

The background of the cover is a photograph of a turbulent sea under a dark, stormy sky. The water is dark blue and green, with white foam from the waves. The sky is filled with heavy, grey clouds, suggesting an approaching storm. The entire scene is framed by a thick blue border with a thin green inner line.

**MEL
KEEGAN**
STORM TIDE

"Unputdownable"
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"A fine example of this genre"
(Gay Times on FORTUNES OF WAR)

"A powerful futuristic thriller"
(Capital Gay on DEATH'S HEAD)

"...the MASTER of gay thrillers ... Mel Keegan's name is a byword for thrilling gay adventure in the past, present and future"
(Millivres on AQUAMARINE)

This rip-roaring and colourful new gay thriller zooms along with a breathless enthusiasm that never flags"
(Time Out on ICE, WIND AND FIRE)

"Gripping"
(Scotsgay on STORM TIDE)

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APHELION (due 2007)

**STORM
TIDE**
Mel Keegan

DreamCraft, South Australia

STORM TIDE

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STORM TIDE

A Foreword for 2006

Many times I've been asked why I don't write more 'contemporary' novels, and *Storm Tide* is a pretty good answer to this question. It's twenty years since the original version was written; it's almost twelve years since it entered the editorial process with GMP; and in those years this story has become a historical in its own right. Contemporary pieces don't stay 'current' for long. The march of technology makes them curiosities before you can blink.

The world in general has changed a lot since I wrote this. To bring the narrative into line with the rest of the titles DreamCraft and I have been issuing since 2002, I switched the units of measure over to metric. The only time you should come across Imperial units now is when Sean mentions them in dialog. He's an American, and even in '06, the US hasn't changed, and won't be changing any time soon. (In fact, Australia changed over to metric over thirty years ago! The original draft of this book was produced with an eye to publication in the US, so Imperial units were used preferentially.)

The metric system is the tip of an iceberg. Consider the question of phones. In the mid-1980s, cell phones were the size of an Aussie Rules football, and so rare on the street, you'd be fortunate to see one in inner London or LA, never mind in rural SA.

Much of *Storm Tide* revolves around a couple of guys fighting to survive against the odds because they can't get help. By 2000, we took for granted that a person adrift in the ocean off New Guinea could call a number in the UK via satellite and ask someone to alert search and rescue in Queensland! These days, even long-distance truck drivers rarely use CB any more. The world has changed more than one realizes.

So has the map. In parts of this novel I refer to Rangoon, in Burma. In 2006 there are no such places. No, they weren't erased from the face of the Earth! But they *were* renamed. A contemporary narrative should refer to Yangon, in Myanmar. I deliberately haven't changed *Storm Tide* to reflect the contemporary map, and for good reason.

Tweaking the novel with the new place names will put it in the present day; and the astute reader would want to know why Sean and Rob don't just pull out a cell phone, call for help ... and defuse the rest of the plot!

The story is 'stuck' in 1986/87 and has become a recent-historical. Another element that roots it in that era is the legislation regarding guns. Australia has had extremely stringent firearms restrictions for more than ten years now, and laying your hands so easily on a shotgun would be impossible today. Even if the weapon were permissible because it exists in a rural area (the current laws *do* allow farmers to own a rifle), you run into problems of land zoning...

Urban sprawl, outward from Victor Harbor in virtually every direction has put much of the area I describe in this story under subdivisions. What was farmland in the '80s is now zoned residential. Victor Harbor is a major town; folks who live there will say it always was! But now the town is *big*, with an urban sprawl of its own, which accommodates the ever-growing body of workers from Adelaide, who run a sixty-minute commute: they work downtown and live in Victor.

Many more things have changed locally, in the last twenty years; some of them are good things! The state has had a Rescue Two helicopter for a long time, to back up Rescue One. But the Coast Guard remains a civilian volunteer organization for the aid of 'boaties' in difficulty on our shores; it's not to be confused with the US Coast Guard.

And on subjects close to the military, one more thing roots *Storm Tide* in the mid/late 1980s. One of the characters is a Vietnam veteran, still on the 'sunny side' of fifty. You do the math. Most of the 'Nam vets are retired now, or looking forward to it. The industries of time aren't restricted to cell phones!

