

The Dynamite Days of Middle School

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Chapter 1 - The Days of Middle School

The days after the first day of middle school were absolutely outrageous. I mean they were beyond fun. I had spent many hours during my fifth grade year in Homestead thinking only of the negative things that might happen to me when I became a sixth grader at a new school and not one of them had taken place. In fact, everything was totally positive.

The second day of middle school, I was offered a chance to join the Conservation Club and I signed up immediately. From there, things just kind of took off. There were several kids who rode the bus with me from Homestead in the club whom I knew from my old elementary school, and having friends in the club made adapting to middle school a lot easier. If I ever had a question about anything, I had a seventh or eighth grade club member whom I could ask. I must admit that the first few weeks of school I asked quite a few questions.

The middle school that I was supposed to have attended was blown away by Hurricane Andrew and we all had to ride the bus about forty-five minutes north of Homestead to attend Marshside Middle School, which was okay with me as I was happy just to have a school to go to after what I had been through.

My best friend, Laz Cruz, had moved to Atlanta because Hurricane Andrew had destroyed much of Homestead Air Force Base where his dad was a pilot. He was moving back to Homestead because they were rebuilding the base, but I didn't know exactly when. I did know one thing; I missed him every single day. On top of that, the girl of my dreams had moved to Ft. Myers and I didn't even know she was moving until I found out at the bus stop on the first day of middle school. My two other elementary school friends, Billy and Timo, were long gone as well. I hadn't heard a word from any of the army members other than Laz's

mom had called to tell my mom they were moving back to Homestead. I guess you might say that Hurricane Andrew had profoundly altered my entire life.

The myriad changes that I had been through during the past year had placed me very closely in touch with myself. I knew, fully well, that I was the only obstacle to my own success and I was determined to forge ahead with my life. I would set my short term goals at achievable levels, keep my long term goals in focus, and allow nothing to hold me back. You might say that I had become adept at adapting to change.

My first goal was to adapt to my new school, Marshside Middle School, and to succeed academically, as well as, socially. I was very fortunate to know a few people who had attended my old school, Sunset Elementary in Homestead. I had eaten lunch with Jason Lure, my old enemy, on the first day of school and he had introduced me to some of his friends. After that, I didn't see him much and I sat with some other kids who were pretty cool. Lunch was an awesome time for talking and catching up on what was happening in other classes and neighborhoods. Everyone had a good time at lunch which was obvious from the noise level in the cafeteria. Sometimes it would become extremely loud and the assistant principal on duty would give us silent lunch, an unpleasant experience to say the least, the next day. Anyway, you might say my social life was off to a good start.

Academically, I had no problems at all. I loved my classes. My teachers were pretty normal; however, I did have a language arts teacher whom you might call unique. He was infatuated with the English language and his fondness of it was quite contagious. He had, in a relatively short period of time, instilled a love of reading in me that kept me going to the media center once a week to check out a book or two. Reading helped me to increase my vocabulary and to understand the information in the different texts we used in science, math, and social studies.

Plus, it kept me occupied on the hour and a half bus ride that I took daily to and from school, for books were wonderful company.

My physical education teacher was unique in his own way too. He was huge. It was like he must have spent years in the weight room working out. We called him Mr. S, for Superhuman! Sometimes, he would hold his arm out and let anyone who wanted to try, swing on his outstretched appendage. Quite often he would throw the ball out on the court so hard that not one kid wanted to try to catch it. The ball would slam against the wall on the other side of the court, rebound, and then you could handle it. It was funny that we studied Newton's Laws of Motion in science class the same week that I met Coach S. The first Law stated that an object in motion would stay in motion until acted on by an outside force. Well, when Coach S would place that ball in motion, I never wanted to be the outside force! Anyway, P.E. was fun. It was kind of like a huge stress reliever for all of us.

There was one thing that kind of puzzled me when I received my schedule on the first day of school. I was placed in a Spanish class that was for eighth graders. It didn't take me long to realize that I was the only sixth grader in the class, for it was kind of like being a minnow in a school of sharks. I told my mom about it and she called the guidance office to get me correctly placed. They asked her if it was okay for me to be an office assistant during that period, for there was no other class in which I could be placed. Mom said that if I wanted to give up Spanish, my elective class, it would be acceptable to her. I replied, "Sure," because I didn't wish to be engulfed by the apex predators of Marshside Middle.

The next morning in Spanish class, an assistant from guidance came in and announced that Jay Stewart needed to go to the office. I was aware that it was for my schedule change and I knew that I wasn't in trouble, but as I gathered my belongings and headed towards the door, the so-called cool eighth graders went

“Oooooooh, Jay Stewart, you’re in trouble!” I wasn’t affected in the least by their admonitions, for I didn’t pay them a bit of attention. I just followed the assistant back to the office.

When I arrived, the secretary already had a stack of errands for me to run. I put my book bag in the closet next to her desk where I was told that I would have a spot on a shelf for my stuff when I was working. I then took a few slips of paper from the secretary, Miss Helio, and off through the hallways I went. I certainly did get to know quickly where every room in the school was located and, boy, did I get to know the miscreants in a hurry.

The first day of being an office runner was exciting, but after that, it became quite routine. It was mostly the same kids that I had to get out of class over and over to go to the Assistant Principal’s Office when they were in trouble. That was the worst. The nice part of the job was simply the freedom of walking the halls without having a pass. Being an office assistant made me feel that I was doing my part to keep the school running smoothly, for I did far more than just escort rule breakers. The coolest thing that I did was to help the janitors unload boxes of copying paper from the trucks when they would arrive. They were exceptionally heavy! I always felt like a weight lifter while I worked. You wouldn’t believe how many boxes a school uses. I guess it’s to keep the teachers armed with an ample supply of paper in order to create massive amounts of busy work for the hapless students.

The months of September and October were very demanding ones for me. I guess that was great because it helped me to keep my mind occupied as I anxiously awaited the arrival of the holiday two-week break. I was thinking that I might one day write a book about some of the funny incidents that the kids I had to walk to the office were involved in, for there were quite a few. The book would probably be a best seller because it would be absolutely hilarious. I didn’t

condone bad behavior; on the contrary, I found it to be reprehensible. I did, however, find extreme humor in a few incidents and from time to time when I thought of one or two, I would chuckle to myself. Sometimes, I would just burst out laughing.

One might think that there were a lot of bad kids at Marshside. In fact, there weren't at all. Ninety-nine percent of the students at Marshside exhibited exemplary behavior, but the remaining one percent, you might say that their deeds were deviant. It was from the experiences of these few that I would draw the funny incidents for my book. Of course, I would probably never venture as far as really penning a treatise addressing negative adolescent behavior in a pedagogical setting. It was more likely that, in the future, I would write an expository composition in a language arts class that would serve to crack up the instructor when he, she, or the entire class read it. I might even pen my *Memoirs of Middle School* so that future generations of students could share my wonderful experiences.

My very first story would feature the tale of Chef Gregore. I fully realize that a person might ask why the kid was called a chef. Well, a chef mixes a lot of ingredients to create a culinary masterpiece, and you might say that Gregore sort of, kind of, did the same thing to earn himself the distinguished title. From time to time, every kid does the same thing with scrumptious school cafeteria food, but most kids leave the jumbled food on their plates only to have the assortment of taste combinations discarded in the trash at the end of lunch. It's just that Chef Gregore took it one or maybe two steps beyond that which was acceptable to your normal everyday classroom teacher. Before I begin, I must preface my story with the following warning: This story was related to me and it may or may not have happened exactly as I tell it. I will endeavor in my narrative to repeat it exactly as I heard it. If you happened to have been in the place that we students at Marshside

refer to as The Palace of Culinary Delight and witnessed the event, and I included superfluous information or possibly omitted something; I apologize profusely.

The way the story was related to me by an eye witness to the mind-boggling event was that a young man in the seventh grade named Gregore Stardusky determined that the time had arrived for him to seek his fifteen minutes of fame. His path to glory would be strewn with great intentions of becoming a chef and not just any plain old ordinary run-of-the-mill chef. He would be one that would leave an indelible memory in the minds of those who shared the great fortune, or misfortune, depending upon how you perceive this, of being present in the cafeteria that lunch period.

Gregore had what was referred to at Marshside as a split lunch. That meant his entire class went to the cafeteria in the middle of his third period class and returned after eating to finish the last half of the period. I found the idea of a split class extremely interesting as it would seem to provide a time for discussion of any test that the instructor may have begun at the beginning of the period. I guess it forced the wise teachers to administer all exams after lunch to foil any and all attempts at extracurricular conversation of a formative or final assessment.

Gregore had science during third period and his class was walked to and from lunch accompanied by their instructor, Mr. Kandew. Mr. Kandew was an inexperienced teacher from what I was told. I say this because inexperienced teachers sometimes, not always, make decisions that are done in a bit of haste without prior experience present to serve as their guide. Mr. Kandew was what one might call a stereotypical Marine Corp Drill Sergeant type with a propensity for vocalizing his orders a decibel or three above what one might consider to be normal.

Anyway, as the story goes, Gregore one fine school day, announced to the students at his lunch table that he was about to become a chef. Puzzled by this

strange proclamation, the stunned students watched in total awe as Gregore began to make what he would call Gregore stew. First, he took his uneaten meatloaf and broke it into small pieces. To that he added a spoonful of mashed potatoes followed by a splash of chocolate milk. He then, with the utensil of choice, a plastic knife, blended the ingredients for ten or fifteen seconds. Not satisfied with the texture of his concoction, he added beet juice from his vegetable receptacle and for condiments, squeezed ketchup, mustard, salt, and an enormous amount of pepper, followed by a squeeze of pickle relish from a plastic packet. The students' reactions to his new stew were mixed and I intend no pun. Some found it disgusting and others thought it to be exceptionally humorous. There was one person, however, who found it to be a violation of rules and that was none other than the science teacher, Mr. Kandew; for, as he approached Gregore's table, he took note of the "stew" and became enraged at merely the sight of the gooey glop of yuk!

Without hesitation and in a voice that was clearly audible two buildings away he shouted, "GREGORE, YOU ARE IN VIOLATION OF CAFETERIA RULE NUMBER SIXTEEN DASH SEVEN ONE THREE THAT DEALS WITH THE WASTING OF FOOD!" By now the entire lunchroom had stopped eating and talking and were tuned in to Gregore's tongue lashing. In fact, I was told that there had never been so many students all focused on one scene in a school cafeteria setting as were the Marshside third lunch participants on that particular day.

The teacher continued his tirade with, "THE RULE STATES THAT IF YOU WANT ONLY TO WASTE IT, YOU GOTTA TASTE IT! START SCOOPING IT, NOW, CLOWN!"

With that demand, Gregore, trembling uncontrollably, picked up his fork, but was immediately chastised for making an incorrect utensil choice when

Kandew continued, “NOT YOUR FORK, SPOON IT, NOW!” This caused Gregore to drop his fork and quickly grab his spoon. By now, the lunch ladies wearing their little hair net things and meatloaf juice stained aprons, had emerged from the back and were standing in a horizontal line across the front of the room in order to get a bird’s eye view of this wild spectacle.

Gregore, not desiring a sample of his hand-crafted culinary masterpiece, hesitated a moment as he gazed, his face contorted in total disgust from the mere thought of eating and digesting his made-up meal, at the chocolate purple stew. The teacher prompted him to hurry by screaming, “SCOOP IT, NOW. I DO NOT WANT TO HEAR, NO, KANDEW!”

With that, the students began to chant, like little league baseball players at a game in which they were behind two runs with two outs in the ninth inning and two men on base, loudly proclaiming their wish for a rally to the batter, “KAN-DEW, KAN-DEW, KAN-DEW, KAN-DEW, KAN-DEW!”

Having had enough of this, Gregore decided the time had come for his just dessert. With every eye fixed upon his quivering frame and the awe struck silence of an impending disaster hanging in the air as thickly as the odoriferous fragrance of orange blossoms in March on the edge of a citrus grove, Gregore delved deeply into the stew, poised it directly in front of his mouth, and prepared to savor the intense flavor.

Just as the sickening mixture was about to enter his wide-open oral cavity Kandew shouted, “JUST KIDDING, DUDE! MY CLASS LINE UP NOW ON THE WALL!”

Needless to say, the entire cafeteria went off like a rocket. The students were totally convulsed with laughter, even the cafeteria ladies were bent over. Kids were slapping high fives everywhere. I heard that some who had food in

their mouths when Kandew said he was kidding sprayed the contents all over their respective tables as an effect of their sudden laughter.

I found the entire incident as it was told to me to be surrealistically hilarious. I would have loved to have witnessed the event although I would never have wished to be the one who the kids in the entire school now affectionately referred to as Chef Gregore; for I was told that he was absent two days after Kandew's successful attempt at humor. In fact, I heard that he transferred to a new school and that Mr. Kandew had been reprimanded for bad judgment by the principal in a written letter that went in his file. I didn't know if any of this was true and my grandmother had warned me early in life to only believe about half of that which was told to me. Anyway, I had a laugh about it every time it would come to mind for the longest time and I would definitely include the story in my *Memoirs of Middle School*.

My mom didn't believe a word of it. She was always on the side of the teacher no matter what was related to her about a school incident. She said that a teacher would never do something like that. I'll venture a bet that all teachers would seek the parental support that my mother offered them with great consistency, for she certainly served as a teacher advocate in each and every instance.

Chapter 2 – Impending Launch

The school year was flying by so quickly. It was like a week after Halloween and I really hadn't paid attention because I was having so much fun at school. It wasn't that great at home because no kids lived in my neighborhood. It was being rebuilt after the hurricane tore it completely apart. I was earning extra money on the weekends helping the workers who were constantly pounding nails, carrying boards, and stacking building materials as they rebuilt Homestead. I had saved quite a bit of money in two months and had a very good reason for doing so. I was going to Ft. Myers on the two-week holiday break in December to stay with my step-dad's aunt. She owned a home on the Caloosahatchee River, plus she had a large boathouse built over the water with a long dock right outside its front door. Best of all, there was a boat to use for any purpose that I wished. My mom had set it all up and I was going for a week starting the day after Christmas.

The boathouse and boat were not the real reasons that I was going to Ft. Myers. That's just what all the adults thought. I knew it was quite selfish of me to conceal my true intentions from them, but they wouldn't understand the feelings that I had for Susie although my mom understood. She didn't count as an ordinary adult though. Moms are kind of like that. They know what's happening, on most occasions. My mom could be the sweetest of sweets at times and she could also, if she saw fit, be the exact opposite. Anyway, Susie had left me without warning after the hurricane and I missed her so terribly that it hurt inside. I simply had to find her in order to make her aware of how much that I truly cared for her. It certainly was something for which it was worth waiting. There were just a couple of months to go and I would actually be in Ft. Myers, Florida!

With the money I had saved from working, I was going to buy Susie a necklace with a seahorse on it for Christmas. When we were in the fifth grade, our

class took the coolest field trip to the Miami Seaquarium. While we were there, Susie saw an exhibit of the neatest seahorses imaginable. She just stood and stared at these strange-looking sea-creatures for the longest time. After that, all she talked about for days was seahorses and how she wanted one for a pet. Anyway, I couldn't find a live one so I was saving to buy her one on a chain. Now, all I had to do was find her after I arrived in Ft. Myers because I had absolutely no idea where she lived. I was determined to locate her though and nothing would stop me! I had a strategic plan or as my language arts teacher would often say, "I had my ducks in a row!"

Well, there was something that could possibly stop me if it was bad and that something was a gift from the Dade County School District. It was a present we students in middle school received four times a year and that was our report cards. My sixth hour teacher, Mr. Hipartner, distributed them to us after the end of the first nine-week period since his was the last class of the day. I didn't understand why it was Marshside's school policy to wait until the end of the day for distribution, but it was. There were a lot of things in life that I couldn't understand, so I just did them and decided that when I grew up, I'd try to change things a bit, but right now, I had to adhere to the policy of, "Do as you are told and do not question authority!"

Mr. Hipartner always waited until the last few minutes of the period to pass them out to us. My belief was that he did it so that if a kid didn't feel that he or she earned the grade on the report card, that an argument might ensue. He always told us that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. I had to have that one explained to me the first time he uttered the saying. After his explanation of do a little now to prevent a lot from happening later, it made perfect sense.

When he gave me mine, I almost passed out! I had all A's and B's but had earned a C in social studies. I was in for it when I got home. I don't know why

parents never seem to focus on the positive elements of a report card. Their eyes always seem to gravitate towards the negative. It wouldn't matter that I had three A's and two B's, the one C would be my downfall. I had to think of an excuse. Let's see. I could use the standard one, "He hates me, Momma. He hates everybody." I might even try, "Everybody got a C or even worse, Mother." I know; I'll use this one, "The teacher lost my work, Mom." To my great surprise, she just told me to bring up the C next nine weeks. She then congratulated me on my A's and B's. I certainly lucked out of that one! That's my ticket to Ft. Meyers, I thought after she had finished her improve your report card speech.

Anyway, Mr. Hipartner, my language arts instructor, was not your every day, run-of-the-mill teacher. We would always greet him with, "Hi, partner!" and he would reply, "It's MR. Hipartner and heavy on the mister." That wasn't all. He wrote the most radical short stories imaginable. He made me wish to be a writer someday so that I could bring the same joy to other people that his tales brought to all of us.

He also told us some really radical stories in his class. There was this metal bar under our desks that was placed there for support; I guess. Somehow or other a bar from a desk in his room fell off the bottom of a desk one afternoon causing a loud clinking, metal-hitting-the-floor type noise that caused us all to kind of come up out of our seats. He thought that his entire class being scared out of their wits was so funny. His face lit totally up as he scooped the bar from the floor and wildly waved it around. He proudly proclaimed that he was a king and that he would rule us absolutely with this iron scepter. "Oh boy, I thought," this was a very different teacher. In fact, he later asked that we not say he was weird. He asked that we refer to him, when telling his classroom stories to people outside of his kingdom, as eccentric. I looked it up and it means peculiar or odd. I guess it sounds better than weird. He taught us that words we use that sound less harsh or

milder than other words when used to describe something are called, “euphemisms”. Land fill he said was a euphemism for dump. After he explained the word’s meaning to me, I started hearing all kinds of euphemisms. The English language is totally full of them.

He was all the time smacking the bar during class on whatever he chose causing us to “launch” as he called it. He would wait until we were hard at work and not paying attention to where he was in the room and then “WHACK!” It would launch us straight up out of our seats. He would then laugh like so hard and we would all go back to work. After the tenth time it began to get annoying for some kids, but not me. I didn’t mind. I kind of thought it was fun being launched and I would laugh when he did it. Not everyone found humor in his rocket fuel as he called it.

One kid who didn’t like being a human satellite was Larry Loper. He was always in trouble for disrupting just about every class that he was in. I knew him from the Assistant Principal’s office. As a kid, he was pretty cool but as a student, he was the exact opposite. He just didn’t hold exhibiting good behavior in class as his first principle.

One afternoon as I was walking him from P.E. to the office because Coach S had written him up for hitting a girl in the back of the head with a volley ball, he asked me if I would like to help him pull a prank on Mr. Hipartner one day after school. He said it would stop him from launching us. I originally told him no, but he kept telling me it was a simple joke and I wouldn’t get in trouble. He kept begging me so I bowed to peer pressure and finally agreed to at least to listen to his plan. As time went by, he never elaborated on his plan with me and I totally forgot it. In the future, my memory lapse would return to haunt me.

Chapter 3 – Marshside Clubber

The Marshside Conservation Club was so much fun. We had this Clean-up the Beach yearly event where we all met on a Saturday on Miami Beach and all day we walked the sandy shoreline, scooped trash, and put it in giant plastic bags. Our lucky teacher, who was our club sponsor, Mrs. Conga's job was to drive the coolest four-wheeler with a trailer attached to it up and down the beach picking up the bags that the members had filled with trash. My task was to take the bags from her trailer and throw them in this huge dumpster thing. It was like feeding a metal mega-monster that had an insatiable appetite for plastic and trash, I thought, as I wiped sweat from my eyes, swatted flies, and watched the other club members on the beach chasing each other, walking, talking, and simply just having fun. Next year I would not volunteer to feed the trashzilla dumpster thing, for sure!

