to spot Eddie at first. Then someone shouted: "There!" Kenny saw him. At least, there was a rat-hat bobbing around near the middle, just in front of the slip joint. The turbulence was easing and the water was returning to its original, flaccid murkiness. "To your right, Wog," Pratt called out. Angelo turned and began paddling towards the hat. It was slowly sinking. He grabbed below the surface where he thought Eddie's body suit ought to be and missed. The hat had disappeared. Angelo duck dived. He was back up again in a matter of seconds and gasped out: "Got him!"

Eddie came in like a tired fish. It took a few grunting, puffing, anxious moments to drag him up the ladder to the catwalk. They were precious moments, all ticking away much too fast. More were wasted taking the helmet off.

Faces gawped. They were the same kind that sought out disasters like road accidents, those drooling countenances hungry for stimulation, excitement. Above all, they wanted to witness gore and dying, maybe figuring if they saw enough of it, they wouldn't have to experience it themselves first hand. They shuffled closer. There was nothing to fear, not from a man who was lying either unconscious or dead.

Then MacFarlane let loose. The action appeared subconscious as if the young diver was in the grip of a terrifying nightmare and battling with an imaginary foe. Nevertheless, the surprised crowd leapt back. Someone reeled as Eddie's flailing arm slapped his head. The victim fell against the bystanders, pushing them further away.

They all watched. Eddie opened his eyes and stared up at the underside of the rig floor above him. His expression was not one of confusion as might have been expected. Rather, he seemed eminently satisfied. His eyes had that strange twinkle of latent insanity and his mouth opened wide. He appeared about to laugh, but all that issued from his throat was a long, orgastic sigh.

He sat up. There was no effort involved. He didn't use his elbows or his hands to assist, just bent from the waist and sat up. His legs were tucked beneath him in the relaxed way a young woman might be apt to sit. He panned his gaze around the circle of people and grinned. A giggle vibrated in his throat. Kenny Pratt started out for him, berating the others close at hand. "Come on, you bastards, let's get him up." Eddie turned to Kenny and giggled again. Kenny was stooping, reaching out. Eddie took his hands and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "The blanket," Pratt ordered, then said to Eddie: "You're alright now, mate."

Eddie giggled.

Pratt's expression changed. The benevolent smile was contorting. Eddie began to squeeze harder and Kenny heard the cracking as the bones in his hands splintered. It took a moment to overcome the disbelief that Eddie, his friend, could be doing this to him, and another for the pain to really register, then, he started to scream. The scream broke off as he was hurled sideways. He hit the guard rail and tipped over it into the pool.

Eddie advanced towards his audience. There was a scurry of feet as they moved back. Col Stokes was off to the side. He couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. So the kid had gone a bit crazy, so what? The bends did that. Col wasn't a diver himself, but he wasn't stupid. You didn't work on rigs for two years and learn nothing. Even if he was only a roustabout, he'd seen enough of this sort of thing to know that the kid needed the chamber pretty quick. It should be easy enough to get him in. Christ, he was only a runt. Couldn't be more than ten stone. Col would have had half as much again on him.

He pushed his way through and advanced on Eddie. "Take it easy, kid. No-one wants to hurt you." MacFarlane turned. His eyes were wild and he was still grinning like a village idiot. Eddie opened his smiling mouth and produced another of his satisfied sighs. Col caught the blast full in the face. Jesus, what had he eaten for lunch? His guts must be rotten. "Come on, kid. Come wi\_\_\_."

Eddie launched himself at the man. In a second, he had turned into a kicking, punching, gyrating madman that even Col Stokes couldn't get close enough to subdue. Eddie drove him back against the guard rail. Col's hands were up, trying to defend himself. "Help me, you bastards," he cried out. "Get him off!"

A hand touched MacFarlane's back and retreated hastily. "It's me - Angelo." Eddie seemed to stiffen on hearing the announcement. Angelo tried again. "It's Wog, Eddie. We just want to help."

MacFarlane spun in a circle. His outstretched arm missed Angelo's face by a mere whisker. By the time Eddie was facing front again, Col Stokes had recovered somewhat and his pride was hurting far more than the bruises Eddie's blows had caused. "Right, you little punk, that's it!" He moved to clutch the young diver in a bear-hug.

Eddie's hand shot out and clamped on his throat. Stokes gagged, then his eyes began to bulge. His hands went up automatically to Eddie's wrist and tried to pull it down. When they failed, Col started clutching at the fingers in an effort to prise them loose. The pressure increased. Stokes was unable to breathe and, incredible though it might seem, he could feel himself rising until his feet no longer touched the ground.

The crazy man that had been Eddie MacFarlane turned, bringing Stokes with him. He surveyed the frightened faces on the catwalk with a look of casual indifference; then looked back at Stokes. The man's face was red, turning purple. Eddie bounced him a couple of times. Jerking him side to side made his legs swing. He tried a few more movements of his human toy; then seemed to become bored by it.

At one end of the catwalk he noticed a ladder going up and set out in that direction. As he walked, he lowered the body and began to drag it along the ground beside him with all the contempt of a young student for his school bag. The crowd backed away. Those men in his direct line parted to let him through. At the foot of the ladder, Eddie simply tossed his burden into the crowd causing stumbling and confusion, then began climbing the ladder.

~0~0~0~0~

Doug Bromley wasn't sure what had gone on down in the moon pool and had, in fact, been on his way there at the request of Jack Pierce who was still in the shack monitoring Bill Rose's ascent. He'd noticed the group of men clustered around the companion-way that led below deck and was about to tell them to return to their work stations when someone called: "He's coming up!"

The group fell back to form a horse-shoe around the top of the ladder. A voice said: "Good on yer, Eddie." Two or three men started to clap. Like the toolpusher, they apparently had no knowledge of Eddie's crazed attack on the crew below and assumed him to be just a plucky kid who had come through a very trying ordeal and was now on his way, unassisted, to the decompression chamber. Eddie put them straight by cutting a swath through the gathering with a pair of flailing fists. He paused for a moment to look around, as if assessing his options, then took off along the deck.

Bromley hesitated just long enough to check his watch. His eyebrows arched in surprise. Eddie was well over time. He should have been in the chamber by then. In fact, he should have been stone cold dead. The toolpusher broke into a stumbling trot.

MacFarlane was running ahead of him, barging past the odd crew member who failed to get out of his way. "Hold him!" shouted Bromley. "He's off his head. Stop him!"

It was doubtful that Eddie heard the toolpusher's diagnosis of his condition, but he certainly seemed about to prove its accuracy. A solid wall of humanity appeared before him, clogging his escape route. The deck was narrow at that point, but there was an option available to him - another companion-way on his right. Instead of taking it, Eddie ran straight past and waded into the advancing oil men. He punched and kicked with all the ferocity of a wounded beast, felling one, then another of his adversaries. But even for a man with the strength of ten, there were too many of them to tackle. They eventually fell on him and he disappeared beneath a mass of tumbling bodies.

Bromley pushed his way through, becoming angry with those who seemed to regard his jostling as that of another queue-jumper, at least until they saw who he was. Eddie was lying still. Bromley knelt beside him. He touched the boy's neck, searching for a pulse; then pulled away sharply - Eddie's skin was like ice. He tried again, knowing it was a waste of time - there was no pulse. In fact MacFarlane was so cold that he might have been dead for hours. The toolpusher slumped and smoothed his thinning hair. He stood up slowly. "Cover him, for Christ's sake," he mumbled. "And someone get the medic."

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Sometime later a Bell Bubble arrived on the pad. The pilot said both Sikorsky helicopters were grounded back in Karratha with electrical faults and the Bubble was all they could manage. There was no sense in arguing about it, so they secured two stretchers to the racks either side, figuring the occupants wouldn't mind. Eddie MacFarlane certainly wouldn't, and Con O'Reilly was in a coma and likely to remain that way for some time. As for the rest of the injured, they had their pride to worry about. Even Col Stokes had discharged himself from the sick bay and was already whispering to everyone - because it was all his bruised throat would allow him to do - that he hadn't been on death's doorstep but had merely feigned unconsciousness so as not to panic the poor bastard.

Not that anyone had been doing much in the way of work since the incident, but everything stopped when the helicopter took off. They stood watching it, Vikings saying farewell to dead heroes, except only one was dead and Karratha was hardly Valhalla. Neither was the vessel of their final journey ablaze with fire. It just sputtered crab-like above the sea, growing ever smaller.

About a mile out from the rig, it seemed to dip and plunge as if the pilot had lost control, but it recovered from whatever the problem was and those still watching, expected to see it continue on its way. Instead, it spent some time hovering around the same spot. Then it started to come back.

It had no sooner settled on the pad, than the pallid, extremely agitated pilot jumped out and stared at the empty rack on the left side.

"Jesus Christ, he's lost Eddie," someone commented unnecessarily.

The pilot spun around to face the gathering of men. His eyes were popping and he looked as if he was about to faint. "He got up and jumped!" he declared, pleading to be believed. A voice advised: "Don't be a fuckin' dill." "He's pissed," said another. "Been on the grog."

"I tell you, he got off himself! Look, if you don't believe me." He dived forward and caught hold of one of the straps. It had been broken, torn in two. "He just ripped them off. I've never seen anything like it!"

Neither had anyone else, apparently, and they weren't about to believe a man who drove a MixMaster for a living, no matter how many breathalysers he took. Not that the oil men reacted physically - they'd had enough of violence for one day - but they weren't very understanding either. He was glad in a way to take off and begin the search. It didn't do any good though, because his one-time passenger had disappeared without a trace. Eventually, when they obviously figured there was no more he could do, they let him return to the mainland.

Kenny Pratt's stretcher took the place of Eddie's on the rack. He might have had something to say about that, but he didn't know until after the chopper had landed at its base, because he was unconscious when they strapped him on. That was the medic's doing. Kenny had insisted that his hands were just bruised and would be alright in a day or two. Jerry knew the bones were splintered to buggery, but he hadn't been able to convince the young diver. "Okay, you win," he'd said eventually. "I'll just give you something for the pain and if the bloody things drop off, don't come whingeing to me." Then he'd pumped Kenny so full of dope that he'd gone out like a light.

Jack Pierce had watched the helicopter until it was merely a pinprick. Nothing fell off that he could see, but he wouldn't be happy until he received a radio message to say that Kenny was safely in hospital. He went from the chopper pad straight to the rail and leaned on it, facing out to sea. It was getting to be his favourite pastime. He closed his eyes and realised almost immediately that it was the wrong thing to do - there were too many memories in darkness, and too much soul-searching. He re-opened them and found himself staring at a patch of water about forty metres out. It seemed to glow the same way the water by the bow had glowed before with just a hint of luminous violet.

