

ISLANDS

by Sara Stamey

Excerpt – CHAPTER FIVE

Headed for Coral Bay on my motorbike, I buzzed across a rocky plateau chopped off in bare cliffs overlooking the sea. The road meandered past dusty clusters of wood and tin shacks, chickens pecking dry earth around rusted auto carcasses. Black men lounged by storefronts with garish signs, drinking beer and casting sullen stares after me. Women walked the narrow edge of the road carrying bundles of laundry on their heads and trailing flocks of graceful big-eyed children.

I rounded a steep, tight curve. Sharp sunlight flashed in the handlebar mirror. A rusted truck hurtled down the grade behind me.

My grip jumped. I edged to the left side of the road. The bike skidded in loose gravel, my gut clenching as the dented pickup skimmed close. A blast of horn and blur of dark faces jeering.

The second time it was a dilapidated, multicolored four-door crammed with dreadlocked young men roaring up behind me on the twisting road, swerving to crowd me nearly off the pavement. I scrambled in a hot clutch of adrenaline to keep the Honda on the road. Through the open windows of the car, pulsing reggae – something about an angry mob – and what sounded like “Muddah scunt” yelled at me.

My arms were still shaking with tension when I turned off at the underwater park, jouncing over the rutted road to a dirt lot. I found a slot in the shade between a battered Volkswagen van and a shiny convertible. Yanking off the helmet, I raked damp hair back and dragged in a lungful of hot, dusty air.

I was a field anthropologist, exploring a foreign culture. It was normal to encounter resistance or hostility.

Gusting breeze swirled a dust-devil over my feet. Beyond a fringe of palm trees and a curve of white beach dotted by towels and sunbathers, a lovely stretch of turquoise water beckoned. Filing away the questions and shadows under *To Be Pursued*, I made a beeline for the sea's cool promise. For the rest of the morning, Dr. Susan Dunne was going to be a tourist in paradise.

I stood at the edge of the sea, squinting against sun dazzles, waves rolling in to fret at the blazing white sand. I was rooted there. Sucked back into my nightmare and waiting for the shadow man to stride out of the waves and drag me into the depths –

A piercing shriek. A pigtailed little native girl ran past, laughing and chasing a multicolored beachball.

I shook my head, slapped on some sunscreen, pulled fins and mask from my carryall. I'd taken the Scuba course after receiving John's letter and the photo of the underwater petroglyph rock.

If only I'd taken him up on his invitations to visit the islands for some diving. Hadn't kept putting it off. Maybe everything would have changed, that would have been the key random event that forked into a whole different set of possibilities. Maybe he wouldn't have died. I should have kept watching out for him. Should have stayed "tuned in."

The same endless loop of guilt and anguish. Wading into the water, I bent to splash my face. Sunlight caught the silver curves of my dolphin pendant. It had been John's, one of the few possessions Dad had collected on his solitary trip to the island to bring his son's ashes home. He hadn't tried to reach me on the Canadian dig. At the time I'd been angry, but now I realized it had been a solo rite.

Water drops jeweled the little charm. I wished I could believe in even the possibility of the dream John had once confided. He'd figured being reborn as a dolphin would be the closest he could come to a heaven.

I dunked quickly into the water, letting it wash over me. Standing, I braced myself against the tug of the waves, adjusted the snorkel, and propped the mask up on my forehead while I struggled with the fins, balancing storklike on one leg.

“You forgot to spit in it.”

One fin on and one off, I spun around and lost my balance, sprawling into the surf. I emerged sputtering, lunging to grab an escaping fin.

The man watching me was tall and muscular, with a close-cropped coppery beard and a broad grin. “I see you found your luggage.”

It was a small island. I found myself regarding the same set of bronzed legs I’d reluctantly admired at the airport. A brief swimsuit did nothing to conceal a narrow-hipped, broad-shouldered physique that would have had Shelli Carver salivating. I grasped my dislodged mask and irritably slicked my hair back.

“I can’t imagine you don’t have something better to do.” I turned my back on him and stuck the mask firmly on my face, grasping the fin.

“You won’t see a thing if you don’t spit in your mask first.”