During September, the Conservation Club sponsored a school-wide contest called, "Do Your Part". You had to write an essay or a poem that dealt with saving the planet. The top prize was two tickets to Miami Seaquarium. When I read that, I decided that I would win that contest, for I knew precisely how I would use those tickets. To be quite trite, that was a no-brainer! My best friend, Laz was moving back here and what a neat way for us to spend a day upon his return. There was absolutely no doubt in my young mind that I would claim first place in the Ecology Essay Contest. All I needed now was a plan. I could hear Mr. Hipartner proclaim, "One must have a plan," and I generally adhered to his scholarly recommendations. With that in mind, I began to formulate my idea.

I had heard or read, I couldn't remember which, that after Hurricane Andrew there were some monkeys that escaped from the Metro Zoo and supposedly, one monkey in particular was hanging out at the land fill eating trash to survive. This caused me to begin to think about how I could write a poem

about a monkey that ate trash. If you used a poem, it had to have a theme or lesson about life that the reader had to infer from the poem itself. I knew that an inference was when you took facts, details, and examples from that which you were reading and came to a conclusion from them. I just had to make it easy for the reader to make an inference about the theme of my poem. That's where I began to put together my plan to make my theme or statement about life swing by its tail right into the face of the reader, so to speak.

My theme would be that we must act immediately to save the planet by recycling and being concerned with ecology. There was nothing particularly special about my theme, for everyone's essay or poem would probably make the same statement about life, but I was going to go about it in a different way. I would create a monkey who lived in a garbage can and went to the landfill or dump, as I call it in the poem, every morning at nine to eat. There would be so much garbage to gobble up at the dump he would grow bigger and bigger and bigger by the day. The monkey would be a symbol, meaning he would represent our Earth and its landfills which grow larger and larger every single day. My theory was that if we kept feeding it, it would someday explode because of the immense amount of methane gas produced as a result of the decaying trash.

In the poem, I would tell the reader that the solution to this would be to recycle now before Trash Monkey, as I would call him, exploded. In other words, to save him would be to save our planet. Initially, it seemed relatively straightforward; however, after giving it substantial thought, I decided that I best put an outline on paper. After doing so, the entire poem quickly took shape.

About the middle of the poem, I would have Trash Monkey stop eating trash and state that he was concerned with ecology. He would then ask the reader to join him in saving the Earth by recycling trash instead of feeding him and I would then have him state other ecologically sound actions that the reader could

take. I would follow that with lines in which the entire class repeats what Trash Monkey says about ecology.

I knew from having Mr. Hipartner for language arts that the best writers were those who used graphic organizers to collect their thoughts before writing. He always told us that students who plan before writing score far higher on writing tests than those who chose not to. Well, I certainly had my plan in my mind. All I needed now was to put my original outline on paper in the form of a rough draft and start my additions and revisions to it. After that, I would compose my final copy. It consumed several hours, yet, in the end, I felt that it would have been well worth my effort. The more I read it, the more I liked it, for it certainly made a statement about saving the planet. Now, all I had to do was get Mr. Hipartner to love it and then follow that with the judges sharing the identical feeling.

Trash Monkey

He stays down deep in the garbage can
eating spoiled macaroni and purple ham.
His mamma doesn't like it or think it's sweet
when the slime's hanging way down to his feet.
If you want to see him, now, you best be slick.
You swish around the garbage with a big ole stick.
You poke around; poke around, with your pole
cause he's buried in the junk like a land-fill mole.
Every morning at nine he does zip
down to the dump he takes a trip.
He's eating up the garbage at a rapid pace

while the flies buzzin' everywhere around the place.

The dump's growing smaller every day
and Trash Monkey bigger; what can I say?

You'd better go see him now.

Be the first -you'd better be quick for he's gonna "Burst"!

So let's recycle and do it now

before Trash Monkey goes, "Kerplow"!

If he blows up, what a sound

there'll be even more smelly stuff on the ground.

Then, Trash Monkey says, "Listen to me!

I'm concerned with e-col-o-gy.

I'll stop eating trash; you will see.

I'm concerned with e-col-o-gy.

Recycling rules; it's number one,

Do your part and have some fun!

It's the easiest task you've ever seen
to save our Earth and make it green.

Now let's sing this mon-key song

I'll read a line; you follow along."

Trash Monkey's going to leave the garbage can!

(class repeats)

He's got some pals in every land.

(class repeats)

We all promise to do our part

(class repeats)

to save the Earth and today we'll start.

(class repeats)

If it's recyclable, we'll pitch it in

(class repeats)

the closest available recycling bin.

(Class repeats)

We'll help Trash Monkey; he's a friend.

(class repeats)

We pledge to use a recycling bin!

(Class repeats)

We'll feed the birds and plant a tree.

(class repeats)

We're concerned with e-col-o-gy.

(class repeats)

We'll recycle; you will see.

(class repeats)

We're concerned with e-col-o-gy.

(class repeats louder)

I'm so sad; I'll tell you why -

for now it's time to say good-bye!

Thank you!

By Jay Stewart, 6th Grade, Mr. Hipartner's Class

I was now finally ready to present it to my teacher and hopefully the school. It all made sense to me. My biggest hope was that my audience would understand my theme of saving the planet by recycling and being concerned with ecology. I mean, I said it enough in the poem. Either way, win or lose I had the most awesome time writing and practicing reciting it. It was just that I could not wait for the announcement of the winner.

Each language arts class in the school would choose a winner and from there those papers would be narrowed down to the top three. The grand prize winner would be chosen from among those. The winners would have their essays or poems published in the school paper and read over the intercom during the morning announcements at a later date.

Mr. Hipartner asked us, if we wished to read ours aloud to the class. I indicated, by raising my hand that I wanted to read mine. Several other students did as well and he said he would call on us in alphabetical order. That gave me some time to muse on my poem. I was extremely nervous about reading it to the class at first, but I then began to think about how I had come to firmly believe in myself. My increased self-confidence was the result of all I had been through in

the past months. There were so many changes, and I adapted easily to each one of them. This would be nothing I told myself. With that in mind, I settled down and calmly awaited my turn at recitation.

When my moment arrived, I took my little friend Trash Monkey to the front of the class and I began my radical rap. Well, I'll tell you; the crowd went wild! They loved it. When it came to the part where the class repeated the lines that I read, every student happily joined in. Words just can't explain the feeling that I had that day. The closest word to it would be exhilarating but it was even more than that. Even Mr. Hipartner said that it was commendable, his greatest compliment to a student. I must admit that I attributed my success to my scheme, my preparations for writing.

All I had to do now was to wait for the announcement that I had won first place in my class, and honestly, the wait was excruciating. The next day, Mr. Hipartner announced that I had won for the class and all applauded loudly which made me feel somewhat special. Wow, I thought, Mr. Hipartner didn't take as long as I had anticipated. Now, I wanted to win those tickets in the worst way imaginable. My teacher and class loved it, but would the teacher judges? I would have to allow Trash Monkey to stand on his own merits. It was out of my hands.

After three days, the moment arrived. That morning, I sat in class, my eyes fixed upon the intercom box, for about three minutes before a voice broke the silence of the room. At last, the announcer asked us to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, recite it and sit down. After I sat, I was as nervous as a mouse walking across a sleeping elephant's back. While I waited, I gritted my teeth, grasped the sides of my desk, and fidgeted in my seat; but, to my great disappointment, there was no mention of a contest winner at all. When the student reading the announcements ordered us to have a nice day, my mood of anticipation did an about face, for the painful wait had been for nothing.

After about fifteen seconds of silence, to my great surprise, the principal's voice broke in and said that she would now tell us who had won the school-wide essay contest. Once again, my hands tightly gripped the sides of my desk. My jaws thrust my teeth into the lockdown position and I became totally fixated on the intercom. You might say that I was a bit nervous!

“Students, third place in our contest goes to Miguel Sontoro. Second place goes to Sabrina Skolter and our first place grand prize winner of the tickets to the Seaquarium goes to Jay Stewart for his poem, ‘Trash Monkey.’” Would the three winners please stop by my office at their convenience? Congratulations to all students who took part in the Conservation Club's Contest.”

My class broke into the loudest applause that you could imagine. I had a grin on my face that stretched all the way to Fort Myers. I had won! I believed in myself and I had won! Wow, this was so cool! I was one jazzed dude! Every student, who chose to listen, had heard my name. How cool was that?

Later in the afternoon when I went to the office to pick up the tickets, the secretary said the principal had them and I had to see her in her office. As I entered, she looked up from the papers on which she was working and told me how proud she was of me. She told me that my poem would certainly have an effect on a lot of students and that the amount of recycled trash in the area would probably increase. I thanked her, put the tickets in my pocket and went on with my life, which for now, was going great.

Chapter 4- Gotcha!

There was another Conservation Club activity for which I volunteered, and that was to empty the recycling boxes that were in all the classrooms in the school. It was really fun. I met most all of the teachers at Marshside because it was after school and most of them were still in their rooms working when I would come in to pick up their paper-filled boxes. They would thank me and ask how I was doing which made me feel as if I were really helping out. My science teacher would always say that I was eco-friendly. I guess because I was following my poem, Trash Monkey, with action. Sometimes it would take me until five to finish and I would then ride home on an activity bus that the school provided for athletes and club members who remained after school for various reasons.

This particular day I had just emptied the boxes in my science classroom into my large box on the pull cart that I used to transport my loads of paper to the giant recycling bin located at the end of each hallway. I had just arrived at the huge waste paper receptacle when, out of nowhere, Larry Loper, who was hiding in the mass of paper wads inside the recycling bin, jumps up, knocking the closed top wide open and screams, “Yaaaaaaah!” right in my face.

He launched me past the solar system. I almost had an accident in my pants he scared me so badly. I never dreamed that there would be a human in the recycling bin and an extraordinary one at that!

“Dude, what’s with you?” I screamed at him.

Crawling out of the bin with candy wrappers sticking to his shirt and a big glob of something stuck in his hair, he exclaimed, “I launched you, Jay. The look on your face was so funny,” he proclaimed while roaring with laughter.

“Yeah, it’s funny to you. Are you a Mr. Hipartner wannabe?” I inquired.

“No, but with your help we are going to give him a taste of his own medicine,” he told me in a lowered tone of voice as he looked all around to see if anyone might be listening.

“You are on your way to Mr. Hipartner’s room right now, correct?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I replied after hesitating to think for a second.

“He’s in his room, correct?”

“I don’t know,” I answered as I felt a sense of his prank beginning to rear its ugly head in his tone of voice.

“Well, he is because before I blasted you, I checked by looking through his window. Here’s what I need you to do,” he ordered.

I interrupted his command by asking, “Why do I have to be the one to get in trouble with you? There are a thousand other kids here at school,” I stated firmly as I really wanted to back out; however, I felt as I had wandered too far into the net of peer pressure and was now totally entangled in its twisted twine.

“You’re not going to get in trouble, dude. This is going to be really, really funny. It’s going to go down quickly and we will all have a big laugh, but Hipartner is going to learn a very valuable lesson,” he pontificated with a very serious look on his misguided face.

“Ok, ok, tell me what to do. I’ll do it,” I folded in under the pressure and agreed wholeheartedly to take part in this perilous scheme.

“All right, you go get Hipartner out of his room by asking him to help you by carrying the recycling box in his classroom to the big one at the end of the hallway. Tell him that you need help emptying it because your mom’s waiting on you in the parking lot. Ok?”

“Then what?” I wanted to know as I still didn’t get it.

“Remember what happened to you a few minutes ago?” he asked.

Now, I caught on and blurted out, “You are going to launch him like he launches us!”

“Yes, I am. We can’t get in trouble because we can say he does it to us.”

“I think you have a point,” I unwittingly said for I was unaware of the possible dire consequences of my forthcoming actions. When I arrived at his classroom, he was seated at his desk grading papers.

“Hi partner!” I uttered as I swung open his door.

“Use mister, Mister Jay!” he shot back.

“Sir, can you please take your recycling box to the bin at the end of the hallway for me? I’m kind of in a hurry,” I said in a little kid pleading kind of tone.

“Sure, Jay,” he quickly replied as he put his red pen down, stood up, and walked to the door.

As he left his room with the recycling box in his hand, I kind of followed behind him. Just as he got to the bin and was about to lift the giant lid, Larry, who had been listening to the teacher’s approaching footsteps on the concrete walkway, blasted straight up and screamed, “NO!” almost in Hipartner’s face.

Hipartner launched two feet straight up. Holding his hand to his chest, he staggered around and around in a tight circle for a few seconds, gasped for breath and fell to the ground with a loud, “Thud”.

As we watched in total terror, we weren’t laughing. I screamed, “Heart attack!” as Larry, trying to climb out, knocked over the bin spewing trash everywhere and fell flat on his chest, his legs still inside the bin. I scrambled to the teacher’s side, took his arm, and frantically felt for a pulse.

Larry had by now crawled out of the bin, stood up and was next to me crying, “If he’s dead, we will be on trial for murder. I didn’t mean to hurt him, Jay! This is terrible. What was I thinking?”

You weren't thinking; I thought, as I couldn't find a pulse. There may have been one but I certainly couldn't find it. By then, I was in a state of panic. "I'm starting CPR, Larry. Kneel down and help me turn him over," I ordered because he was lying face down on the concrete corridor. Larry quickly knelt by my side. We mustered all of our strength to the count of, "One, two, three," in order to turn him on his back when, without warning, he bursts up from the floor screaming in our faces, "Gotcha!" We were both blasted so badly that I thought I was the one having a heart attack. Simultaneously, both of our legs gave out and we fell to the ground in a seemingly choreographed fainting scene as he laughed so loudly for so long that it caused us to begin to laugh and we all three did for like the longest time. Wow, he certainly had taught us a lesson, "Don't mess with the Master Blaster!"

When I got home, I was going to tell my mom as soon as I saw her, but she wanted to tell me something very important, so I didn't get a chance.

"Jay, guess what?" she asked as I took off my shoes and sat down at the kitchen table.

"What, Mom?"

"Guess," she answered.

"Ok, you got two for one on the eggs you bought at the store today and you are scrambling me a dozen for dinner." I guessed.

"No, better than that," she stated.

"What, Mom, what?" I begged as I knew it was something good.

"Laz is moving back right after Thanksgiving," she told me.

With that, I went into a state of happiness that could not be duplicated! My best friend was returning to help me put back together the broken pieces of our lives. He would be so thrilled when I told him of our impending trip to the

Seaquarium. My prowess as a writer had made certain of that journey to view the unique creatures of the sea.

I never did tell my mom about how I gave in to peer pressure and became a collaborator in the Hipartner prank. I guess that I was so caught up in the school year that I totally forgot about confessing. It didn't really matter, for I would never be a part of a deviant scheme again. At least, I hoped that I would be able to exhibit more self control if I were confronted with a peer's offer to join in on something that might get me in trouble. My big mistake was agreeing even to listen to his scheme. That's what led me astray. I should have told him that I wanted no part of it. I guess you live and learn, or, at least, you hope you learn! Anyway, time would tell and it certainly was flying by like kids racing across the courtyard at lunch time in order to be first in the line for the tasteless cafeteria poser food. I say poser because there were certain items served for lunch that just didn't seem to be authentic. They were more like plastic facsimiles of cuisine.

Chapter 5 – Hurry up, Laz!

There was still three weeks until Laz arrived and I could hardly wait. As soon as he arrived, I was going to tell him all about Mr. Hipartner's brilliant double gotcha. That was seriously funny; he really did get us. I knew Laz was going to want to be in his class when I told him about the neat stories that he wrote and read to us and the fact that, besides his strange ways, he was a great teacher.

One morning during my three-week wait for Laz, I arrived at Marshside very early because my mom had to go to Ft. Lauderdale to the doctor and she dropped me at school. While standing outside of the gate which was still locked, this girl Shaka Shiloh, who was in my P.E. class, walked up to me and started a conversation. She asked me if I liked anyone and I told her that I liked this girl Susie Jamers who had moved from Homestead to Ft. Myers after Hurricane Andrew destroyed her house. She had no reply to that and just stood there looking at me as if something was wrong. All of a sudden she blurted out, "Jay, I need a favor!"

"What kind of a favor?" I asked.

"I'm planning a surprise birthday party for my boyfriend, Bart, next Saturday." She told me.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Well, first I'd like to invite you and second I'd like you to tell Bart that..."

She was, without warning, interrupted by Bart who had just come up behind us and was yelling at Shaka for talking to me.

"Calm down," I offered the enraged boyfriend.

"I'm not talking to you, Bozo," he screamed.

Not wanting to be suspended for fighting, I swallowed my pride and just began to walk away when the school's security police person walked up and told Bart and me to go to the office immediately.

This was wild. I was getting ready to walk away from what could have been a fight and as a reward for a positive behavior get sent to the office. This was messed up. On the way to the office, I didn't say a word to Bart and he didn't talk to me. I wasn't really happy with Shaka either for getting me in this situation although it was more Bart's fault than hers.

We finally arrived at the main office where we were directed to the guidance office. When we entered the room and the secretary told us to take a seat in the first room on the right. There were three chairs against the wall with a desk across from them. Conflict resolution posters adorned the pale blue walls and the whole room gave me the creeps. It was the first time I had ever been sent to the office for disciplinary reasons, and ironically, I didn't do anything that would warrant being told to go there.

As I was sitting there thinking, the counselor came in, took a seat, and began to yell at us both.

"What is the meaning of this, boys?" she loudly asked.

We both just sat there staring at the floor when she singled out Bart and firmly asked, "What is this about, Bart?"

Looking up with anger that shone in his eyes like a dog whose food had just been snatched away, he loudly stated, "Bozo here was talking to my girlfriend!"

"What's up with Bozo, Bart?" I angrily asked as I was getting fed up with this dumb kid and being in the office for something that I didn't do.

Turning her head towards me because we were sitting at opposite ends of the row of the three chairs, she asked, "Jay, what's this about?"

“He just told you, Ms. Steadling, I was talking to his girlfriend, and I don’t appreciate being called Bozo either.” I told them both.

“Bart will apologize to you, Jay. I want to know why you were screaming at each other so loudly that you were heard two buildings away. Which one of you was screaming or was it both of you?” she continued her interrogation.

She became pensive for a moment and then said, “You know, boys, it doesn’t matter who screamed. That was the effect of the matter. I would like to get to the cause of it; yet, I know exactly what caused the entire incident.” With that she had the secretary send for Shaka to come to the office. In about three minutes, Shaka arrived and took a seat between us.

Ms. Steadling asked Shaka what the incident was all about when suddenly Bart broke in screaming that he was tired of her talking to other boys when she was going out with him.

“Bart, will you stop acting like a five year old, please.” Shaka begged.

“Shaka, are you going out with Bart?” Ms. Steadling asked.

“I was, Ms. Steadling.” she quickly replied.

With that, Bart’s head dropped onto his chest. “Why, Shaka, why? I don’t want to break up. Why?” Bart cried.

“I’ll tell you why, Bart. I was going to ask Jay to help me plan a surprise birthday party next Saturday night for you and you totally ruined it all.” Shaka told a very sad young man.

Sitting there, I was asking myself how I could’ve been caught up in all this drama when Bart blurted out, “I caused this, Jay. Dude, I’m sorry for yelling at you and calling you a name. Shaka, I am so sorry, really sorry for the whole thing.”

“That’s okay, man.” I told him quickly as I wanted out of there.

Ms. Steadling told us to go to class and that we had learned a valuable lesson from this incident. She asked us the cause and Shaka answered, “Jealousy.” The counselor then asked if we agreed with Shaka’s answer. We nodded in agreement, shook hands, and off we went to the P.E. class that we all three had with Mr. Superhuman second hour. As I walked directly behind the two former love birds, I could hear them talking.

