

DEEPER

JAMES A. MOORE



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[SEVENTEEN](#)

[EIGHTEEN](#)

[NINETEEN](#)

[TWENTY](#)

[TWENTY-ONE](#)

[TWENTY-TWO](#)

[TWENTY-THREE](#)

“JAMES A. MOORE IS SOMEONE TO WATCH.”

—Bentley Little

“A GRAND STORYTELLER WHO CAN HOLD HIS OWN WITH THE MASTERS.”

—Midwest Book Review

**“THE ONLY HORROR AUTHOR OUT THERE WHO’S ALREADY WRITING AT THE
LEVEL OF THE MODERN GREATS.”**

—Garrett Peck

**Praise for
DEEPER**

“A FAST READ THAT WILL KEEP YOU GOING UNTIL YOU FINISH IT.. Some folks are comparing Moore to King and Koontz, but to me he is an American original.”—*Baryon*

“INSTANTLY AND TOTALLY CAPTIVATING . . . a book that a reader is not going to want to put down until it’s finished. While . . . there’s plenty of action, excitement and terror, Moore does more. [He] creates very real, three-dimensional characters . . . [and] some of the most compelling and frightening monsters and supernatural creatures it has been my pleasure to encounter in recent years. *Deeper* is simply a blast to read. You will kick yourselves if you pass this one by.”—FearZone.com

“JAMES A. MOORE HAS GIVEN US A COMBINATION OF CTHULHU MYTHOS AND GHOST STORY IN *DEEPER* . . . a captivating story with an excellent blend of mystery and adventure that will keep even jaded readers entertained . . . a great read.”—*Monster Librarian*

“MOORE’S TRIBUTE TO ONE OF HORROR’S MASTERS, H. P. LOVECRAFT. At the risk of offending HPL purists, Moore is the superior stylist. One of Moore’s hallmarks is the depth of character given to the players in his tales, and *Deeper* is no exception . . . nearly perfect novel in the horror, one that can stand proudly alongside its inspiration.” —*Horror World Book Reviews*

**Praise for
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“FAST-MOVING with a good mix of sex, gore and laughs . . . Moore knows how to keep the pages turning and the blood running. Sad, introspective vampires in powdered wigs need not apply.” —*Pa*

“*BLOOD RED* DOES WHAT ALL THE BEST VAMPIRE NOVELS DO; it... digs for blood beneath the skin.”

—*The Agony Column*

“OFFERS PLENTY OF . . . HORROR CHILLS leavened with flashes of humor.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“THE COMPARISONS TO VINTAGE STEPHEN KING ARE JUSTIFIED. Brutal and scary, *Blood Red* has restored my faith, not only in the vampire subgenre, but in horror as a whole.”—Keala Patrick Burke

“THERE IS SO MUCH TO ENJOY ABOUT *BLOOD RED*. Moore is powerfully descriptive.” —*Baryon*

“MOORE HAS WOVEN TOGETHER THE BEST THREADS OF VAMPIRE LORE with lust, power, and brutality . . . Grab this treat, turn off the phone and enjoy a refreshingly inventive take on the vampire tale.”

—*Monsters and Critics*

Praise for
SERENITY FALLS
and the Serenity Falls trilogy:
WRIT IN BLOOD, THE PACK,
and DARK CARNIVAL

“QUITE POSSIBLY THE BEST HORROR NOVEL SINCE *SALEM’S LOT*. [It] will grab you and horrify you while maintaining a death grip on your interest throughout. This is the ultimate page-turner . . . Fully fleshed, well-developed characters. Immerse them in a great plot and superb action where the menace and mystery increase with each paragraph and you have a truly important novel. James A. Moore’s *Serenity Falls* shows some of the strength of a young Stephen King, some of the flavor of the current Bentley Little and a dash of the wit and perverseness of Dean Koontz. In the end, *Serenity Falls* is a major accomplishment in the horror field. Read it and you will echo my praise.” —*Baryon*

“INTENSIFYING TERROR.”—*The Best Reviews*

“A TREMENDOUS HORROR STORY WORTHY OF THE MASTERS. James A. Moore is perhaps the most talented writer of this genre to date.” —*Midwest Book Review*

