

Broadland Suspense

The Blue Lady

A Comedy Action Thriller

by

Anthony Jude McGowne

The year is 1974, a time of strife and turmoil in the British Isles and across the globe, as the economy plunges downward and industry collapses. Undaunted, a group of young Scottish men hire a cruiser on the Norfolk Broads for their summer holiday.

Comical circumstances complicate their attempts to find fun and romance, and the interference of a criminal element ensures they get more than they bargained for.

Their nautical skills are put to test with high waters and near-collisions, while their attention is drawn by scantily dressed young ladies. Unwittingly caught up in a Customs sting to catch a crafty gang of smugglers, the boys find their fortunes quickly changing. But even in the midst of adversity, intrigue, and danger, these plucky lads depend on their camaraderie and sense of humor to see them through.

This is one holiday they'll never forget; their time with the *Blue Lady* changes their lives forever.

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Author's Note: All hotels, boats, and locations mentioned in this novel are fictitious, including references to the Broads. The depiction of the Norfolk Broads as a setting for this story in no way reflects the actual area. The Norfolk Broads is one of the most beautiful and serene waterways in the world. It is safe and ideal for family holidays, and the incidents and danger portrayed in this novel are fictitious.

~AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT~

In memory of my brother, Edward McGowne, an inspiration to all in youth work and football.

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Chapter 1

Ah ... Saturday ... how lovely it is to have a long lie in bed, I thought to myself.

“Tommy, are you going to sleep all day? It’s almost lunchtime.”

“I’m up, Mom,” I yelled, as I threw off the covers and tumbled out of bed.

I glanced out the window at a beautiful day and gave a sweet sigh of relief that I had laid my pen to rest for the summer. The whole of the United Kingdom seemed to be in turmoil, but I was happy that my second year of study at Glasgow University was over. Now I could look forward to a summer of bliss, excitement, and pleasure.

I quickly washed and changed for the upcoming game, thinking how fortunate I was to stay at home, twenty-five miles or so from the university, only a thirty-minute rail journey. Unlike me, many students came from farther afield and had no other option but to stay in residence rather than commute, which could be a blessing or a curse, depending on one’s individual situation. I don’t know how I would have coped if faced with residency. I was fortunate enough to return home every day, which was an ordeal at times, but it allowed me to train and play football with the local Ayrshire amateur team. This activity kept me alert, fit and healthy, although I had a few bruises to contend with over the winter months.

The boys of the team were, on the whole, a genuine bunch – some real characters among them. I was team captain by unanimous decision, simply because of my straightforward, positive attitude. Well, maybe I also gained their respect by being a bright student who was always eager to solve their problems. I can honestly say nothing gains friendship more than being there for someone. I might not always have the answer, but I listen.

Over the past three years, six of us had gone on holidays together to mainland Spain and Majorca during the summer fair holiday, which was now rapidly approaching. Last year, ’73, proved difficult for most of the boys, with the

introduction of part-time working. I wondered if they could afford a holiday at all this year, having only scraped by last year. I laughed to myself as I reflected on the antics of Rab, Jock, and Sammy, with a candle as their only means of light while playing darts in the local inn the previous winter.

I grabbed a piece of toast from the plate on the kitchen table. "Well, I better be off. Bye, Mom."

"Don't get hurt now, son!"

"Maybe see you at the game, Dad, if you can make it away from the inn?"

"I'll at least catch the end of the game, Tommy," Dad called.

"Okay, see you," I said, making my way out the door.

* * * * *

The game was grueling, but we managed to grind out a positive result, to the delight of our manager, Geordie. After the game, I called the jolly five together. "Look, lads, it won't be long to the fair holiday. I suggest we clean up and meet at the inn later this afternoon to discuss what we can arrange."

"We're skint, aren't we, Jock?" said Rab. "Bloody three-day work week has seen to that!"

I nodded. "With the economy in the dumps, I know it has been tough for all of you. But surely we can thrash out something. Is everyone fine with meeting at the Black Horse Inn at five?"

"Aye!" was the resounding answer.

"Right, I'll see you all later, then. Good game, lads!"