Bart asked, “Shaka, are you still going to have the party?”

“I don’t know, probably not.” she answered in a dejected tone.

“I mean; you could because your mom doesn’t know about any of this,” he added.

They continued walking without saying a word until just as they were almost at the gym doors, Shaka turned to Bart and told him, “My mom doesn’t know about any of this and she has spent so much money on the DJ and food for the party. I’m still going to have it, but I’ll have to tell my mom that the surprise was ruined.”

I guess she had to work out all of this with her mom. It was her problem for liking such a loser anyway. The last thing that happened before they entered class was Bart asked if they were broken up for good and she told him, yes. He then asked if he was invited. She thought a second and said yes and that they could still be friends. She then turned to me, pulled an invitation from her book bag and asked me to please be there. I said I would since I had never been to a real kid party with music, dancing and food before. It sounded like a lot of fun. I so wished Susie could be there, but that wasn’t going to happen, but the future would hopefully bring us back together to live happily ever after. I really liked the thought of that!

When I got home that afternoon, I told my mom the entire story. She said it sounded like one of her afternoon soap operas. I laughed and agreed with that.

She then said she would drive me to Miami to the party Saturday evening. She would visit relatives there and pick me up at 10 o'clock. I said great and that I couldn't wait for the fun I was certain to have at Shaka's.

Chapter 6 – Get the Party Started

Saturday seemed like forever but finally it was here. My mom took the longest time getting ready to go and because of that I was about thirty minutes late. When we pulled up to Shaka's, you could hear the music from the DJ's amplifiers in her backyard inside the car with the windows rolled up. My mom said, "Jay, That's pretty loud. Don't stand too close to the amps please. The music is so loud that it could damage your hearing," she commanded in her motherly tone.

"Okay, Mom, I promise. See you at ten." I yelled over the thumping bass as I slammed the front door of the car and sprinted towards the fun that was obviously being had by all. This was evident from the kids' voices in the backyard, for it was like everyone at once was trying to talk over the music.

I hurried up the walkway to the front door and rang the doorbell to no avail. Deciding that everyone was in the backyard, I walked around to the side of the house, opened the iron-fence gate, and joined the revelry. I had just reached the end of the house and had turned towards the patio when I was greeted by Shaka who didn't look as if she was having that much fun at her own party, a party that wasn't for Bart anymore. His big bad bully behavior had put an end to that. Big bad bully made me think of a very silly game that some kids played at school called BB check. First, you signed in by locking your little pinky finger around another kid's. Then if you say a word that begins with "B", you get punched in the arm unless you say, "BB check." Big bad bully would get you really punched. The Principal came on the announcements and said BB check was prohibited at Marshside Middle because of the problems it caused, so BB check got checked quite quickly.

After I spoke with Shaka, I walked towards the back door of her house where there was a table with about a dozen two-liter soda bottles resting upon a white table cloth that was stained with brown splotches from people not carefully pouring their drinks. I took a cup from a stack, dipped some ice into it from the large cooler on the ground below the table, and filled it to the very top with delicious cold soda.

Looking around the crowd, I saw quite a few people from school that I knew from my classes and from being an office assistant. There were about thirty kids there, a few were dancing but most were just hanging out enjoying the beautiful Southern Florida evening. It was almost Thanksgiving and it was still warm. Actually, it was perfect. If Susie were there, it would be even more perfect I thought. I was going to find her during the holiday vacation. That was a bet!

I had just moved away from the table with the sodas when Shaka, who looked really sad, walked up to me and said, “Jay, look at Bart. He’s dancing with Silvia Wyldthing and I do not like the way he’s holding her. I should have told the DJ not to play slow songs.” She was wasting her breath telling me all that because I really didn’t care if he was dancing with an elephant. I had enough of him to last a lifetime.

“Yeah, you’re not going out with him, are you?” I kind of hesitatingly asked.

“I don’t know. I, eh, I mean, no, we are split up,” she answered in an unsure tone.

“He is really enjoying himself,” I told her to try to add a little pain to her drama. It was an attempt to get even for being dragged into the deal in the office at school.

“Yes, he is a little too much. Hey, Jay, you wanna dance with me, please?” she pleaded.

“I can’t dance, Shaka,” I immediately shot back.

“Sure, you can, Jay. All you have to do is hold me as closely as Bart is holding Wyldthing and that’s it,” she continued to beg as she could see that I was extremely hesitant to do it.

“I’ll give you ten dollars if you will,” Shaka offered.

Now, I needed money for Susie’s seahorse necklace and ten dollars would help a lot, so I blurted out, “You’re on, baby. Let’s dance!”

“I’m going to tell the DJ to play another slow song. I’ll be right back.” she told me.

As Shaka was maneuvering through the crowd to get to where the DJ was standing, she was constantly watching Bart and Silvia staring into each other’s eyes like a couple of love-struck zombies. She finally made it through the crowd, told the DJ, and walked back over to where I was waiting to earn my pay.

As the next song began, Shaka took me by the arm and dragged me into the mix. She put her arms around my neck and I put mine around her waist. I closed my eyes and dreamed it was Susie as we moved to the beat of the music. Dancing like this is kind of fun, I thought as my reverie was broken by Bart grabbing Shaka by the arm, swinging her around and shouting, “I’m sick of this game playing, Shaka. Who is it going to be, me or him?”

Gazing into Bart’s enraged eyes, Shaka said, “You, Bart, you. It’s you!”

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her in front of the entire crowd of now forty people. Someone started singing Happy Birthday to Bart and everyone joined in, even me. I didn’t care. I had earned my ten dollars and earned it well.

Towards the end of the party, Silvia Wyldthing walked up to where I was standing and told me that Bart had paid her to dance with him to get Shaka’s attention.

“What?” I loudly shouted to pretend she had done something terribly wrong. “You, did what? Girl, you sold out. That’s not right. I don’t believe you did that! You took money to dance?”

“Gee, Jay. I needed the money....” She tried to explain.

“Well, jealousy broke them up and ironically jealousy brought them back together again. It’s kind of like a love story with a happy ending although I was the pawn in the entire game. All’s well that ends well, but I still don’t believe you did that, girl!” I lectured.

Just as I had finished my grown-up sounding speech admonishing Silvia for taking money to dance, Shaka walked up to me and said, “Hey, Jay. Here’s your ten dollars for dancing with me!”

Silvia looked at me and cried, “You Dawg, you sold out!” We then both began to laugh so hard that we cried. The rest of the evening every time Silvia would look at me we would laugh again. It turned out to be a great party.

I couldn’t wait to tell Laz and Susie too. I would probably remember this party for the rest of my life.

It was only a week until Laz would be in Homestead and honestly it made me very happy every single time that I thought about it.

Chapter 7 – Laz’s Back!

Finally, time with all its changes wound down to Thanksgiving. School was out on Wednesday, Thanksgiving was Thursday, and Laz would arrive at Miami International at 9:45 Friday Morning.

I had so much to tell him about middle school. It was extremely hard to imagine that so many interesting things could have happened to me in only the first three months of school. It made me wonder what else could possibly take place during the next six months. Whatever life brought, I would be ready to accept because I had become extremely self-confident. I owed that to my best friend Lazaro Cruz. He was a model of self confidence who did not allow the challenges of being in a wheelchair hold him back from doing any reasonable thing.

I was going to ask Laz to go with me to Ft. Myers during the two-week holiday break in December. Bruce’s aunt lived by herself in a large waterfront home and had a boathouse with a dock connected to it for us to stay in. How cool that would be! We would have our own house built over the water with a boat to use that was docked right outside our front door. What was even wilder was that Aunt V’s husband was in a wheelchair before he passed away two years ago in 1990 and the entire house was equipped for the physically challenged, even the boathouse. On top of that, there was a wheelchair lift on the dock that would put Laz directly into the front of the boat with little effort at all. He wasn’t going to believe me when I told him. It was going to take me at least two days to fill him in on everything that had happened and also that which would take place in our future. I knew he would say that I was making most of it up, but I wasn’t. Aunt V told my mom all about the facilities at her home and approved both of us staying as long as we wished any time that we desired. She must have a lot of money as

she certainly owned a lot of nice things. How fortunate we both were to be able to share them.

When Friday finally arrived, I was as excited as a mouse in a cheese factory. I awakened at four a.m. and couldn't go back to sleep. My step-dad, Bruce and I were going to meet our friend Laz at the airport to give him a ride to the apartment in Kendall where his family would be staying for a while until accommodations were available in Homestead.

Bruce and I arrived at Miami International at about nine o'clock Saturday morning. What a busy airport! It's hard to describe the scene. It was kind of like you were in the woods and you see this rotting piece of tree lying on the ground so you kick it over and bugs go scrambling every which way. That's exactly what the place looked like.

We found his flight on the giant arrival board and then proceeded to the gate to await his return. What was so way cool was that when we arrived at the gate, Laz was being wheeled towards us by a flight attendant. His plane had landed earlier than the time stated on the board. My eyes lit up like sparklers in the dark when I saw my best friend ever.

"Laz!" I screamed over the drone of the intercom announcing the arrival of his flight.

"Jay!" he loudly replied just as the announcement was over. This caused everyone in a one-hundred foot radius to turn their heads to witness the reuniting of two best friends.

We shook our traditional brother hand shake for like a minute. He almost broke my hand his grip was so strong.

"Hey, Bruce, I didn't mean to dis you. I was just so excited to see Jay. I really didn't think that we would ever get to meet again after I moved to Atlanta," he told my step-dad.

“It’s okay, Laz. We are all glad you are back. You and Jay have a lot to talk about. He told me some really funny things that have happened to him in middle school.” Bruce replied.

After making our escape from the mega-crowded airport, we were finally on our way to Laz’s new home where his mom and baby sister were awaiting his arrival. Laz had come by himself because his mom had come a week earlier to get the apartment ready. He had been staying with a family friend in Marietta, Ga. His dad was in Germany for another month stationed at an Air Force Base there. He told us all this as we maneuvered in and out of the massive traffic on the way from Miami to Kendall, Laz’s new home for now.

While driving we never shut up for one second. There was so much to share. I told Laz to ask his mom if he could go with me to Ft. Myers to stay in my Aunt’s boathouse and go fishing for a week. He said he knew it would be okay.

“What day would we leave?” he asked.

“The day after Christmas, we would be there for an entire week,” I answered.

“Wow, that’s awesome!” he blurted out.

“You haven’t heard half of how awesome it is. I’ll tell you the rest on the phone tonight,” I said as we pulled into the driveway of Laz’s new home.

Chapter 8 – Ft. Myers or Bust!

That night on the phone, we talked for over two hours. Laz said he fell out of bed laughing so hard when I told him about Shaka's party and Chef Gregore. After that, I followed it up with how Mr. Hipartner blasted us by playing opossum and how we were so upset because we thought that we had given him a heart attack. He then jumps up and screams, "Gotcha", causing us to almost have one. I then informed him that he would be accompanying me to the Seaquarium and that I had written a poem about a monkey who ate trash to win the trip. He said that it all sounded rather confusing but that I could elaborate on it at a later date.

Laz told me he wanted to go to my school, but couldn't because of the location of his residence was not within the Marshside's school boundary. He went on to say that he would call every other night to talk about what was going on. I told him that if he didn't call, I would.

As we spoke, we chatted about our upcoming trip to Ft. Myers. I explained that my primary purpose in going was to locate Susie. Bruce was listening to the radio and couldn't hear, so I continued to tell Laz that staying in a boathouse that was built over the water and fishing from our own boat were purpose numbers two and three. It was probably a pretty selfish thing for me to say, but Laz would understand, because that's what best friends do.

I went on to tell Laz that evening that Bruce was going to take us across Florida on the Tamiami Trail and to tell Laz and me all about its rich history as we drove through the Everglades and the Big Cypress Swamp.

It was going to be the absolute ultimate to have Bruce share his great knowledge with us. I simply could not wait to go, for the wide-open expanse of the great sawgrass marsh, the Everglades, and the deep green stillness of the Big Cypress Swamp held secrets that were about to be unlocked.

Time, at least for me, was sailing by quickly. Laz and I spoke on the phone about three times a week. He would always say, “Jay, I want to go to Marshside Middle School.”

“I know, Laz, but you can’t. You know quite well that can’t happen. Have patience, my friend, before you know it the Air Force will have built officer’s quarters for your family. After your new home is finished, you and I will be together at Homestead Middle School, hopefully for the seventh grade.” I told him.

“You make everything sound so much more pleasing,” he added.

“Yeah, it’s thinking positively, bro. If you dwell on negativity, it will bring you down. In U.S. Military talk, being negative is an air-to-air missile that you have to out-maneuver to avoid being destroyed. Being positive is the protective shield that guards you from attack,” I lectured.

“That is a very cool way of explaining it. Let’s call it ‘Jay’s Theory of Positivity’,” he chuckled.

“Whatever, dude. Get ready because we are going to Ft. Myers in a few days. Don’t eat too much at Christmas. You’ll sink the boat.” I laughed as I told him good-bye.

“Same to you, bye.” he blurted out as he ended the call.

Before we even realized it, time had ground the days into memories and we were off to Ft. Myers. Bruce and I packed the car early that morning, ate breakfast with mom, and then headed towards Kendall to pick up Laz.

When we arrived, Laz was in his front yard awaiting our arrival. He had this little freshwater fishing pole designed to catch minnows in his lap, a large straw hat with a wide, floppy brim on his head, and his suitcase by his side.

“You’re leaving that sombrero here, dude!” I yelled at Laz through the rolled up windows of Bruce’s minivan as we pulled alongside him. Reading my

lips he began to laugh so hard that he started Bruce and me giggling like second graders.

“It’s for the sun, son,” Laz uttered while still partially laughing.

“Yeah, son, we’ll find you something a bit more attractive when we get there, and as for your miniature fishing pole, leave it here. Bruce’s aunt has all the rods, reels, and tackle we will ever need in her boathouse,” I ordered as Bruce put his makeshift plywood ramp securely in place on the side of the van and we wheeled Laz up the ramp into the area where Bruce had removed the seats so that he could have room for the ride. Bruce buckled Laz’s chair to the floor so he was safe, jumped into the van, and off down North Kendall Drive to US 1 we went. We drove on Dixie Highway, US 1, for a while. We then we got on SW 27th Avenue for a little ways and “Boom”, there was US 41! We turned west and Ft. Myers was but a few hours away.

“Guys, this is the eastern end of the trail. We have a bit of city to see as we head west, but once we cross Krome Avenue, SW 177th Avenue, we’ll be in the Everglades. As we continue through the city, I’ll give you some history about Florida’s Everglades and the Tamiami Trail. Krome Avenue is named after William J. Krome, the gentleman who, in the early Twentieth Century, surveyed Henry Flagler’s railroad route to the Keys.

Honestly, I couldn’t wait and neither could Laz as he said, “Bruce, we are quite fortunate to have you as our tour guide today!” Loudly laughing, we continued our exciting journey towards Florida’s beautiful Everglades.

Chapter 9 – Caution: Crocodile Crossing

Once we crossed Krome Avenue and drove for a few miles, Bruce began one of the totally most interesting historical stories that Laz and I both had ever heard.

He began by saying, “Boys, look around on both sides of the road. What you see is what Marjorie Stoneman Douglas named in her 1947 book of the same title, *The Everglades, River of Grass*. The first line of her book reads, ‘There are no other Everglades in the world’. The Everglades are kind of like you two guys, very special.”

“Thank you, Bruce. Was it Ms. Douglass who first called the area *The Everglades*?” Laz asked.

“Good question,” Bruce continued. “She only named it *River of Grass*. The term *Everglades* first showed up on a map in 1823 but it was spelled with two words *Ever Glades*.”

Laz and I knew a little bit about the Everglades since the headquarters of Everglades National Park was in Flamingo just a short ride from Homestead. We had made several field trips to the park when we were in elementary school and took guided tours provided by park rangers. I guess we were too little to realize the significance of what we were hearing but understanding the importance of the Everglades, thanks to Bruce’s guided tour, was beginning to take on new meaning in our lives. We lived right on the edge of the Everglades and it was our responsibility to see that it was preserved for generations to come. Laz and I were usually always in total agreement about things. On this particular subject we most certainly were in total agreement. The Everglades must survive!

“Tell us more, please, Bruce.” Laz pleaded.

“Sure, let’s start with the origin of the Everglades National Park. It was opened in 1947, the same year that Ms. Douglass published her book. It is the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States and is the home to many rare and endangered species. There are thirty-six threatened or endangered animal species alone! I’m going to leave it to you guys to further research the Everglades’ flora and fauna and continue with the history of the Tamiami Trail that crosses and divides the Everglades. I will from time to time during my talk refer to the sheet flow of water through the Everglades and its continued flow being of the utmost importance to its survival.”

“This must be what it is like to listen to a college lecture. How did you learn all of this interesting information, Bruce?” Laz inquired as he gazed at the seemingly never-ending saw grass, also known as sedge.

“Well, I lived in the Ft. Myers area most of my life until I met Jay’s mom and moved to Homestead. The million or so times that I drove the Trail to and from Homestead to Ft. Myers sparked an interest in the very diverse ecosystem and I began to read about it. Of course, I didn’t drive it a million times. That is a figure of speech called, “Hyperbole”. Hyperbole is a huge exaggeration used for effect in writing or speaking. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know about it. I’m still learning and my wish is that you guys take an interest in the area and continue my quest for knowledge,” Bruce answered with a tremendous smile on his face.

“When was the Tamami Trail built?” I asked the professor as we passed a small flock of buzzards pecking at the remains of what looked like a smashed raccoon alongside of the road. The vultures were so were hungry for rotting flesh that they hardly glanced up from their meal to acknowledge our passing.

“Jay, construction of the north-south section of the Trail started in 1915. A wealthy Miami resident named Captain James Jaudon owned a great deal of what

is now Everglades land. He wanted to develop it, although his land was in Monroe County and he desired a more southern route for the Trail. That's why he came up with the idea of a road linking Florida's Atlantic and Gulf Coasts so as to provide access to his real estate holdings. The state liked his idea and work on the Trail began. It took twelve arduous years to build the entire 275 mile road from Tampa to Miami. The workers had to contend with snakes, alligators, and mosquitoes so thick that they looked like dark clouds. The combination of the names of the two cities that were linked by the trail, Tampa and Miami, provided its name, Tamiami. Tamiami wasn't the first name proposed. I want you guys to research it and tell me what it was, ok?"

"Sure, Bruce," we chorused.

"The road cost eight million dollars to build," Bruce went on but was interrupted by Laz who added that wasn't a lot of money for that much road.

"Yeah, Laz, it wasn't, but a dollar was worth far more in 1916 than today. That's an entire story of its own. Inflation is another subject you boys can research after your week in Ft. Myers." Bruce offered.

I'm going to be in the library for weeks I thought as Bruce pulled into a roadside park to use the restroom. While he was gone, Laz and I were almost eaten alive by hungry mosquitoes. They were so bad that I had to wheel Laz out of the van into the parking lot with me, for the van was full of the annoying insects.

"Hurry up, Bruce," I shouted while running in circles swatting them from my skin. Laz had draped a towel over his head and was laughing at the sight of me running all around the parking lot trying to elude the pack of blood-thirsty bugs.

As Bruce came out of the restroom, a loud "pop" caused him to swing around towards the swampy area just behind him.

Chapter 10 – Fascination Highway

“What was that “pop”?” I yelled across the parking lot where Bruce was walking over to a seawall that had a narrow wooden walkway in front of it. I imagine that the walkway was there to prevent people from falling from the seawall into the water.

As Bruce stepped down from the concrete seawall onto the wooden walkway, he shaded his eyes from the sun and turned to shout at us, “It’s a school of snook. It was one of the larger ones that made the noise as it gulped down a baitfish. I wish I had a pole right now!”