Nor are they confined to people. The old freighter in this novel is a 'break- bulk' cargo ship typical of the vessels which dominated ocean freight in the 1950s. She'd have been launched in the mid-'50s and by the mid-'80s she's at the end of her service life, old and creaky, but still working. This was *exactly* the vessel the story needed. But by 2006, there are no 'break-bulk' freighters left. The *Lan Tao* would have gone to the breakers decades ago. And, still talking about ships, the Royal Australian Navy patrol boat I describe here is also obsolete! They were updated too.

I did give some thought to 'tweaking' *Storm Tide* to bring it up to date, but the fact is, little about the novel works now, and do much would have to change that the result wouldn't be *Storm Tide* any longer. My call was to leave it just as it is; and if it's become a historical — well, enjoy!

Mel Keegan
Adelaide
Halloween, 2006.

Chapter One

In the last forty minutes the wind had begun to rise sharply and rain slashed the gray horizon. Since midnight the radio had been broadcasting warnings of the incoming storm, and every coastal town down the entire length of the Gulf Saint Vincent was making ready to meet the violent weather. High winds, thunder and torrential rain were forecast. The lowlands would flood, property damage would be immense, lives would be lost. What boat owner in his right mind would be five kilometers offshore, staring into the teeth of the rising storm?

Rob Markham hit the ignition a third time and swore as the twin Evinrude 400s coughed, sputtered, and stalled out. The wind whipped the surface off the waves and flung an icy, salt spray into his face as he hoisted himself out of the red vinyl seat. His blue jeans and gray sweater were already soaked and his skin prickled in the mid-August chill.

The *Fancy Dancer* had begun to toss like a cork, and Rob had just started to worry. In the well of the boat behind him, Sean Brodie had stowed the rods, bait and the box holding their catch. The bream, mullet and trevally had been biting quite well. According to local lore, the fishing was always outstanding in the last hours before a storm hit. The trick was to get one's boat and oneself back home before the wind and white water began to ravage the coast.

Sean turned his back on the gale and shrugged into his electric blue parka. The gusts ruffled his short-cropped dark hair. He braced his denim-clad legs against the pitch of the deck as he got to his feet in the stern, and gestured at the outboards.

"What's wrong with it this time?" The Californian accent cut across the rising wind like a knife.

"I wish I knew." Rob made his way aft, struggling for balance as the boat heaved. She was a six-meter pleasure craft with a brilliant yellow fiberglass hull, powerful motors — and a completely open cockpit. Not the kind of boat in which one would choose to ride out a storm. Rob glanced over his shoulder at the southwest sky. "You can always count on the bloody weather to louse things up!"

“Could be we got a couple of damp plugs,” Sean suggested as he zipped the parka.

“How would I ever have thought of that?” Rob demanded fatuously. He was already unlatching the lid of the toolbox, and lobbed an aerosol can of dewatering fluid in Sean’s direction. “Give me a hand here.”

They crushed in together between the outboards, warm body against warm body. The press of Sean against him brought the smile back to Rob’s face. It was too difficult to hold onto his annoyance when Sean was so close — which was the whole reason they had taken this vacation.

For months they had been drifting apart. They were beginning to lose one another, and if they wanted to save a relationship that had been so good, it was time to invest some hard work in it.

In the last six months a dozen factors had conspired to drive them apart. Sean was working late, sometimes working entire nights if his project was on a deadline. In the previous year, Rob had been moving from job to job, finding it impossible to settle; but not until he secured permanent employment did the trouble begin at home. He had a wealth of experience on the shop floor, and motorbikes were his lifetime fascination. But Rob never made friends easily, and working with hostile colleagues always inspired him to seek another job; and then another. After years of hunting, he literally stumbled into good working conditions and congenial company ... and soon wished he had passed by. Work and traveling forcibly separated him from Sean. When they could find time to be together at last they were too often tired, too preoccupied.

And then, there was Peter. Rob had not even known about the young tennis player until the affair was history, and Sean confessed he had been seduced. He swore the flirtation had never been emotionally profound. It was just a means to release the tension that had begun to build up explosively.