I pulled it off. He was sitting on the edge of the sand now, sifting a handful through his fingers. A smile tugged at his lips.

“Look, I’m a certified diver and I think I can handle snorkeling.” I deposited a glob of saliva in the mask, rubbing it around and rinsing to keep the glass from fogging. His gaze still prickled my back as I finally got the fins on my feet.

“Have fun, then. I don’t have to tell you about the urchins and fire coral.”

I straightened and met his eyes. They were clear blue and direct, lively with suppressed laughter. I found myself breaking into a grin.

He rolled to his feet with a quick, athletic movement and walked into the water, hand out. “Truce? Name’s Vic.”

I returned his clasp. “Susan.” I looked down at the mask, admitting, “Despite my shiny new certification card, I did forget to spit in it.”

The sun sparked copper glints over his tawny head as he laughed. He pointed down the beach, past some teenagers lounging on a blanket, boom-box sputtering reggae. “See that lonely pile of Scuba gear?”

I followed his finger and nodded.

“Funny thing about tourists who sign up for a morning intro dive. They go out for drinks the night before, start in on the shark stories...”

“And the hangover makes a dandy excuse come morning?”

“You got it, no-shows. I’m not a regular instructor, just helping out a buddy who works at Tropic Adventures, so it’s been a while since I took a dive for fun.”

He gave me a quizzical look. “What do you say?”

I hesitated, then lifted my palms. “What’s paradise for?”

His teeth gleamed against the beard. “Come help me set up.”

He led the way up the beach. A long, ragged scar ran down the left side of his back and around to his belly, standing out pale and angry against the smoothly muscled tan. Turning beside the tanks and buoyancy-control vests, he gave me a head-to-toe appraisal as I caught up. I was starting to regret my impulse.

“Hmm. Tall, but slim. Good to see a person keeping fit. A runner? I’d say a high muscle ratio, not much of a floater. About four pounds?”

“What?”

He held up a webbed belt. “How much weight do you need?”

“Oh.” I cleared my throat. “I’ve only been diving in Puget Sound. Full wetsuit, hood, and gloves. Took fifteen pounds to sink.”

“Puget Sound!” He shivered. “Tried it myself, once was enough. You’re in for a treat.” He gestured at the turquoise bay shimmering with light. “I’ll throw the extra gear in the Jeep.” He bent to hoist a tank onto his shoulder, grasping another by its valve.

I picked up extra weightbelts and followed him up the beach, lead clanking. He deposited the tanks with practiced ease. I leaned past him to drop the belts.

He was giving me another appraisal. “That swimsuit doesn’t cover much.”

I looked down at all the pale skin revealed by my one-piece. “I don’t believe it’s meant to.”

“You can get sunburned even underwater.” He handed me a rumpled T-shirt.

“Oh. Thanks.” I pulled on the shirt, trying to read upside-down some faded printing that ended with “No Problem.”

He was zipping up a short-sleeved wetsuit top. “Wish I had a shorty to fit you. You might think about picking one up if you’re planning on diving a lot. How long are you here for?” The question was casual, but his gaze stayed on mine.

His eyes were an unusually vivid blue, striking against the deep tan. I yanked my gaze away. If there was such a thing as “animal magnetism,” this beach-hunk had it in spades, and he had to know it. But it wasn’t just the sexy packaging, it was more the kind of energy he radiated. A zest for life. Like John.

I moved hastily toward the shore.

He followed. “Not just on vacation?”

“I’m here on a research grant.”

“Figured you weren’t a tourist. After a while you get so you can place them too easy.” He opened valves, checking air pressure. “Ever used this kind of buoyancy vest? Here’s the automatic inflator. You can always go manual if you want, here’s the dump valve.” He helped me on with vest and tank.

“Here’s your pressure and depth gauges. We’ll head back at a thousand pounds, come out at four hundred to be safe. You’ve done all the drills, mask clearing, buddy breathing? Any trouble with your ears?”

“Send me in, coach.”

“Indulge me. You know the ‘don’t touch’ sign? I’ll show you some fire coral if you’ve only seen pictures. No fun getting a hit.” He handed me fins and mask and marched me into the water.