“Laz to the rescue!” came Laz’s reply. “I brought the little rod and reel that Jay told me not to bring,” he shouted at Bruce who was obviously very excited, for he nearly stumbled into the parking lot as he leaped to the seawall.

“Hurry, Laz. Get your pole. What kind of lure do you have?” Bruce anxiously asked.

Laz wheeled swiftly to the van, picked up his rod with his tiny little reel on it and replied, “I’m not sure. It is a little round lead head with a plastic tail on it. It looks like a small fish when you cast it out and reel it in.”

Just as Laz finished describing his lure, he was positioned directly behind Bruce who was standing on the seawall pointing to the fish.

“Laz, cast your lure towards those mangrove trees and reel it towards you as fast as you are able. The snook will think it is a baitfish trying to avoid being eaten and that will stimulate them to feed, I hope.” Bruce said as Laz cast his lure directly at the mangroves that were growing on the edge of the water in front of the bank on the other side of the canal which was about thirty feet across. From his vantage point on top of the seawall, Bruce could see the lure land just on the

other side of the school of snook. Boy, I was a bit envious and wished that I had brought a pole. Anyway, Bruce ordered, “Reel, Laz, reel!”

Laz turned the crank on the reel as fast as his hands would allow him. Suddenly, he shouted, “I’ve got one!”

“Pull back hard, Laz,” Bruce commanded as Laz’s pole bent double and his line was zinging off of his reel at what seemed like a hundred miles an hour as the snook was headed towards Miami. The strength of the great fish was pulling Laz and his chair rapidly across the parking lot on a collision course with the seawall.

“Help, Jay!” he pleaded. Sprinting as fast as my two legs would carry me, I grabbed him just as he was going to slam into the side of the seawall. With that, the snook leaped into the air. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. It was golden-brown with a long dark line running down its side from behind its pectoral fin to its tail. It opened its mouth while in the air, shook its giant head, and threw the lure right back at Laz as if in a paradoxical role reversal, it was casting the lure straight at Laz trying to catch him. The lure just missed Laz’s head as he ducked and it landed with a tinkling sound as it skidded across the asphalt parking lot.

With line hanging over his shoulder and his little pole that had just nearly been destroyed by the golden monster lying across his lap, he grinned at me and blurted out, “Jay, dude, that was fun!”

“I see.” I replied, softly as I had so wished I had had the same chance at catching Florida’s popular game fish, the snook.

Sensing Laz’s and my disappointment, Bruce spoke in a consoling tone, “Guys, Aunt V’s dock has snook all around it. When I was your age, I spent many an hour fishing from it. Not only that, the islands and oyster bars that you’ll be able to get to by boat are teeming with not only snook, but trout and redfish as well. You two are going to have a very good time fishing the area around her

house. Don't worry about losing that one, Laz, there will be plenty of other chances for you to catch a trophy fish, and you too, Jay."

"I can't wait, if it's going to be that cool. What a powerful fish! I almost was pulled in," Laz told us while chuckling.

"Come on, Guys, let's go. There are so many more beautiful sights to see and I must continue the lecture on the Trail and Everglades history," Bruce said as he secured Laz's ramp and I wheeled him into the area behind the front seats of the van. Bruce then got in, I followed and we were on our way into paradise.

"When I was younger," Bruce began, "I knew a gentleman who had worked on building the Trail in the 1920's. I used to visit his house on occasion and he told me that teams of men had to wade through the swamp and lay cypress rail tracks built on cypress poles in the mud. After the tracks were finished, carts full of men, drills, and dynamite lumbered over them pulled by an ox."

"Why did they need dynamite in a swamp, Bruce?" I inquired as it seemed so strange.

"Because, Jay, beneath all of that mud there is solid rock, the crew, he said, would first drill a hole in the rock and stuff in the dynamite. After that, they would light the fuse and hightail it out of the way of the huge explosion! It took 2,598,000 sticks of dynamite to build the trail!" Bruce exclaimed as we listened with our mouths hanging open in disbelief.

"The mosquitoes and horseflies ate the men up. It was a very difficult life he would tell me and he would always say that he hoped I would never have to endure such hardship to make a living. After the dynamite had loosened the rock, giant dredges would come along and scoop up the loose rock and those pieces of rock became the roadbed. It's interesting to note, guys, that in a while, we will be driving by the rusty remains of the last dredge. It was called the Bay City Walker.

It rests just inside of the entrance to the Collier-Seminole State Park that we will pass in an hour or so,” Bruce added.

“Did he ever say how much money that he was paid for all of that hard work?” I asked.

“Yes, he told me that, as I remember, it was fewer than one hundred dollars a month,” Bruce answered.

“Not a lot of money for all that,” Laz added.

“Yeah, but remember what I told you about inflation, Laz,” Bruce said.

“Guys, remember that the road took twelve very difficult years to build?” Bruce asked as he drove.

“Yeah,” we answered.

“Well, in 1922, seven years after the road that was proposed by Capt. Jaudon was started, the state of Florida ran out of money for the project.”

“How did it get finished,” I wanted to know.

“Easy, there was another very wealthy business man besides Capt. Jaudon, Baron Collier, who owned millions of acres in southwest Florida. Since his land was north of Capt. Jaudon’s real estate holdings the route was changed to more of an east-west segment that we are on right now. He agreed with the state that he would pay for completion of the project because the road would make his real estate much more valuable; thus construction on the east-west segment of the road financed by Mr. Collier began. The Florida legislature then took the southern part of what was then a very huge Lee County and established a new county named Collier County after Mr. Collier. The road was finished and ready for traffic in 1928. The Loop Road in the Big Cypress Swamp was the original route. You can see it on a map.

“Lee County must’ve been colossal,” Laz added.

“Yes, it was. Hendry County, the county directly to the east of Lee, was once a part of Lee County as well. I want you guys to research this even further when you get home after you finish telling me all of the fish stories that are going to take place this coming week of vacation.”

With that Laz shouted out, “What’s that large dark, furry animal over there?”

Chapter 11 – It’s So Funny That I Can’t Bear It.

We had just pulled out of the park when Laz declared he had seen what, to him, looked like a black bear on the edge of a group of cypress trees about fifty yards from the Trail on the north side of the road.

“It is a bear!” Laz proclaimed. “Look, guys, over there!”

Both of us looked in the direction that Laz was pointing but saw nothing that appeared to be a bear. Bruce pulled over to the side of the road and Laz continued to insist that there was a bear in the water just outside of the large group of cypress trees located in the direction we were all three now looking.

Bruce explained to us that the groups of cypress trees were known as a cypress head or dome. He told us that the larger trees grow in the middle of it and they get smaller and smaller towards the outside of the head. The lack of sufficient oxygen causes the roots of the cypress to stick out above the water. These protruding roots Bruce said were called knees. He went on to say that there were two types of cypress in the Everglades, the bald and the pond and we were looking at bald cypress as we watched for Laz’s bear.

As Bruce was talking about the ecological importance of cypress heads he was interrupted by Laz who exclaimed, “There, there it is, look!” as he pointed in the direction of his black bear.

The dark, hairy creature that Laz called a bear had been beneath the water for what seemed like two or three minutes and had just come up for a breath of air when we all three spotted it.

“It’s a Florida otter, Laz.” Bruce told him as it dove again and took off swiftly in pursuit of its prey.

I began to laugh as Laz looked like he was quite disappointed.

“It’s not funny, Jay,” he angrily stated. “It looked like it was diving underwater to get a fish. I saw a show on TV where bears dove into the water to catch a salmon. That’s what I thought that I was seeing.”

“Yeah, yeah, it is quite funny, Laz, and I’m never going to let you forget it, dude,” I told him. “You won’t find salmon in the Everglades.”

“Ok, Jay, how about the time at school you told me about when you and that other kid pulled that prank on Mr. Hipart....”

“Uh, Laz, that was a joke,” I broke in because I knew Bruce would be very upset with me if he found out about the prank gone awry. Plus, I had learned a lesson from it and would never be guilty of something like that again. I had to interrupt Laz.

“What joke?” Bruce asked.

Suddenly, Laz yelled from behind us, “There it is again! The amazing diving bear!” and we all three began to laugh causing Bruce to stop his interrogation.

Bruce pulled back onto the highway as we continued to chuckle. He also never asked me again about the so-called joke that I allowed peer pressure to get me involved in. Laz had done that on purpose. He had saved me from a stern lecture or maybe even being grounded. He knew that he shouldn’t have said what he did about my stupid prank and he diverted Bruce’s attention from the subject. What a neat friend. How fortunate I was. I would never tease him again for mistaking a dark-coated, four-foot otter for a bear. I did think that he otter be more careful with his identification of Everglades wildlife though.

Along the Trail, we saw many alligators sunning themselves on the bank or stealthily slithering through the water in wait for their next meal. The water looked like it was a dark color from the road, but when you stood over it and

gazed into it, it was crystal clear. Anyway, the gators were so thick that I told Laz that the road should be renamed Alligator Trail.

Just as I said that to Laz, Bruce spoke up telling us, “Guys, the road that is directly north of us and crosses the state is called Alligator Alley. That’s how it got its name.”

“Wow, I can believe it. Look, there’s another one,” I said as I pointed at an eight-foot specimen on the bank to our right.

Laz belted out, “Let’s go wrestle it!” and we all laughed again. What a wonderfully enjoyable trip this was turning out to be.

Bruce told us when we finished laughing that it was against the law to feed or harass alligators and that if we tried to wrestle that particular colossal reptile that we would be its next meal. We could then be arrested for harassing as well as feeding it! Bruce was extremely clever. Laz and I stated many times that we had an enormous appreciation of his intelligence and humor.

As we continued our westward trek across Florida towards Ft. Myers, Laz spoke up saying, “Look, guys, airboat rides! Let’s take one!”

Chapter 12 – Miccosukee Paradise

Bruce told us that we didn't have time to take an airboat ride but that we would be returning for certain and he promised that he would arrange for us to take a ride across the saw grass. I then asked if we could please take a minute or two and stop to watch an airboat take off. Bruce nodded his head in agreement and pulled into the parking lot where Miccosukee Native American guides were loading tourists onto airboats and very loudly whisking them away into the Everglades for one-hour tours. When I say loudly, I mean just that. The Miccosukee guides must wear ear muffs to protect their hearing from the loud roar of the engine. The flat-bottomed aluminum boats have airplane engines with a giant propeller on the back to push them across the top of the saw grass and water. We watched in awe as one airboat vanished into the distance. Even though we couldn't see it, we could still hear it for a long period of time. I'd perceived a lot of nature's wonder in my mind's eye and in pictures as I read of beautiful places around the world over the past few years, but no picture, real or imagined, matched the wondrous beauty of the Everglades.

I asked Bruce about the Miccosukee as we left the parking lot and continued on the Trail.

"Jay, the history of the Miccosukee is extremely interesting." Bruce answered my request for information.

"Were they always here in the Everglades?" Laz wanted to know.

"No, Laz, they weren't. Native American tribes did live in South Florida dating back more than a thousand years, but the Miccosukee came to this area in the 1800's," Bruce lectured.

"Why did they settle here in this paradise?" I inquired of Bruce who you could tell couldn't wait to tell us.

“Jay, the Miccosukee were once members of a Native American tribe called the Creek. The Creek lived in the southern states. As time went by, some Creeks moved their homes to what is today north and north central Florida. The most southern of their settlements was about where Tampa is today. The very Southern part of Florida was only used then as hunting and fishing ground by the Native Americans. A series of events led to the US Secretary of War ordering General Andrew Jackson, who would later become president, to, along with his troops; invade the Creeks who lived in Northern and Central Florida in what was called the First Seminole War.

“Did he chase them all the way to the Everglades?” I asked.

“No, Jay, he didn’t. They didn’t go that far south until what was called the Second Seminole War in 1835 and it wasn’t the entire Seminole Nation who went that far south. It was a small fraction of the tribe who later became known as the Miccosukee who moved into the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp. Other Seminoles stayed in the Northern and Central Florida and fought there.

“As time passed, the Creeks or Seminoles, as they became to be known, who lived along the Trail, and in the Big Cypress Swamp adopted the name, Miccosukee. Originally part of the Seminole Tribe, the Miccosukee decided to break away and form an independent Tribe that governed itself. Other members of the Seminole Tribe settled on Reservations, land given to them by the US Government, around Lake Okeechobee, as well as, other parts of South Florida, and they retained the name, Seminoles. In 1962 the Miccosukee officially became recognized as a separate tribe from the Seminoles. Guys, there is so much more to it than that. What I’ve told you is but a minute part of the history of these wonderful people. The history of the Seminoles of Florida would take hours to explain. The research is now up to you two. After vacation is over, you need to

get to the library and read all you are able to. I'll drive you both anytime that you wish."

"I'm going to have my mom take me to get a library card as soon as I get home," Laz told Bruce.

"I have one and I plan on reading every book possible about the Everglades, the Seminole and the Miccosukee's history," I exclaimed as I noticed three birds perched on the branches of a cypress tree growing along the banks of the water that was beside the road. "What are those birds resting on the branches with their wings outstretched?"

"Those are anhinga. They are unique water birds in that their feathers do not have oil glands that serve to waterproof their feathers. The birds are outstanding divers and swimmers under water. They chase down fish and with the help from their long neck and sharpened beak, they spear the fish, swim to the surface and gulp it down! After their meal, they fly to the branches of trees and spread their water-soaked wings to dry in the sun. You can always tell which birds are females in that the feathers on her chest are much lighter in color than the male's chest feathers.

"Thanks, Bruce," I said, "You are a driving encyclopedia."

"Well, it's all from reading. There is nothing as important to your success as the words that lie between the covers of a book. They won't jump out and spear you like the anhinga, you have to dive in and spear them," Bruce told us as we laughed our way deep into the Big Cypress Swamp.

Bruce had really piqued my interest in the Everglades and I could hardly wait to research the area upon my return to Homestead. Laz was equally enthralled, as well. We both would be spending a great deal of time in the public and school libraries of Dade County in the coming months. There was absolutely no doubt about that. Personally, I wanted to see maps of the area to put this all in

perspective. As usual, I had formulated a plan. I was going to write down what I knew of the Everglades and then I would make extensive notes about that which I desired to know. The ecosystem types of the Everglades were of particular interest to me as I discerned areas that seemed to be totally unique in appearance as we drove through the marsh and swampy regions. Unable to contain my curiosity about the diversity of different types of ecosystems in the Everglades, I threw another question at Bruce.

“Bruce,” I asked, “what are the different ecosystem types that I have noticed as we crossed the Everglades Park?”

Well, Jay, he replied, there are many distinct types of ecosystems in the park. I’m only going to mention those we may see from the Trail as we cross the peninsula. I am going to leave it to you guys to thoroughly research all the ecosystems of the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp when you get home.

First, there is what we initially crossed as we entered the park, the Saw grass Marsh or as Ms. Douglas called it, The River of Grass.

Then you have the rockland pine forests, the highest area of the park. In some places, it soars to a massive height of a few meters above sea level! I was, of course, kidding about massive. I say that it was high when I really mean higher than the area surrounding it, for most of the park is flat. The earth is very rocky in the rockland pine forest and fires are quite common because the dry needles of the pine fall on the rocky surface and dry quickly. Lightning starts a great deal of these fires during the summer months and human carelessness ignites the pine forests in the winter months and spring. The plants that grow here have adapted quite well to these fires.

Next, you have the Hardwood Hammocks where the limestone rises a few feet above the adjacent area allowing trees such as the cocoplum, gumbo limbo, mahogany, cabbage palm and other plants to grow. The soil is quite damp in the

hammock and fires are not as common here, unless it is during a severe drought. It's interesting that as the leaves from the trees and other vegetation fall, the acidic nature of them dissolves the limestone around the hammock allowing water to flow in and form a kind of moat around the Hammock like the ones that circled the castles of old. The Native Americans settled in the Hardwood Hammocks and planted their gardens in the fertile soil.

As we near the coast, you will begin to notice a different ecosystem called the Mangrove Swamp. There you will find buttonwood and mangrove trees growing in an area that contains brackish water, a mix of fresh and saltwater, and quite a few fish as the roots of the mangroves grow in the water providing not only protection for the juveniles of the different species; but nutrients are in ample supply there, as well. This, of course, brings the larger fish in search of a meal of little fish to the mangrove trees. The mangrove swamp is a vital part of Florida's coastal ecosystem. They are so important to it they are illegal to cut in any way. When you guys are fishing, it would be wise to always pole as closely as possible to the mangrove roots and when you get within casting range, flip your lure right to the edge of the roots and reel it back. You will be extremely happy with the results if you are very quiet so as not to spook the fish as you approach.

Finally, south of here you will find the last ecosystem called the Coastal Prairie. Here you will see open meadows and woodlands containing the various hardwood trees that inhabit the Hardwood Hammocks. Coastal prairies are really beautiful, but, certainly all the ecosystems are equally as attractive.

“There you have them, guys. Now, try to identify the ecosystems that we pass today and as we cross on our return to Dade County next week,” Bruce told us as he continued his role of chauffeur/tour guide.

Amazed at the amount of information that we had both just digested, we stared out the window trying to identify exactly the landform we were currently seeing as we drove along the Trail.

Chapter 13 – Swamp City

We had spent the better part of the morning learning so much about our surroundings. So much that I had temporarily lost focus of my purpose in going to Ft. Myers. I had to find Susie as soon as we arrived. I needed to stop asking so many questions so that Bruce could concentrate on driving and we could arrive before dark. I had only a week of vacation remaining and it was a long, long time until the summer. My thoughts of Susie were, without warning, suddenly interrupted by Bruce firmly applying the brakes and pulling over in the grass on the south side of the road.

“Look out there, guys!” he exclaimed.

“Wow,” I stated as I saw a deer in the beautiful grass gazing at us.

“Do you see it, Laz?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah, I don’t think that I have ever seen anything quite as beautiful as that,” Laz answered.

It was one of the most breathtaking sights of my young life. First, there was a tall grass-like plant growing along the border of the open area that was topped with gorgeous yellow flowers. Plus, the huge open area at which we were admiring was literally covered in a light purple color from I guess the color of the grass or some type of blooms on it. Standing in the middle of this wonderland of stunning color, was this beautiful Florida white-tail deer. I vowed that I would never forget that sight. The cypress trees growing in the distance provided a backdrop that accentuated this natural scene and its wondrous colors. It was a masterful painting created by nature’s artistic hand.

We stared at the deer for a minute or two as if we were in some sort of trance and then Bruce pulled back onto the Trail.

Laz asked, “Bruce, was that a Coastal Prairie where the deer was standing?”

It was exactly that, Laz, he replied.

We hadn't driven a mile before Laz came up with another question. At first I was a bit aggravated and wanted Bruce to concentrate on his driving to enable us to get to Ft. Myers more quickly, but I wasn't about to dis my best friend by stopping him from asking another question. I had asked plenty myself.

"Bruce, why is it that there is more water on the north side of the Trail than on the south?" Laz inquired of Encyclopedia Bruce.

"Laz, before the Trail was built, water flowed freely from Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee River Basin above it, south through the Everglades and emptied into the Florida Bay at the very southern end of the Florida peninsula.

"How did the water flow south, Bruce, the land appears to be level on the north side of the Trail?" I interjected.

"It appears level, but it is not. The land south of Lake Okeechobee is sloped ever so gradually at only two inches per mile. This causes a sheet flow, which is a movement of water over a surface in a thin layer across a large area. In this case the large area is the Everglades," Bruce added.

"I see! That's why Ms. Douglas called the Everglades a River of Grass. Water flows through it like a river. It's a very wide extremely shallow river!" I exclaimed as this was all coming together.

"Exactly," Bruce said, "and we are now in a swamp. You have hardly any water flow here as opposed to the Everglades.

"Let me guess the rest," Laz stated, "When the Trail was completed, it served as an obstacle to the sheet flow of water from Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee River Basin. That answers my question about the water level on the north side of the road. Thanks again, Bruce." Laz gratefully added.