As I was about to leave, Bobby caught my arm. "Is it all right for me to join your holiday group this year, Tommy? I fancy a change away from my parents. The villa they rent is fabulous; nevertheless, it's a little restricting for me."

"Of course, Bobby. It would be great to have you along."

* * * * *

The Black Horse Inn was heaving when I entered. Trying to assemble everyone round the table was proving really difficult. Fortunately, big Sammy was on hand to bring them to order. Once I had their undivided attention, I asked for some realistic holiday suggestions.

"Why don't we go camping?" shouted Jimmy. "That will leave us with extra

money for fun and other amusements.”

There was general disquiet, and Rab objected, “No! We can do that anytime.”

“Well ... what about a boating holiday, then?” said Jock.

“Sounds good to me!” Sammy bellowed from the back. “One of my workmates went down to the Broads last year and said he had a great time. Oh, and they went into the big resort at Upmouth for dancing on the weekend. It has everything, including a showground, plus all the babes on the beach.”

“I’m all for that!” said Jimmy. “My kind of holiday. Another thing, we can all pile into my van and save some money getting there and back. Given our circumstances, it sounds like a cracking idea to me.”

“Okay, settle down then!” I said. “Does anyone have a better idea?” No one spoke. “All in favor of the boat, put up your hand.”

I counted hands and was amazed that all were in agreement. “A unanimous decision, for once. Since the holiday is coming up quick, we best make our arrangements as soon as possible. Can you all make it to the travel agency on Thursday afternoon, say around noon?”

“Yes!” came the resounding reply. I nodded. Although the three-day work week made money tight for the boys, it made things easier to arrange for a meet with a travel agent. “I thought we’d use the agency at town center this time.”

“Why a different one from last year, Tommy?” asked Sammy.

I smirked. “After Rab released some unwanted wind that left a stench in the shop the whole time we were there, I figured you’d all agree it was best to give the usual one a miss this year.”

“Aye, you’re right,” Jimmy said. “It even got worse when he lost control of volume.”

The group went into fits of laughter.

“It was that curry I had the night before,” said Rab apologetically.

“Well, make a deposit in the loo before meeting us at this new agency,” Sammy quipped.

The group laughed again.

* * * * *

It was a nice, sunny afternoon as the boys all gathered outside the travel agency. “Okay, are we all here?” I asked.

“Aye, that’s us now!” Jock replied. “Wee Jimmy has just arrived.”

“Hey, Rab,” Jimmy said, peering through the travel office’s front window. “Looks as if you’ve done us a favor, breaking wind to convince Tommy to change agencies. “Take a look at the dolly working inside!”

“She looks tasty. Mmm!”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get in and try to behave, please.”

The receptionist was with a customer when we entered the shop. She signaled for us to take a seat while we waited. After a minute or so, she came over and said in a low voice, “You and your friends can browse through some of these brochures while you’re waiting. I’m afraid I’ll be tied up for at least ten more minutes.”

The expression on Sammy’s face was priceless when she said she’d be ‘tied up.’

“I promise I won’t be too long,” she added.

“I’ll hold you to that,” I replied, smiling.

Jimmy, never to miss anything, quickly remarked to Sammy, “I saw your face, you dirty beggar, when she said she was tied up. I can read your mind.”

Sammy got a little flushed, then replied, “I suppose you didn’t give it a thought then, Saint Jimmy.”

I’m sure the girl must have wondered what was going on as Rab and big Jock burst out laughing. She looked over me in bewilderment. I just smiled and gave the thumbs-up, pointing to a brochure in my hand, as if something they had read made them laugh. She smiled back – and what a smile. She seemed happy with my response.

Well under the estimated ten minutes later, the curvy sales assistant finished up with her other customer and came over to us. “What can I do for you today, boys?”

“We were thinking of a holiday on the Broads.” Leaning forward a bit, I checked the name on her badge. “Jill, is it?”

“Yes, Jill.”

“I’m Tommy. Pleased to meet you, Jill.”

“Likewise. Whereabouts abroad were you thinking of going?”