He shook his head and turned away. He was obviously tired, and there had been so much talk of phosphorus in the water and glowing face-plates, it was no wonder he was seeing things. He took one last look back over his shoulder and the glow he thought he'd seen had gone. That confirmed it for him. His judgement was definitely failing. It had killed Eddie and that was enough. It really was time to get out of all this. What was the point in waiting until the end of his shift to resign? He might as well get it over with now or at least put it in writing. He pushed off the rail and headed for his room.

From where he had been floating just below the surface, Eddie had seen Jack looking, but he didn't feel the way he had in the past about the diving super, not the way he ought to, because he wasn't really Eddie any more. He only looked like Eddie; inside, he was now something else.

*It* remained beneath the surface and moved a little closer to the awful, floating thing called a rig. *It* knew what it was, the way it knew so much more of this other world, now that it could be a part of it, be one of them.

The view from inside this pathetic creature was very limiting, but there were advantages. It could draw on the human's memory, at least that part it had managed to glimpse before Eddie had stopped thinking. From these memories, it knew something of what these humans were and why they were here. And it knew quite intimate things about some of the other creatures this one had associated with.

It knew that the one who had been looking out at it was Jack Pierce, that he was something called a diving supervisor, and that Eddie had liked him. They were friends. It wasn't sure what a friend really was, having none of its own - It didn't think it had - but the feeling was warm and not unpleasant.

There was another thought - it wondered how Jack Pierce would react if, now that he was dead, Eddie came up to meet him and said: "I'll bet ye did nay think tay see me again, Jack?" That might be fun, but it was pretty sure that the time wasn't right. Later, maybe, when it was more used to this peculiar shell it now inhabited.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 1

"Sounds nice." Del Presswood mumbled the response automatically, not meaning a word. What the hell did he care about the landscaping around a backyard swimming pool?

Admittedly, the cab driver was just making pleasant conversation and it cost nothing to humour him, but if people didn't insist on bragging about what they had and how great it was, then maybe his own life would seem less like an object lesson in failure.

"Which way now?" The taxi coasted to a standstill at the T-intersection and the driver waited patiently.

Del tried to get his bearings. Everything appeared different at night and it was almost impossible to read street signs, if you could find them at all. "Left," he said. The cab pulled away again. After a short distance, Del realised that he should have said 'right'. It didn't matter: all roads led to Rome and he wasn't exactly looking forward to the reception when he got back.

He watched a couple of dogs getting it together on a front lawn and envied them for a moment. They seemed to be enjoying themselves with no thought for the consequences of their actions, or the future in general. Then he remembered how that same attitude had been responsible for the mess he was in now. It wouldn't have been quite so bad if he knew that he could go back and change it, but he was fairly sure that if he were able to re-live the past three years, he'd make the same mistakes all over again. He began to feel nauseous and said: "Drop me off on this next corner, will you?"

The driver pulled up and the two of them went through the usual ritual of payment and the exchange of polite courtesies. Then the cab was moving off, the driver waving, Del waving back, everything for the sake of appearances. One time, he ought to pay at the start of the journey, or say: "You're a lousy driver and I hope your cat dies," but whenever these rebellious notions came to mind it was always too late.

The wind was bitterly cold. He kind-of hitched his shoulders up the way people do and felt a warm buzz around his body. He didn't know why that should be. Perhaps it made the hairs stand on end. The sensation didn't last, however, so he quickened his pace, hoping to generate



some heat that way. When he felt even colder, he began to wonder if it was retribution for being indecisive.

The walk wasn't helping the way he'd thought it might. It was the middle of the night. The streets were deserted. No-one with half a brain would be out, unless, of course, they needed space, like him. The solitude should have brought him back to reality when, in fact, it was driving him deeper into make-believe. He just kept picturing unlikely situations - he'd say: "Hi, hon, I'm back. I missed you." She'd run up, throw her arms around his neck and reply: "And I missed you, my darling." Now, that was about as far-removed from reality as you could get.

He would have to face the truth sometime - their marriage was on the rocks: when a woman started talking divorce instead of simply going home to mother, she expected more than an apology and a bunch of red roses. Not that he had given Sally either. Carnations, maybe, and a: "Surely to God we can work this out?" His only other contribution had been to watch her digging in her heels and then follow suit himself. That was how their last skirmish had ended, with neither of them prepared to give an inch to break the resulting stalemate. He'd appealed, of course: "Be reasonable, for Christ's sake!"

Sally probably figured she was: "Get a nine-to-five job like any normal person." It wasn't intended as a suggestion, and in case he was under the mistaken impression that she might not have been serious, she'd added: "Or find yourself another family!"

The ultimatum had been impeccably timed, delivered just as he was climbing into the cab to leave for his last shift. The driver hadn't helped matters any. "I always thought my missus was the only Godzilla." he'd commented after they'd pulled out of earshot. "I never realised two of them had escaped."

Del had managed to restrain his true feelings. At least, he didn't talk about it to anyone, but he'd gathered that something must have showed because after just one day back on the rig, the men began treating him like an unexploded bomb, and were probably glad to see the back of him. That wasn't good: the toolpusher of a drilling crew ought to command respect, not fear. Maybe the same thing was happening at home, he thought. Maybe Sally was retaliating because she was afraid of him. After a few more minutes of walking, the idea seemed ludicrous - Godzilla II was afraid of no man.

He reached the house, frozen to the marrow and stood by the gate looking along the path to the front door. It didn't seem like home, merely an expensive hobby he had neither the time nor the money to pursue with any conviction. Once, he'd thought of it as their love nest, Utopia - he was young and stupid three years ago - now he only stayed for the sake of his son, Danny. A boy needed his father, certainly better guidance than his mother was prepared to offer. There was never a more pertinent example than the child's bike which had been left neglected and rusting on the front lawn. Two months ago it had been brand new, his present for Danny's third birthday; now it was ready for the tip. He couldn't blame the kid - Danny wasn't old enough to know any different. Sally was the problem.

He walked to the door and eased his key into the cylinder. The latch stuck when he tried to turn it - another one of those jobs he'd been going to do for so long it was laughable. He jiggled the key until it finally worked. He was good at that - jiggling - except, he was far better with mechanical things than he was with situations and people.

The front entrance led straight into the lounge. He closed the door quietly behind him and glanced habitually at the time on the illuminated panel of the VCR. She would be asleep. He stood in the dark, acclimatising himself, noticing how the shadows had changed since he was here last - she'd been re-arranging the furniture again. He tried not to groan out loud. Suddenly, his jaw was set and he was grinding his teeth. There was an unfamiliar smell about the place. It took him a moment or two to track it down and recognise stale pipe tobacco. Perhaps it meant nothing, but he had a nagging suspicion that he was no longer the only juggler in Sally's life.

He tried to tell himself it didn't matter, that it was to be expected. A woman with a bastard for a husband who was only there one month in two needed more than a kid and a framed 8 x 10, to

remind her that she was still a woman. Then he started to think about his needs and he stopped making excuses for her. He could feel his anger rising and the answer seemed to be a beer. It was 3.30 in the morning, he was freezing his nuts off and he couldn't think further than a cold beer! Presswood, he said to himself, you really are pathetic!

Accepting the self-analysis with a shrug, he trudged through to the kitchen. As he was pulling a can of Fosters from the fridge, he noticed a jar of mustard pickle on the shelf. Del hated the stuff and Danny lived on tomato sauce, so unless Sally was pregnant again, it had been bought for someone else. The juggler smokes a pipe and likes mustard pickle, thought Del. He only hoped his rival was a pretty-boy because he'd be able to fix that, unlike everything else.

He started to slam the fridge door; then stopped himself - let Godzilla sleep. Maybe she'd fall into a coma and he could sell her for medical research! He stood in the darkness, sipping beer from the can. It was too cold to taste of much and each gulp that went down caused shivers, but he continued to drink because he was a hard-as-nails oil man who could take whatever life threw at him. Well, almost. He put the beer on the draining-board and went across to switch on the light.

There was mail on the table. He sat down and began flicking through the envelopes. They were mainly bills. It was significant she hadn't opened them, the same way she had no intention of paying them either. Del pushed them to one side and picked up the airmail letter. Failing to recognise the writing, he flipped it over to read the sender's name.

He frowned. Who in hell was Agnes MacFarlane? It had a certain ring to it, but he couldn't think why, so he re-checked the front. It was definitely addressed to him. He opened it. The paper was ruled both sides and had apparently been neatly removed from a school exercise book. This Agnes must be careful with her money, not like some people he knew. There was also something about the script which was flowing and decorative, beautiful, in fact. The writer had used a broad-nibbed fountain pen. So, there was still pride in communication after the ball-point!

It only took a paragraph for him to discover who Agnes MacFarlane was. He'd never met the woman, only her son, Eddie. They'd been together on a rig off India, just after he and Sally.... well, some time ago, anyway. He looked up from the letter and stared at the fridge, trying to remember Eddie. He could picture freckles and masses of ginger hair, and the boy's peculiar, guttural Scottish accent, but little else. He couldn't even recall his face. Wasn't that awful? He'd worked with someone for nine months and couldn't put a face to their name!

By the end of the second paragraph, he was beginning to wish they'd never met. The woman was paranoid. She was insisting that something terrible was going to happen to her boy; that she'd had premonitions, that she'd phoned the Company, and they wouldn't listen and now she was asking for his help!

It was ridiculous! Del was in charge of the drilling crew, sure, but Eddie was a diver. He used them to help keep the show on the road, no more. They were the responsibility of the diving supervisor. Why didn't she pester him instead?

Agnes mentioned her reasons next - Eddie had talked a lot about Presswood. By the sounds of it, the youngster had set him on some kind of pedestal. Wasn't it always the way? You tried to keep a low profile, do the right thing by people, and they tied you to a pole and held you up for the world to chuck rocks at you!

He was tempted to throw the letter straight in the garbage, but he read through to the end, just in case there was something else she had tacked on that might change his opinion. There was just more of the bleeding-heart routine and: "Please help me. Signed, Agnes MacFarlane." That was it.

He left the letter on the kitchen table and returned to the lounge, switching off the light as he passed. He'd already made up his mind to spend the rest of the night on the couch, so he turned on the gas heater. Sure, it was wasteful, but he paid the bills, and he wasn't game to risk making a noise getting the spare blankets from the cupboard outside Sally's room.

There! - He'd even stopped thinking of it as their room. Now it was Sally's. Next he'd lose claim to the hallway and the kitchen. Wouldn't it be a bastard if he had to walk all the way down to the park to use the public toilets and maybe wash in the duck pond!

Kicking off his shoes, he curled up on the couch and fidgeted for a while as he waited for the room to warm up. He felt like a bum reduced to sleeping under bridges and would most likely end up as one when her solicitor got through with him. There wasn't much doubt that she'd already considered that option, had probably exercised it the day he'd left for the rig. From what he'd heard - and that was considerable since at least half of the guys on any one shift were experts in being taken to the cleaners by ex-wives - he'd be better handing over the lot without a struggle and hope she'd toss some back out of sheer cussedness.