“Aren’t you going to warn me about air embolisms, the bends, nitrogen narcosis, and Great White attacks?”

“They’ve only eaten two or three people this week.”

He sank below the surface. I followed.

The earthbound world and its shadows fell away into stillness. I was floating, drifting down into the sea's embrace, kicking effortlessly above a smooth slope of sand and shifting pattern of lights from above – flying, more than swimming, through crystal clarity. The water somehow amplified details of fish and coral, outlining shapes with a knife edge, infusing colors with their own lights. A cloud of silvery fish drifted past and broke into glittering sparks around me.

The slope plunged deeper, sea taking on a bluer tinge. I rolled over face-up and watched etched-glass air bubbles rise to the surface, dropped back farther to revel in the freedom from gravity. Arching into an open somersault, the tank only a weightless bulk, I drifted down in a slow free-fall past darting schools of fish in colors I'd seen only inside aquariums.

Vic was waiting below, beside a wrinkled brain coral. He gestured, and I followed him deeper over a drop-off. I caught a quick, echoing breath.

It was a lost alien city. A mad architect run amuck with coral. The reef had proliferated into fantastic shapes – tall arches, convoluted ribbons and passageways, pagoda-like spires plumed with delicate fringed plants in muted colors – submerged in flickering bands of surreal light. From out of its watery maze, a huge black manta ray suddenly lifted, flying on rippling batlike wings. The devilfish. It soared overhead, shadow touching my face, circling and gliding deeper, disappearing with a last beckoning dip.

I hovered, staring after it, caught in a disturbing, impossible sense of *deja vu*. Seen before, but not by me. John? A dark foreboding stirred inside me.

A high-pitched sound below caught my attention. Vic guided me on, through a dappled lacework tunnel of coral, lancing lights strobing the dimness inside. Orange blossoms of a feathery creature sucked into its tube on the rock, vanishing like a mirage as I approached. We emerged into a shimmering silver cloud of fingerlings. Vic, peering under a branching coral, waved me over. He pointed at a dark crevice underneath it. I squinted into it.

A mass of slippery-looking pinkish flesh, and an eye staring out at me. The shapeless blob writhed and rolled closer. A tentacle shot out at my face.

I scrambled backwards in a gush of air.

Vic's laughter bubbled. The tentacle had unrolled to reveal the row of suction cups on an octopus arm. With an oddly human gesture, it deposited a beautiful pink, spiral shell. It rolled up again, retreating into its hole.

Vic put the shell in my hand, closing my fingers around it, his hand warm in the cool sea. He gestured, indicating my vest pocket. I peeled open the velcro and sealed the shell inside.

He checked our gauges and shot off along the reef. I kicked hard, but fell behind as a school of large, yellow-tailed fish scattered behind his fins. I turned to watch the fish shoot by, the mask and awkward tank limiting my range to a blinkered forward view. I kicked faster to catch up. I was panting, sucking at the hissing regulator, the water resisting me now. Glancing down to the fanlike growths and fronds of seaweed streaming sideways, I realized I was fighting a current. I looked up. My guide's fins had disappeared. A dark flicker, more felt than seen, moved in beside me. I angled to the side to see.

Six feet of lean, steel-gray, hook-jawed fish had materialized beside me in a glitter of sharp teeth.

I sucked in a shocked breath, coughing on seawater.

The big barracuda fixed me with a glassy stare. I edged around to face it. It disappeared in a flash. I turned back into the current and it was there, hovering inches from my face.

I gasped. The regulator mouthpiece popped out.

Coughing, choking, I flailed for the air line. Finally grabbed the mouthpiece and purged it of water. Took a deep, shaky breath, kicking in a nervous circle. The barracuda was gone. But the current had carried me backwards. I kicked forward again. Couldn't find Vic. I was breathing hard, straining. Checking the gauge, I realized my aimless thrashing was using up the air. I'd lost my bearings, wasn't sure which way to head back. The water was darker out here, murky, oppressive.