The word ‘abroad’ immediately put another notion in my head, and I tried to remain dignified by not laughing, but the others were not so refined. Frowning, I turned briefly and ordered, “Quiet, you lot!” Recovering my smile, I faced Jill and explained, “It’s not abroad that we wish to go, Jill. I’m sorry I didn’t make myself more clear.”

“I sort of gathered that, Tommy, with spontaneous fits of laughter from your

unruly friends.”

Jill looked me in the eye with a lovely smile lighting up her perfect countenance. *What a beauty*, I thought to myself. *No wonder the boys can't take their eyes off her.*

“Sorry I picked you up wrong,” she said. “One takes it for granted, now that nearly all our customers are looking for a beach holiday in Spain or the Mediterranean.”

“I can understand that,” I replied, trying to be diplomatic. “Actually, we’re looking to take a boating holiday.”

“If you give me a minute, I’ll go to the storage cupboard and get a brochure for you.”

“That’s fine, no hurry. We have plenty of time.”

“Aye, we have plenty of time to ogle you, baby,” whispered Jimmy to the group.

All eyes were on her as she made her way across the room. I’m sure she was aware of it, as her steps were slow and determined. If she were on a catwalk, the boys would have a ticket for every show. I even found myself distracted by her tight-fitting skirt and curvaceous figure.

Jill was forced to stretch to reach up into the cupboard – so much so that her skirt traveled up her leg, exposing a generous amount of thigh to the glazed eyes of her spectators.

“What a pair of pins!” remarked Jock.

“I was too busy checking her headlamps,” said Sammy, “but I’m even more impressed with her legs, now that you mention it.”

I was quite sure Jill could not help but overhear the comments when she was at her most vulnerable position. She took her time, then made directly to me, where she obviously felt safest. The one thing I had learned when faced with a hostile group is that there is always a bully or big mouth. If one challenges him first, the rest will usually back off. Most often, the mouthpiece is the coward. It’s the same with a boisterous group. One will usually find they have a leader, so it’s always best to select him or her when dealing with a delicate situation. In Jill’s case, she was outnumbered by the opposite sex, and apparently felt my presence calmed her.

Jill turned to me and inquired, “What was all that about lamps and pins, Tommy?”

I was just a little flustered by her question and quickly tried to think of a way to cover up the group’s fantasies. “Ah! Sammy was just reminding me to buy some

postage stamps for an item I have to send. Also, my mother asked if I could purchase some clothespins. That's all."

Jill gave a wide smile, knowing full well they were discussing her figure. She then proceeded to wind them up, saying, "Maybe you would like another brochure from the top shelf of the cupboard, boys?"

I turned around and was amazed to see a mixture of bowed heads and red faces. "Well, that didn't half shut up the lot of you," I said to them. "With this stony silence, I thought I was back in the dressing room at halftime with big Geordie giving us grief about our passing ability." I turned to Jill and added, "You can hardly blame them, though. You're a real head-turner, Jill."

"And you're a real charmer, Tommy. It's a good thing my boyfriend isn't here at the moment. I think he would be having a word in your ear."

"I'm sure he would agree with me," I replied.

She laughed – a sound of an angel to my ears. "I see there is no beating you. I guess that's why you're in charge, and team captain, no doubt." Still staring at me with those tantalizing eyes and happy smile, she continued, "Have a look at what you see on offer, or what takes your fancy. I've no doubt it will be a pretty one." She pointed to the picture of a girl sunbathing on a cruiser.

I grinned. "Will do, Jill. You can deal with the customer that is waiting."

Jill smiled and nodded.

"Right, lads, let's see what tickles your fancy," I said, winking at Jill as she turned to answer the telephone.

There were all types of craft, big and small, including sailboats, on offer. Rab pointed to a particular one and said, "You can give that type a miss. I'd probably be more in the water than on the boat, trying to dodge that big pole that swings to and fro with the sail."

"That would sober you up quickly," said Jimmy.

Having turned the pages from front cover to back, the boys seemed somewhat dejected by what was on offer. The cost of hiring put them on a low. Jock tried to brighten up the situation by saying, "I think fair Jill fancies you, Tommy."

The boys nodded in agreement, and Bobby said, sounding somewhat surprised, "The lads are correct. I think she is smitten by you."