It was a sickening thought and now that reconciliation was out of the question, he couldn't make it go away. He guessed he'd have to take the whipping; then touch his forelock and say: "Thank you, Ma'am. It was a pleasure being crucified by you." All he could do to soften the blow was make a few moves of his own before her legal wheels really started to roll.

He'd already made that decision - he hadn't altogether wasted his entire shift. He intended to see John Stanley about it today, as soon as the Company office opened. In the meantime, he'd go through the motions of a man trying to see the woman's side of it. He wondered if he ought to pay a hire fee for using her couch, maybe leave five bucks on the coffee table. She'd probably take that as an insult - better make it ten.

## 2

The light woke him, that and Sally going off her head at him for leaving the heater on full-bore. The phone was also ringing and had apparently disturbed her, but he - male chauvinist pig that he was - hadn't heard it. Godzilla - 2: Toolpusher - 0. She answered it while he was still gathering his senses. There was a sharp clack as she placed the receiver none-too-gently beside the phone and said: "It's for you." Then she swept out.

Pardon me for breathing! Del got up and shuffled across the room, barely conscious. The VCR clock said it was still only 5.41 in the morning. He fumbled the receiver up to his ear, "Hello." A woman's voice began to gabble excitedly. Strewth, now they were ganging up on him! "Sorry, I didn't catch that." He noticed how her voice cut off in mid-sentence as soon as he began to speak, typical of a long-distance call. He hated them. Half the time he felt like an amateur comedian waiting in silence for the audience to laugh.

"Am I speaking to Mister Derek Presswood?"

"That's me," he confirmed once he was sure she wasn't going to carry on and say something else.

"This is Agnes MacFarlane telephoning from Glasgow, Scotland."

Where else? "Yes, Mrs. MacFarlane. I read your letter, but I don't see what I can do?"

"....sswood. You have to help...."

"Mrs. MacFarlane."

"....wit's end and I can't th...."

"Can you just slow down?"

"....What am I...."

"Mrs. MacFarlane."

"....to do?"

"Agnes." Will you bloody listen! "Agnes, just take it easy. You're speaking too fast. I can't understand you. Agnes?" The line was quiet. "Agnes, are you still there?"

There was a sniff. "Yes, I am. I didn't mean to go on like that. I'm sorry."

She seemed a little calmer. At least she had stopped talking nineteen to the dozen. "Okay. Just remember the time lag. Wait for me to finish before you start and I'll do the same for you. Now, how is Eddie? Have you heard from him?"

"What?" She sounded shocked.

"I asked if you'd heard from Eddie."

"What do you mean, heard from him? How could I? My son is dead, Mr. Presswood! But you know that, surely?"

"Dead? Eddie?" Del's mind raced - freckles, lots of them, and red hair, but still no face. "I'm sorry, Agnes. I didn't know. I just got home last night." Now she was sobbing. Why did they do that? Just when you'd got it together, they turned on the tap and the next minute you were agreeing to anything. It wouldn't happen this time, though. He had enough of his own problems.

She broke off crying. "I'm sorry. I assumed you'd know. I thought the Company might have told you, seeing as you and Eddie were friends."

Friends? They had worked together once upon a time. Del hardly knew him. "Yes, we were, but they didn't tell me. What happened?"

"It wasn't an accident, Mr. Presswood. I know it wasn't. I saw it."

"In your dream."

"I'm not mad. I did see it. If you don't believe me, ask them how he died. Ask them what killed him. They won't tell me. I'm only his mother, but you're one of them. They'll tell you. Ask them about Eddie dancing. Ask them about the purple milk. Ask them why I can't bury my son, Mr. Presswood." She was crying again.

"I'm sorry, Agnes. You've lost me. What do you mean, you can't bury Eddie?"

"Just ask them." Her voice had become angry.

"Why don't you tell me, Agnes?"

"Ask them," she repeated bitterly. A dull click followed and the line began to hum.

"Agnes? Agnes? Don't hang up. Agnes!" She'd gone.

Sally was in the kitchen, standing with arms folded, glaring at the electric jug, willing it not to boil so that she could get in a bit of practice on an inanimate object before taking Del apart. Her shoulders flinched, so she had apparently heard him enter, but she didn't look round. "How long has this been going on?" she demanded in a tone which implied that she already knew.

Here we go again! "If you mean me working my butt off so that I can come home and have you bitch at me...."

"I mean the fancy woman. Your little bit of tartan on the side." Her animosity towards him was too crisply delivered to be spontaneous. In fact, she'd probably been working as hard on it as he had on his own tactics. She finally turned and looked him straight in the eye. "She phoned earlier, sounded pretty distraught. Don't tell me you were stupid enough to get her pregnant."

"The mood you're in, I'm telling you sweet FA. Believe what you want."

"I am not in a mood!"

Pig's bum! If he'd had any sense at all, he'd have walked out, but reason and logic didn't have a lot going for them at that moment. He went to the table and sat down instead.

The jug boiled. She unplugged it and filled the teapot. "Do you want a cup?" she asked over her shoulder.

"That's civilised of you. White with one arsenic, thanks."

She spun on him. "Snide remarks aren't going to help the situation."

"And you are, I suppose? How the bloody hell else do you expect me to react? I get a letter and one phone call from a woman I've never even met, and straight away you're accusing me of having an affair! Look." He leaned heavily on the table. "Let's stop playing silly buggers, shall we? It's over, Sal - a disaster. The only good thing that's come out of our marriage is Danny and I don't want him hurt."

"You won't get him!" she snapped hastily. "The courts always give custody to\_\_\_"

"Jesus Christ! You can't wait to put the boot in, can you?"

"I'm not going to let you walk all over me, Del!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!"

"And you can keep that foul language out of my house!"

He knew it! - My house. Del put on a look of shocked amazement and stared about him. "I thought something was wrong." He stroked the surface of the table with his hand. "I've got one just like this, you know." He rose and began walking along the draining board, stroking and touching things as he passed. "And this, and this." He caught the fridge door. "This is the spitting image of mine, and I'll just bet there are some cans of Fosters on the top shelf." He pulled it open. "Yes, I thought so. Ah, wait a bit, though - mustard pickle? No mustard pickle in my fridge." He turned to face her. "You're right - I'm in the wrong place. This must be your house."

She had a look of bored contempt on her face. "Have you quite finished?"

He cocked his head and glanced up as if in deep thought. "No, not quite." He reached into the fridge and took out the jar of pickle, then went over and placed it in her hand.

She frowned. "What's this for?"

He watched her eyes. They quivered with uncertainty. He was pretty sure he'd been right about her - she had been screwing someone else. "Put some on your boyfriend's pipe and shove it!"

"I - I don't know what...."

Del was walking to the door. He turned and produced a humourless smile. "Your arse or his, I don't give a shit!"

He went across the lounge and phoned for a cab. He thought for a moment just after he'd hung up and fumbled in his pocket. He brought out some coins, selected a dollar and left it by the phone. After due consideration, he picked it up again - hell, he was going to be paying the phone bill, anyway!

Then he went through to the bedroom and tossed some clothes into a case. When he came back, Sally was standing in the kitchen doorway. She was leaning on the frame, sipping tea, trying to appear smug and in control. Del walked past. "I'll be back for the rest of my stuff."

"Where will you be? What if I need to contact you?"

That wasn't very likely, unless it was for money, or to serve divorce papers. "Do it via the office." He was going to say: "Give Danny my love," but he knew she wouldn't, so he just took his case and his overnight bag and went out to wait for the taxi.

### 3

Del stood awkwardly on the doorstep. It was nine-thirty in the evening, the same day he had returned from the rig, a few hours after he'd seen John Stanley at the office to arrange a transfer to some job closer to home, and a few more since he'd given Sally all the ammunition she would ever need to put him through the wringer. He kept asking himself why he was there and the only answer he could come up with was that there was nowhere else; and, anyway, she'd suggested it in the first place.

She was Stanley's secretary, a nice kid. Well, not really a kid. Liz would be in her early twenties, but seeing as he'd topped the big three-oh a couple of years back, he'd always thought of them as worlds apart. They'd only ever chatted when he came to check in at the office. Usually the conversation was pretty light-hearted, like older brother to little sister, but today she'd appeared different. Maybe it was the mood he was in or the situation in general. He expected she might have felt sorry for him, standing there with his baggage, looking like a drowned rat. He was sure that was why she'd made the offer. What he couldn't figure was why he hadn't taken her up on it at the time.

Considering his predicament, it was a pretty stupid move. What did he think - that she was a nymphomaniac looking for a sugar-daddy, or that he was going to turn into a child-molester overnight? All she'd suggested was that he used the couch at her place until he got his act into gear. How could that make matters any worse than they already were?

He heard footsteps approaching and the door opened. Her image was blurred and he could only see it through one eye, but he could tell it was Liz. He couldn't recall being so relieved to

almost see someone for a long time. Dizziness made him unsteady and he used the door-frame for support.

"Jesus!" Liz stared for a moment, drinking in the spectacle, trying to rationalise it. Finally, she said: "What happened to you?"

Del felt a smile coming, but held it back because he knew it would hurt. "Can I come in? I'll try not to mess up your carpet."

She ushered him gently into the small hallway, then through to the kitchen. "Sit down. I've got a first aid box somewhere." She rushed out and was back in less than a minute. When she looked at his injuries again, the small kit she had just opened on the table seemed nothing short of useless. "I think you need a hospital. Did you get run over by a truck or something?"

"Just the driver and some of his mates." His explanation came across as a mumble which had as much to do with his physical condition as the booze. "Nothing's broken."

"You can't be sure."

"I know...", he began angrily, then managed to calm himself. It wasn't her fault. "I know what I feel, Liz. Do the best you can. I'll be right."

She went to the sink, part-filled a plastic bowl with water, then returned and splashed a generous measure of Dettol into it. She began dabbing at his face with cotton wool drenched in the solution, biting her lip each time he flinched. "You should have come straight back with me and this wouldn't have happened."

"I know that now -ouch! - don't I?"

"You guys make out you're so tough."

"But we're pussycats, right?"

"I didn't mean that. You just seem to think you can handle everything."

"Out on the rig we can. It's different here. People are different."

"When do you go back?"

He had to wait until she had cleaned up his swollen lip. "Day after tomorrow."

"It's not much of a break. There." She straightened up and stood back to review her handiwork. "Christ, Del, you're a mess," she decided and began to clear the table. "I didn't notice your bags. Did you leave them somewhere?"

"I can't remember."

"It doesn't matter."

"Don't tell me," he slurred smugly, or tried to, "There are some of your boyfriend's clothes here that might fit." He finished with a chuckle that ended as a groan.

Liz paused and stared at him. "You've got a smart mouth, Del Presswood. I don't wonder those truckies tried to take your head off. I was going to say that I'll borrow something from my Dad for you tomorrow, but if you want to go out in the street looking like a...."