“Yes, hopefully someday there will be a solution to the problems causing the reduction of the sheet flow, which is so important to the Everglades and to the Florida Bay. I hope that it is in my lifetime. If not, it’s up to you boys to help be a part of the solution and to be stewards of your Everglades.

“I want you two to do more homework on the factors reducing the sheet flow. The Trail is not the only obstacle. As soon as you research it, I want you to report to me the additional reasons. To better understand the problem is the beginning step to becoming involved in a solution so that your children and grandchildren for generations to come can enjoy a trip through the Everglades and witness the environment as it was before the Twentieth Century began.

“Ok, guys, the next stop is Ft. Myers; we have to get a move on. My aunt is waiting on us and so are the snook around her dock!” Bruce told us as we continued our journey across the majestic marshes and swamps of Florida.

Chapter 14 – More Water Please!

We hadn't driven very far when we passed a sign that said, "Panther Crossing." Bruce pointed it out to us and said that the Florida panther was the state animal of Florida and that the animal was a type of cougar like the ones in the western states. The Florida panther, he went on, had adapted to the swamp forests and pinelands of the Everglades but because of loss of habitat there were just a few dozen of the species remaining.

"Do you think we'll see one, Bruce," Laz excitedly asked.

"No, Laz, It's not likely. If you ventured quietly down one of the hiking trails you might have a chance," Bruce replied. "That doesn't mean to not keep your eyes on the north and south side of the road, just in case. You just never know what is going to pop out of a hammock into the open."

We then passed a Miccosukee village on the south side of the Trail. I noticed that Miccosukee families had erected what looked like huts with palms woven together for roofs.

"What are those huts called, Bruce?" I asked.

"Those are chickees. That is the word for house in the Miccosukee language. When the tribe first came to the Everglades, they built them out of the bald cypress trees that you see all around you. They put the posts into the earth and then built a raised floor because of the water level that was subject to fluctuations, especially during the rainy season. The roofs were made of palmetto fronds or of sable palm fronds that were thatched, which means woven tightly together.

"Do they leak when it rains?" I asked.

“No, the Miccosukee weave them so tightly that they do not leak and can withstand very high winds. Actually, the Miccosukee are awesome craftsmen.” Bruce added. “Each one of those huts,” he pointed out, “has a different purpose. They are for either cooking, sleeping or eating.”

“Wow, that is so cool,” Laz blurted out.

We passed a sign that said, Ochopee. Bruce said that the town had a population that was very small and that the building on our left was the smallest post office in the United States. It measured seven feet by eight feet, he told us.

“That’s fifty six square feet,” Laz brilliantly stated. “I derived my answer by multiplying the length by the width to find the area.”

“Well, using Laz’s formula for finding the square footage, I calculate that my 11 by 10 foot bedroom is 110 square feet, or almost twice the size of the tiny post office,” I blurted out to stay abreast of Laz’s mathematical prowess.

We passed an old looking frame building that was a restaurant that served gator tail and frog legs. I tried, but was unable, to imagine what both would taste like. Continuing on the Trail, it wasn’t long before we saw a sign that said Marco Island to our west. I knew then that we were very close to the Gulf of Mexico. I had missed the sign that said we were in Collier County and suddenly made the realization when we entered the city limits of Naples. Bruce told us that he would give us the history of Marco Island, Naples, and Ft. Myers on our return trip next week. He went on to say that he was dropping us off and heading back as he had to get back to work. He also said that he would show us how to use the boat and wheelchair lift, as well as, drive the boat before he departed for Miami.

While we were driving through the city of Naples on the Trail, the shopping centers, fast food restaurants, and mall stood in stark contrast to the deep green beauty of the Big Cypress Swamp that we had just driven through on our way here.

Traffic light after traffic light caused me to begin to think as we waited for the green signal. My thoughts turned to the Everglades once again and I asked Bruce what were some of the other obstacles to the sheet flow of water.

“We certainly have the time now for me to answer such a great question, Jay,” Bruce replied to my request for information.

“Before you begin, Bruce,” Laz interjected, “I have a question that requires a shorter response than Jay’s. Does the Trail completely block the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee and above the lake into Florida Bay?”

“No, Laz that is what one might think and it’s a very good question. First, do you remember the large culverts we passed along the way today?” he asked.

“What’s a culvert?” Laz wanted to know.

“They are huge pipes, Laz. They are under the road all along the Trail and allow water to flow through from the north to the south; however, they get clogged with debris and need to be kept clean for water to flow freely through them. There are also two major sloughs, deep, marshy rivers, which channel water through the Everglades. The larger one is named the Shark River Slough and the smaller slough is called Taylor Slough. There are even smaller sloughs that flow through Big Cypress then flow into the west coast’s Ten Thousand Islands area and western Florida Bay.” Bruce informed us.

“I remember seeing the Shark River Sign when we went over a bridge. You were talking and I didn’t want to interrupt,” I told Bruce.

“Yeah, I should have told you then, but I was on another subject at the time. You mentioned a bridge. That’s how the water gets through. Do you understand now, Laz?” he asked.

“Sure do. Now let’s hear about the other obstacles to the flow, please,” Laz pleaded.

“Ok, ok, but just one big one as we are going to be there in about a half an hour more,” Bruce answered.

“In 1926 and 1928, two major hurricanes like Andrew hit South Florida. The 1926 hurricane caused about three hundred deaths, but the 1928 storm caused over two thousand casualties mostly from drowning around the shores of Lake Okeechobee. After the hurricane’s devastating loss of life, the Florida legislature created the Okeechobee Flood Control District. They took steps to ensure that loss of life from flooding around Lake O would never happen again. They built a levee all the way around the huge lake so that its waters would be contained. This stopped the mass flow of water to the Everglades. It didn’t stop it completely but cut off most of it. Now, it’s for you two to research and learn what else the flood control did plus how agriculture around the Lake provided obstacles to the sheet flow. Hey, Guys, look. Ft. Myers! We are here,” Bruce shouted out.

My heart began to beat very fast, for my months of anticipation of this moment had finally come to fruition.

Chapter 15 – Ft. Myers Rules!

Finally, after months of waiting, we were actually in Ft. Myers. After we pulled into Aunt V's driveway, Bruce jumped out of the van to give Aunt V a hug and I shot off like a rocket to see the boathouse. Just as I was around the side of the house, it suddenly dawned on me that I had left Laz in the van. I dashed back as fast as my two feet would move to find Bruce helping Laz out of the van.

"I'm sorry, Laz." I apologized.

"It's okay, dude. I'll blaze you the next chance I get." He sarcastically replied.

"Ok, let's go check the dock, the boat, and the boathouse out," I told him as I grasped his chair and took off through the green grass.

"Wow, Bruce's aunt has some kind of big bucks. Look at this place," Laz said as he gazed in wide wonder at the beautiful two-story waterfront home.

It was gorgeous. There was a long driveway that had flowers of all sorts and colors growing along it and the yard had so many majestic trees. There were orange, grapefruit, tangerines, avocados, and there were stately royal and sable palm trees that appeared to be very old scattered throughout the landscape. The house was one of the early twentieth century architectural styles with tall white pillars and steps leading up to a veranda that wrapped almost all the way around the house. The windows were huge. I'd never really seen anything like them before in Homestead. I later learned that they were so large to catch the breeze coming off of the Caloosahatchee River when there was no air conditioning. What a neat old home this was!

The dock and boathouse were even cooler. Laz and I went immediately to our new home over the water and opened the door.

“Look, Jay, our own TV, telephone, refrigerator, stove, two bedrooms, oversized bathroom, and we can fish out this window!” Laz excitedly told me as he wheeled around the entire house.

“How cool is this?” I asked as I opened the cabinets that were stocked with every kind of snack a kid could ever want plus gobs of adult-type food. “I guess we were on our own but, isn’t it wonderful?” I thought as Bruce and Aunt V entered the house.

Bruce quickly introduced us and as we four went outside to look at the boat, “pow” a snook hit a baitfish under the dock causing us all to launch straight up. I felt as I was back in Hipartner’s class.

“Big, big snook,” Bruce told us.

“Yeah, huge,” Laz said, “like the one that almost pulled me in the water on the Trail.”

“It sure was, Laz. They both were monsters!” Bruce agreed.

Aunt V was a seventyish looking lady whose clothing appeared to have been purchased from an upscale department store for it fit her as if it had been made by a custom tailor. On top of that, her jewelry was even more extraordinary. I guess, for a kid, I had good taste or at least could recognize people with good taste in clothing and jewelry. Anyway, Laz and I were two lucky guys for the next week. This was going to be the ultimate kid vacation!

“Thank you so much for inviting us here, Aunt V,” I said to her.

“You are welcome, Jay. You two are also invited for the entire summer if you enjoy your week here,” she offered.

“I’m certain that we will. May I call you Aunt V?” Laz asked.

“Why, certainly you may,” she replied. “I’ll bet you boys can’t wait to see your boat. Let’s go take a look, for it has been anxiously awaiting your arrival for some time now.”

As we ambled to the very end of the T-shaped dock which jutted out from the boathouse fifty feet into the Caloosahatchee, small crabs scurried sideways to avoid the oncoming steps of the human invaders. Startled by our interruption of whatever it is that crabs do on a dock; they scrambled for safety on the pilings that supported the structure.

Upon arriving at the dock's terminus, we peered at that for which we had been so anxiously awaiting; for resting peacefully as there was no wind and consequently no waves to rock it, the nineteen-foot flat-bottomed watercraft beckoned to its new captains to go for a cruise. There was a forty horse-power motor affixed to the transom for propulsion, a steering wheel mounted on a console with a cushioned seat behind it, and the rest of the boat was open space. On the port side of the boat in front of the steering wheel, there were brackets bolted to the floor where Laz's chair would fit and be locked securely in place so that he would not move when the boat was in motion. It was the quintessential boat for us.

Laz was the first lucky passenger to enter the craft. Bruce swung the doors to the lift open, wheeled Laz inside, and closed him in the box-like apparatus. The entire lift was on a track with two rails extending about six feet from the dock. There were railings on three sides of Laz but in front of him there was no rail. Bruce gently pushed the box forward. It slowly moved along the rails until it came to the end where it stopped and locked firmly in place. Pushing a button on the dock, Bruce and I watched as Laz was electronically lowered until he was level with the transom or side of the boat. In front of Laz's feet there was a ramp in a vertical position that served to keep the chair in the box. Bruce told Laz to push a button on the left side of the box, Laz obeyed, and the ramp began to gently move to a horizontal position and then continue its downward motion until it rested on the floor of the skiff. Bruce instructed Laz to very carefully descend

the ramp. The transom of the boat was just a bit over a foot high so Laz didn't have far to go. He did it with ease and within seconds he had the wheels of the chair in the brackets awaiting my entrance into the boat to lock him firmly in place. Bruce and I then got in, fixed Laz to the deck, and we were prepared to go for a ride. Just as we were about to take off, Laz begged me to go to the van to get his fishing pole. I told Bruce that I would be right back, climbed on the dock, ran to the van, and sprinted back to the boat for my friend. When I returned from retrieving Laz's little pole, I handed it to him and hopped back into the skiff. He proudly held it across his lap as Bruce backed away from the dock. With that, we were off on an adventure that was truly hard to describe, for the gentle purr of the motor, the sweet smell of the salt air, and the cool breeze in our face fueled the anticipation of greater things to come.

Chapter 16 – Oysters Anyone?

Bruce took us all around the entire area. It was unreal where the flat-bottomed boat could go. We went into places where the water was extremely shallow, less than one foot in depth. The river was clear and we saw all kinds of fish that Bruce identified in an instant. I made mental notes of each species as we slowly cruised the waterway. I couldn't wait to get back to the dock to try my hand at catching a trout, redfish, or even a snook. Bruce had faithfully promised the presence of those species in the immediate area of the dock and I was going to confirm his promise as soon as the opportunity to do so presented itself.

Laz sat in some sort of trance as he viewed the serene surroundings in total awe.

“What are those rocky islands sticking up out of the water over there?” he asked as he pointed in the direction of what I thought was an oyster bar.

Bruce confirmed my thought by saying, “Those are oysters not rocks and they are very sharp. The whole island of oysters is called an oyster bar. You don't want to get too close to them. Fish love to hang around them so you guys take this pole and use it to gently push yourselves to within casting distance of the bar and throw your lures as closely to it as possible without getting hung on the oysters. More than likely, as you reel your lure back towards the boat, you will get slammed by something quite fun to catch.”

Bruce picked up the eight foot fiberglass push pole that was in the bracket on the starboard side of the boat. He then turned off the motor and pushed a button that raised it up until the propeller was out of the water.

“You don't want to run the motor in shallow water, guys. The propeller will damage the seagrass that is so valuable to the ecosystem. Always use this pole when you want to fish near oyster or sandbars and always obey the primary rule

of navigation; don't go where the birds are walking!" Bruce told us as he poled within casting distance of the oyster bar.

"Ok, Laz, pick up your pole and fling your lure as closely to the bar as you are able," Bruce told him.

Laz did exactly as ordered and he had not reeled his little plastic swimming bait ten feet from the bar when an eruption on the water's surface caused us to turn in the direction of the splash. The fish took off with Laz's lure firmly in its mouth at a very high speed. It then began to make multiple leaps in the air trying to throw the lure back at Laz. This time the lure stayed put and after a three minute battle, Laz reeled a two-foot long skinny silver fish to the boat. As it lay on its side, Bruce put the landing net beneath it and lifted it out of the water in order to dislodge the hook from its mouth and release it.

"It's a ladyfish!" Bruce explained as he removed the hook from the fish and put the ladyfish back in the river to bring someone else the joy that it had brought Laz. The second it felt the cool water on its silvery sides, it darted off through the grassy shallows and disappeared into the dark depths of the river.

"That was awesome!" Laz exclaimed as he grinned enormously.

"It certainly was!" Bruce exclaimed and then interrupted our joy by telling us that we had to get back to the boathouse. Laz's little pole that I had told him to leave at home had proven itself in battle and would do so many more times before the end of vacation, for on multiple trips around the mangrove lined islands of the Caloosahatchee, Laz and I caught a plethora of species and proudly released every single one!

As we motored back to the dock, Bruce said that before he returned to Homestead he would show us how to throw a cast net so that we could catch baitfish or shiners, as he called them, from the dock. He said that we could net them easily at night. There was a big light with a shade over it that caused the

light to shine brightly in the water in front of the dock. This caused hundreds of small silver baitfish known as shiners on the west coast of Florida and pilchards on the east coast to gather under the light at night. The snook, trout, ladyfish and sometimes tarpon, another high-flying acrobatic fish when hooked, would lie in ambush in the dark shadow outside of the light's glare. From time to time the predators will dart into the school of shiners and grab a few in its hungry jaws causing a commotion on the surface that we would hear from inside of the boathouse. He said that when he was our age, the splashing sounds of feeding snook and other fish would wake him up. Unable to go back to sleep, he would go out and cast a live shiner that he kept in a floating nylon bait bag that was tied to the dock with a rope. He told us that we could keep two dozen in the floating bait bag after we learned how to throw the net, and capture the little silver shiners.

We passed an island about fifteen minutes from Aunt V's that was about a couple hundred feet long and about a hundred wide. It was heavily wooded and was surrounded by a beautiful white-sand beach. The moon was full and the light sparkling off the water and illuminating the island sparked my imagination causing me to nudge Laz and point towards it.

"What a neat place for a tree fort, Laz," I shouted over the drone of the outboard engine.

"Yeah," Laz said as he nodded in agreement.

At the end of the island, there was an old wooden building partially built on wooden pilings that jutted out into the water.

"What's that?" I asked Bruce.

"It's an old fish house. Netters used to bring their catch there to sell and get ice. It's really old and the wood is rotten. Don't try to get on the dock," Bruce warned.

The place was so alluring that I knew full well the first chance I got that Laz and I were going to check that place out, for, I couldn't get it out of my mind as we motored back to the boat house.

Chapter 17 – Hello, Susie, Is that you?

When we arrived at the dock, I tied up the boat, wheeled Laz into his lift, and began cast net throwing school. Bruce gave a demonstration and then gave Laz a chance to toss it out. His first attempt at throwing the net so that it opened in a perfect circle was a disaster. I then tried and did even worse. The net hit the water in a large tangled ball of lead and monofilament making a resounding “thunk” that caused a pelican who was sitting on top of a piling on the neighbor’s dock to jump about three feet straight up.

“I blasted that primitive-looking big beaked bird on the dock over there,” I told Laz.

Loudly laughing as he witnessed the blasted bird as well, he replied, “You have learned something in Mr. Hipartner’s class!”

“Yeah,” I shot back, “his class is a blast!” With that over, we continued our attempts to perfectly throw a cast net with the same determination we had to rebuild Fort Nacho when Jason Lure and his thug buddies destroyed it.

After about twenty attempts, Laz finally threw the net in a perfect circle. Bruce told him to pull it in and not allow it to sink.

“There is no use letting it sink to the bottom as there probably isn’t a fish within a mile of here after the bombardment of lead that you guys threw at the creatures of the sea,” Bruce joked as he told us that he was leaving for Homestead in a few minutes. He gave us final instructions about making our beds, washing our clothes and towels in the main house, and to always put a pint of outboard motor oil in the six-gallon gas can each time we refilled it or the motor would freeze up ending our fishing trips.

“There is plenty of oil in the tool shed behind the house. Aunt V will take you to get gas when you need it. Do the dishes every evening after you eat, and remember, you are two very lucky young men to be able to stay here,” Bruce told us and then said he would see us the following Sunday.

After he left, I told Laz I had something extremely important to do in the boathouse. Laz asked me what, but I didn't answer. I had been here for hours and had to try to find Susie's telephone number. I had waited so long for this moment. I was on a mission and it wasn't fishing. Looking around the interior of the boathouse for the most likely place for the phone book, I spied a chest of drawers on which rested the telephone. I rifled through the first drawer to no avail. The second drawer was full of photo albums of Aunt V's late husband holding lots of different kinds of fish. I vowed to look at those later as I nervously pulled open the third drawer. Lifting another photo album, I could hardly control my emotions as there it was, covered in glossy yellow with letters of blue, the telephone directory that would hopefully direct me to my Susie. This alphabetically ordered collection of phone numbers would bring a joyful ending to my journey for love and both of us would live happily ever after in the subtropical paradise known as Ft. Myers, Florida!

My fingers trembled as I leafed through the pages on my way to J for Jamers. There was Jackson, then Jagger, and Jalpo, and finally Jamers. I found Ralph, Lorenzo, and Harry Jamers listed. I then came to the realization that I never paid any attention to what Susie's father's first name was. In desperation, I flung open the front door of the boathouse and called to Laz who was flinging his lure from the end of the dock back towards the seawall and reeling it in as fast as he could.

“Laz, what is Susan Jamers' father's first name?” I shouted as he was fifty feet away.

“Daddy,” he yelled back, “I don’t know, Jay. That’s all I ever heard her call him. Why do you like her or something?” he asked.

“Yeah, or something,” I replied in an ill-humored tone

That was it. I was calling Ralph, Harry, Waldo, or whoever they were and asking for Susie.

The first call I made, the person answering the phone sounded like they were at least halfway intelligent when I asked, “Can I speak with Susie?”

The reply was, “I dunno know; Can you?” You would have thought that I would’ve known better than to begin the question with the word “can”, as many times as I had heard my teacher ask, “Can you?” when kids posed the question, “Can I go to the bathroom?” The person must have been a teacher, I thought. The next to answer was a great-grandmother type who replied, “No, sweetie, there is no Susie here.” The third person was a triple moron. I asked if I could speak to Susie and the guy said that she had moved to Slipper Rock, Idaho, where she was working in a tin can factory licking and sticking labels on cans of Lucky Larry’s Llama Livers.