Still, Rob was deeply disturbed. It was the first time he had consciously realized, he could lose Sean. He could wake up one morning and find himself alone. After thirty years of being more or less alone, he had no wish to return to the days of deprivation. He had always believed finding Sean was the best moment of his life. Losing him again would be the worst. And if it happened, Rob would have no one to blame but himself.

The Peter Kramer affair had shocked Sean too. Rob never demanded the details about his relationship with the blond, petite and impishly alluring Peter, but a pale-faced Sean haltingly volunteered a confession. With Rob away one time too often, he had been alone and miserable, and he went to the gym, thinking he could sweat the bleak mood out of

himself with an hour's hard physical effort. Peter was using the weights. His body was velvet smooth, gleaming with a healthy sweat; his long hair was roped back in a damp ponytail while he worked. He had seen Sean the instant he walked into the gym. Sean noticed him moments later. He stripped to his shorts and began to punish his muscles, but his eyes were on Peter. Two hours later they were in bed, and the scene was repeated several times a week for the next month.

When Sean could bear the deception no longer, the confession rushed out of him as if he were determined to force either a confrontation or a resolution. Pain assaulted Rob, but he forced himself to listen, and to understand. Sean had been in Australia for only a few months when they met. Most of his friends and all of his old lovers were 'at home' — he would always think of Santa Monica as home. He was in Australia to do a job, on a two-year working visa.

What happened when his visa expired was largely up to Rob. Sean could be on the next flight back to the US. Or he could take the boss's offer of an extended contract, apply for permanent resident status and stay in Australia. Adelaide was not quite a Mecca for either tourists or gays, but it had clean air and good beaches. Aids was still almost unknown, the state of South Australia boasted a Mediterranean climate ... and good company, Rob thought. No. *Great* company.

The night following Sean's confession was stormy, but by morning they had made their peace. Peter Kramer was twenty-two, ten years Sean's junior, and he was racing from bed to bed with the reckless delight of youth. Just a year ago, Sean had been in LA, where the kid's careless, promiscuous antics would have raised more than a few eyebrows. Here, in this untroubled state, literally on the edge of the world — the embarkation point for Antarctica — Peter was in surprisingly little danger. Aids was something that happened to other people, or was occasionally mentioned on television. Many moving obituaries were published in *The Sydney Star Observer*, but Sydney seemed a world away. Adelaide was like a cocoon, as if it belonged in another decade. Someone once called it a graveyard with lights.

Years later, the quip was that even the lights had been switched off. Sean regarded Adelaide as a country town. It had many of the advantages of a city, and few of the disadvantages: no real pollution, and no omnipresent, haunting shadow of Aids. But the gay community was quiet and quite small. It could be difficult for a young man to find his own kind of companionship.

Rob had begun to think he would spend his whole life alone if he did not get himself into the hub and heart of Australia's gay life. Sydney and

Melbourne beckoned like beacons on a stormy night, and he was on the point of quitting his job, packing and leaving when, like a bolt out of the blue, Sean arrived.

The handsome, dark-haired and blue-eyed stranger was an engineer on contract to Aurora Petroleum. When he saw the job advertised in a Los Angeles paper, Sean could not even have found the city of Adelaide on a map. Three months later, he lived in a small apartment block overlooking the South Parklands, worked in an executive suite ten stories above Grenfell Street, and spent Friday and Saturday nights trawling Hindley Street, searching for *someone*.

That winter, Sean was thirty-one. *Anyone* would not do. The novelty had worn off Peter Kramer's brand of blissful promiscuity. Sean Brodie wanted to know he would wake up to the same smile, the same kiss, he had gone to bed with. He was looking for someone about his own age, well built but not enslaved by the gym, someone who laughed easily, dressed casually, liked the same kind of food and music, so there would be a patch of common ground to share.

Propping up the bar in the noisy, smoky, overcrowded pub that cold June winter's night was a man two years Sean's junior. He was just a fraction shorter, with deeply wavy hair the color of a ripe chestnut, which he wore long on his collar. He dressed in crisp blue denim, a designer tee shirt, tan leather jacket and Reeboks. Robert Markham was gazing into his Fosters as if he could read the future in the depths of the almost-empty schooner glass. He was totally ignoring the antics of the boys around him. Most of them belonged to the pimple-chinned, matriculation-year brigade, barely old enough to be getting plastered on the low end of Hindley Street at ten-thirty on a Friday night. Some still wore their school trousers. Sean ignored them as resolutely as Rob disregarded them. They might not have been there at all. Sheena Easton launched into something vivacious, filling the bar with well-intended noise. A dozen boys began to dance, but Sean raised his voice to cut across the din of overloaded speakers and, without a moment's hesitation, he deliberately propositioned Rob.