Del had got up and limped over to her. He placed a finger gently on her lips. He was about to say something, an apology perhaps, but instead he found himself just looking at her. She, in turn, was gazing at him. Her lips were parted, silent but for the faint whisper of her breath. It was a moment in time, fleeting, but it was there and would not be forgotten. Even as he drew her to him and she pressed her cheek against his shoulder, the closeness didn't have the same power as that brief spark of magic which had already passed between them.

Del sighed. He wasn't sure if it was caused by relief or disappointment, but he did feel strange inside. They remained holding each other for a while; then parted as if by mutual consent. Liz pointed at a doorway. "Go through. The fire's on. Are you hungry?" She caught the shake of his head. "How about a drink, then? There's some in the cabinet by the TV."

Where had this girl been all his life? By now, Sally would have been half-way through the temperance lecture, but Liz...? "I think I'd prefer something hot." He flicked his tongue carefully around his mouth and could still taste blood. "Well, warm, anyway."

"Okay," she said in a cheerful, sing-song tone. "Make yourself at home. I'll only be a minute."

She was actually three or more, time enough to fix an instant coffee, take it through to the lounge and find Del flopped on the couch and out to the world.

He had no idea of the time when he woke, only that he was in a sweat and didn't know where the hell he was. He stumbled around, tripping over furniture which shouldn't have been there, searching for an apparently non-existent light switch. He was in so much confusion that he didn't hear her come in, and even when she put on the light, he simply squinted through a dazzling haze at a mere ghost of a figure. "Sally?"

The blur advanced until he could distinguish some features, then he knew he was wrong. She went to him, took his arm and led him back across the room. "No, Del - it's me, Liz. You're in my flat. Don't you remember?"

He frowned briefly as the haze cleared. "Yes, sorry. I think I must have been dreaming." A switch clicked and they were in darkness for a while. His bare feet touched the chill smoothness of glazed floor tiles although he couldn't recall taking his shoes off. Then they were entering another room. Tufts of shag-pile carpet were curling under his toes and the air was sweeter somehow, not heavily scented, just decidedly feminine. She lowered him and he found he was sitting on the edge of a bed. She left him for a moment. Another light clicked on, a softer one this time. He looked around, bewildered and a little hesitant. "But this is your room. I shouldn't be in here, Liz. It's not why I came. I didn't intend ...."

"Neither did I Del." She came over to him and stroked his hair. "And I'm not forcing you into anything. I just don't think you should be alone tonight and I don't fancy the lounge-room floor." She chuckled. "If it makes you feel better, I'll put on one of Dad's boiler suits and you can sleep in your clothes. I just want to be with you, Del."

He nodded. "Thanks, Liz, but I'm an oil man, not a saint. I couldn't guarantee to \_\_\_." He suddenly realised how little he knew about John Stanley's secretary. Suggestive comments across her desk in the office were one thing, but here in her bedroom they could drop him into more hot water than a little. "\_\_\_to do the right thing," he finished awkwardly.

"Del." She crouched before him and looked into his eyes. "I'm not after a lasting relationship and I don't consider you a one-night stand. I'd just like to be your friend. Any way you want - I don't mind."

He shook his head sadly. "I don't know what I want any more, Liz. Things keep going sour. It's getting to the stage where I daren't form any attachments because I know I'm going to make a mess of them. I know oil, and that's all I know. Maybe I'd better stick to just being a toolpusher."

She bowed her head and glanced at the floor between his feet. "I've never been screwed by a toolpusher before." When she looked up, she was trying to wipe a smile from her face. "I'm sorry. That was crude."

"No, it's called being honest. Maybe I ought to try it. Might be good for me. Just don't say I didn't warn you. Now, which side do you want - left or right?"

She reached forward and began to unbutton his shirt. "It's a single bed, Del - all it's got is a middle." She opened the front of the shirt to reveal a massive scrape and the start of a bruise on his chest. "Oh, Hell, wouldn't you know it!" She released a heavy, frustrated sigh and stood up. "I'll go get the first aid again." Then she was leaving the room, muttering: "It doesn't happen this way in the movies."

Del heard and rolled his eyes. "Tell me about it," he whispered softly to himself.

~0~0~0~0~

She did tell him about it, in a letter, and about herself and how she felt. He was reading it in the plane as it taxied out of Tullamarine. Liz had written him two pages, nothing mushy or theatrical, no adolescent obscenities, just a few simple words about emotions and feelings that he could identify with. The rest was locked into his memory - her warmth, her touch, two nights of something very special. No regrets.

The turbines began to scream. He glanced at the runway speeding past the window and caught himself wishing he wasn't such a slave to his job. If he was half a man, he'd jump from

the plane and return to her, maybe give away the oil business entirely and become a storeman or a council worker, something normal. Then the nose was up and the aircraft was climbing, burning fuel that he had helped provide. It was almost like suicide.

He stared for a while at nothing in particular. What was to see that he hadn't before? Except, his destination would be different this time. He would be closer to home, to Australia, to his broken marriage and a young son he would be lucky to see twice in two months. But he would also be closer to Liz and that would make the coming four weeks at least bearable.

A signal chimed and information blurb began to issue from the speakers around the cabin. Del unclipped his seat-belt; then stooped to drag his overnight bag from under the seat. It wasn't his usual one. He still had no idea where it or the suitcase had got to. He wasn't over-concerned about the loss - they contained mainly work clothes - it had simply meant returning to the house for replacements. He'd done the right thing and phoned beforehand. When he'd arrived, there was a set of luggage already packed and waiting outside on the porch. He'd tried knocking. He could hear Danny saying: "Mum, someone's at the door," but she hadn't answered. A quick glance at the shiny new cylinder confirmed that, predictably, the lock had been changed, so he'd tossed the old key on the mat and left.

Unzipping the bag on his lap, he pulled some clothes aside to make room for Liz's letter and found the one from Agnes MacFarlane. He groaned. In the confusion he had forgotten all about it. She must have packed it because he distinctly remembered leaving it on the kitchen table - point of information: Sally's table. He'd fully intended asking John about it, but with the business of Sally and the transfer, it had slipped his mind. Well, it was too late now. Perhaps by the time he finished this coming shift it would have all blown over and Eddie would be at peace. That was what was important - being at peace.

He thought about that sentiment and decided to read Liz's letter one last time. As he read, he wondered if he might not be experiencing a kind of peace himself, albeit the turbulent variety, if that wasn't a contradiction in terms. He lingered over her last line, wishing it wasn't the end, hoping it was a sign of a new beginning: "Come back soon." she'd written, and then the best, most unbelievable bit: "I love you - Liz."

He smiled as he finally packed it away and thought to himself - four weeks wasn't such a long time. How bad could it be? Admittedly, he would have to defer his courtship of Liz, but there were some advantages to being incommunicado. Sally couldn't get on his case, for one, and even Agnes MacFarlane couldn't screw up his life once he was out at sea. For twenty-eight days he could turn his back on whomsoever he pleased and there wasn't a damned thing they could do about it.

He relaxed in his seat to wait for the refreshments to come round and smiled - this transfer to Olympian might not be such a bad move after all.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 1

"This is ridiculous!" A frustrated Jack Pierce walked around in a small circle. He didn't need the exercise and as an aid to solving his latest problem, the action was as much a waste of time as coming to Les Meyer in the first place. He raked an agitated hand through his thinning grey hair. "I gave you my resignation. Why can't you just accept it?"

Meyer was apparently enjoying himself while trying not to show it too much. "I have, Jack. The Company has. It's not a question of refusal."

"Then, what is it? Why can't I go? I've agreed to work out my shift...."

"Which would be quite acceptable under normal circumstances," interrupted Meyer. "But Merv Bryant's come down with a virus and as we haven't managed to find a replacement for you yet, you'll have to hang on till we do, or until Merv's well enough to come back to work."



"A virus!" Pierce couldn't believe that something invisible to the naked eye could be jeopardising his sanity. "When did a damned cold ever stop a man from doing his job?"

"Since medical science categorised it as a communicable disease! I can't drag a bloke out of his sick bed and risk three quarters of my crew going down with the flu just because you don't fancy pulling some extra time. Be reasonable, Jack. It'll be a week or a fortnight at most. You can wait that long, surely? What difference is a couple of weeks going to make?"

A lot of difference, thought Jack. He could be stark staring mad by then. There had to be another way! "What about Bill Rose? He's an experienced diver. He could handle it."

"But he's not a supervisor, Jack," drawled Meyer condescendingly. "You know Company policy."

"Stuff the Company, and its policies! I won't stand still for this, Les! One way or another, I'm getting off this rig!" He spun on his heel and stormed towards the door.

"Where are you going now?" Meyer couldn't decide whether to maintain his air of quiet indifference, or to leap from the chair and stop Pierce. It depended really what the man had in mind. He shifted his weight further forward in readiness. "There's nothing you can do."

Pierce clutched at the door frame. His knuckles turned white as he inflicted his anger on it. "I'm going to Doug Bromley, then we'll see who can do what!"

Meyer relaxed and eased back in the chair once more. "Forget it, Jack. Bromley's going out on today's chopper. He's leaving - he transferred." He allowed the smile that he had been suppressing to break and spread across his smug face. "We did manage to get a replacement for him."

As the colour drained from his cheeks, Pierce looked suddenly very old and tired, beaten in fact. Bromley had been his last hope. If he was flying out today, he wouldn't give two hoots about the rig, or Jack, especially not when he had transferred off Olympian and wouldn't be coming back. And it would be no good badgering the new man who probably knew nothing of the recent catastrophic events. Pierce had another awful thought - what if he was an apathetic bastard like Meyer? No way could he cope with two of them. He sighed deeply. "Who?" Meyer's eyebrows arched. The mongrel wanted to play the question-and-answer game - direct answers to specific questions. Pierce was definitely not in the mood. "Who is the new toolpusher?"

"Presswood. Derek Presswood, Del to his friends." Les noticed the jolt. It was only minor, but Pierce was shaken nevertheless and he failed to recover from the setback. Meyer decided it might be worth another prod. "Do you know him?"

Pierce worked his lips. They were as dry as his mouth had become. "I've heard of him." Had he ever! Eddie had talked about Presswood as if he were an older brother. They had been friends, and friends stuck together. It couldn't be coincidence. Presswood was coming out to investigate his friend's death. And that meant only one thing - he was coming after Jack!

Pierce left Meyer's office feeling like an unwanted tom-cat which had been dumped from a car. He didn't want to be there, would have done anything to find a way out of this blind alley he'd scuttled into. Now there were more dangers than hiding places. He was exhausted yet all he could do was keep on the move because the Ranger was closing in. He's gonna get you, Jack, his conscience taunted. He's gonna get you in the end. You can run. You can try to hide, but he'll find you.