“A SPRAWLING EPIC...Moore creates and develops a whole population’s worth of memorable characters ... This is easily the best horror novel to appear this year. It’s more ambitious than the last three novels you’ve read put together. If there’s any justice in the world, James A. Moore will be the genre’s next superstar. He’s the only horror author out there who’s already writing at the level of the modern greats. The name James A. Moore will soon be spoken in the same reverent tones we now speak of King, Straub and Koontz. Count on it.”—Garrett Peck

“YOU’RE GOING TO GET YOUR MONEY’S WORTH WITH THIS ONE, in terms of both quality and quantity. You’ll become immersed very quickly, and once caught up in the story, you’ll find it difficult to put the book away until you’ve finished it.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“BRINGS TO MIND EARLY STEPHEN KING—think of it as *Dawson’s Creek* as written by King. *Serenity Falls*, James A. Moore has written a novel where all hell breaks loose—literally. His descriptions of small town quirks and foibles hit the mark on all cylinders . . . a great horror novel.”

—James Argendeli, CNN Headline News

Titles by James A. Moore

DEEPER
BLOOD RED

Serenity Falls Trilogy

WRIT IN BLOOD
THE PACK
DARK CARNIVAL

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BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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A Berkley Book / published by arrangement with the author

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For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

eISBN : 978-1-101-13304-0

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375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

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This one is for Lee Thomas, Chris and Connie Golden, my sister Ro, for remembering my love certain old films and, of course, my wife, Bonnie Moore.

A heartfelt and profound thank-you to Mike McCarty, an excellent writer and special effects artist with KNB Special Effects, for all of his technical assistance on *Deeper*. Several scenes in the novel required information on diving and I have never done any diving deeper than the local swimming hole. Believe me, the book wouldn't have worked without his help!

A huge thanks to Alan M. Clark. Alan, you're the best!

Special thanks also go out to Brian Keene, Jeff Strand, Kelli Dunlap and Tom Piccirilli for their insight. Thanks, guys!

Thanks to Don Koish, not only for deciding to publish *Deeper*, but for his insightful input and the numerous discussions we've had about all things in the genre and life in general. You're one of the best, my friend. Thanks also to Kelly Perry, who manages to keep me on track with my storytelling, and to Leigh Haig, who was forced to endure countless rereads in an effort to find every flaw in the manuscript!

ONE

My grandfather used to tell me that the oceans knew all the secrets the world had to offer. He said the biggest problem was that no one ever seemed to know how to listen for those secrets.

That stuck with me over the years. I've never been a man of science. I've never had the patience to go through all of the studies and tests that are required to be a proper man of science, but I have always paid attention to what the oceanographers and weather people had to say about the world that lurks below the water's surface.

It's a damned big world under there, and even with everything we've learned about the seas, there are a million more mysteries to be solved. For me the notion of actually solving them is laughable. I just like to contemplate them from time to time when I've had a few too many drinks and I'm looking out over the harbor.

My name is Joseph Alexander Bierden. Most people just call me Joe. I've lived in the same place for most of my life and I haven't been in much of a hurry to get anywhere else. I like the sea and I like the town of Bowden's Point. It's no Black Stone Bay, but it'll do in a pinch.

Anyone who's ever been to a seaside town knows the drill. There are people who live there year-round and there are people who come to visit. I'm one of the year-round residents. I make most of my money during the summer months, when there are plenty of people who need to hire a boat, mostly for fishing and sometimes just to have a party where the neighbors aren't going to complain about the noise. I have three boats all told. One old wreck called the *Marianne Winston*—after an old girlfriend who dumped me not long after I bought it—is used by me when I feel like actually going out for a little crabbing. I have a twenty-foot galleon, called *Lisa's Hope*, I use for smaller parties and I have a sixty-foot yacht, *Isabella's Dream*, for the parties that feel like spending a small fortune and don't mind the hefty security deposits. There have even been a few weddings performed on the *Isabella*, and a few honeymoons as well.

It's a living and the only one I really want to have. My job—I can't really call it a career, because I just don't take it seriously enough—provides me with a roof over my head, a good deal of free time to spend with my wife and kids, and allows me to work around my first love whenever I feel the need.

My first love has always been the ocean. Isabella knew that when I proposed to her, and still she accepted. I guess that's the reason I've always been faithful to her, despite the numerous temptations. Don't get me wrong. I don't think I'm anything special, but you mix the summer weather, enough alcohol, and a party on a yacht together and I've had a ridiculous number of offers.