I hung up and began to laugh. I mean; how dumb was that? My laughter soon turned to despair as I was out of Jamers and completely out of luck. Now, I had to rely on pure chance to see Susie. The odds of me finding her in Ft. Myers had just equaled the odds of winning the lottery, about twenty million to one. That didn’t matter. I once heard a line from a song that said, “Love will find a way,” and I vowed to never give up my quest for Susie Jamers. This was simply a minor setback for I was a positive thinker.

Chapter 18 –Island Runners

To eliminate the disappointment brought on by not being able to call Susie from my mind, I began to think about the old fish house on the end of the beautiful island. I so wanted to return to have a closer look at the intriguing building and the island itself.

“Hey, Laz, let’s go check out that island where that old fish house was,” I offered.

“You are certifiably crazy, Jay! It’s late. What would your Aunt say?” Laz replied.

“She won’t say anything. She’ll think we went fishing in the boat. Plus, we’ll row away from the dock before we start the engine. She’s probably in bed anyway,” I told him.

“You are an adventurous dude, Jay,” Laz remarked.

“Well, you are too. Let’s go, Amigo,” I shot back quickly so as not to give him time to think about any other reason for not going.

“Ok, to the boat, Captain!” Laz belted out.

“To the boat, Mate,” I answered.

The craft was in the water waiting for us which made this adventure into the unknown all too easy. My excitement escalated as I put Laz securely on the lift and lowered him to the boat.

“This is just too unproblematic,” Laz told me as he reached the level of the boat, lowered his entrance ramp and with my help wheeled into place. I then locked his wheels, untied the dock lines, took my place at the oar, and began to stealthily paddle away from the dock.

Once we were out of hearing range, I turned on the bow lights so that other boats could see us, cranked the engine and began a slow speed, just above idle,

towards the boat channel. The full moon illuminating the channel markers with its silver beams simplified navigation. In fact, without the moonlight, it would have been much more difficult to find my way to the boat channel. I made a mental note of the path so that if we ventured out at night during the rest of the week, I would know where I was going without getting grounded or stuck in the shallow water that lay on both sides of the markers.

While we cruised toward the island, I couldn't help but to gaze in wide wonder at the picturesque setting. The moonlight twinkling on the water and the gentle splash of the waves against the hull of the boat combined to create a feeling that Laz and I were explorers about to land on a previously unknown island and to be the first to claim it as our own.

My adventurous thoughts where suddenly interrupted when Laz cried out, "Land Ahoy, Captain. Thar be our destination," in his most eloquent pirate jargon.

"We're not pirates, Laz. We are explorers," I corrected him as suddenly the old fish house came into view. I had to quickly make a decision as to where on the island I wanted to land. There were two large egrets standing in the water in front of the fish house which caused me to remember Bruce's primary rule of boat navigation, "Don't go where the birds are walking!"

I decided to circumnavigate the island to look for a deeper spot where I could pull the boat up on the shore and to place the anchor firmly in the sand. That way Laz didn't drift away as I ventured in to the woods to check out not only the entire island but also the alluring fish house.

After a complete trip around the small island, I decided to put ashore at the opposite end from the fish house. I motored up until the bow was firmly on the white sand beach. I took the anchor rope and attached anchor from the hatch in the bow and jumped out of the boat onto the shore. The soft white sand cushioned

my landing and my feet made indentations on the shoreline marking the spot where the bold explorer, Captain Jay Stewart, first set foot upon what would prove to be a mystical island. The thump created by my entrance leap caused a giant blue heron that was about halfway down the island doing some night fishing to careen away while squawking in loud protest at the human intruders.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes, Laz. Don’t go anywhere, mate,” I commanded.

“I won’t, funnyman. Hey, Jay, do you think you might need this?” he asked as he pulled a flashlight from his jacket pocket and tossed it to me on the shore.

Catching it with my left hand and saluting with my right, I uttered the only words I could think of, “Thank you! I shall return,” and I headed into the deep, dense darkness of the Australian pine studded island.

About twenty feet into the woods a limb scratched the side of my face causing me to jump. The woods were not lit up by the moonlight like I thought they would be and I then decided to use the flashlight for the darkness created by the canopy of foliage hovered above my head shrouding the entire island. Turning it on to illuminate my way, I spied, directly to my side, the dead branch of the Australian pine tree that had scratched my cheek. In anger for its arrogance in marring my flesh, I snatched it from the tree and tossed it aside. I then shined the light in the direction I was walking only to be totally, I mean mega-totally weirded out by that which lay in front of me!

There was a prodigious spider web stretching across the path through the trees on which I was walking! Not only that, in the middle of this gargantuan web was the most hideous looking orange and black, white-spotted spider whose hairy body was the size of my fist. I trembled at the thought of having unknowingly ventured into its lair only to have it cling to my skin, hunching on its eight furry pedestals, as it hungrily began to devour bites of my delectable flesh chunk by

chunk as I twisted and squirmed in agony trying to free myself from its nightmarish snare!

There was no doubt that it was hungry; for as I shined the flashlight's beam directly upon it, its eyes glowed in the night like two florescent orange bulbs, creeping me out even more. It seemed to be staring at me as its jaws churned and horrendous drops of spider drool bubbled from its mouth, popped and then dripped onto the web below it.

Spider drool is not cool, I thought, as I walked around the web and continued my trek through the woods. I couldn't wait to tell Laz about the spider. I was going to give it a name. I would call it "Spydore" because of its creep-you-out level of plus ten which was as high as something could be measured on the creep meter!

In somewhat of a hurry to arrive at my destination, I strode uneventfully into the depths of the island. I so hoped that Spydore was the last strange occurrence of the night. After about two unexciting minutes, my light fell upon the dark brown weathered boards of the aged fish house. I hesitated for a moment as I thought about whether or not to go in it to look around. Bruce had warned me to steer clear of the dock but said nothing about the house. Its history was so alluring to me that I began to walk closer to it with the firm intention of entering its ruins. In fact, it seemed to beckon me to come on in. That was it. I decided to walk up the wooden steps and take a look around. The old steps were loose and wobbled as I ascended them carefully for fear of falling on my face. Without warning, the eerie silence of the night was shattered by a sudden sound; a voice of an old man rang through the ancient structure and seemed to ominously hang in the night air. Totally paralyzed from fear and unable to flee, I trembled uncontrollably as I listened to the vocalization of this man or thing.

“Weigh your catch in the basket of the scale. Ice them down. Record the total number of pounds on the pad by the door. Return for pay tomorrow,” the voice called out.

This outcreeped the Spydore! The dial on my fictitious creep meter had surpassed plus ten, gone around twice, and flown off into the night. I bolted from those steps and booked it directly to the beach as fast as my legs would carry me. I certainly didn't want to run through the woods and take my chances there and the clear shoreline offered itself as the fastest escape route from Nightmare Island's Boathouse that I could think of.

Running at the fastest pace of my life, I approached the boat screaming “Laz, Laz, let's bust out of this spook hole! Did you hear me, Laz? Laz, what's wrong?” I asked as he was staring straight ahead as if he too had perceived a ghost in the area.

“Laz, what's wrong?” I shouted. My plea snapped him to his senses and he answered, “Jay, I was sitting here thinking about this beautiful island when I heard a noise behind me. I couldn't understand what it was saying but it was a voice. I was so scared, Jay. Not knowing what to do, I decided to muster up my courage. I turned all the way around and saw nothing in the water, not a thing; yet, the voice came from just above the surface of it. I turned to look on the other side of the boat and suddenly this old man bursts out of the river right beside me screaming, “Weigh your fish,” or something like that then he splashes to the shore and runs off down the beach and vanishes into the trees. Believe this or not, I thought I saw him take his false teeth out of his mouth and chatter them as he ran!

“I don't think he was real, Jay. I mean I honestly think he might have been a well, he could've been a...”

“I know what you are thinking.” I answered for him.

“I never thought I’d say it but, yeah,” Laz stated. “Maybe because I was so scared or in a state of total shock but he just was kind of surreal, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do, Laz. I had two terrifying experiences on Nightmare Island myself. Let’s get out of here now!” I exclaimed as I picked up the anchor, shook the damp sand from it, and placed it and the attached rope in the hatch. I then pushed the boat away from the shore, hopped in and started the motor. I wanted out of there before Fishman or whatever it was tried to get in the boat.

“Wait until you hear what happened to me, Laz,” I shouted as the engine revved.

“What, Jay?” Laz yelled back.

“I’ll tell you tonight when we get back. It’s a long terrifying story, my friend,” I added as I sped towards the boathouse.

After we arrived home, Laz and I talked late into the night. We tried. I mean we really attempted to come up with an explanation for the whole thing but were unable to come to any other conclusion than that island was not a place that we would choose to visit again anytime in the near or distant future!

I knew one thing for certain. I was going to write an outrageous story about our experience in Mr. Hipartner’s class. He was going to call it fiction, but I would argue that point, because as fictional as it would sound, it actually happened and was as nonfiction as you can get!

Chapter 19 – Sailing for Susie

The next morning we awakened to the sound of Aunt V's lawn service dude riding his mower like ninety miles an hour back and forth across her lawn like he had to have ten yards cut before noon and this was his third and it was eleven o'clock.

After wolfing two bowls of cereal and a muffin each, we decided to go fishing around some of the less scary islands we had seen the day before. I chose a rod and reel from the group of six that were in the boathouse, Laz picked up his trusty little minnow rod and off we went to the home of hopefully hungry fish.

As we cruised slowly towards the main boat channel that was marked with red and green buoys, we saw two girls in a small sailboat that was, at that moment, because of the lack of wind, not sailing. They were more like just floating along with the tide.

"Hey, Jay, let's go ask those girls if they need a tow or something. They're just drifting," Laz said.

"They look like ninth graders, Laz," I replied.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Never mind, Laz," I shot back sarcastically.

"Go over there, Jay," he ordered.

"Ok, ok," I said as I swung the bow in the direction of the stranded sailors.

We pulled alongside the two and I asked them if they needed help. They said that they needed to be towed back to their dock which was about a mile from there. I wanted to go fishing but we had already offered our assistance so I tied a rope to their bow and tied it again to the stern of our skiff and very slowly off we went in the direction the girls were pointing.

Looking back as we were towing the two, I could see that this was all very funny to them. They were covering their mouths and giggling profusely. I didn't know whether they were laughing at us or not. "Whatever," I thought. I could stop and untie the rope and set them adrift again but that would be extremely mean, although it would be quite humorous and Laz and I could laugh equally as hard. We could see how many curse words they knew as we left them helplessly floating the Caloosahatchee with the tide and no wind. As we motored away, we would like wave to them as we had the last laugh. They would be very displeased, to say the least, but I would never do it even if they were laughing at us which they probably weren't. Girls just tend to laugh a lot, I thought. All of this popped into my head as I was extremely bored and wanted so to go fishing instead of tediously towing the two stranded females to their dock. It was just a stupid thought, but it would have been hilarious had we really done it. I could just hear Laz, had we set them adrift, saying that by his tabulations; the one girl uttered 32 expletives and the other 41! The thought of it cracked me up enough for Laz to ask me what was so funny. I told him that I would later explain my reverie and that he should prepare himself to be bent over with laughter.

When we got close to their canal, the girl in the cute brown bathing suit pointed in the direction of her dock and I swung the bow directly towards it.

We pulled alongside the wooden structure, and I untied the tow rope from our boat and pulled them gently towards their moorings.

One of the girls clambered onto the dock to tie the bow line to the cleat, while the other held the stern so that it would not drift away. Finished with her task of securing the vessel's bow, she then walked to the stern where she was tossed a line by the girl still in the sailboat. As the stern line was tied to the dock, the other girl climbed out of the ship and both sat on the edge of the seawall as if they expected to talk to us a bit.

Picking up on their body language that was inviting us to chat, I maneuvered our skiff in front of the sailboat, tied it off to the dock, and introduced Laz and myself.

“Hi, guys. Thank you so much for rescuing us. I’m Mariella and this is my best friend Jasmin. Do you two live around here?” she asked.

Obviously pleased with the conversation, Laz replied, “Yeah, for a few more days!”

“Why just a few more days?” she wanted to know.

“I’m from the Miami area and my best friend Jay here is from Homestead,” Laz answered with an enormous grin on his face.

“We’re staying in my step-dad’s aunt’s boathouse about a mile from here on the river.” I added.

“Yeah, I know where that boathouse is. We sail around there quite a lot,” Mariella replied.

“What grade are you in?” I asked the girls.

“Eighth, how about you guys?”

Wanting to lie but recalling what Mr. Hipartner said about when you lie, you have too much to remember, I answered, “Sixth.”

“You guys look like eighth graders,” Jasmin said.

“Yeah, we look old for our age!” Laz replied.

Both girls looked puzzled by Laz’s attempt at being cool, so I added, “What he meant is that we’ve been through a lot in our lives. We survived Hurricane Andrew in Homestead. It tore our city and our lives apart. Laz moved away and then to my great fortune moved back again.”

“Oh, I see,” Mariella sympathetically said.

“What’s your school like, Laz?” Jasmin inquired.

“I guess its average. I haven’t been there that long. Jay’s at the coolest school, Marshside Middle. He has a crazy teacher named Mr. Hipartner,” Laz told the girls.

“Yeah,” I added, “I forgot to tell you what he did for Halloween. He put a hood over his head with cut out holes for his eyes, nose, and mouth, of course. He said he then took the chain from his chainsaw not to cause injury and when the little kooks, as he called them, came dressed in Halloween garb knocking on his door destroying the silence of his sanctuary, he flung open his door, cranked the chainsaw in their surprised little faces and chased them screaming down his walkway to the road. In their frightened haste to avoid being so-called “sliced and diced” as he jokingly calls his prank, they dropped their bags of candy that they had worked so hard to fill, thus giving him his just dessert. He said he then scoops the candy in a giant plastic bag to be consumed by him at a later date, and brings his souvenirs of battle, the empty bags, into his humble abode.”

I went on to tell them as they were cracked up laughing at this strange teacher’s tale that he brought seven Halloween bags to school on November 1st and put them, standing up, on the table in front of his room and called them his “monuments”.

The two that were exactly alike resting beside each other caused me to raise my hand and say, “Let me guess, twins?”

“Of course, two ninjas weren’t as tough as they were dressed up to be for I have the power,” he answered in a voice that was quite loud to the point of weirdness.

By now the girls were rolling in the grass.

“That guy is certainly different!” Jasmin said as she wiped tears from her eyes.

“Sure is.” I replied. “That day he had a plastic chain saw that he would crank and it would make this toy kind of roaring sound. He’d get this strange look on his face as he would walk up and down the rows of students revving its toy wind-up motor as he held it above their heads while he laughed wildly.” I told them.

Remembering why I came to Ft. Myers in the first place, I turned the mood of the conversation in a more serious direction and asked them if they knew a girl from Homestead who moved there this year named Susie. I then described her and just as I had finished, Mariella said that she thought she rode her bus. My pulse quickened as I nervously swallowed and asked if either of them knew where she lived.

“No, but it has to be within a mile or so of here as that’s the area where our bus picks up,” Jasmin told me.

“Wow!” I blurted out. “Would you please ask her if she knows Jay Stewart and Lazaro Cruz? If she does, please give her my phone number in Homestead and ask her to call me.” I then asked Mariella if she had pencil and paper on which I could write my number. Without hesitation, she turned and sprinted to her house. She came back with my request and I clearly jotted my name and number in Homestead on the pad that she had given me. I also included the number of the boathouse phone in case either Susie or the two girls wanted to call us before we left for home on Sunday.

“Oh, another thing, have you guys ever been to the island with the old fish house on it? That place is weird. You might even say unnerving for a better description of it,” I asked.

“What do you mean by unnerving? Did you hear voices coming from the fish house or were you frightened by an old man who swam underwater up to your boat and then burst out in your face screaming ‘Weigh your fish,’ and then

ran down the beach clicking his false teeth that he took out and held in his hand!” Mariella inquired.

“How did you know?” Laz blurted out.

Now convulsed with laughter, Jasmin replied, “That was Captain Jettymon. He does that to scare tourists away hoping they will leave the area not even thinking about moving here and never return.”

“Wow! I’ll bet he’s not a member of the Ft. Myers Chamber of Commerce,” I replied as both Laz and I were laughing at ourselves for allowing this obviously strange citizen to terrify us out of our wits.

“Probably not,” Mariella said.

“Mr. Hipartner is going to absolutely love the story that I write in his class of how my best friend and I were blasted by Captain Jettymon,” I joked.

“Hey, you have to hear the story of Carl’s Splashdown Party at Marshside Middle this year,” I told the two girls.

“That sounds very cool,” Mariella stated.

“Yeah, it was cool in more ways than one,” I told her.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well” and I began the story, “one day in October, I was walking, because I’m an office assistant one period a day, this bad kid, Carl, whom I had to get out of class like three times a week, to a rendezvous with the assistant principal. Anyway, on the way there, he stopped at the water fountain to get a drink, and I told him to hurry up as the assistant principal was eagerly awaiting his arrival. So, he turns from the fountain towards me with water dripping from his face, wipes it with the back of his arm and asks me with this enormously silly grin on his face if I wanted to watch a splashdown party take place. I had no idea what the kid was talking about, so I answered, that it sounded like a lot of fun. I then told him to hurry up and to talk as we walked. He said that the next day I should watch out

the window in my fourth period math class just after the bell at the end of the period and I would witness the gala event. We had the same class that period and the whole thing was quite puzzling. Knowing Carl though, whatever this splashdown party was, it would most likely be, let's say, unique.

When the next day rolled around, about five minutes before class was over, Carl, told the teacher he really had to go the bathroom. The way he was jumping around looked quite convincing and she said to hurry up because the bell was about to ring. Just as it rang, I gazed out the window at the grassy area between the building I was in and the one beside it and there was Carl. Directly in the middle of the grassy area between the two buildings there was a sprinkler mounted on top of a metal spike that was stuck in the ground. Just as I laid my eyes on it, the sprinkler came on. When it did, Carl runs to it, yanks it out from the ground, and holds the metal spike in his hand as if it were a fire hose with a handle on it. His newly created water cannon was now shooting a stream like twenty-five feet. At first, it looked as if he were just watering the plants below the adjacent building's walkway in the grassy area. While Marshside's newest maintenance worker was giving the plants a drink, kids were coming out of their classrooms going and coming to their next class. The walkway immediately in front of Carl was totally jammed with people. That's when the funniest thing I have ever seen went down. Carl yells out, 'It's splashdown party time!' and turns the stream of water from the plants to the people in the walkway! He begins to spray and I mean soak every single kid. Dozens of students were trapped because there were so many of them in the hallway. There was nowhere to run. Plus, there was an iron railing that prevented them from spilling into the grassy area from where Carl was spraying them. It was hilarious, for me anyway. He was running up and down the walkway, protected by the railing, shouting, 'Splashdown, splashdown, splashdown!' and he as he shouted, he was making certain that he

had thoroughly soaked them all. Kids were screaming and yelling so loudly that the school police showed up and took Carl to the squad car and locked him, for his protection, in the back seat. I heard he was expelled from Marshside forever for his prank. Anyway, I laughed until I cried although I quit laughing after I left the classroom, because I didn't want to get beat down by the wet students who were everywhere. As I walked to my next class, the hallway looked like a pool area where an elephant had just done a cannon ball!

While I was telling the girls, they were bent over with laughter. Jasmine and Mariella said it was the funniest thing that they had ever heard. Laz didn't look all that thrilled as he had heard the story and I suspect that he might have been a bit jealous of me being the center of attention for a bit too long. Being considerate of my best friend's feelings, I decided that it was about time to head on back to Aunt V's.

We then thanked them both and Laz invited them to visit the boathouse if they were sailing in the area. They told him that they would positively make a point to sail on over one day when there was sufficient wind to fill the sails. Being stranded in the middle of the river is not that much fun, but it had enabled them to meet two new friends they told us as we prepared to leave their dock.

"Hey, that made it all worthwhile," I stated as I untied our skiff from the dock with my right hand, waved good bye to the two with my left, hopped into the boat, and we were off through the waterways leaving the two rescued damsels on their own. So far, it had been a most enjoyable day. Of course, as I always say, there was only one thing that could have possibly made it any better.