He wandered the ship aimlessly for a while, finally gravitating to the moon pool area. Why he was there was a mystery, unless this was where diving supervisors always ended up after swimming round and round in ever-decreasing circles. It was really where it had started, where all his troubles had begun. He walked over to the ladder, the same one Eddie had descended on his way to meet his doom, the one Jack had forced him down. His hand went to the rail, touching it as Eddie would have that fateful morning. "You shouldn't have gone, son," he whispered. "You shouldn't have listened to me. You should have said: 'No, Uncle Jack, I'm no gonnay die!' Damn it, little Eddie!" he whispered, "Why didn't we fly to the moon instead?"

He walked away and was trudging up the ladder at the far end of the pool area when he heard a sound that caused him to interrupt his climb. At first it was just a hesitant rustle in the wind, then it got clearer as it approached. The chattering of distant rotor blades was unmistakable. Jack caught his breath and felt his heart miss a beat - Presswood's here!!

A voice said: "Hey, Jack, you coming, going, or you gonna hang around on that ladder all day?"

His head and shoulders were just protruding through the hole in the deck. He was staring at a grubby pair of jeans. He followed them up. The voice belonged to one of the roustabouts. "Sorry," Pierce mumbled and climbed the last few steps.

Pierce stood aside from the companion-way to let the man go down. Eric wasn't far behind his mate. He hurried to the stairs and after extending the diving super a curt nod and a smile, began his descent. He reached the bottom and broke into a shuffling trot along the catwalk. "Mike!" he called out. "Wait up!"

Mike glanced back and sighed - fucking Sutcliffe was just what he didn't need right now! He stopped beside the ladder which led into the moon pool and waited. A disturbance in the water caught his eye. He leaned over the guard rail to get a better look. There were just a few ripples on the surface which dissipated almost immediately. Mike straightened up and resumed walking.

"What did you see?" asked Sutcliffe, falling into step alongside.

Mike shrugged. "Dunno. A fish, maybe."

"No fish in there," declared the other man with conviction.

"What would you know Fuckwit? It's the sea ain't it? There's fish in the sea."

"I suppose." They were nearing the end of the catwalk when Sutcliffe asked: "Aren't you gonna watch the chopper land?"

"I'm on my break and I'm starving. Fuck the chopper!"

"But the new toolpusher's supposed to be coming in," insisted Sutcliffe.

Mike pulled up sharply and turned. "So? You want to kiss his arse, go ahead. The amount of shit comes out of your mouth already, nobody'll notice. You comin' or not?" Mike started walking again.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"What kind, d'you reckon?"

"What?"

"Fish - what kind of fish d'you reckon you saw?"

"How the fuck do I know? Maybe it was the big bastard that swallowed that diver, MacFarlane!"

"D'you reckon?" enquired the other man, glancing nervously through the rail at the water below.

Mike groaned. "You're a fuckin' idiot, Sutcliffe, d'you know that?"

"Nah!" Sutcliffe wasn't referring to Mike's comment which he had apparently missed, but was deciding for himself on the question of the fish. "Couldn't be the same one. Must be big, but." He appeared to think for a moment, then said: "You go on Mike. I'll see you later."

"Where you goin'?"

"Aw, nowhere," lied Sutcliffe unconvincingly.

"Suit yourself." Mike quickened his pace. Positive he could hear heavy footsteps thudding on the steel grating behind him, he turned in time to see Sutcliffe running back the way they had come. "Dickhead!" mumbled Mike as he left the area.

A dark shape moved below the waterline at the base of the ladder. It looked like a head. Something smaller rose beside it. The glassy surface trembled as the second object reached up and latched onto the rail of the ladder. It was definitely a hand and would have appeared human but for the green/brown colour and puss-like texture which were disgustingly vile. As it

slid up the rail a few inches, an area of slimy tissue caught on a rung and fell away to reveal a patch of raw, weeping pulp beneath.

Another hand reached up to catch the rail on the left side. Still submerged, the head tipped back and twin ellipses of violet light shone out from cavernous eye sockets. They moved from side to side, looking up through the water and beyond the surface, searching for signs of life which it wasn't quite ready to contact - nay fer a while. Cannay give the game away yet.

All seemed quiet. It started to move slowly up the ladder. The head and shoulders heaved and broke the surface. As it continued to climb, water ran in streams from the pustular flesh, clouding the immediate vicinity at the base of the ladder with oily excreta. Each time the left hand contacted the metal of the rail, there was a click which echoed faintly around the moon pool area. The source of that small noise was a gold band encircling one of the digits of the hand. And on the widest part of the band, engraved with precision was the letter 'E'.

It heard something! The shape that used to be Eddie MacFarlane paused. The presence within it listened.

Eric 'Fuckwit' Sutcliffe hurried back along the catwalk, chuckling and talking to himself. The sound of his own voice and movement came back to him as an echo. "Sshh!" He giggled like a naughty child and continued on, treading more quietly.

Standing motionless on the ladder, the thing that was no longer Eddie waited. Globules of the muddy puss dripped from the putrefying cadaver and plopped noisily into the water. The approaching human might hear and that wouldn't do because it would spoil the surprise. Carefully, silently, it lowered the body of its host back into the pool.

Sutcliffe reached the ladder and knelt on the steel floor beside it. He glanced out at the moon pool and spoke to the fish he was now positive was down there, somewhere: "I'm gonna get you, you big fat bastard!" Then he chuckled as he set to work with clumsy fingers, rigging and baiting his hand line. "I hope you like steak," he muttered and chewed on his protruding tongue to aid concentration while he drove a 9/0 Mustad hook through a lump of meat as big as his fist.

His preparations completed, he stood up and positioned himself. He swung the weight on the end of the line a few times like a pendulum, then heaved it towards the centre of the pool. It went in with a splash and he watched the ripples extending out across the shiny surface.

The line tightened and the sinker drew the bait down until it finally settled almost directly below him. "I wonder how deep you are?" He re-wound a metre or so of line onto the plastic spool. "Let's try that for starters."

Eric settled himself with his legs dangling over the side of the pool, then leaned across to the ladder. He whipped a few turns of line around the hand-rail and tied it securely. "Mike'd go spacko if he saw me. 'Don't tie it off, you fuckin' moron,'" He mimicked with a chuckle. "'What you gonna do if it runs?'" He beamed. "Ain't gonna run Mike, not 'less it takes the fuckin' ladder with it."

He pulled the line up and down a few times to excite the bait then held it still with the nylon draped over his crooked index finger. "Come on, you big sod. Let's show Mike how a fuckwit can catch fish."

## 2

Liz had been on Del's mind for the entire trip. Apart from regrets concerning his young son, he had thought of little else. Then as the Sikorsky was easing down onto the pad, he happened to look out at the waiting faces and one in particular caused his euphoria to split wide open.

The face was older now and may even have appeared wiser to the un-initiated, but a pile of shit was still a pile of shit, even after five years. That was how long it must have been since he'd locked horns with Meyer and from what he'd heard on the grapevine, Les was an even bigger bastard now than he had been then. Jumping feet first onto Olympian might not be as advantageous as he'd imagined after all.

Del was the third man out. As he stepped onto the pad, most eyes were glued to him, not because he was the new toolpusher, but because no-one had been expecting a man with so many lumps and bruises on his face. Meyer seemed eager to take a closer look and hustled his authoritative way through the crowd to Presswood. He made sure he halted two metres away, providing himself with a margin of safety, and grinned slyly. "I heard you were having problems." When Presswood merely responded with a sigh, he figured it was safe to move closer and shake hands, which was, after all, the civilised thing to do.

Del watched the hand extending towards him. It wasn't a display of friendship. More likely the entire show was a political statement for the benefit of the crew: here's your new toolpusher being greeted by his boss. Understand that - his BOSS! Del took the hand and tried to hold his feelings at bay. "G'day, Les. Been a long time."

"Too long, Del. Good to see you. Here." He began to reach down for Del's travel bag. "I'll take one of those for you."

It was like - hey, guys, look: Les Meyer's not too proud to carry a man's case for him, even one who's just gone fifteen rounds with his wife and lost. Del beat him to it. "I can manage thanks." He glanced around, searching for the man he was replacing. When he thought he recognised Bromley, he went towards him. "Doug?"

Bromley smiled and came to meet Presswood half-way. "Glad you could make it at such short notice, Del." He shook Presswood's hand. "Really glad." He frowned at the mess that decorated his replacement's face. "Are you going to be okay?"

Del touched the swelling beside his eye demonstratively. "I've had worse, but thanks anyway for the concern. Listen, Doug, I know you want to get off, but could we have a quick word? I won't keep you." He was aware of Meyer's obnoxious presence bustling up right behind him, so when Bromley agreed to the request, Del started to lead him to a quiet spot on one side of the helipad. Meyer stuck like glue. Presswood turned and smiled. "Why don't you carry on, Les? I'm sure you've got plenty to do. I'll catch up with you." Then, before Meyer could find an excuse to hang around, he added: "Oh, stick these in my room on the way through, would you?" He held his out his travel bag and gave the suitcase a kick.

Meyer took them reluctantly. "I'll see you in my office - when you can find the time," he rasped sourly, then turned and struggled off the pad with the baggage.

Bromley watched Meyer's back. "I won't be sorry to get that creep out of my hair. I gather you've met before."

"You could say that." Del looked the other toolpusher square in the face. "Anything I should know?"

Bromley glanced across at the helicopter which was already loading for the return trip. "I don't think I've got that long and you'll find out for yourself soon enough." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "What I will tell you, though, is that there's something not right here. Maybe it's the rig, maybe this hole, maybe it's just me; but the accidents, the vibrations, and that diver going missing - it's really weird."

A shiver ran down Del's spine. "What diver? No-one mentioned anything. What was his name?"

"Eddie MacFarlane."

The sudden roaring of blood in Del's ears blanked out whatever else Bromley was saying. He wasn't sure if he might not be on the verge of passing out, the psychological overload was so critical. MacFarlane this, MacFarlane that - Eddie was beginning to rule his life! Did John Stanley know about his connection with Eddie when he fixed the transfer? Had Agnes got to him, too? What the hell was going on?

Bromley was staring at him. "Del, are you okay?"

Presswood shook himself out of it. He nodded. "Tired, I guess. Probably delayed jet-lag, or something. What can you tell me about MacFarlane?"

At that point, a voice called from the doorway of the waiting Sikorsky. "Come on, Doug! We're wasting good drinking time!"

Bromley's eyes panned the surrounding deck and found Pierce walking off with his replacement divers - one for Eddie and another for Kenny Pratt. "Look, I hate to dump it on you like this, Del, but I've got to go. Talk to Jack Pierce, the diving super." It had been Doug's intention to point out Pierce to Presswood, but the man had apparently been in a hurry and had already gone below. He glanced quickly at the waiting helicopter, then seized Del's hand and shook it once more. "A bit of free advice, Del - watch your back: something funny's going on here."

"Funny?"

Doug was already moving towards the chopper. He glanced over his shoulder. "Just watch it, okay?"

Presswood's gaze followed Bromley across the pad. He envied the man for a moment. Then he felt betrayed. When these emotions had passed, he was left with the crawling, cancerous fear often experienced with loneliness and isolation. The feeling intensified as the helicopter took off and began to pick up speed and Del was unsure why this should be so.