It isn't all peaches and cream as the old saying goes. There are a lot of things that have to be taken care of during any year to ensure a comfortable living, and there have been a few times where I wasn't very proud of myself for some of the work I did. Back when I was just starting out, I did some rather shady work bringing in bundles of drugs that I picked up offshore. If my reputation in town hadn't been as solid as it was, I might well have been caught, too. I didn't do it too often and I only ever took on the extra work when I needed the money to pay the bills and make a decent living. I stopped dealing with any part of the drug trade around the same time one of the other captains I knew would

up with a few bullet holes through his body and his head missing. It wasn't easy to get out of the business, but I managed, and the man I was picking up for was a good sport about it. If he hadn't been, I wouldn't be writing this down now.

So, yes, a few things I'm ashamed of, a few marks on my list of the seven deadly sins, but nothing extreme. Funny how that works. We can almost always justify our actions if we take the time to explain them to ourselves.

I'll let you in on a secret, though. Sometimes we don't know that what we're doing is wrong until it's too late. Sometimes the most innocent things, the safest things, can turn like a snake and bite you on the ankle, and when that happens, there's only one choice left.

You've got to try to fix what you did wrong and pray to whatever gods you might believe in that you aren't too late.

I should have known things would go wrong on that little venture. My guts were telling me that taking the job was a bad idea, but I brushed it off because the money was nice and because Bel wanted a vacation that was worth noticing.

All you can do in life is make sure you do things for all the right reasons. There's nothing else in the long run, except to hope the things you do don't come back to kick you in the jaw.

It started at the end of the busy season. I was just about ready to pull out my little crabbing boat and go lay some traps and call it done. The tourists were mostly gone and the air was starting to get its early morning winter chill. The girls wandering around in bikinis had graduated up to wearing jeans again—always a depressing thing for an old leech like me: married but not blind, you know. And God help me, there were already signs popping up for the end of summer sales and the new fall fashions in the windows of half the stores in town.

I wasn't really trolling for new business. It hadn't been the best summer ever, but it was far from the worst, and I had earned enough to keep the bills paid. Charlie Moncrief, my trusty right-hand man, was double-checking all of the nets and cables and I was polishing the brass railing on the *Isabella's Dream* when the offer came my way.

Charlie is a big man, with an easygoing smile and a permanent tan caused half by the sun and half by the wind. Even in the winter, when there's no way in hell to get the boats out for a long trip and the sun doesn't much peek its face out of the clouds, Charlie has that dark tan. And his eyes, Lord Almighty, his eyes are almost exactly the same color as the sea on a stormy day. Women seem to love them. I could spend days telling you stories about Charlie and his numerous adventures on the water and in different ports, but I will say this: he is a perfect example of what has been said about sailors for years. There's a girl in every port, and in most of them there are probably two or three. Charlie always had a way with the ladies, and could drink most men under the table without even trying.

Charlie noticed the people first, of course, because there were women involved. Four people came toward the yacht and looked at it carefully. I nodded my head and left them in peace, because most of the times when you have a small group like that, they're considering whether or not they want to rent your ship out for the day and trying to decide if the rates are fair enough. The rates are never fair enough, but most people are willing to pay them. I'll negotiate most times, and now and then I'll even let them win a good haggling argument, but only if the coffers at home have enough money to see me through a few more days.

None of them looked like the seafaring type. There was a couple who was obviously together and looked like they shouldn't have been. I guess I should describe them properly just so you can get a good picture of them. There was a stick of a man with salt-and-pepper hair, and a girl of around twenty hanging at his side. She was more handsome than pretty, and had a smile that was pure confidence and good feelings. She had more muscles than he did, and I assumed she was big into sports. Her hair was cut short so it wouldn't get in her way, and if I'd been asked by someone I would have labeled her an athlete. They both looked like they belonged on a college campus. The stick man had professor written all over him. I'm sure you know the type, the sort who only feels right in his classroom, where he's practically the king, but take the classroom away and suddenly he looks a little confused about where he is and why he's there.

The stick man spent a few minutes staring at the boat and then came closer. He walked up the causeway until he was almost on the yacht proper and then froze like a rabbit caught off guard by a human. He was dressed in a three-piece charcoal suit and looked about as comfortable as a thief in a confessional.