Chapter 20 – “Oysters Anyone?”

On the way home, to get my mind off of Susie, I asked Laz if he wanted to return to the oyster bar where he caught the ladyfish to try our luck until dark.

“Sure, Bro, let’s go there,” he excitedly shot back.

I pushed the throttle forward causing the bow to lift and then gently recede as we sped towards the oyster bar where I was certain that hungry hordes of fish anxiously awaited our arrival with their, so called, evening meal!

Arriving in about five minutes of cruising the ‘Hatchie’, we pulled slowly up to the bar. I turned the motor off and poled stealthily up to within ten feet of its edge. Forgetting what Bruce had taught me about staying out from the bar so that I could cast into it rather than from it, I put the anchor in and got out of the boat to wade to the end of the bar giving us both a chance of fishing different areas. This proved to be a huge mistake as I completely forgot that the tide was going out. As the bright blue southwestern Florida sky turned gradually to splashes of pink streaked above the western horizon as if the entire scene were a landscape painting done by a master, we both caught saltwater trout after trout. I lost count after ten but I had never had such a good time unless, of course, I was with Susie.

As our surroundings began to turn grey from the diminishing light, the sun disappeared below the western horizon, and Laz called for me to leave.

“The mosquitoes are tearing me up, Bro. Let’s go!” he pleaded.

“I’m coming, amigo. Hold on,” I yelled back as I splashed through the shallow water on my way to the boat. The tiny bugs called no-see-ums that you supposedly couldn’t see but sure could feel as they bit into your scalp and body were having a flesh feast with me as their host as I arrived at the boat and tried in vain to push it with both hands into deeper water.

“Push harder, Jay.” Laz ordered as I pushed with all of my energy but was unable to move it an inch. While we were catching so many fish, we didn’t notice that the tide was now low and we were stuck in about an inch of water. Laz, the boat, and I were going nowhere for four more hours until the tide came in providing enough water to float our boat.

“The tide goes out for six hours, Laz, and then comes in for six hours approximately. We’ll need at least four hours of incoming tide to be able to get out of here,” I told him.

“We’re stuck, Jay, and the bugs will finish us off,” Laz cried.

“Chill, dude, cover yourself up with this tarp,” I said as I reached into a storage area and pulled out a nylon tarp that Laz took from my hand and draped over himself to provide a bug barrier.

“Laz, the human tent,” I called him as I swatted at mosquitoes that were now thicker than before. The buzzing sound they made around my ears caused me to continuously slap at the side of my head. I’d probably knock myself out, I thought, before the night is over!

It was dark, totally dark, the moon wouldn’t come up for another hour or so and I didn’t have a clue as to what to do to get us safely to Aunt V’s. I didn’t want to alarm Laz, but I had to now because of the problems our dire situation was certain to cause; so, I asked my brainy friend.

“Laz, what do we do? We have to somehow get off the bar before Aunt V calls the Coast Guard and who knows who else,” I said to Laz as he partially emerged from his nylon shelter.

“Look in the compartment below the steering wheel to see if there is a radio,” he advised.

I hadn’t given that a thought as I pulled open the doors of the console below the steering wheel. I rummaged through the life jackets, a first aid kit, fire

extinguisher, and there it was, a handheld VHF radio. My heart leaped as I so hoped the battery was charged and it actually was because I turned it on and the screen lit up showing numbers that I guessed were channels. I dialed through channel after channel and to my dismay, heard no captains talking. Not knowing what to do, I dialed to channel one and decided to call for help on each channel. I pressed the talk button and stated what I'd heard them do in movies. I called, "Mayday, mayday, this is the vessel Lazosaurus Rex. We are stuck on an oyster bar in the Caloosahatchee River."

After seven channels, I got a reply from a boat on channel eight.

"This is the vessel Alice Bley. What is your position, Lazosaurus Rex?" the captain asked.

I pushed the talk button and anxiously replied, "I don't know Captain. I'm on a bar in the middle of the river."

"Your signal is strong, Captain. I might be near you. Do you have a light?" the voice asked.

I looked again beneath the console and there I found a handheld light. I answered, "Yes, Captain, I'm turning it on now," I replied.

"Turn on your bow lights and stern anchor lights, stand up as high as you are able and shine your hand-held light up and down the river. I'm on my way there."

"Hurry!" Laz shouted from beneath the tarp.

"He didn't hear you, Laz," I said as I flipped every switch on the console until the red and green bow lights came on as well as the stern white light that was on top of a three foot pole at the rear of the boat. I then began to frantically blast mosquitoes that were lighting on me with one hand and signal with the other hand.

After about five minutes, I heard a boat's engine coming in our direction. I pointed my light directly at it and began to turn it off and on as fast as I could punch the button.

"I see you, Captain," the voice crackled on the radio. "I'll be there in a minute. My boat is large and I can't get in to the shallow water. Wade out to your waist when I get close and I'll throw you a line. When you get it, take it back and tie it to your boat. Then, if you are able, I need you to wade or swim to my vessel to climb aboard. We don't need any extra weight in your boat so that we can pull it free."

"My friend is in the boat, captain. He is in a wheelchair," I told him over the roar of his engine.

"Okay, I'm going to throw you two lines," he answered as I was stepping over the transom into the water.

The acrid odor of the diesel fumes from his engines filled my nostrils as his exhaust smoke drifted with the night breeze in my direction. The human intrusion into his territory caused an enraged Great Blue Heron to careen away from where he was wading in search of a fish and to squawk loudly in protest as it passed above our heads. That was the second blue heron we had scattered since we first arrived in Ft. Myers. I'll bet that we were greatly disliked in the wading bird community around here.

As I waded towards the rescue craft, I saw that there were three people aboard, two men and a kid a bit older than us. I wondered what they were doing out here at night when I noticed that there were piles of green net on the deck in the stern of the boat telling me that they were gillnetters. Bruce had informed me of how gillnetters were devastating the fish populations in areas where they set their nets by taking tons of fish at a time. He said that it wasn't illegal but in a

short time he felt there would be a law passed banning gillnetting. Anyway, they were going to save us so I didn't care who they were, at that particular moment.

As the boat was almost on top of me, the captain put the motor in neutral and the kid tossed me two lines. I was about waist deep in the river and I momentarily struggled trying to grab both lines as they splashed the water just out of my reach. I stepped forward and picked up one but the other was floating away. It was difficult moving through the water but I snagged it just as it was about to escape my grasp entirely.

With both lines now firmly in hand, I began my way to the boat where Laz was awaiting my presence.

"Watch for sharks!" Laz cried.

"No time to be funny, Bro." I replied to his attempt at humor in the night.

"Where are you going to tie the two lines? I'm stuck awaiting your answer," he tried to pun.

"Ok, Laz, whatever," I replied to his lame attempt. I secured the lines to the two rings on each side of the stern of our skiff and waded back to the net boat. The kid put a ladder over the side of the net boat and I didn't have as much trouble boarding as I had anticipated. I clambered up the ladder, swung one leg over the transom, grabbed the Captain's outstretched hand to steady myself from falling into the boat and swung my other leg over. My feet were now both safely aboard and I was quite pleased.

"Welcome aboard!" the captain belted out.

The captain then told Laz to hang on and Laz's third attempt at humor was the question, "To what, Captain?" with that, the ship's engine lunged forward as both ropes became extremely taut. Not dislodging the skiff from its sandy captivity, the captain eased forward on the throttle putting even more pressure on the two lines as the boat strained to move. The ropes were now seemingly

stretched to the max. “Come on,” I thought as more throttle was applied. When over the engine’s now deafening roar, I heard Laz shout, “I’m moving. I’m moving.”

It had worked. Laz and the skiff were free from the shallows of the oyster bar and moving slowly into deeper water. When we were safely away from the bar, the captain came back to where I was standing and introduced himself as Captain Ralph. His mates were Brent and the kid’s name was Chad he told me. I told him my name, as well as Laz’s, and I sincerely thanked him.

As I stood in the stern, I couldn’t help but notice the inordinate amount of different species of fish in the boat. Not only were there many, many fish, but large blue claw crabs were ensnared in the net’s mesh, as well. One thing that I did notice before Chad pulled Laz with the two ropes up alongside of us so that I could get back in our boat was there were quite a few dead snook in the net and in boxes that were filled with other species, as well. This was extremely disturbing, for Bruce had warned me to return to the water immediately any snook that I caught by mistake in any cast net. He said it was illegal to take one by any means other than hook and line.

By now, Chad had pulled our boat alongside the Alice Bley. Taking the rope that Chad had used to pull our boat up to the net boat from his hand, I thanked them again and hopped into the skiff with Laz. Standing in front of the console I firmly grasped the wheel, cranked the engine, and started home where Aunt V was nervously awaiting us on the dock.

“We’re okay, Aunt V.” Laz called to her from about thirty feet away.

“Boys, don’t do this again. I was just about to alert the Coast Guard,” she sternly told us as we pulled alongside of the dock.

“It’s my fault, Aunt V. I got us stuck on an oyster bar. We were catching and releasing so many trout that I didn’t notice the outgoing tide. It stranded us and a gillnet boat saved us by pulling us off,” I explained.

“Well, I’m glad you two are safe. Go change your wet clothes,” she called to me as I was bringing the chair lift down to help Laz up to the dock.

When Laz was safely on the dock, we went into the boathouse and did a serious amount of talking for quite a while. During our conversation, we both agreed to be more careful in the future by being totally aware of the stage of the tide. There was more to tell Laz, but I was still damp from having waded in the river and I decided that it was time to get some dry clothing.

Chapter 21 – “Cook Out!”

I had just changed into dry clothes and was about to tell Laz about the sad sight that I witnessed when I was in the net boat when there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find Aunt V directly in front of me.

“Hi, Aunt V, I’d like to apologize once again for the trouble we have caused you,” I said.

“Ok, Jay, I understand. You have learned your lesson, both of you, about the twelve hour tide cycles of six hours incoming tide and six hours outgoing tide, haven’t you? Actually, a tide cycle is approximately twelve and a half hours. Just remember six and six and you’ll be okay.” She told us.

“Yes, we won’t ever forget it, Aunt V. I was telling Laz what Bruce told me about tides but that was after we got stuck. We’ll always remember six in and six out!” I promised. “I just can’t explain how fishing, especially when I’m catching fish, mesmerizes me.”

“By the way, Jay, a young lady called for you while I was waiting on the dock for you to return this evening,” Aunt V told me.

“Did she leave a name and number?” I excitedly inquired for I so hoped that it was Susie calling saying for me to rush to her house for the hug that I’d been waiting on for months and months.

“Yes, the name and number are on the pad of paper by your phone,” she answered.

“Thanks! We’ll see you tomorrow, Aunt V,” I shouted as she was leaving our residence on her way to the big house.

I was so nervous that my hands were trembling terribly. Laz was in the bathroom and I was glad for I didn’t want him to see the condition I was in as I darted across the room to see who it was who called. Picking up the note pad, I

said to myself, “Please be her. Please be her. Please be her!” When I was close enough to read it, I saw the name Mariella and her phone number.

Disappointment to the max set in like the morning fog over the Caloosahatchee. Well, she might have found out where Susie lived and was going to give me the address, I thought, as I tried to remain positive. I dialed as fast as I was able and in two rings Mariella answered.

“Hello,” came the soft voice from the other end.

“Hi, Mariella?” I said.

“Yes, is this Jay?” she wanted to know.

“Yeah, it’s your knight in shining armor who rescued you from the demons of the deep,” I laughed as I replied.

“You’re silly. Listen, my family wishes to invite you and Laz to a backyard cookout Saturday at five. Can you come?” she asked.

“Sure! We will be there. “We’ll come over tomorrow just to make certain of the exact directions so we won’t be late. I want to check out the beautiful area anyway,” I fibbed because my real reason for going there was to see if I could locate Susie. I knew precisely where Mariella lived.

“Ok, see you then,” she said.

“Bye, Mariella.”

“Hey, Laz, guess who called?” I asked as he was wheeling out of the bathroom.

“Your mama?”

“No! For real, Laz, guess!” I excitedly ordered.

“Santa Claus?”

“Stop being funny, Laz. It was Mariella and she asked if we would come over to her house Saturday at five o’clock for a cookout,” I told him.

“Yeah, I hope you said we would.” Laz stated.

“Of course, I did. Those are two cute girls, my friend.” I said.

“You left out two cute eighth grade girls, my friend,” Laz sarcastically remarked.

“Yeah, but we’re old for our age,” I laughed as I quoted Laz’s brilliant statement.

“Now you’re being funny,” he said.

“Laz, when I was in the net boat, I noticed something very, very serious,” I told him as I changed the subject from silly to dead serious.

“What, Jay?”

“There were snook everywhere. They were in the net, in boxes, and on the deck because they were too large for the crates that the other smaller fish they had netted were in.” I told him.

“Dead?” he asked.

“As a door nail, whatever that means.” I replied.

“What are you going to do about it?” Laz wanted to know. “It is illegal to catch a game fish in a net.”

“We are going to conduct surveillance of the boat as it goes to the spots where they set the nets and at their dock. You know they couldn’t possibly eat that much fish. They must be selling the snook illegally somewhere. Once I have all the information on them that I can collect, I’m calling the law,” I said.

“They might try to destroy us if we are caught watching them, Jay, or what if they find out it was we who squealed on them?” Laz asked me in a quite concerned tone of voice.

“Laz, I’m not going to worry about it and neither should you. It is our civic responsibility to stop this waste of our precious game fish, the snook. If they continue netting them, there will be none for us to catch or for any other person. Think of the thrills we will have every time we visit here when we catch those

beautiful fish. I mean; they have a chance to get away when hooked but a gillnet gives them a zero chance,” I lectured.

“You’re right, Jay. When do we begin surveillance?” he asked.

Tomorrow evening, just after dark, so that they won’t see us. The day after tomorrow morning, we are going over the Mariella’s house by land to pretend we are making certain that we know where she lives. The real reason we are going is that I am almost positive that the gillnetters moor their boat just across from Mariella’s dock.” Then to myself I said that the really real reason was to look for Susie. I should’ve uttered it aloud but now wasn’t the time to talk about her.

“How do you know it is their net boat?” he asked.

“Easy, I remember it because of its look. Net boats have a distinct appearance because of the forward cabin that allows all the room in the rear of the boat for the nets, the net roller and the fish crates. Plus, when the captain answered me on the radio, he said that it was the Alice Bley responding to my mayday. The name on the net boat in her canal is the Alice Bley. Is that enough evidence?” I asked.

“Sounds like it, Bro. Let’s go to sleep. I can’t wait until tomorrow. Good night, Detective,” Laz joked.

“Good night, Funny Man!” I said as I flipped off the lights.

Chapter 22- "Fish On!"

It was a bit difficult getting to sleep that night and we slept an hour later than usual in the morning. I got up before Laz and prepared a breakfast of cereal and toast. I then poured a glass of fresh orange juice that Aunt V had squeezed from the navel oranges on one of her many citrus fruit trees in the front yard. The taste of freshly squeezed Florida orange juice was a delight that brightened up our morning. When Laz came out of the bathroom, I had everything waiting on him.

"Wow, you are a gourmet breakfast chef, Jay," he exclaimed as he pulled up to the table.

"Why, yes, I am." I've had days of practice I laughed as I began to eat my cereal. "I have an idea that I want to run by you after we finish eating, Bro."

"Why can't we talk about it now? Your ideas are usually pretty interesting," Laz added.

"It's not polite to talk with your mouth full and I have a mouthful to tell you. Eat up and we'll get to it," I told him while looking out the window at the morning sun sparkling off the water.

"What do you see out there?" Laz wanted to know.

"I see an invitation to an adventure this early evening," I answered as I ate the last bite of my toast, gulped the remaining delicious orange juice from my glass, and took my dishes to the sink. Laz finished at the same time so I returned to get his glass, spoon, and bowl. Just as I began to wash the dishes Laz asked me to please hurry so that we could talk. I told him to stop being so impatient and to meet me outside and that I would take care of the inside chores. I had to keep the place as neat as possible. I certainly didn't want Aunt V to think that we were irresponsible or even ungrateful for her most gracious hospitality. When I had

everything washed, dried, and placed on the shelves and in the proper drawers, I proceeded to the dock in front of the boathouse where Laz was waiting.

“Okay, Mr. Jay, what’s the plan? Laz inquired. I’ve been waiting long enough. Let me guess. We are going to become detectives and somehow or other surreptitiously gather information on the naughty netters. How’s that for a guess?” He asked in a voice that bordered on facetiousness.

Laz, a facetious guess like that is a guess that is intended to be funny but winds up sounding a bit silly. Did you intend it to be humorous, silly, or both?”

“Whatever, just get to the plan, Stan. You’re the man,” he laughed as he added; “Now that was silly!”

“Okay, I’m going to give it to you in parts so that each segment of the day and evening activities meets your approval. Let’s first look at the big picture. Today we have an objective followed by tonight with a different objective. Today, we are going fishing in our boat all day. Does that meet your approval?” I wanted to know.

“Aye, aye, Captain!” He shouted as if fishing was all he desired to do for the rest of his life.

“Okay, tonight we are going to wait around the corner of Mariella’s canal, where the net boat is moored, out of sight and follow the Alice Bley to the place they are placing the gill net.” I added.

“I disapprove of that plan, Captain. If they see us, the next day we are found floating in San Carlos Pass. It looks as if we had been thrown from the boat by accident and drowned while trying to swim to shore when actually we were destroyed by the netters in order to make certain that they would never get caught. I don’t particularly care for the story of our lives to end so tragically. Couldn’t we strive to have a less unfortunate ending?” Laz asked.

“You just don’t give your best friend enough credit. I have lain awake most of the night and I have a foolproof plan that will not cause anyone grief other than the netters. We are going to lie in wait with our running lights off until they are in the channel and cruising towards the spot where they set the nets. We will follow in the shallow water off to the side and with our anchor lights and running lights turned off. They will never see us.” I cleverly replied as I could tell by Laz’s look he wasn’t ready to accept my plan as of yet. More questions would be forthcoming, and to each query I would generate a spontaneous reply in order to calm his baseless fears.

“Yeah, and we get stuck in the shallow water, again, and there is no one to call on the radio to pull us off,” he sarcastically shot back.

“Wrong, the tide will be high enough for us. They won’t go out until at least nine or ten o’clock. The tide was low at five yesterday, remember when we were stuck? It is an hour later every day. Today it will be low at approximately six o’clock which will give us more than enough water in which to run,” I retorted.

“Well, Bruce said not to run in the shallow water for fear of tearing up the sea grasses that grow on the bottom that are so vital to the ecosystem of this pristine area,” Laz fired right back at me.

“Okay, I gave that considerable thought as well. The motor has different tilt settings on it which I can set that will keep the propeller from damaging the sea grass as we cruise the shallows. Laz, this is in the interest of saving a vital resource to Florida’s fishing industry. We have to follow them. We have to have evidence to present to the Game and Fish Officers when we bust these bad boys wide open, okay? On top of that, Laz, I have a depth finder that is lit up and I can monitor the distance between our hull and the bottom. If it gets to two feet deep,

I'll veer into deeper water. The bottom is safe; I promise, bro." I pleaded and it appeared that I had almost gained his approval.

"One more objection, Jay, how about running with no lights on? That is illegal after sundown," Laz added.

"And who is going to be around to arrest us?" I asked. "The law, if it were there, would bust the snook killers. On top of that, we will be in shallow water where no other boats will be. This is in the interest of conservation, Laz. It has to be done to save the lives of our precious fish. If we get busted, then we bust the net boat on the spot. Okay?" I asked for this was a reasonable objection raised by my friend.

"Okay, counselor, I surely do feel that you would make a fine lawyer someday as you are quite aware of how to present a case. I'm hooked on your plan, dude," he finally agreed.

"Great, now let's go fishing. Get the net and let's try to net some of these baits that are always around the dock," I ordered.