I looked down. I'd drifted out over the drop-off, looking down into bottomless deep blue rippling with the shadows of black devilfish wings. I was

hovering over the abyss, staring into all that dark emptiness, trying to slam doors against my nightmares.

Something touched my leg.

I kicked convulsively. Fingers slid down my calf, tightened around my ankle.

^*night sea, a light beam shivers over the creatures carved in stone, stirring into life. Hissing breaths, a spill of bubbles, and the icy hands of the shadow man drag John drag me into the drowning depths*^

Flailing against their grip, pulse pounding in my ears, I wrenched free. Rammed into a coral outcrop, salt burning scraped skin. Groping through entangling green fronds, I thrashed around to ward off another attack.

It was only Vic hovering there, eyes closed as he replaced and cleared seawater from the mask I'd kicked off his face.

I shook my head, mimed a mortified apology. He dismissed it with a gesture. Checking my gauge, I saw I'd used up most of my air in my stupid panic. I held up five fingers and Vic nodded, pointing down-current.

We headed in, the current's flow gliding us smoothly over the reef's rise. I hung back over the last sandy slope, unwilling to emerge. Now that the surface was close, I was reluctant to relinquish weightlessness, the clean sea hush, the shallows luminous with wavering sun. I sighed and broke through into the world.

Muffled reggae and hot flower scents enveloped me as I stood waist deep, squinting in the shock of blazing light. I pushed up the mask and filled my lungs. "That was...." Words wouldn't do. "And the shell!" I pulled the pink spiral from my vest pocket.

His white grin flashed. "He's smart, the way he'll bribe you to leave him alone." He splashed water over his face, slicking his hair back.

"You can't mean that octopus really intended to give me the shell? They can't be that intelligent."

“Sure. Aren’t you a marine biologist?”

“Me? What makes you say that?”

He laughed. “I wondered, you looked so surprised at everything. When you said you were doing research, I figured you were another biologist, studying the reef. Here, I’ll hold that.” He took my mask, steadying me as I removed my fins.

“Thanks. The dive was fantastic.” I gnawed my lip. “Sorry I kicked you.”

“Was it that barracuda? They’re just curious more than anything. I was behind you, trying to get your attention, didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No, no.” I waved a hand in embarrassment, annoyed at myself for losing it out there. “My imagination ran away with me.”

He gave me a quick look, then shrugged comically. “I had to stop you before you headed out to sea to join the humpback whale migration.”

Back at the Jeep, I leaned against the fender while Vic broke down the equipment. He nodded at a cooler. “Help yourself.”

I picked mango-papaya juice and perched on the open tailgate. The dive, the weightless immersion in that dazzling sea, had left me lightheaded and euphoric. Stripping off the T-shirt, I leaned on my elbows and closed my eyes to the sun. Palm fronds rustled, a soft breeze playing over my skin. “Mmm.”

“Welcome to paradise.” He sat beside me.

I turned my head, saw his cocked eyebrow, and smiled. We touched juice cans and finished our drinks in comfortable silence, as if we’d done all this before. Everything oddly familiar and strange at the same time, echoes of the Alice-in-Wonderland vertigo. But pleasantly so, like the mesmerizing splash and shush of the waves.

I glanced at the man beside me, lost in his own private contemplation of the cove. His meditative quiet convinced me the handsome face and breezy manner only rode the surface over more intriguing depths.

He swung around to face me and I found myself looking straight into his disconcerting eyes. He contemplated me with the same tranquil look he’d fixed on the distant sea, like a big cat taking in his surroundings. With an unsettling

twinge of recognition, I recalled our family's ginger tom, crouched in such ease at the edge of the lawn, muscle rippling under sleek fur -- wearing the same calm cat smile. Poised to either flop and stretch luxuriantly in the sun, or launch himself explosively after a deer-mouse.

Vic asked, "If you're not a marine biologist, what brings you down here?"

I cleared my throat, sitting up. "Archeology."

His open gaze slammed shut. He looked away, asked brusquely, "Shipwrecks?"

I blinked. "No, petroglyphs." He didn't comment, so I explained, "I'm hoping they'll provide evidence of pre-Columbian contact from Africa."