"Excuse me?" He looked directly at Charlie, who was busy wrapping a mooring cable back into a manageable mess.

"You looking to hire out?" Charlie said, barely looking up.

"Yes, I think. We'd like to hire your boat and services." The man looked uncomfortable about the entire affair, as if he'd rather have been sitting in a nice safe library reading the newspaper. Nothing wrong with that, mind you; just he seemed very uncomfortable with the notion of hiring out a yacht and even more uncomfortable with the idea of actually getting on one.

Charlie pointed his chin in my direction. "Need to talk with Joe over there; this is his 'boat.'" A lot of sailors will take a person to task for calling a yacht a boat or a dinghy a ship. Charlie might have liked to have done the same, but I had simple rules when it comes to dealing with any of the potential customers and those included not being an ass about nautical terms. Still, Charlie couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice. I'll answer questions if they'd like me to, but I won't correct them and surely don't chastise them for being ignorant. I expect the same courtesy in return when it comes to doctors and lawyers. I don't understand what they do and a lot of them don't understand what I do, but there's always a common ground somewhere along the way.

The man looked over at me and smiled apologetically. I guess he figured I'd take offense at his approaching Charlie instead of me. If I'd been wearing a captain's hat, I might have. I put down my polishing rag and wiped my hands clean on my jeans before heading in his direction.

Up close he was just as skinny. It wasn't a starved puppy sort of thin, just a slight build. I knew several men with that sort of frame who could hold their own in a bar brawl. This particular gentleman wasn't one of them.

"How can I help you?" I tried to keep my voice cheerful and neutral. The girl who was with him gave him a light push to urge him onto the yacht. He didn't actually burst into flames when he set his foot on the deck, but he looked like he expected to.

"I'm Dr. Martin Ward." I nodded, because the name had been offered. "I'd like to see about hiring your boat for a rather long time."

"How long are we talking, Doctor?"

Ward thought about that for a few seconds, and while he was thinking, the girl with him spoke up. “One month. Does that sound right to you?” The first part she aimed at me, the second at Ward.

He nodded. “That sounds almost perfect.” The look he sent her way was one of pure gratitude.

“A month? At this time of year?” My mind was divided right then. A big part of me was doing the great math dance and figuring how far into the black a month of extra cash would put me. A smaller but equally vocal part was telling me that I was dealing with a completely unprepared imbecile who had no idea how bad the weather could get on the ocean when autumn was creeping in fast.

“Is this a bad time of year for boating?” He looked at me with wide eyes, like maybe he had just realized he’d made some horrible social blunder. I half expected to see him reach down to check his fly.

“Weather can be tricky, is all. Sometimes storms come out of nowhere and linger for a few days. He nodded his head and looked a little depressed. “Doesn’t mean it can’t be done, but if you actually want to stay on the water for a whole month, there’re a lot of things to consider by way of supplies.”

“Oh, no, not all the time. We’d want to sleep on land.” Damned if I didn’t want to pat him on the top of his head right then, like a puppy in need of a reward.

“I’m just warning you that if you want to go fishing every day, some of those days are going to be a little rough if you don’t have your sea legs, and a few of them are going to be impossible.”

He nodded his head enthusiastically. “Fair enough, Captain Joe. You come highly recommended. I’ll trust you on any decisions about rough weather.”

That brought a smile to my face. You’d be amazed how many seemingly intelligent people don’t catch on that there are differences in how a storm affects the land and how it affects a ship on the ocean.

“As long as we understand each other.”

“What are your rates for a monthlong expedition, Captain?” That was the girl standing next to him.

I looked at her and smiled. The smile was easy. She was pretty in a very athletic way, and reminded me just a little of the girl whose name was still stuck on my crab boat. Her hair was short, blond, and curly, and had the sort of color that only comes from being in the sun a lot.

“We can haggle out the details. It’s the end of the normal season, which puts me in a mind to be a little generous.”

Charlie laughed and shook his head, his damned grin spreading across his face like a flash of lightning and then staying there.

The girl looked his way and frowned slightly.

“You’ll have to forgive Charlie,” I said with a smile of my own. “He’s not used to the idea of me being generous.” I told them what my normal daily rates were, fully expecting them to turn a dozen different shades of green. The thing is, my yacht requires a lot of upkeep and I like to turn a profit, too. My summer rates have to pay for the whole year. I don’t live in Florida, where I could rent out year-round. I have to make the money last.