For eight months, right through summer, it was superb. The 'graveyard with lights' had at last come alive for Rob, and Sean was settled in the job that had begun to bore him. Rob moved into the apartment by the parklands, which suited Sean fine. Rob was a naturally early riser — Sean was not — so breakfast was always on the table when the six-thirty alarm rang.

And then, after months in a dole queue, Rob moved cautiously into a new job at the Honda agency on Pirie Street. The money was good and

the company was pleasant. But the hours clashed badly with Sean's, and the scene was set for disaster. The personal drift began slowly, insidiously.

World-weary veterans swore it happened to every couple, gay and straight alike. Marriages steered onto the rocks. Relationships ended on the scrap heap. Peter Kramer happened along at the worst, or best, possible moment. Rob would never recall the boy without a shiver, yet if anyone was responsible for single-handedly patching up a relationship that was starting to split wide open, it was an irresistible damned *kid*.

It was June again, the night when Sean had laid his cards out in plain sight, made his apologies and mutely pleaded to be understood. They were deep into winter. The wind was cold as ice on the street and the rain had been lashing without a break for a week. Sean was miserable, and so was Rob. Winter blues made their mood even worse. But that night was a second beginning. They were better in bed than they had been since summer, and Sean's relief at having the truth in the open made him putty in Rob's eager hands.

That night was almost a return to their first exhilarating weeks together, and they both rose willingly to the bait. They talked almost through till dawn. The following morning, smudged and hung over, they both called in sick at work, and spent the whole day at the apartment, until nothing remained unsaid. They must spend more time together before they became strangers who occasionally managed to find their way into the same bed, almost coincidentally; they must regain the closeness they had treasured, before it was too late.

The day was still sharp and painful in Rob's memory. This unseasonable vacation — two weeks almost completely alone, with the opportunity to share a friend's holiday shack on the coast between Goolwa and Victor Harbor — had sounded like sheer heaven. Not even the threat of stormy weather was enough to dampen their spirits. They would make it. Rob clung determinedly to the belief.

The shack was a timber-frame holiday home, standing above the tidal zone, up the coast from the tourist destination of Victor Harbor. It had not been opened since summer. The air inside was stale and the phone was turned off, but the power was on, the building was sound and dry. And the bed was enormous.

The *Fancy Dancer* was one of the three things of any real value Rob owned. He ran a battered Toyota Land Cruiser, and garaged at home, jealously guarded, was his bike, the big 1100RC Honda. For most of the previous week the boat had been tied up at the water's edge, while he and Sean divided their time between the single-minded pursuit of sensual pleasure and the more innocent diversion of fishing. Sean had always

enjoyed fishing, since the boyhood afternoons shared with his uncle, as far from the smoke and noise of Santa Monica as they could drive for a weekend.

For Rob, angling was an exquisitely painful penance. He never caught a thing, while the quiet and solitude compelled him to grapple with the problems which were tangling his life into a Gordian knot.

For a week he and Sean had shared the sea, the shack and each other, and Rob was content. They were closer now than they had ever been — closer than most families could claim. The feelings Rob nursed for Sean were strong and enduring, a foundation on which they would build. The most ironic aspect of this interlude was that it was all the handiwork of a blond, leggy, carefree little tennis player. Peter had a lot to answer for, not all of it bad.

As the wind began to lash in earnest the *Fancy Dancer* pitched and yawed underfoot, and the deck was slick, treacherous. Still, a sudden boyish grin stripped years from Sean's face. His blue eyes crinkled at the corners. Drops of water clung to his hair, though it was not raining yet. He slipped his arm tight around Rob's waist as they pressed together between the obstinate outboards.

"Not wishing you'd stayed home, are you? It was you who insisted we come out this morning!"

"Ask me again in about an hour," Rob said dryly, "when I'm up to my shoulders in a tub of scalding water, with a double scotch in one hand ... and you in the other."