I was a little flushed, so I quickly responded, "Never mind the girl! We are here to look for a boat."

"I didn't know they were so expensive to hire for a fortnight. I think it will be a camping holiday for me," said Jimmy.

After a moment of general disquiet, I said, "Give me the brochure, Jock, and I'll have a word with Jill."

"You do that," said Jock, smiling.

"Get stuck in there, Tommy boy!" said Jimmy. "I'll bet she sees you, all right."

I shook my head and pulled the brochure from Jock's hand.

Jill was busy now with the other customer. I stared at her while waiting patiently, noting how her dark hair glistened in the sunlight streaming in through the window. I was careful to keep the brochure open and glance down at it occasionally, so as not to arouse suspicion from my team. I didn't like the idea of her having a boyfriend, but was hardly surprised that such a lovely lass would have a suitor. Nevertheless, I found myself entertaining the idea of falling for her. She was a real beauty with a smart yet sweet disposition.

A few minutes later, the customer left, and she was free. Turning her attention to me, she asked, "Well, did you see anything you fancy, Tommy?" She grinned coyly, seeming aware that I'd been giving her the eye.

I laughed at the leading question. Was there a hint behind it? I wondered, but quickly forged ahead with the conversation to draw her off that trail. "I'm hoping you can help us, Jill."

"I'll do my best for you." She smiled with a twinkle in her eye.

I don't often find conversations difficult, but dealing with her set my heart racing and fogged my thoughts. I fought to concentrate on the matter at hand. "These prices are a little steep for a two-week holiday. Have you any other brochures? Or are you able to help us with a cheap last-minute break?"

"I'm sorry, Tommy. That's the only brochure we have." She hesitated for a moment, then said, "It's the high season. The full price is always requested unless there's a cancellation." Again, she paused before adding, "Perhaps I can do some checking. If you'd like to come back in a few days, I'll see what I can do for you. Or better still, if you give me your number, I'll call you if I come across a deal."

That was all the ammunition the boys needed. Before I could respond, they shouted, "Give her your number, Tommy boy!"

Jill giggled and played along with the fun. "What is your number then, Tommy?"

In unison, the boys gave a long, drawn-out, "Woo-oo-oo!"

I felt my face heat a bit as I shot them all a warning look. Turning quickly back to her, I smiled and said, "Sorry, Jill, the lads are just a little boisterous this

afternoon. I'm sure they don't see many pretty girls this early on a weekday."

"So, you think I'm pretty?" she teased.

"Well, I would say so." I continued feeling more than a little flushed by this time, but managed to repeat my number so she could jot it down on a pad. "Best time for me is around five most evenings," I said. "And ... I must apologize once more for their behavior." I glared sidelong at the lads while still trying desperately to regain my composure.

"Not a problem, Tommy. I've enjoyed the fun. It's kept me on my toes."

"I'll look forward to your call."

I gathered my squad together, and we made for the exit, with all of them singing, "Bye-bye, baby!" They continued to blow kisses at her on the way out, until they were interrupted by the appearance of the second receptionist, who was trying to squeeze in past us through the door. She bumped into big Sammy, no less, which sent her reeling. Unexpectedly, she was caught by the open arms of wee Jimmy.

"That's some catch you have there, Jimmy," said Sammy.

"Aye, what a beauty! I'm kind of reluctant to let her escape."

The lass's eyes lit up, and she smiled. "If I'd known you boys were coming in, I would've returned earlier from my lunch break!"

Big Jock moved closer to her as Jimmy said, "Do you wish me to carry you to your desk, or even into town?"

She smiled, and Jock laughed as he said, "He hasn't the strength, honey! You'd be safer with me."

"My, all this attention! I'm sure I'm in safe hands for the moment."

A delighted Jimmy kissed her cheek and put her back on her feet.

"Did you get what you were looking for, boys?"

"Not when I see you, baby!" Jock said.

She tittered and then waved them good-bye.

* * * * *

"Hey, Jill," Anthea said, looking out the window to watch the rambunctious young men depart. "Some good-looking lads you had to deal with there. I'll bet they kept you going."