It wasn’t Ward who did the haggling, it was his sidekick. She put up a good fight, but in the end w

came up with a fair and equitable deal.

“What are you planning on doing for a month out on the water?” Charlie looked past the couple and studied the mismatched pair who was still standing on the dock. I could see why he’d want to stare; I recognized their faces, but couldn’t decide where I knew them from. It wasn’t really any of my business as long as they weren’t going to try to use the *Isabella* as a source of illegal income. Neither of them looked like they were up to anything riskier than sitting behind desks in a stuffy office and reading a lot. The guy looked about ten years older than me and forty pounds heavier, but not in a good way. The lady with him looked a good ten years younger and was probably a looker when she wasn’t busy dressing like a conservative librarian.

No one answered Charlie’s question right away, and that made me a little nervous, but not over so. Still, I was happier when the girl answered.

“Dr. Ward is studying rumors about a system of underwater caves not too far from here. From everything we’ve heard this is the best time of year for actually gaining access to the caves.”

“So you want to go diving?” Charlie looked at the girl as if she’d grown a second set of eyes and they were crossed.

“Is that a problem?”

“Not if you don’t mind a little cold water . . . ”

Here’s the thing. It gets cold fast in New England, and the water reflects that chill. The Gulf Stream doesn’t even consider coming up our way and the winds that come down from the Arctic Circle seem to specialize in sucking the heat out of the ocean. I’ve had a few occasions where I managed to get myself properly wet in late October or early November, and believe me, it’s not something I ever wanted to do after the first time. Hypothermia is a real threat, and anyone who thinks a dry suit will keep you warm in that sort of chill has never gone diving into the waters off the coast of Connecticut or Massachusetts. And these people were saying they wanted to go for swims every day.

We discussed the matter for a few minutes, just so I could make sure the people who were about to pay for my Christmas vacation understood exactly what they were getting themselves into. I’m not really fond of the idea of pulling corpses out of the water, especially when the dead people in question are supposed to pay me a lot of money. I’m a businessman first when it comes to my services. They agreed to sign a waiver that excluded me and my crew from any liabilities.

They wanted to go diving, and they were bringing along fifteen college kids to help them with that. That would bring their number up to nineteen, and we added a little more haggling about the cost of feeding them all. Two meals a day minimum meant a lot more food shoved into the larder.

After that, it was just a matter of working out the details.

You ever hear that old saying about the devil being in the details? Well, I’m here to tell you that there is a lot of truth in that stupid phrase. More than I imagined when I met Dr. Ward and his cronies.

I was late coming home from the docks, but Belle was used to that. Between being a bit anal about how the yacht looked and the occasional drink with Charlie, it wasn’t exactly a news flash. My wife

being far more adept at changing than I have ever been, started cooking dinner around the same time I pulled up in the driveway.

I got lucky when I met Isabella. We met in college, and had probably a dozen classes together ranging from philosophy—a course I should never have taken—to a few English courses and even a class on marine biology.

I knew it was lust at first sight. Love came later, but when it finally showed up I decided to spend the rest of my life with her and she was good enough not to have me arrested for stalking her. She's the only woman I've ever met who could possibly put up with me, and, as an added bonus, she's a knockout.

She took one look at my face and knew something was up. The chances of me ever pulling the wool over her eyes are about the same as me growing wings.

“What did you do?” Her voice was teasing, and so was the grin on her face.

“I landed a really big fish.”

“Meaning you went fishing instead of making a living? Or meaning you made some poor bastard pay you too much?” Belle stirred a collection of potatoes, meat, and onions on the stove and my stomach decided to let out a few rude noises to remind me I hadn't had much beyond breakfast to eat.

“Second choice. A nice gig. I get to run a couple of college types around and watch them freeze their privates off. Best of all, they're gonna pay me.”

I wanted to reach out and hug her, but I knew the rules. The loving had to wait until she was done at the stove. She's always had a thing about open flames, and we had a piece of crap gas stove that I planned on having replaced for the last five or so years.

“How long a run?” She stirred her concoction again and I moved past her to grab a few plates and the flatware.

“About a month, but they want to come in every day.”

“A month?” Her voice raised a few notes higher than usual, and I knew she was thinking like me that they had to be nutcases.