Sean licked his lips salaciously. "I'll take that as an invitation." He swiped the cap off the dewatering fluid and gave Rob enough space to lift the big scarlet head covers off the Evinrudes.

The interiors of both were wet, and Rob whistled. An hour before, the *Dancer* had caught a wave broadside. A solid wall of water slapped the outboards hard, and they were not new. The casings would be waterproof in most conditions, but they were well worn. Immersion proof, they were not.

The fine oil misted everything, and then Rob lunged back to the control panel and hit the starter. The battery sounded sick but this time both motors coughed, spluttered and settled into a steady, earsplitting V8 growl. Sean gave an exuberant whoop and slapped the covers back into place.

"For my next trick," Rob said brashly as he bowled the DWF aerosol back into the tool kit and slammed the lid, "I shall attempt to saw my assistant in half while whistling excerpts from *Die Valkyrie*."

The levity made Sean chuckle. He slid in under the wheel, revved the

Evinrudes and turned on the radio. A dense sheet of static white noise blanketed the local commercial station. "Damn, this interference is getting thick."

"Who the hell needs a weather report?" Rob demanded as he settled in the seat beside Sean. "You can *see* this bitch of a storm."

The southwestern sky was dark as a funeral shroud now, and lightning had begun to flicker. Far away, thunder pealed like a drum roll over monstrous amps. The weathermen were describing a vast low pressure cell which had built up over the Southern Ocean. Meteorology was a mystery to Rob. He only needed to know that he was cold, wet, and he had seen the first licks of lightning.

The *Fancy Dancer* came around smartly. The coastline was a gray-green smudge, low down in the east, a craggy vista of hills, valleys and creeks running down to the boulder-strewn, eucalypt-forested edge of the sea. The radio cleared, but the station was just repeating the same broad-spectrum warnings as had been issued since midnight.

The storm had already ravaged the southwest of the state. The tuna fishing town of Port Lincoln had suffered major damage, and to make matters worse, the coming evening threatened the highest tide of the decade. When that king tide came up the creeks after a day of torrential rains, the valleys and lowland paddocks would be two meters under.

Most small boats would be tied up in port, while larger vessels would have moved out beyond the hundred-fathom line, where they would turn their bows to the gale and set sea anchors. The last thing Rob had expected to see as the *Dancer* came around toward the headland where their shack stood, was another boat sharing this stretch of water.

It was a rich man's dream toy, an ocean-going cabin cruiser with acres of plate glass and chromium, and a dove-gray hull which was almost invisible against the sea from a distance. Her radio masts whipped overhead in the wind, and across the transom was her name, in fancy lettering. She was the *Minuette*.

A moment after Rob spotted her, Sean saw her too. He whistled through his teeth. "Will you just take a look at that."

"I am," Rob said aridly. "Avariciously."

"They're not maneuvering." Sean nodded at the stern, which showed no wake of prop froth. He shut back the *Dancer's* throttles and the powerboat cruised down. He angled a glance at Rob. "They could be in trouble."

"Are you kidding? That thing must be worth five million bucks!"

"And the storm that's coming in will still chop her to driftwood," Sean added. He switched on the shortwave and lifted the mic. "*Fancy*

Dancer to Minuette, are you receiving?"

He repeated the call four times but the radio remained dead. Rob leaned over and fiddled with the tuner. "We're blanketed with interference," he muttered under the whine of the rising wind. Thunder rumbled, uncomfortably close at hand, and he shivered. "Try them again."

"*Fancy Dancer to Minuette*," Sean called, and then dropped the mic in disgust. "This is useless. Why sit here calling when they're only two hundred yards away? Their shortwave could be on the fritz."

It was possible. Wealthy owners or no, they could be in real trouble, and one of the laws of the open water was that any vessel would stand by another in a situation like this. Still, some animal nerve make Rob's hackles rise, though he could not have said why.

He straightened in his seat and held onto the surround of the low windshield as Sean put the wheel over and opened the throttles a little. The outboards had just begun to gargle when they saw the flash of orange-yellow flame and a puff of silver-black smoke, from a window in the side of the cruiser.

"Damn, they *are* in trouble. The buggers are on fire!" Sean opened the throttles full, closing the distance in a matter of seconds.