"Oh, I was more than a match for them at the end, but I have to say, it was dicey for a while. If it hadn't been for their leader, I would have been in hot water."

"Where are they going on holiday? I wouldn't mind going along!"

“Anthea!”

“Well, why not? They are attentive and good-looking, and pretty fit, if you ask me – going by the way they threw me around.” She giggled.

“You were being manhandled, and it didn’t seem to bother you one bit. You are just a little flirt!”

”So!”

Jill shook her head, then set her mind to helping Tommy and his friends solve their holiday predicament. She spent over five minutes on the phone to London before replacing the receiver.

“Good news?” asked Anthea.

“Yes, couldn’t be better. Sheila’s dad from the London branch has offered his cruiser for ten days, at a very reasonable price.”

“That’s terrific,” said Anthea.

Jill nodded, deciding to wait until closing, after Anthea left, to call Tommy.

* * * * *

“Hello. Is that you, Tommy?”

“Speaking! Were you expecting someone else to answer?”

“Oh, you cheeky boy! It’s Jill here.”

“Hello, beautiful Jill. It’s lovely to hear your voice.” I caught the hesitation before Jill continued speaking, and thought perhaps I’d gone a bit far with my compliments.

“Well, Tommy, it’s about your boating holiday,” she said after a second. “I’ve been on the phone to our London branch, and they say you have left it late, so there are only a few available craft open to you for hire. However, by chance, my colleague Sheila has given an alternative. It so happens that her dad has a boat berthed on the Broads. This will meet all your requirements. It’s not the most up-to-date craft, but it has a shower and toilets. The only thing is ... it can only be leased for ten days, if that is okay with you and the boys.”

“Sounds sweet, almost as sweet as you.”

Again, Jill paused, seeming taken aback by the sincerity in my voice. But the plucky gal pushed on, saying, “I have taken a liberty and booked it provisionally. You said that ten days would suffice if nothing else was available. Is that okay?”

“That sounds great, Jill. You did the right thing. I’m sure the boys will be happy with anything that saves a bit of cash, even at the expense of a few days. Oh,

by the way, it was very kind of you to call.”

“Not a problem. We always aim to please our customers.”

“I wish you were going with us!”

“I don’t think so, Tommy. I bet your girl would not be too happy with you flirting on the phone. And, if you don’t have a girl, I’m sure I would only be a handicap, with all the girls available to you on the boats.”

“First thing is, Jill, I don’t have a girl, and secondly, who is doing the flirting?”

Jill started laughing, and I imagined her trying to gain her composure after being outgunned. After a moment’s silence, she said, “Right, Tommy, I’ll tie everything up for you with Sheila tomorrow morning. We have to take a small fee, and also arrange the insurance for you. I’ll try and get it down as low as possible, though. Oh, one more thing. Do you all have a driver’s license?”

“Yes, we all drive. Is that important?”

“Yes, that makes life much easier. Tell the lads to bring their licenses with them so that I can register their number on the insurance policy document.”

“I’ll pass on the information. Is there anything else we need?”

“Yes! The money.” Jill laughed. “I will need the full amount, as your booking is last-minute.”

“Of course. My mind was on other things.”

Jill paused once again, then said, “So, give me a call and let me know when you’ll be by to handle the paperwork, then.”

“Will do, sweetheart. Can’t wait ... bye.”

* * * * *

I met the boys for a pint and a chin-wag at our local bar, the Black Horse Inn, Friday evening to explain what was on offer from the travel agent. “Gather round and do keep quiet – especially both of you!” I said, pointing to wee Jimmy and Rab. “I’ve had a holiday offer by telephone from Jill to put before you.”

“Woo-oo!” everyone yelled in unison.

“Okay, enough! Not that kind of offer. It was purely business.”

“Mighty pretty business though, Tommy,” said Jock.

I was knocked out of my stride once more, but I pressed on, trying to minimize the reddening of my face by being more aggressive. “No more interruptions, please! What we have on offer is an eight-berth cruiser with all

amenities for ten days. It belongs to a colleague of Jill's. Well, her dad actually. The price is exceptional, and the only drawback, of course, is the loss of four days' holiday. Take your time and have a discussion among yourselves for a few minutes."

