

PARADISE COVE by Davin Goodwin

EXCERPT

Finished with my morning swim, having pushed myself hard the last quarter mile, I sat on the end of the pier with my legs dangling over the edge. No clouds in the typical Caribbean-blue Bonaire sky and a faint hint of salt floated in the air. The wind shoved waves, larger than normal, against the shore.

An iguana lay a few feet away, basking in the sun, overweight from gorging itself on the remnants of the near-by garbage can. It sat motionless, one eye tilted in my direction, the other skewed over the edge of the pier at the water. It was a resident of the area and joined me regularly on the pier after my swims.

I had taken to calling it Charlie.

As I towel-dried my arms and hair, I noticed two teenaged boys using a stick to poke at an object near the water's edge, a stone's throw south of the pier. The object had washed ashore and was covered with random strands of dark seaweed.

I watched the boys take a few steps forward, jab the stick at the object, then retreat, as if expecting something to happen. Nothing did, so they repeated the process several times with the same result.

Some younger children ventured forth, staying well behind the brave teenagers. Wide-eyed, high-pitched streams of Papiamentu—the native language of Bonaire—filled the air as they half-talked, half-screamed. They gawked at the object, then raced back up the beach to their mothers, sitting on beach blankets.

One mother stood, nodding her head, and, appeasing the child, walked toward the water. She stopped a few feet shy of the shore. Her eyes widened and she shuffled backward to the other women, grabbed her cell phone, and, with a shaky hand, put it to her ear. She pointed at the object and spoke, her Papiamentu not as high-pitched as the child's, but every bit as excited. Unfortunately, I didn't understand a word they said, my Papiamentu being only slightly better than my Klingon.

The base of my neck tingled.

I no longer carried a badge, but nearly three decades as a law enforcement officer, specifically with the Violent Crimes Division of the Rockford, Illinois, police department, had trained my curiosity to remain on high alert. Of the hundreds of traits, quirks, and ticks conditioned into my

psyche during those years, the sense of inquisitiveness, along with a constant need to know and understand, were the most deeply engrained.

I shook my head, stood, and walked down the pier to the beach. This was something I probably needed to see.

My sudden movement startled Charlie and he darted to the other side of the pier, both eyes now pointed in my direction. I gave him a shallow wave. "Sorry, Charlie."

The water surface on the west side—or leeward side—of the island remained consistently flat, almost glasslike, aided by a solid wind from the east. The wind also swept most of the seaweed, litter, and other debris out to sea. Few items floated ashore on the leeward coast of Bonaire.

Except during wind reversals. Over the last few days, the easterly wind had changed direction and blew in from the west, bringing with it all kinds of surface floaties.

I plodded through the sand, closing the distance to the water's edge. Most likely, an unfortunate tuna or tarpon had met its demise. But based on the actions and behaviors of the children, and the concern of the mother, I quickly changed my mind. A fish washing ashore was too common an occurrence and wouldn't generate the reactions I'd just witnessed.

Then I remembered the epidemic affecting the green moray eels. For some reason, a strange parasite was attacking the green morays, causing the deaths of many. The occurrence was so rare that a group of marine biologists had recently arrived on the island, and with the help of local researchers, were studying the phenomenon. The situation was declared serious, possibly affecting the entire green moray population of the local reefs. When a dead eel washed ashore, the researchers wanted to be informed so they could harvest the carcass for study.

The teenagers moved back a few steps as I worked past them and stood over the object. It wasn't a tarpon or tuna. Or a diseased moray eel. I turned back toward the beach and scanned the area, noticing the increased crowd size. I admit, the word crowd is relative on a small island like Bonaire, but, even so, a small horde of lookie-loos had gathered. Some vied for a better view, meandering closer to the water's edge.

But not too close.

I sighed and shook my head. Few things draw a crowd to the beach faster than a human body part washing ashore.