Then he was gazing past the chopper to the far horizon and this in particular seemed to magnify the ache. It couldn't be just the mainland that he was missing, surely? Not Karratha either, nor Australia as a whole: men like Presswood stayed places; they didn't belong to them.

It was Liz, he decided after he had cleared away the deadwood. Suddenly, the fleeting relationship which had once seemed an answer to almost everything was now starting to rear up as his biggest mistake yet. Two nights they had spent together, only a few short hours, but the memory of them was pulling at him like a great emptiness inside. Why in God's name hadn't he just spent his leave in a bus shelter? What are you, Presswood, he jeered - bloody stupid? Didn't you realise what it would be like to leave something that precious behind?

He was still gazing out at the vast emptiness and didn't hear the man come up beside him, just his voice: "On a clear day you can see fuck all."

Del frowned. The sentiment was inconsistent with his thoughts, but, by the same token, it said it all. He glanced across his shoulder at a stocky, weather-beaten man. "That's enough for some people."

"And are you one of them?"

Del shrugged. "I'm not really into philosophy, just oil."

"Me, too." The man offered his hand. "Sam Gault - driller. And you're the new toolpusher."

"Del Presswood." Del took the hand. It was infinitely more sincere, more human than Meyer's.

Sam said: "I've heard of you. You worked with a mate of mine on the Southern Explorer."

Oh, Christ, thought Del - more friends of friends. Where did all the strangers go? "Really? Who was that?"

Sam made a clucking sound. "Pete Webb. He died in a car smash last Christmas."

Thank God for the automobile! One less friend to worry about. "Sorry. I remember Pete. He was a nice bloke."

"Yeah," said Sam. He was silent for a moment, then said: "Well, I guess this isn't getting the job done. I'll see you around, eh?"

"Yes, nice to meet you, Sam. Oh, Sam," he called to the driller's back. Sam turned. "Which way to the Company office?"

"I'm going that way. I'll show you."

Meyer was waiting in the office for him. The fact that he was still standing yet doing nothing in particular seemed to suggest that he had some unfinished business on his mind. Del headed straight for a chair set in front of one of the desks and flumped into it. Meyer glared at him briefly, then went over to close the door that Presswood had deliberately left open. "Do I gather you have something of importance to tell me?" Del asked.

Meyer returned and lounged against the desk. His eyes were on Presswood's, but when the toolpusher locked onto his gaze, Les had to turn away. He pushed off the desk and began strolling around the room. "I think we'd better be honest about this, Del. You always used to be hard to get along with and by the looks of your all-too-obvious battle scars, you haven't changed much - you're still upsetting people."

"Takes two to tango, Les."

Meyer ignored the thrust. "Well, it's not going to happen this time. I'm in charge here. You work for me. Is that understood?"

"Absolutely, Les."

"And if you think you can...." Les couldn't believe his ears. "What did you say?"

Del got up. He was smiling benevolently as he sauntered over to the Company man and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. "You're the boss, Les. This is your baby. I'm just here to help keep the wheels turning. I'll leave all the decision-making to you."

Les had a strange look of uncertainty on his face. "What's your game, Del?"

"Nothing, Les. I'm here to do a job, that's all."

Meyer straightened. He was like a man who'd just solved a perplexing riddle. "Oh, I see. You think I can't handle it, don't you? Leave him alone, you're thinking, let him blunder around, making mistakes, making a fool of himself."

"Now, does that sound like me, Les?"

Meyer moved in close. "It sounds exactly like you, Del! And you can forget it. I've got my finger on this button. Nothing happens on board Olympian without my say-so. You've got a problem - you come to me!"

Del made a circle with his finger and thumb. "Wilco, chief. Any sign of trouble and you'll be the first to know." Meyer was nodding but was still finding it hard to believe. "Oh, by the way, where can I find Jack Pierce," Del asked casually.

A cloud descended over the Company man's complexion. "Pierce - what do you want with him?"

"Hey, don't look so worried. It's personal, Les. Just want to talk about a mutual friend."

"Oh." Meyer relaxed slightly. "That's alright, then. He'll either be at the divers' shack or down by the moon pool. If he's not in either of those places, you'll have to ask around."

"Thanks, I will." Del sauntered towards the door. "I guess I'll see you later, Les."

"Just a minute! Don't you want a run-down on the operation?"

Presswood stopped and shrugged. "What for? You seem to have everything under control. I'm obviously here on a need-to-know basis and as far as you're concerned I don't need to know anything. So, I thought I'd settle in, then go and have a chat with Jack. Where's my room, by the way\_\_?"

The door flew open and a man rushed in. His face was flushed and he was puffing and panting. "\_\_moon pool," he gasped, his arm flapping vaguely at the doorway behind him. "It's Sutcliffe! He's dead!" His brief message delivered, he stood there, breathing heavily, staring at Meyer, waiting for instructions or at the very least, a positive reaction.

Les responded by turning white. The only parts of him that moved were his hands which had begun to clench and unclench in a manner which had become so typical of him as to be almost a trademark. His eyes were wide and glassy Presswood stared at him. "Well? Any suggestions?"

"I - yes, I...." He directed a confused look at the man in the doorway. "Dead, did you say?"

"Jesus!" spluttered the man in exasperation. "Isn't someone going to do something?"

"Les?" urged Presswood quietly.

Meyer shook himself. He had begun blinking furiously. "Who is this Sutcliffe? What does he do?"

"He can't do fuck all now!" growled the messenger. "He used to be a roustabout."

Meyer's head snapped around and his eyes fixed on Presswood. "He's one of yours, Del. This is your problem. You're the toolpusher."

Presswood was aware of two pairs of eyes burning into him. He concentrated on Meyer's. "You said if I had a problem I should come to you. Well, I have and I'm here. How would you like me to handle it?"

Meyer was now shuffling around on the spot, hands and eyelids working overtime. "What are you asking for, *carte blanche*? This is your responsibility. Just fix it, for Christ's sake!"

"Okay, Les, I will." Presswood turned to the man and nodded. "Take me there. Has someone called the medic?"

"Jerry's there already."

"Good. At least someone's showing some initiative. Come on." He began to follow the man out, then paused in the doorway and turned. Les was now sweating profusely. Del pointed directly at him. "I'll remember this, Les. You can count on it!"

#### 4

Mike felt better with some food inside him. When he got back onto the rig floor, the first thing he did was look for Sutcliffe. There was no sign of him and that annoyed Mike. It was one thing to befriend a brainless dill because no-one else would give him the time of day, yet quite another to be his nursemaid. He left the floor before Sam Gault noticed him and made his way to the moon pool which was the last place he'd seen Fuckwit.

He was surprised at the crowd that had gathered on the catwalk beside the pool and was approaching with a frown when Len Avery stepped right in front, barring his way. "You don't want to see this, Mike," he warned.

"How the fuck do you know what I want, Len?" He leaned aside and peered past Avery. "What's going on?"

"Let them handle it, Mike. There's nothing you can do."

It was personal, that was obvious from Avery's tone, but Mike couldn't relate the situation to himself, not unless it had something to do with.... "Sutcliffe?" he asked incredulously. "Has something happened to Fuckwit?" He started to push past.

"Mike, no!"

"Sutcliffe!" He shook Avery's hand from his arm and began to rush towards the crowd. "Eric!" he called. Faces on the perimeter of the group turned. When they saw who it was they parted. Mike barged his way through. "Eric!" he said again as he made it to the centre of the circle.

Someone had the sense to hold Mike back, although at first it was an unnecessary restraint - the man had frozen on the spot, temporarily overcome by shock. He was staring down at a body lying on the floor.

It was Sutcliffe alright, no doubt about it. His clothes were saturated. Water draining from jeans and shirt dripped through the grating on which he lay. Jerry Dennis, the medic, was kneeling beside him and was probably responsible for Sutcliffe's eyes being closed. It was pretty certain they would have been open when he died - wide open. And he would most likely have been screaming too, except no-one would have heard, owing to the lump of raw meat which was stuffed in his mouth.

Dennis was in the process of working it out with his fingers. Once it was free, he slid it clear along the length of nylon fishing line which passed through it and into the dead roustabout's mouth. Jerry felt around inside. "Oh, Jesus!" he declared. His fingers had just contacted the large hook embedded in Sutcliffe's palate.

Mike had been watching this. It was there for all to see - his mate's dripping body, the line running from his mouth, through the piece of meat and then winding its way beneath the feet of the spectators. He freed himself and pushed men aside so that he could follow the trail of nylon. It didn't go far. Most of it lay in a tangled heap on the catwalk. His eyes skipped over

the loops and coils, picking up on the single strand which led straight to the ladder. When he saw how it was tied to the rail and also saw the orange spool sitting close by on the steel decking, he didn't need to be a genius to piece together Sutcliffe's last moments.

Jerry Dennis looked up as movement stirred the crowd once more and a man who was a stranger to him broke through the circle.

Del Presswood stared for a while before introducing himself then he asked: "What's happened here?"

"It appears to be a fishing accident."

"In the moon pool!"

Jerry's eyebrows arched. "Sounds ridiculous, I know, but he was in the water with a hook in his mouth and the line he was apparently using was still tied to the ladder. What do you think?"

"In his mouth!"

"That's what I said, bait and all. Don't ask me how it got there - I'm not a fisherman. He probably got hooked up somehow, then fell in and drowned. It'll need an autopsy to confirm it, of course."

"So, nobody saw it," said Presswood glancing around at the men. "No-one was with him?"

Mike pushed his way back through the gathering of onlookers. "I'm his mate." He knelt down beside the medic, looked at Sutcliffe and sighed. "I wasn't with him, but it's my fault. I kidded the silly fat bastard there was fish in here." He seemed to be taking it well, but then his face contorted with lines of anguish and guilt. "Jesus, Eric, I was only jokin'! You great, stupid fuckwit, it was just a joke!" Mike sat back on his heels and went rigid. He continued to stare down at his mate, breathing like an enraged tethered bull through gritted teeth and distended nostrils.

Jerry tried to raise Mike, but the man refused to budge. "Someone give me a hand," said Jerry. "Take them both to sick bay."

"What about the hook, Doc?" someone asked. "You might need a disgorgers." The comment was followed by a few chuckles.

Presswood noticed Mike's body flinch. It was a primer activated by the ill-timed quip, a warning that the situation needed defusing before the grieving oil man gave vent to his pent-up emotions. "Cut that out!" snapped Del. His eyes panned the ring of faces. "I need four men to lend a hand. The rest of you get back to work! The show's over."

Del accompanied Jerry Dennis and his two patients to the sick bay before finally returning to the Company office. Meyer had no doubt been pacing like a caged tiger, but he stopped the instant Presswood entered. "Well?"