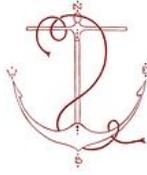
There were a few mutters and moans with the loss of four days, which was only to be expected. When the din receded, I said, "I need a show of hands for all those in favor." All raised their hands, to my delight. "Good. Then it's a go. Let's meet at the travel office tomorrow at noon to take care of the paperwork. You'll need your share of the payment, plus your driver's licenses for the insurance document. Oh, and Jill suggested we stay a night in a country hotel on the way down, which means we get the full ten days on the boat. What do you say?"

There was a moment's pause, then an overwhelming, "Aye!"

"Right. I'm off, then," I said.

"Yes, and we know where," said Jimmy.

I left without replying to the innuendo. I knew they suspected I was dating Jill, but I didn't want to make an issue of it.



Chapter 2

Mike Sanders sat in his black leather chair, blowing circles of smoke into the air from his favorite cigar, while pondering his next move. His club wasn't doing too well in the current economic climate. Rocketing unemployment and discontentment didn't exactly inspire people to spend their cash on luxuries. With other gangs muscling in on his territory, Mike had taken a huge gamble and put his money into diamonds. Only problem was getting hold of them. Time was of the essence now. The stones had been cut, but word was out. In the past few weeks, all attempts at moving the diamonds by ferries or air travel were a definite no-no, with two large hauls of precious diamonds being recovered by Customs in high-profile cases only adding to his woe.

Staring at his cigar, he got an idea. Derek Anderson was a small-time smuggler who never seemed to have a problem getting his goods over from the continent. At that moment, there was a knock at the door, and his right-hand man, Ted, popped his head in. "A small disturbance, boss. Big Ross was becoming a little boisterous, so I had to call him a taxi. He took objection, so I had to help him into the seat."

"He was conscious when he left?" asked Mike.

"Yes, boss. Unconscious when the taxi left, though."

"I am happy with former. Sit down for a minute, Ted. I've had an idea about getting the diamonds over. What do you think of Derek Anderson?"

"The drink and cigar supplier?"

"Yes."

"Well, he can be trusted."

"That's all I need to hear. Don't let me detain you."

"Right, boss." Ted ducked out of the office and closed the door behind him.

Mike gave Derek a call. After a discussion, he came up with a proposal. He

made the business offer, then said, "You still spend a lot of time with your boats, Derek?"

"Yes, it pays to have a few craft on the water. I don't arouse any suspicion that way."

"Good. I'll send details of the deal with my man Ted. When you're ready, you can pay me a visit to seal the deal."

"Sounds good, Mike. Ted knows where to reach me at Southwich. I'll contact you, once I've seen what you have to offer and can work out my costs."

"Right, then. Ted will give you a ring to set up a meet."

"What, you're not sending the details by post?" Derek said with a chuckle, obviously joking.

"Good one, Derek! No. You know Ted, so that keeps everything tidy. I like tidy."

"As I do. Look forward to meeting with Ted soon."

Mike replaced the receiver and called Ted into the office. "Looks as if we have our man. I want you to go down to Southwich tomorrow."

"No problem, boss. Hand-to-hand stuff."

"Got it in one, Ted."

* * * * *

The following day, Ted arrived to meet with Derek, and both men shook hands. In the process, Ted handed over a large brown envelope. Derek carefully opened it to avoid tearing the contents. Finding a chair, Ted sat patiently as Derek perused the proposal. Finally satisfied, Derek commented, "Tell Mike it's going to take a lot of planning, and my men will be looking for a bonus, so my fee could be considerable. I'll get back with you as soon as I can, with my plan and the final cost."

"Fine, Derek. Oh, I need half a dozen cases of your finest brandy for the club."

"That's what I like to hear. I'll mark that down for you."

Both men shook hands once more, and Ted left Derek to work on his plan for Mike's deal.

* * * * *

Derek had spent a day across the channel, securing a vessel that wouldn't prove to be a liability. He needed a cruiser and crew that regularly visited the south coast. After a few hours, his partners came up with the perfect solution. A pleasure hire boat, which took small parties for a day visit to Eastgate would fill the bill.