He turned his newly-guarded gaze on me. "It won't make you popular. Natives are touchy with outsiders. And anthropologists aren't exactly lining up to cheer people like Fells and Vergara."

"You know their theories?"

A mirthless smile at my surprise. "My specialty was the Conquest era, Central America. Can't say I know much about petroglyphs." He shrugged. "You'll be beating your head against a wall with that pre-Columbian contact angle. What's the point?"

"The point?" I stared at him. "The point is, we deserve the truth. After five hundred years of the bullshit Spanish Conquest version of history --"

"Give the native view a chance? Good luck."

I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic, or merely dubious. Maybe I was still reacting to Caviness's condescension. I said lightly, "I'll need some luck."

He only frowned down at his juice can.

I cleared my throat. "You mentioned Puget Sound. Were you working there?"

Another uncomfortable pause before he answered. "Just visiting a friend. He was trying to talk me into moving there when I got out...."

"Got out?"

"Out of the Army," he said shortly. "Drafted, Vietnam, same old story. At least the GI Bill paid for my degree." He shrugged again, stiffly.

I found myself glancing at the ugly scar. "It's quite a coincidence!" My voice ridiculously perky. "Running into another archeologist at the beach."

"*Ex*-archeologist." He was scowling at the sea. "If you stay here long enough, you'll stop calling things coincidence. Time and chance don't work the same here. The island has its own rules, you give in to them or you go away."

Taken aback, I blurted, "I don't believe in giving in."

"Congratulations." Echo of Laura in her speeding car. "I didn't think there was anyone left to fight for the noble lost cause." The sarcastic edge was clear this time.

"Look, I'm no more tied to lost causes than winning ones. I'm just trying to see from as many perspectives as possible. If I can reach a conclusion, fine. You've been trained as an archeologist, you know there's a lot to be said for the scientific, impartial approach."

"Impartial." He snorted. "You don't know how this place works. You think everything's all clear, but you can't know anything until you dive in and *feel* what it's about. Then it's too late for the scientific method."

I blinked again, straightened my shoulders, and stood. "Time for me to go. Thanks for the dive." I started off.

"No, wait! Christ, I've been on this goddamn rock too long." He jumped up, grasping my wrist.

I spun around, staring at his big hand enclosing my wrist. Heat flushed my face, his pulse drumming through me. I broke free.

He held up his hands. "Sorry. It's the island. Too many shortcuts? Throws you off, right?" Face intent.

"Like that line you tried at the airport?"

"Line?" He frowned. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "That was no line, I swear I've seen you before." He spread his hands, breezy-easy once more. "I promise, before I shove a beer at the next beautiful woman I barge into, I'll introduce myself like a good boy. Truce?"

I was still rattled. Under this tropic sun, I couldn't think straight. "All right."

"I always shake on important deals."

I hesitated, then gave him my hand. He clasped it with a firm pressure, gaze holding mine, holding frank promises.

I retrieved my hand, cleared my throat, checked my watch. "It's almost noon. I should get going."

He tossed his juice can into a box in the Jeep bed. "Guess I better hustle this gear to the shop." He pulled on a pair of shorts and a shirt. "Come on, I'll take you to lunch. You have to try the local conch chowder."

"No, thanks. My friend will be looking for me."

"So there *was* a friend. Will he keep you from having dinner with me?"

"Of course not."

"Good. When?"

"I haven't said yes."

"Okay. I'm trying to mend my wicked ways. I'd just like to get to know you, Susan." He grinned. "Right, you've heard *that* one a million times. Here's my card." He fished in a pocket of the shorts. "Give me a call. Please."

I took the card without reading it. "I'd like to pay for the dive."

"No way. Sure you don't need a ride, then?" He climbed into the Jeep and started up the motor. He leaned over the sidebar. "Thanks for coming along. Showing you the reef was good for me, made me see it new again. See you soon, I hope." He put it into gear and turned around.

I glanced at the business card in my hand. My face froze around the smile, gaze snapping upward.

He waved as he rumbled off down the dusty road. "Take care, Susan!"

Now that I knew who he was, I'd take that advice to heart.