Presswood hooked his thumbs in his belt. "What kind of a circus, are you running here, Les?" Meyer opened his mouth to protest, but Presswood didn't give him the opportunity. "Don't bother to answer that - I'll figure it out in due course. Now, where can I find my quarters?"

"You can't go yet!"

"I'm tired."

"But you haven't told me what's going on, what you're doing about it!"

"There's nothing to tell, Les. I don't know what's going on. All I know is that a roustabout called Eric Sutcliffe is dead - possible cause: drowning. Jerry's doing a preliminary examination now. When I have his report, I'll radio town...."

"I'll talk to town," insisted Meyer. "I'm in charge here. Don't overstep your authority, Del."

Presswood shrugged. "Okay, Les, have it your way. If one of us is going to get egg on his face, it might as well be you."

"What do you mean....?"

The intercom buzzed. Meyer tutted then went over and spoke into it. "Les Meyer. What is it?"

"Jerry Dennis in sick bay, Les," said the speaker. "I think you'd better come and take a look at this."

"Just tell me Jerry."



"It would be better if you saw it for yourself. Bring along the new toolpusher. I think he should see it too."

"Okay, Jerry," sighed Les, "But I hope you aren't wasting my time." He headed for the door and glanced sideways at Presswood as he passed, but said nothing.

They were in sick bay in a matter of minutes. Jerry led them over to a cot where Sutcliffe's body lay, still on the stretcher, covered by a sheet. Meyer advanced only so far then hovered in the background. Del said: "What's that awful smell?"

"It's on the body," said Jerry. "Some kind of slime. I don't know what it is, yet. It was on the ladder in the moon pool as well."

"Is that all you brought us here for?" grated Meyer.

"No," replied the medic. "Something else, and I warn you, you won't like it." He stretched out a hand and began to peel back sufficient sheet to reveal his patient's chest. Eric's striped shirt had been unbuttoned, then loosely replaced with the panels overlapping. "Check this out," said Jerry, pulling the shirt-front open.

"Jesus!" said Del.

Meyer gagged.

"I told you, you wouldn't like it."

Del leaned over for a closer look. "Could he have done that himself?"

Jerry shrugged. "I suppose he could have, but how many people do you know could even cut themselves deliberately, never mind self-mutilation on this scale?"

Presswood straightened up. He was unable to take his eyes off the word which had been raked into the flesh of Sutcliffe's chest. "Does it mean anything - 'fuckwit'?"

"Apart from the obvious, I don't know." Jerry covered the chest with the shirt and drew up the sheet. "But that's not up to us to decide."

"That'd be right!" said Meyer at last. "Dump it all in my lap. As soon as things start to get...."

"Jerry wasn't referring to you, Les," cut in Del. "He was meaning the police."

"Police!!" Meyer caught hold of Presswood's arm and turned him; then he was gripping both arms tightly above the elbows. "Why do we need to bring the police into this?"

Del looked down poignantly at Meyer's hands. The fingers opened slowly and they fell away. Del brought his eyes up to focus on the Company man's face. "Because they don't like people solving their own murder cases, Les, not even Company Drilling Superintendents."

## 5

Del eventually made it to his room. Typical of the conditions under which they all worked, it was without trimmings and purely functional. In the early days, he had tried adding personal touches such as photos and the odd ornament in the hopes of creating a more homely atmosphere, but they had merely served as constant reminders of the place he would rather be. Then, when things had started getting strained between him and Sal, the mementos had become weeping sores he hadn't the time or the expertise to cure, so he'd packed them away and had attempted to lose himself in the job. Now he had come full circle and was wishing he had something of Liz's to remind him that not everything in his life had been a total disaster.

It was probably just as well there was only the letter. It was one thing he definitely wouldn't be sticking on the wall or leaving around for some inquisitive bastard to find and talk about. If there was nothing to suggest otherwise, the crew would tend to regard him as a cold son-of-a-bitch who felt more for his job than he did for anything else in the world. If they thought that, they might leave him alone to sort out whatever mess had been dumped on him.

He was still pretty much in the dark about that. Apart from refreshing his unfortunate acquaintance with Les Meyer, he hadn't spoken to anyone in depth about anything. There hadn't even been time to follow up on Doug Bromley's suggestive warnings. Now that the recent events seemed to confirm his predecessor's suspicions that something weird was going

on, he figured the smartest game he could play was solitaire. Perhaps after an hour or so of his own company, something might start to make sense.

The outer room was merely an office, furnished with filing cabinets, desks and other more specialised equipment. Being only small, it was a work-jungle and wasn't helping his frame of mind. He passed through to the sleeping quarters which he knew would be smaller still, but might, at least be conducive to relaxation, after a fashion.

The smell hit him the instant he walked in. Del screwed up his nose at the lingering must of stale tobacco smoke which rose to meet him. He would have to try to ignore it. At least Doug hadn't smoked a pipe. Del caught himself wondering about Bromley's taste in pickles and gave himself a sharp reprimand: "It's finished," he growled and tossed his luggage onto the bed.

Three strides and he was at the door on the far side of the bedroom. He peered in. It was just the usual mini-bathroom, except there was no bath. There never was when he felt in need of a good soak. He went to the wash basin instead and splashed water on his face. Then he looked up, saw the reflection of his battered countenance in the mirror, sighed and went in search of a towel.

He knew that stretching out on the bed was the wrong thing to do, but he had only intended to take the weight off his feet for five minutes. He awoke with a start when he heard a man's voice. There was a shape hovering in the doorway. He blinked at it. "What? Who's that?"

"Jack Pierce," mumbled the visitor awkwardly. "Look, I shouldn't have disturbed you. I'm sorry." His head disappeared and Del could hear footsteps crossing the office.

"Jack, wait!" he called. "It's okay." He swung his legs off the bed and lumbered, still half asleep, towards the door. Pierce had stopped and turned in his direction. "What did you want?"

Jack shook his head. "It can wait. It wasn't important."

"Stay anyway," said Del. Pierce looked nervous. "Really, I mean it. You did me a favour. I never intended to doze off. Pull up a chair." Del was attempting to push his shirt-tail back into his pants when the material ripped. "Oh, great!"

"I suppose there's someone at home who can fix that for you?" It should have been an ice-breaker, a casual note to begin on, but for some reason he had the feeling he had touched one of Presswood's sore points. The toolpusher had become suddenly moody. "Sorry, I didn't mean it to sound as if I was prying."

Del waved off the apology. "You weren't." He went back into the bedroom. When he returned, he was buttoning a fresh shirt. He turned a chair to face Pierce and sat down. "Now, what shall we talk about?"

Jack leaned his elbows on his knees and stared vacantly at the floor. "You're not going to make it easy for me, are you?"

Del frowned. "Come again."

"You might as well say what you're here to say and get it over with." Jack rolled with the pent-up emotions: it was preferable to fighting them. "Don't waste your time with prolonged investigations. I can tell you what you need to know - why he died, how he died. I've already resigned, you know, so there's no point in threatening me with losing my job. Then again, you'll probably want to take it further, get your pound of flesh in court."

Del's hands were up, trying to halt the babbling, self-flagellation. "I don't know who you think I am, Jack, but I sure as hell don't take confessions. And what's all this with the investigations? What investigations? Is this something else I should know about and nobody thought to tell me?" Del leaned back and folded his arms. "Let's get one thing straight, Jack - I transferred for personal reasons. I didn't choose Olympian: it was just available. At least, I thought that was the case. Now I'm beginning to wonder. I feel like I'm being manipulated, and I don't like it."

"I thought..." Jack mumbled himself into silence. Presswood was waiting. What did he give him - the whole truth, or just enough? What was enough? He didn't know. Jack looked up. "You're not here because of Eddie, then?"

"I didn't even know this was Eddie's rig until I met Doug Bromley on the chopper pad. He suggested I talk to you and I was going to get round to it. You seem to have got in first."

The intercom buzzed. Presswood answered it. "Les here," echoed the speaker. "Can I see you in my office? We've got a problem with the Kelly."

Del glanced at Pierce. The diving super had started to rise. He appeared relieved by Meyer's interruption, but Del had the feeling that he could never be at peace until he had unloaded whatever problems were troubling him. "I'm tied up right now, Les. Sam should be able to handle it. I'll be there as soon I can." He waved at Pierce to sit down again.

"Five minutes, Del. This is important!"

"Everything is with you, Les. I said I'll be there when I'm ready!" There was a slight sneer on Del's lips as he walked away.

Pierce said: "Eddie was right."

"About what?"

"About you. He said you were hard-nosed, that you'd only take so much stick before you started throwing it back with interest."

Del shrugged. "I just do what I have to. I don't always enjoy it. If people respect me, I'll do the same for them."

"Does Meyer know that?"

"He knows. Les and I go back a way. He was just an irritation before and the odd scratch used to fix him up. I always figured he'd eventually dry up and fall off. The fact that he's still around, places him in a different category, a bit like skin cancer. I'll tolerate him for so long then I guess I'll have no option but to cut him out."

"Will it come to that, do you think?"

Del walked to his chair and sat down again. "I don't know. Depends on how responsible he is for what's been going on here. I need enlightening, Jack, and I think I'd rather hear the facts from you than Les Meyer's version. Take your time." He leered demonstratively at the intercom. "Take as much time as you need. I'm in no hurry."

~0~0~0~0~

Pierce had just got to the part where the chopper returned after losing Eddie's body in the sea, when Meyer burst in. "What kind of a bloody fool are you playing me for....?" He pulled up abruptly when he noticed the diving supervisor in the other chair. After a moment or two, realisation dawned. "I am a bloody fool, aren't I?" He began weaving a figure eight around the room, shaking his head in amazement at his own stupidity. "You set this up, the pair of you! I underestimated you, Jack." He stopped to glare at Pierce. "Those radio messages - I thought you were just trying to make sure your transfer got through without a hitch when, in fact, you were arranging to set your dog on me." He looked pointedly at Presswood so that there was no doubt as to whom he was referring.

Jack could feel the tension building in Presswood. The toolpusher was still seated and apparently in perfect control, but he wouldn't take the insinuations and insults forever - he had said as much before. "Careful, Les," warned Pierce. "You're assuming again, and you're way out of your depth."

"Well, you'd know about that, wouldn't you Jack!" Meyer snarled. "Deep water's your specialty, as long as it's one of your divers in it, divers like MacFarlane. When was the last time you went down, Jack? When did you last go for a swim at the beach, even?"

"What are you saying, Les?" Jack rose slowly from his chair.

"I'm saying you've lost it, Pierce! You've lost your nerve and you've lost touch with reality. YOU killed MacFarlane! You screwed up and now you're trying to land me with the responsibility! I told you it was risky. You should have reconsidered making that dive, but, oh no - you knew better....."

"You lying bastard....!!" Pierce launched himself at Meyer.