The chop was already more than a meter high, and Rob was seriously considering the wisdom of putting on a life jacket. The sea was nearer gray than green or blue as he struggled aft. He threw a line over the transom, onto the deck of the cruiser, and perched on the side while Sean brought the powerboat in close enough for him to hop over. She tied-on to a chrome steel cleat, bobbing wildly, and Rob extended his hand to help Sean up onto the polished redwood deck.

No passenger or crewman was in evidence. The wind whipped Sean's hair into his face. He raked it back and cupped a hand to his mouth. "Hello! Is anyone there?"

The boat seemed deserted. The engines were shut down, the deck was unattended, and they saw no figures in the glassed-in cockpit. Sean nudged Rob's arm and pointed at a doorway to the right side of the ladder which climbed to the flying bridge. Inside were steps leading down a few feet into the compartment.

"You reckon we're trespassing?" Rob murmured, one hand on Sean's arm to hold him back as he made to move inside.

"Standing by a vessel in distress can hardly be called trespassing," Sean argued. "We both saw the smoke. You want to go back to the *Dancer* and try the shortwave? There's lightning all around, we'll be lucky to raise anybody."

He was right, Rob admitted, and bit back his words of caution as

Sean stepped through into a plushly-appointed lounge. The carpets were wine red, the fittings were all polished pine and brass, highlighted by framed art prints of famous yachts and China Sea clippers. Behind glass was an enviable collection of silver trophies. But the air reeked of burning plastic, and there was no time or breath to waste on cynical comments about the privileges of rank.

Rob coughed on the chemical stink and his voice was hoarse. “Smells like it’s this way. The galley, maybe,” he guessed. Sean was a pace ahead of him when he saw the bright red cylinder of a CO₂ extinguisher in a bracket by the door. He plucked it out of the clasps, checked it and hurried after Sean, who had moved through one of two inner doorways, into the next compartment.

There, the smell of burning was almost suffocating, and they saw the first wisps of smoke. Rob’s heart beat a tattoo at his ribs. “Can you see what’s burning? Where’s the fire?”

Sean was trained in emergency procedures. His work sometimes took him aboard oil rigs, as far afield as Bass Strait, where safety regulations were stringent and even day visitors were given rudimentary instruction. Rob would trust his judgment here without hesitation.

But Sean was not listening to him. He was frozen just inside the doorway, his broad shoulders blocking Rob’s line of sight. Although they both knew they had a duty to assist in an incident at sea, Sean took a step back, as if he was now intent only on getting off this boat, the fastest way he could find.

“Sean?” Some raw instinct warned Rob to keep his voice down. “Sean, what’s the matter? I don’t see the fire.” Sean stepped back, almost colliding with him, and as Rob caught him by the arms he felt the sudden tension in the larger, stronger frame.

Like a cat on hot bricks, Sean moved aside a little, allowing Rob to glimpse into the compartment, and a pulse began to hammer in Rob’s temple.

“Is that what I think it is?” He swallowed on a throat grown suddenly hoarse. “Oh, Christ.”

On the long, low table between the stuffed leather furniture were a large number of plastic packets, each filled with white powder, and tightly taped. Beside them was a laptop displaying complex columns of figures. On the settee beside the table lay a wooden crate, painted some indeterminate shade of khaki. The top was off, and Rob glimpsed the gunmetal shapes within. Other weapons were stacked around it. He saw the unmistakable forms of M-16s, a Fabrique National assault rifle, and something that might have been an AK-47. Russian hardware.

“What the hell have we blundered into?” Sean whispered.

For a moment they stood rooted to the spot, feeling the roll and yaw of the deck, nostrils filled with the toxic stench of burning plastic, and then Rob’s fingers closed like talons on Sean’s arm.

“We better get the hell out, while we’ve got the chance,” he said soundlessly. “They may be on fire, but they can work this out by themselves.”

He turned, keeping a grip on Sean’s sleeve to physically drag him along, but in the corner of his eye he caught a twitch of movement in the compartment behind them, and his chest squeezed.

The man was in his late fifties or early sixties, with heavy jowls, a gleaming bald head, and eyes nested in deep creases. His skin was the color of walnut. He was not tall, but thickset, dressed in white slacks and a pale blue shirt stretched tight over his large belly. And protruding from his paw-like right hand, Rob saw the forbidding, black steel snout of a pistol.