“Looks like we'll have a little to sock away for a rainy day this time around.”

“Well, I won't complain about it.” She moved over and scraped the potatoes, onions, and sausage onto our plates, while I pulled two Michelobs from the refrigerator.

“You won't mind not having me here and under your feet every day?”

“Oh, please. Now I get to spend extra time with the milk-man every day.” Once the food was out of her hands and the pan was back on the stove, Isabella slid into my arms for a proper hug. There's little I love more than the feel of that woman against me, her head resting on my shoulder.

“You could come with, if you wanted.”

“I might. Maybe a few days, just to get out and enjoy the last of the summer.”

“Charlie would love to see you almost as much as me.”

“Charlie would love to see anything female as long as it was in a bathing suit.”

“True enough.” I couldn’t help but laugh because she was dead-on with Charlie and always had been. He was a heel as far as women went and Belle had warned him away from a few of her friends in the past.

We sat down to eat and it was decided. The job was too handsome not to take, even if the folks hiring me were in for a few cold and stormy days.

TWO

We started off four days later. I was ready the next day, but the group coming along needed more time to prepare, and there was the matter of the waivers for every one of them. Fifteen kids, all of legal age except one who needed to get permission from his parents. That took two days by itself. A yacht the size of the *Isabella's Dream* requires a few crew members, especially if you plan on going for extended trips. And that, by the way, was a rub I hadn't counted on. The people who'd hired me wanted to sleep on land, but that didn't mean they intended to sleep on the same land. While a few occasions would let me come home to Belle for my rest, the docks at Golden Cove would become my home for much of the stay.

Golden Cove is a strange little town, built by a real estate investment firm and then abandoned only a few days after it opened to the public. The original owners were out of the picture for the most part. Only a few of them ever even came around the place, though it had made them a fortune.

It's as pretty as a postcard, and looks like a little slice of heaven. Most times you couldn't get me to set foot in the area. There were all sorts of rumors about its past and the bad things that had happened there. So, naturally, I'd been suckered into taking a small army of people to the waters off the shore and letting them use my ship. I'd have been bitter about it if I hadn't been paid up front. Having a handsome sum of money sitting in the bank goes a long way to making me more forgiving.

Oh, and I also made damned sure that they paid me extra for the docking fees at Golden Cove. The place was built to take in money and they wanted a sizable chunk of mine for the privilege of parking my yacht.

On the brighter side, the fishing was supposed to be incredible and I had just the right collection of fishing poles to test that theory. My job was to get them where they were going safely; after that I was free to play a bit.

Anyhow, I hired on a couple of the local kids who I knew weren't quite ready for the whole college experience, and made clear to them that they would be working for their money. Davey Walker was just barely nineteen and looked like a freshman in high school, forget college. He was reed thin and short to boot, with a dark complexion and skin so smooth he probably never shaved more than once a week. But I also knew from experience that he was one hell of a good kid to have around when it came to working on engines. I didn't expect to have too much trouble along those lines, but it was nice to have an extra person around who could handle the work. As an added bonus, he could cook if Tom wasn't up to it.

Tom Summers was almost Davey's opposite, and was also his best friend. There was little they didn't do together. Tom had reddish blond hair he kept in a ponytail and freckles so intense that the only way to hide them was to tan himself deeply enough to match them. He'd been doing a good job of it, and was almost mahogany colored. Tom was also the sort of kid who needed to learn a few things about personal hygiene, but as long as he could handle the workload, I would provide him with fresh deodorant.

Aside from those two, it was Charlie and me to handle the work. It was enough.

We got under way early, and most of the trip down the coastline was as pleasant as could be. It only became uncomfortable when I mentioned our destination to Charlie.

The thing is, now and then I forget how much of a sailor Charlie is. He did his time in the Navy, of course, and he was practically raised on the fishing boats, but I forget that sometimes, because he doesn't usually let himself act like a superstitious clown.

He heard the name Golden Cove and jumped back like I'd slapped him in the face with a jellyfish.

"You have a good time, Joe." Just like that he was ready to hop off the side of the *Isabella* and start swimming for home.

"Oh for Christ's sake, Charlie, grow up." I didn't mean to laugh at him, but I did.

Charlie turned on me fast and jabbed a finger in my face. "You know how I feel about that place, Joe. We've talked about it a hundred times." He wasn't laughing. He was pissed off and he was frightened.