With a promise of ten thousand pounds, the arrangement was settled. Derek arrived in London with his driver to see Mike, who had called him to meet and confirm his plans. On entering the club, he and Charlie were shown into the back room by Ted, with Charlie's robust frame almost filling the doorway.

Mike greeted them. "Ah, Derek, how good to see you again. Grab yourself a seat. Cigar?" Mike offered a half-filled box. Turning to Ted, he said, "Thank you, Ted. You can shut the door behind you."

After Ted left, Derek looked at the box being offered and smiled. "Don't mind if I do. One of my batch."

Mike laughed. "What else, Derek?"

"You have met Charlie?" inquired Derek.

"Not properly, but I've seen him with you," replied Mike, offering his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Charlie responded by leaning forward and crushing Mike's hand with a vice-like grip. Mike pulled his hand away, shaking it as he said, "Wouldn't want to do that too often. That's a bone-crusher, if ever I felt one." Mike rubbed his hand, turned white with an imprint of Charlie's grip. "I thought Ted was big. What height are you, son?"

Charlie smiled and said nothing.

Derek lit his cigar and puffed out gently while enjoying the excellent taste of a perfect leaf. "Mmm ... life doesn't come any better than this!"

"Well, I might just dispute that," Mike said, "if we pull off the prize I'm offering. Have you given much thought to my proposal?"

"Indeed I have. With my friends across the channel, I have everything in place."

"Well, man, don't keep it a secret. What have you come up with?"

Derek stood up from his chair and began walking the room, looking into the full-length mirror to admire his frame. Turning slowly to face Mike, he said, "Firstly, it has been at considerable expense to me to finalize my dealings. So, if you'll pardon the pun, what's my cut?"

"Derek, my man, you know I won't let you down when it comes to cash. Look at today's prices. I can guarantee you a hundred-and-twenty-five grand."

“What about incidentals? It has cost me ten grand to hire an extra vessel.”

Mike listened intently while sipping a brandy and smoking his cigar. “Look, I’ll cover all your expenses and, if everything goes to plan, I’ll give you another twenty-five grand.”

Derek smiled. “That’s what I wanted to hear. I have a consignment coming in a week or two, depending on weather, of course, and any other interferences that might transpire. All your man has to do is deliver the goods to the cruiser.” Derek then handed the details to Mike, along with the vessel’s name. Mike began to scrutinize the plan as Derek continued. “It’s all about timing and good planning. Gerry will have his small cruiser at Eastgate to collect the diamonds and bring them to me at Silver Broad.”

Mike nodded. “That’s the reason I chose you, Derek, because of your consistency. How you get your goods over without being stopped has always puzzled me.”

Mike paused, waiting for a reply, but Derek put his finger to his nose before speaking. “They are after bigger fish, Mike. That’s all I’m saying.”

Mike laughed, “I think they might have been letting one slip through the net.”

“Maybe.”

Both men relaxed with their feet up, then Mike stood up. “Well, it sounds good to me. I’ll take care of all your expenses, as I said earlier, and pay you an extra twenty-five grand when the transaction is complete. Is it a deal?”

Derek stood up and offered his hand.

“Oh just one thing, Derek. Your other consignment ... isn’t that a bit risky to have two jobs on at the same time?”

“Not at all. If anything should happen untoward, my boys have orders to scuttle both boats.”

“You certainly have your own way of dealing with problems. I’ll finalize everything shortly with my man in Holland and get back to you.” Mike pulled an envelope from his drawer and handed it to Derek. “Ted has surveyed the area and has chosen a location where we can meet safely. I’ll have the money with me and exchange it for the diamonds.”

Derek accepted the envelope. “I’ll have my man Sid check it out and, if it’s okay by him, I’ll let you know.” Shaking hands once more with Mike, he said, “I’ll be on my way then.”

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When Derek was back in the car, Charlie felt he had to say something. “Look, boss, all that praise being lavished on you and your team made we want to vomit. I don’t trust that guy.”

“Now, now, Charlie! Don’t go overworking your brain. Just stick to driving.”