Presswood flew out of the chair and tried to separate them. He really did feel like the meat in the sandwich, a very short piece of meat between two very tall pieces of bread. Pierce's bony

fingers were around Meyer's neck. Les had hold of Jack's wrists and was heaving and writhing in an effort to break the tightening grip. By the sounds he was making and the colour of his face which was growing ever darker, Del gathered that Les wasn't succeeding too well.

Neither was he. They weren't listening to his pleas for sanity and Jack had hold of Les like a bull terrier which had locked its jaws. Del knew what had to be done and that he would probably hate himself for it afterwards, but there wasn't much choice. Stepping clear, he delivered a short, jabbing punch into Jack's side, just below the ribcage.

Pierce gasped. He released Meyer's throat and staggered back. Ever the opportunist, Les took only a few seconds to regain his breath, then he was rushing for Pierce. Presswood swung a foot. It contacted Meyer's shin and the man was suddenly in a heap at Jack's feet. Del pulled the diving super quickly out of reach before Les recovered. "That's it, gentlemen," he declared authoritatively.

Meyer pushed himself to a kneeling position. "I've had it up to here with your interference, Presswood!" He tapped his forehead to emphasise his point. "I'll deal with you later. Now, get out of my way while I finish putting your friend in his place!"

"The way you were doing before Les? Don't make me laugh. Anyway, I said it's over. You've had your fun, now trundle back to your office and we'll forget the whole incident. What do you say, Jack?" He turned to Pierce who was starting to breathe more naturally. "Bury the hatchet?"

The intercom buzzed. Presswood ignored it, more concerned that the two former antagonists remained calm and separated. Meyer's focus, however, switched immediately to the speaker on the wall. "Aren't you going to answer that?" he urged.

"If it's important, they'll call back," replied Del, monitoring Jack's recovery carefully, watching for signs of renewed aggression.

"But it could be for me," insisted Les.

"Then you answer it."

Meyer did. A voice said: "This is Jonesy. Is Del Presswood there? There's a call for him. It's some police Inspector. Do I get him to hang on?"

"We'll be right there," snapped Meyer. As he started to move off, he glared at Presswood. "That was the radio shack," he declared unnecessarily in a tone which also said: I told you it was important. "Are you coming, or shall I take it."

Presswood darted a look of warning at Les. "I'm coming," he grated, then turned to Pierce. "Will you be okay, Jack?" Pierce nodded. "Sorry I had to hit you, mate, but you were behaving like a bloody galah."

"It's alright." Jack waved him away. "You go and take your call."

"Look, lie down on my bunk for a while. Nobody will disturb you here. I'll see you when I get back."

Pierce looked hurt. "Are you afraid I'll try to nick off before they get here?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The police. I assume that was about Eddie?"

"No Jack, not Eddie."

Meyer called from the passage: "Hurry up, Presswood!"

"Bloody wait, will you!" Del snarled irritably. He returned his attention to Jack. "You heard about Sutcliffe?" Pierce acknowledged that he had. "This one wasn't an accident, Jack." Pierce's eyes widened. "Keep it to yourself, will you? If it gets round that there's a psycho on board we could be in for some real trouble."

Charlie waited inside the partially open door for the two men to pass. He was bubbling with excitement: it wasn't every day the bosses got stuck into each other. He only wished he could have seen it instead of just hearing sounds of the free-for-all from the passageway outside the

toolpusher's quarters. Still, it was something to tell Mac about, a juicy tit-bit his know-all Scotch mate would definitely be interested in. Charlie was pretty sure such a disagreement could be useful to him and his mates. He didn't quite know how, but Mac was smart - he'd find a quid in it.

Once Meyer and the new toolpusher had gone, Charlie stuck his head out to check the corridor before leaving. It was his aim to head for the recreation room as quickly as possible without appearing in a hurry. Neither did he want to get way-laid by anyone, because he had a tendency to mouth off. Mac was always telling him to keep his trap shut, but it was hard when you were a friendly guy like Charlie.

He made it to the rec room and congratulated himself on doing it secretly, oblivious to the fact that those few men he had encountered who might normally have stopped for a chat, had made a definite point of avoiding him because, when Charlie Legget was skulking around with that nervous-jackal look on his face, there was usually trouble in the wind and anyone with an ounce of sense gave him a wide berth. As far as Charlie was concerned, however, he'd simply done it right for a change.

Charlie entered the room and looked around. There weren't many there - it was too early - so he had no difficulty in locating Andy 'Mac' MacIntosh. The burly Scot was hunched over the table around which his group sat, no doubt delivering some choice words of wisdom. Mac was full of them. He knew the law of the workplace, what a man could and couldn't get away with and how to get the most out of the job for the least effort. He was just a roughneck like Charlie, but Mac maintained it was all he wanted to be: "When you become a boss, you sell oot yer mates. You cannay run wi' the hare and the hoonds." Charlie wasn't sure what 'hoonds' were, or what they had to do with hair, but Mac was smart, so it must mean something pretty significant.

Charlie dragged a chair from an adjacent table and tried to shuffle his way in beside Mac. Johnno Carter glared at him. Charlie averted his eyes and sat just behind Mac, waiting patiently, listening.

"Makes me wonder what's doon in that fuckin' moon pool," grated Mac in a sinister tone, his dark, beady eyes, moving back and forth across the faces before him. "Must be somethin' big fer them tay kill two men tay cover it up."

Len Avery, the floor man, had been taking Mac's subversive rambling with a pinch of salt up until then. Now he sat back and let out a snort. "You don't know what you're talking about, Mac. Eddie died from the bends."

"Is that right?" Mac never took kindly to being doubted. "How d'yer know what they did tay him? He could 'ave bin poisoned or drugged! An' you're forgettin' Sutcliffe. That was nay accidental. You cannay mean to tell me he carved that on himsel' - he needed a dictionary tay read Noddy. He was fuckin' illiterate!"

"Okay," conceded Avery. "Sutcliffe might have been killed, but there's no way you can connect his death to Eddie MacFarlane's."

"The moon pool, you dill!" blasted Mac in frustration. "You cannay see it, can you?"

"No, Mac," Len admitted, "And neither can you. Sutcliffe's was probably a grudge killing. Maybe he'd done the dirty on someone."

"The police are comin'," put in Charlie.

Mac frowned. "What're you sayin', Charlie? What would you know?"

"I heard Jonesy tell Meyer over the intercom. He said some police Inspector wanted to talk to Presswood on the radio."

"Who the fuck's Presswood?" Mac was often confused by Charlie's jumbling of the facts. He tolerated the little shit because he was a good ferret and if you could take time to sift out the garbage, a lot of what he said was useful.

"Presswood's the new toolpusher," said Avery.

"They had a blue," added Charlie beaming.

"What?"

"A blue - a fight."

"I know what a fuckin' blue is, yer wee turd! Who had a blue? What about?"

"All of 'em - Meyer, Presswood and Pierce. Goin' at it like shearers on a weekend piss-up. Meyer said Pierce killed MacFarlane on purpose, then all hell broke loose."

"There!" Mac hissed with satisfaction. "Was I right, or was I right?"

"You've only got Charlie's word for it, Mac," said Wayne Cox, "And we all know how 'reliable' Charlie is."

Mac was across the table in a flash, his clenched fist waving in the speaker's face. "Watch yer mouth, Cox, or I'll fill it in fer ye! Ye're talkin' about mah mate." He eased back and put an arm round Charlie. "What else happened, Charlie?"

Charlie rambled. Mac listened, his face changing as each new piece of information was absorbed, rearranged and slotted into the place that best suited Mac's cause. Like Charlie, the Scot was also predictable. Three of the men at the table, including Wayne, decided that a timely return to work was the best way to avoid becoming involved in whatever aggro Mac was planning. He sneered at their backs as they left, but said nothing because he already knew what he was going to do and he wouldn't need an army to do it.

Charlie finished. He sat next to Mac smiling, a dog who had performed his tricks and now waited for his reward. Mac stood up, pushing the chair back noisily. "Where we goin', Mac?" asked Charlie eagerly.

"Tay find oot who killed Sutcliffe."

Charlie scratched his head. "How we gonna do that, Mac?"

Mac tutted. "If someone had it in fer him, who would know?"

"Eh?"

"Who was Fuckwit's mate, yer daft prick?"

"Mike," Charlie answered, but still couldn't fathom Mac's reasoning. "Why?"

"Jesus!" Mac rolled his eyes. "Mike would know if Sutcliffe had enemies." Another idea struck Mac. "Maybe he did it! Maybe it was Mike." His face clouded. "An' he said he was Fuckwit's mate, too! The Bastard! Come on!"

Avery was now truly concerned. "Hang on, Mac. I think you ought to leave this to the police."

"Tay Hell wi' the pigs! Are ye comin', or not?"

"I reckon I'll pass on this one, Mac."

Mac gave the floor man the finger. "Then up you too, Avery!"

Len had half a mind to follow, while the other half was on letting Presswood know what MacIntosh was aiming to do. But he was no snitch, so he compromised and did neither. As it turned out, Mac's posse of two - himself and his grovelling mate, Charlie - came up empty handed. They couldn't find Mike, an eventuality which soured Mac's mood even further.

Once word got round, as was inevitable, others became curious regarding Mike's whereabouts. As soon as the dilemma came to Presswood's attention, an organised search of the vessel was instituted with the same result - no Mike!

If there was one detail common to all three of the recent mysteries, it was a particular location. Somehow, the moon pool featured in the deaths of Eddie and fuckwit, and that was also the last place anyone had seen Mike.

There was one other oddity connected with Mike and his mate - the peculiar, vile-smelling slime which had been all-too obvious on and around the moon pool ladder after Sutcliffe had died, and the stuff seemed to have increased in both volume and intensity with the advent of Mike's disappearance. Presswood was crouching on the catwalk, sniffing at his fingers which were smeared with the obnoxious substance. He frowned up at Jack Pierce who had accompanied him in the search. "What the hell is it, Jack?"

Pierce had no idea and said so. What he omitted to confide was the nagging suspicion in the back of his mind which related this revolting slime to the phosphorus that had surrounded Eddie at the time when the young diver had gone crazy. Jack had a feeling - just a feeling, mind -

that, as well as being present at the point of Sutcliffe's murder and Mike's disappearance, the stuff on Del's fingers had also played a part in Eddie's death.

Del stood up and wiped his hands on a rag. A man was approaching with a mop. Presswood stopped him. "Don't clean it up, just leave it."

"Leave it?"

"That's what I said. And don't let anyone else mess with it either, not until the medic's checked it out."

The man looked puzzled. "So, what do you want me to do, stay here and guard this shit?"

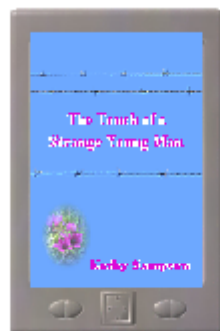
"You've got it in one," said Del.

"You think it's important?" asked Jack on their way up to the rig floor.

"I don't really know, Jack. But I'd like to find out what it is, because I have a sneaking suspicion we'll be seeing more of it. A lot more."

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