"Charlie, it's a damned town. There's nothing going on there that should have you ready to swim a mile the way home."

Remember that couple I told you about earlier? Well, the man who made me look like Hercules looked over when he heard my words and shook his head.

"Well, that's what some of us are here to find out, isn't it?" He managed a small smile, which didn't look like it didn't fit him at all.

Charlie looked at the man and then back at me, as if somehow the man with the miserable face had just proved his point for him. Rather than give my first mate a one-fingered salute, I looked over at the stranger on my ship. "Care to explain that one?"

"Well, my wife and me, we're here to investigate claims that Golden Cove is haunted."

"Yeah? What makes you a specialist?"

He seemed a little surprised that I didn't know the answer already. "I'm Jacob Parsons, my wife is Mary Parsons. We're parapsychologists." It finally clicked where I had seen them before: on the TV at home. Belle was always watching shows about murders, unsolved murders, or real life haunted houses at night, when any sensible person would have been sleeping. I didn't mind, because I could sleep through almost anything. Now and then I watched enough of the shows that the names Jacob and Mary Parsons actually meant something to me. They were on a dozen or more specials every Halloween, and had been for at least a decade.

Charlie couldn't have looked more upset if the man talking to us had actually yanked a ghost out from behind his ear and thrown it at him. I don't like to make fun of people's beliefs, but I had about as much need of a ghost hunter as I did for a gynecologist.

My sentiments must have shown on my face, because Parsons nodded as if to say *just you wait and see, Mr. Know-it-all*. I rolled my eyes toward Charlie and shook my head.

"Charlie, do you honestly mean to tell me you're gonna let a few scary stories keep you from making a living?" He was acting like a child, so I treated him like one.

It's the best way I've ever learned to piss Charlie Mon crief off. And it worked just as well as

always does. Now, I need to explain a little something about Charlie. He is, as I already said, a ladies man. ~~He is also one of the best damned sailors I've ever had the pleasure to know. He can do damn near anything required to handle a boat in the roughest weather and he's as strong as an ox. To the best of my knowledge, he'd never lost a fight, either, and I'd witnessed quite a few of them back when barhopped.~~

My point is this: pissing off Charlie is always a risky proposition. He stared hard at me, with that sort of look in his eyes that said he wouldn't have minded force-feeding his boot down my throat. I'm not really much into taking risks with my life, but I trusted that we were good enough friends that he'd let me slide and just be angry enough to stay on instead.

I sort of hate manipulating people, but I can do it when I have to.

I got lucky. Charlie nodded his head and walked away from me. I knew I'd have to placate him later, but at least he wasn't leaving or tossing me over the bow of my own yacht.

Jacob Parsons looked at me and shook his head sadly. "Sorry about that, Captain. I was just making conversation. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

He was a paying client, so I indulged him. "Wasn't you. Charlie's always been afraid of anything that has a legend stuck to it."

Parsons tried to light up a cigarette, fighting the sea breeze the entire way. After a few failed tries he was puffing away, and once that task was finished, he finally answered my comment.

"He might not have been the best choice for this job, Captain. What you call Golden Cove is supposed to be a pretty intense place when it comes to ghosts and other things."

"What sort of other things?" It was a long trip and I was just bored enough to ask that sort of question. Besides, I needed to know what Charlie was going to be worrying about.

Jacob Parsons looked at me for a few seconds like he was trying to decide if he should actually mention what was on his mind. He squinted a bit when he was thinking. I got to see him squint a little while we were together.

"You know the history of this area pretty well?"

"Well enough." I shrugged. There had been a lot of stories over the years.

"Well, Golden Cove was built on the remains of another town, and one with a nice long history of weirdness."

"Okay, go on."

"I can't think of the name of the town to save my life . . . Mary's the one with the good memories. Anyhow, there was talk of devil worship and other things before the town got leveled. And long before that happened, there was talk about the entire area being a sort of, I don't know, a sort of trouble spot. Nothing as bad as the Bermuda Triangle or anything, but there are a lot of old documents that talk about ships sinking off the shore there."

"Ships sink. I may not be a genius, but I've been on the ocean long enough to know that."

"Well, that may be true, Captain, but there are rumors that the ships might have been helped along. He puffed away on his cigarette like it had done something to piss him off and he was enjoying

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