Dry mouthed, he tightened his grip on the extinguisher and cleared his throat. “We, uh, we called on the radio, you weren’t answering. We saw a small explosion — you were on fire. We came to help you.”

The pistol did not waver by an inch. Beside Rob, Sean was like a statue. The man before them was as immobile as a block of granite, but he raised a bull-like voice. “Lew! Lew, get in here!”

Rob’s palms were sweating on the extinguisher. He tore his eyes off the muzzle of the gun and glanced at Sean’s profile. Sean licked his lips, a tiny nervous expression which only Rob would notice.

“We only came to see if you needed help,” he said reasonably. The Californian accent that had always fascinated and charmed Rob thickened under stress. “It’s none of our business what you do on your boat.” He took a half step back, toward the exit. “We’ll just get our of your way, so you can go on doing it.”

The gun rose a hand’s span and Sean froze again. The older man pursed his lips critically. “There’s times,” he said in harsh, clipped Sydney strine, “when being a good Samaritan can get you into a deep pile of shit, boy. Lew! I said get yourself in here!”

“Hold your horses, Meredith.” The voice was deep, with English vowels, smooth as damp velvet against the Australian and American.

Its owner stepped into the room, and Rob was not surprised by what he saw. The man was in his mid-thirties, tall and sparely built, dressed with European flair, as if he had just stepped out of the grandstand at the track in Monaco. He was too blond for the color to be natural — his brows were shades darker, and arched in surprise as he saw his unexpect-

ed, unwelcome guests. His expression swiftly composed itself, and he touched a discreet intercom on the door by the wall.

“Parker, we have a pair of intruders. See to them.”

“See to —?” Sean echoed. He took a rasping breath. “For the love of God, man, we only came aboard because we saw an explosion. We were trying to help!”

“Very kind of you.” The peroxide blond head tilted toward Meredith. “How much have they seen?”

“They were in there.” Meredith indicated the second compartment with a tiny gesture of the gun. “I reckon they saw the lot.”

“We didn’t see anything,” Rob began quickly. “In fact, I don’t even know what you’re talking about. If we’re trespassing, we’re sorry. Why don’t you just toss us off the boat, and we’ll vanish?”

The Englishman smiled, an infuriatingly seductive expression. “You think I’m a complete fool?”

Sean straightened his shoulders. “I don’t think you’re any kind of a fool, Mr. Lewis, but —”

His use of the name wiped the smile of the Lewis’s face. “You know me? Damn it, you know my name?”

In answer, Sean pointed at the silver trophy in the glass case in the corner of the room. “Your name is on it. Geoffrey Lewis. The Admirals Cup, 1986. I can read.”

Lewis relaxed a little. “You’re very observant. Which only cautions me not to underestimate you. Ah, Parker. Find somewhere to put these two would-be angels of mercy while we decide what’s to be done about them. Make sure they’re somewhere where they can’t cause trouble ... and take the extinguisher. They make quite a handy weapon.”

As he spoke, a tall, burly man in blue jeans and a scarlet tee shirt stepped up behind him. Over the tee shirt was the leather harness of a shoulder holster, but the weapon was already in his hand. An automatic leveled on Rob and Sean, and Rob groaned silently as he set the extinguisher down on the nearest chair.

It was odd, how shock took a few moments to fully impact. His legs did not begin to tremble until he and Sean were being moved deeper into the *Minuette*, but by the time he found himself in the tiny, fire-blackened, reeking and still toxic galley, he was sure he could hear the rhythmic knocking of his knees. Parker was a stone-faced character, all jaw and muscles. He offered no single word as he shoved Sean into the galley after Rob, and slammed the door on them.

It was dim, but there was enough light to see how the fire had stripped the paint off every surface. The source seemed to be the stove in

the corner, and a blackened propane tank told the whole story. The air was noxious, the deck was heaving, and in moments Rob felt queasy. He and Sean stood in a lake of greasy fire retardant, in the middle of the cramped space.

“Well,” Sean said quietly as he pulled both hands across his sweat-damp face, “this is another fine mess I have gotten us into.”

With apologies the sample of this title ends here.
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