"Can I try to net them?" he asked?

"I don't know; can you?" I jokingly asked.

"Poor humor, Jay." came the reply from the disgruntled cast netter upset that I questioned his ability to throw a net perfectly

You know you can. Toss that net on those minnows and make sure you open it, for if not, you will scare them away and it will be an hour or so before they school up by the pilings at the end of the dock again.

With that command, Laz picked up the six foot net and wheeled to the end of the dock where the unsuspecting school of shiners or pilchards, as we referred to them on the East Coast, was darting around in a huge tightly-packed group making the surface of the water appear that tiny rain drops were falling on it. I watched as Laz straightened out the net, and then gathered it neatly in his hand.

He put the rope of the lead line in his teeth and flipped the net over his arm to wait for the minnows to return to ripple the surface as his approach must have caused vibrations that had sent them a warning to dive deeper to safety. He waited patiently for their return as I watched hoping so that my best friend made a perfect throw harvesting a plethora of silver flopping minnows for the live bait well on our skiff. After about three or four minutes they appeared on the surface again. Laz was poised and ready to toss just as they hit the surface and boy did he open that net into a tight circle.

“Let it sink I shouted!” from my vantage point where I watched in awe as Laz allowed the net to sink for about five seconds and then pulled hard to tuck it in and gather the shiners. With that he pulled the net to the surface as I ran to the end of the dock to eye his catch. The net was bulging; I mean it was packed full of beautiful baits all perfect for the predators that would be hungry for their next meal only to be caught off guard by our superb angling talent that was fostered by days of experience.

“Look, Jay, look!” a proud young man shouted. “I did it. I did it!” You certainly did do it, I told him as I took the net from him and ran towards the boat. I climbed in and opened the large cover over the bait well in the stern of the skiff and flipped on the electronic pump that provide water to the well and kept life giving air bubbles so that the numerous minnows could live and stay lively for hours as we fished. I emptied the contents of the net into the well and there were about a hundred baits all probably wishing to go fishing as much as the two of us were. I was so excited that my mind totally left the anticipation of what would come when night fell on the Caloosahatchee and Laz and I started our surveillance of the Alice Bley.

After I emptied the net, I took the hose from the dock and washed away the scales the minnows had left when a few lucky ones missed the well as I shook

them from the net and were flopping on the deck. I released those lucky few back to their school and finished spraying down the deck. I then opened the cover to see if all were swimming and they were. I clamber back onto the dock, gathered our tackle from the boathouse, loaded Laz and we were off to a place that the trout were so hungry we would later refer to it as Gobbling Gardens!

“Where are we going?” Laz asked as we untied from the dock and motored towards the channel.

“I’ve had my eye on a spot ever since Bruce took us around the first day,” I told him. “It’s down the river a bit. There appears to be a channel leading in to an opening that is about twenty feet wide that cuts into a large cove. I’m certain that the cove is very shallow but the cut into it is probably deep since there is an old wooden piling in the water about fifty feet from the entrance. It was probably placed there to mark the channel into the mangrove-lined cove. My guess is that trout and other predators swim into the cove on the incoming tide to feed on the baitfish that take sanction or seek safety in the roots of the mangroves along the shore. The predators probably lie in wait just along the edge of the roots on the high tide awaiting the baitfish to make a careless move by swimming out of the roots as the tide starts out. That’s when they are gobbled up by the larger fish. It’s all part of the ecosystem and that’s why the mangroves are so important to the survival of so many fish. For that reason the State of Florida makes it illegal to cut them or damage them in any way. We will tie up to the piling and cast our minnows out and wait for the trout or whatever starts to move into the cove as the tide begins to come in.” I lectured.

“You are becoming a walking textbook like Bruce, Laz offered.

“Yeah, you know it’s because of my prolific reading. I just can’t get enough knowledge about Florida. I dearly love it and its pristine environment. It’s our duty to study it to gain a better appreciation of it as we grow up and to protect

it so that our children and grandchildren will be able to share these same wonderful experiences that you and I now share. I know you've heard that speech from Bruce but it is so important that it is worth repeating to keep it fresh in our minds.

"I agree," Laz replied as we arrived at the piling and I tied the bow rope to it. As the tide drifted us away until the rope became taut, Laz noted that the tide was coming in.

"That is exactly why we are here to fish the incoming tide this morning so that as the larger fish start towards the cove to feed, they will see our bait, want a snack, and we'll have them on," I told him as I tied small hook on each of our lines and fixed a small float about three feet up from the hook to keep the shiners from sinking to the bottom and being engulfed by a scavenger fish such as a catfish or sea robin. The depth finder said that it was five feet deep so that seem the correct float depth. I then took a shiner from the well and hooked it on for Laz. He told me to put a few in a bucket with some water in it and bring it up to him so that I wouldn't have to keep getting him a bait from the well in case they were to begin biting.

I found that plan extremely unselfish and I complied with his wish by taking six lively little baits in the bucket up front to him and placing them within his reach by his chair.

Laz cast his bait out and I could hear the plop of the float as it struck the surface of the water as I was getting myself a bait from the well. No sooner than I had put on my bait I heard Laz exclaim, "My cork just went under!"

"Reel!" I shouted from the stern as Laz began to turn the crank at a furious speed. When he reeled up the slack in his line, he pulled back and a ladyfish took off across the surface of the water as if shot from a cannon. His drag screamed as

the silver salami looking fish cart-wheeled across the surface in multiple leaps in its attempt at freedom.

“It’s a Ladyfish,” Laz identified the species as it had tired from its initial run and was now allowing itself to be reeled towards the boat. Laz pulled it alongside, lifted it gently into the boat with his line, grabbed it with his left hand, unhooked it with his right and released it to fight again. “The ladies love me!” he quipped as he reached for another bait in the bucket.

“They do. They do,” I agreed as I cast my bait towards the open water hoping that trout loved me equally as well. My float hit the surface and sat resting peacefully for about a minute when out of nowhere my bait shot to the surface frantically trying to escape from the watchful eyes and hungry jaws of some predator. It was swimming so quickly that it was pulling the float. All of a sudden the water in front of my float exploded as if a brick had been dropped from a helicopter hovering above my float. My line tightened in an instant and the fight was on. It took off quickly pulling the drag as if it were quite large. It came to the surface and started to pull even harder. I finally turned it about the time that most of the line had been taken from my reel. I was thankful for that as no line would’ve ended a great day of fishing. After about three minutes of cranking, I had it to the side of the boat. It was a huge redfish.

“You better net that,” Laz shouted as he pulled back on another fish. I slipped the net under the bronze colored beauty with a large black spot on its side near the tail and gently lifted it to the deck. It appeared to be seven or eight pounds and I was a happy person at that time.

“My first redfish, Laz! My first redfish,” I told him as I cradled it in my arms in order to release it unharmed. I bent over and dropped into the water. It swam slowly away ready to fight again on another day and I was ready for another bait. By now, Laz had reeled in a nice trout and the bite was on strong.

This spot was teeming with fish and there wasn't a house or another boat in sight. Our only guest was a pink roseate spoonbill that was perched on a mangrove branch just at the cut that lead into the cove. I wished that I had a camera as I witnessed its unparalleled beauty. I had read or Bruce had told me that pink color was from the shrimp and other crustaceans on which its diet was based. That made sense.

We continued fishing all afternoon. We were totally worn out from reeling in fish after fish. My spot was the best and we agreed to name it Gobbling Gardens, a name we had heard about from the greatest snook fisherman who ever lived, Stanley Fried, of West Palm Beach, Florida. He had been a childhood friend of Bruce and always named places with a strong bite, Gobbling Gardens. As we left, we tallied our catch count. We had caught and released 27 trout, one redfish, three ladyfish and we lost count of the jack crevalles. What a glorious day!

Chapter 23 - "I'm Hooked!"

After we had moored the boat, I hopped up to the dock and brought down the chair lift for Laz. We then went to the boat house brimming with the good news of our new found fishing spot only to find a note on the door left by Aunt V. It read, "Boys, I have gone out for the evening. I prepared a bowl of paella before I left. It is in your oven. Warm it for fifteen minutes or more, if needed, and serve. I hope you like the seafood in it. Love, Aunt V."

I read the note aloud to Laz who could not believe it since it was his very favorite meal. How lucky was that? We arrive starving after a day of fishing and get one of the most delicious combinations of chicken, shrimp, baby clams, and scallops all blended in saffron seasoned yellow rice. It made my mouth water thinking about it. Laz's mom had made it for us a couple times at his house when he lived in Homestead and I hadn't had any since then. I bolted for the oven as soon as I opened the door.

We made short work of that bowl and then decided that we would rest until it got dark. Laz asked how I knew what time to go out and I replied that it had to be after dark and I didn't know exactly when they would come out of the canal. I did know one thing for certain. When they did, we would be close behind them. After we had cleaned the table and dishes, we rested for about an hour and got ready to go. I wrote a note to Aunt V thanking her for the delicious food and told her that we were going night fishing until around midnight and that we would be very quiet upon our return. I taped the note where she couldn't miss it on her front door and then headed out towards the boat. Night was falling quickly and there was no time to waste. I loaded Laz, hopped in and we were off to who knows where. By the time we arrived at the mouth of the canal, the Alice Bley was still at its dock. We shut off our motor and rowed down the bank about a

hundred yards from where they would be coming out. I poled the boat up into a space where we were concealed by mangrove branches that were overhanging the edge of the water. We had a somewhat obscured view of the mouth of the canal because of the leaves but would certainly be able to hear its diesel engine as it roared its way out towards open water.

The bugs found us quickly but Laz was prepared. We sprayed ourselves with repellent and sat back to wait. We relived the day and wondered aloud when we would be able to return to Gobbling Gardens. I said that this summer there would be plenty of days to fish there and Laz agreed. It certainly gave us something for which to look forward. I had had so much fun during my visit that the days were sailing by and I said that I hoped the remaining two nine week periods of school went that swiftly. That was the end of our conversation as we could hear the purr of the Alice Bley's engine coming down the canal.

“That’s it, Laz. We are now on duty. Shove us out from the bank with the push pole, please,” I ordered as I kept a watchful eye on the net boat as it headed out towards the channel. We were now about ten feet from the bank and I put down the motor to crank it. Momentarily it sounded as if it wouldn’t start which scared the daylights out of me. I tried again and to my great relief, it cranked. We were out of their hearing range so we began to follow through the shallows. The depth finder read three feet so our propeller was above the grass and was not close enough to damage it at all. I continued to closely monitor our depth as we follow just out of their sight. After about ten or it might have been fifteen minutes they slowed and turned south of their westerly direction. This probably meant that they were going to set their nets. The moon had another hour before it rose so I couldn’t make out exactly where they were. I turned off our motor and watched as they slowly motored towards what looked very similar to our Gobbling Gardens although I couldn’t be certain. I continued to hear their motor when suddenly the

sound was gone. I motioned to Laz not to speak by covering my mouth with my hand for I knew if they caught us watching them; it would be trouble for sure.

They were setting their nets for certain. It was eerily quiet about ten minutes and I was ready for them to be finished for as soon as they were gone, we were going to get an exact location for the Game and Fish Officers when we turned them in for poaching game fish.

I had almost fallen asleep when I once again heard the roar of the engine as they began to back away from the spot where they set their net. As soon as they were gone, I cranked the motor and slowly headed towards the net. As I approached the spot where they were it became evident that this was in fact the same place where we had fished all day, Gobbling Gardens! I was so intensely angry that Laz had to calm me down after I loudly vocalized my displeasure at the net. After settling down, I began to think of where they would put their net when I realized that the narrow cut that led into the cove was only fifteen feet wide. If they stretched their gill net across that entrance, they would catch every fish on its way into the cove on the incoming tide to feed. Since snook feed prolifically at night, that would likely be a catch they could surely count on.

As we approached the cut, my fear was realized. They had set the net across the opening to the cove. What jerks, I thought as I asked Laz what to do.

“I don’t know,” was his reply.

“Let’s pole slowly up to the net and I’ll try to untie the rope attached to it from the mangrove branch,” I offered as I wanted to get that net untied before a snook unwittingly swam into it.

With that, Laz picked up the pole and began to gently nudge us towards the branch on the starboard side of the boat on which the gill net’s rope was tied. As it came within my grasp, I leaned into the branches to begin to untie the rope. I had just touched the knot when Laz shouted; “There’s a snook in the net!”

I turned to look and there was a snook firmly gilled in the net.

“Cut him out, Jay,” Laz commanded.

I opened Laz’s tackle box, grateful that he had brought it or left it in the skiff by mistake, and removed his knife and wire cutting pliers. I took the knife in my right hand and pulled the net up to where I could reach the entangled snook. I was just about to slice the netting when Laz proclaimed, “Stop, Jay, we will be guilty of vandalism for cutting the net.”

“The snook is going to die, Laz. I have to cut the net.” I pleaded.

“No, Jay, gill netting is still legal. Bruce said that it will be a couple of years before the law banning it goes into effect,” he remembered.

“Yeah, you are right. I’m going to try to get the fish out. I gently grasped the snook with both hands and pushed it quickly through the mesh of the net and allowed it to swim away. Its small size made untangling it easier than had it been a larger member of the species. “It’s free, Laz,” I cried out as it darted into the cove. I turned and slapped high five with my friend who was grinning from ear to ear. I was about to make a bad decision and he stopped me. What a great guy, I thought as I turned back to the branch to untie the rope so that no other snook would become snared on the incoming or outgoing tide that evening.” I’m still going to untie the rope, Laz.”

“You are taking a great chance by doing so,” he warned sternly.

“How do you figure?” I asked. They are nowhere in sight and have no idea about us being here.”

“Well, they are going to know someone was here when they see their rope untied,” he said.

“I’m still untying it, bro. I’ll take the chance. I’m not breaking any law. They can’t block the passage into this large cove. We have the right to get in and

out of there. They can set their nets in places other than Gobbling Gardens,” I told him.

“Okay, I hope it scares them away from here for good. I guess you are right.”

I then once again grabbed the end of their rope and began to push it towards the knot in order to untie it. I had it loosened enough to free it from the branch when Laz cried, “Jay, I see a boat coming!”

“Where?”

“It’s a ways off but it’s coming this way. I see the red and green bow running lights. Let’s get out of here quickly,” he pleaded.

I had just untied the knot and I swiftly pulled my hand from the branches in order to get out of there when as I withdrew my hand I felt a sharp pain in my index finger. “Laz, something bit me!” I cried out as a sharp pain was running from my finger into my hand. “Get the light, Laz. See if it’s a snake.”

“Jay, the boat is getting closer.”

“Get the light!”

Laz, took out his flashlight and shined the beam directly on my hand. “Jay, you have a hook buried in your finger. It is tied to the branch with fishing line.” He then shined the light into the branches and proclaimed, “There are hooks on line everywhere in there. They booby trapped the branch in case someone did try to untie their net rope.”

“I don’t care! Get this hook out of me. The pain is going to cause me to pass out,” I implored.

“I have to get out of my chair, Jay.”

“Just help me, Laz, please.”

We have about two minutes and that boat will be here,” Laz screamed.

“Get the hook out, bro,” I cried.

Laz grabbed the pliers from his tackle box and then the railing on the console. He pulled himself out of his chair. He then fell towards the gunnel or side of the boat where I was sitting. He grabbed my arm as he fell and I pulled him up to where he could sit on the railing with my free arm. There was no time to waste for if the approaching boat was the Alice Bley, we were history. Shining the light on my impaled finger it was obvious that the hook was deeply embedded in my skin. It was not going to be pulled out. Laz then cut the hook from the fishing line they had tied it on. No longer tethered to the tree, I could now at least move around.

“Jay, I’m going to have to push the point of the hook through your skin out of your finger because the barb on the hook won’t allow me to back it out. This is going to hurt badly, bro,” he said as you could now hear the motor of the approaching boat. “Put this towel in your mouth and bite down hard, Jay. I have to do this,” he ordered.

I picked up the towel and bit into it until my jaws hurt.

“Look, Laz cried out. With that, I turned my head to look at whatever he saw and Laz grabbed the hook with his pliers and pushed its point breaking the surface of my skin out of my finger. I have never felt such pain. It was terrible, but being cut to shreds by the netters would have been even more terrible.

“Jay, hold still! I have to cut the hook below the barb so we can pull it out of your finger,” he commanded.

By now, blood was streaming from my finger and you could see the bow of the boat as it was a hundred yards away.

“Hurry, Laz, we have to get out of here!” I called out.

He grabbed my wrist with his super grip, placed the pliers firmly on the hook and clipped it below the barb. He then backed the shank of the hook out of my finger and I was saved for now, but we still had to deal with starting the motor

and getting out of there quickly. I sat down, pushed the button to lower the motor into the water and cranked the engine. As the engine idled, I helped Laz back into his chair. After Laz was in his chair, he wrapped the towel that I had bit into around my finger for the blood was now everywhere. I reached with my good arm for the shift control. Just as I put our boat in gear to back away from the cut the approaching boat sped towards us for they had now seen us. We were trapped with no way to escape. I guess I'll never see Susie again, I thought as I turned off our motor to try to reason with the approaching netters.

"It's been nice knowing you, Jay," Laz belted out over the roar of the engine as the larger boat which we could see plainly was now upon us.

Suddenly, out of the darkness that concealed the identity of the big boat, a voice shouted, "Do you guys know if there's a convenience store around here? We're out of beer."

"Happy that we now had a chance to continue our lives because it wasn't the Alice Bley; I yelled back, "No, there are no stores on the river." The voice replied, "I didn't ask for smores, kid. I want stores."

"No, that's not what I said. Can you move your boat please, my friend is hurt," Laz told them.

"Hi, Burt, my name is Larry. My friend is Harry, but he's bald! Look," he uttered as he shined his flashlight on Harry's bald head. "Which one of you is Burt?"

What idiots, I thought as they reminded me of the characters that Billy and I had met at the boat ramp in Homestead one day before the hurricane.

"Just move your vessel, please Captain Larry, Harry or whomever," I begged the drunks. I didn't want to say that I was hurt again for fear of keeping the drunken dialogue going.

I guess the madness was over for they honored my request and began to back out of the way to allow us to leave.

As they cruised out of sight, Laz remarked that had been a close one and that we were lucky, for dealing with drunk boaters was easier than angry netters. I agreed whole heartily with his statement.

“Jay, before we leave, let’s tie a hook back on their booby trap line to replace the one we cut off. I have a hook just like the one that was in your finger in my box. That way they won’t have any way of identifying you as the one who untied the net in case we unexpectedly run into any of them while we are still here in Ft. Myers and they see you are bandaged,” he brilliantly offered. “I realize that it’s a long shot that would happen, but let’s take no chances. Plus let’s not give them the satisfaction of knowing they hooked whoever untied their net.”

“Good idea, Laz” I said as I slowly drove the boat back to the branch that caused me the excruciating pain. I took the hook from Laz and tied it to the line that the other one was attached. I was careful to use the exact knot, a fisherman’s clinch knot, that Bruce had taught us to tie so they would never have the satisfaction of knowing the person who untied their net got hooked. When finished, I put the motor in reverse, and backed us out far enough away from the trees to turn the boat around and we headed to the boat house.

On the way back Laz asked what I would tell Aunt V about my finger and I said that my story would be I jammed in the lift while putting you in the boat. That sounded reasonable. He agreed and said that the netters would be very angry not to have snared any snook at the cut but that was their problem.

Chapter 24 – “Looking for Love”

The next morning we were up early. We decided that we would head out to Mariella’s house by eight so as to give us all day to kind of get a good look at the surrounding neighborhood. We might even run in to Susie or a kid who knows where she lived.

On the way out of the yard, I stopped to tell Aunt V where we were going and explained to her the invitation to the cookout, as well as, the net boat surveillance that Laz and I were going to undertake when it was dark. She said that she totally understood and for us to be careful. I promised that I would and we were off to Mariella’s. What an understanding person Aunt V was!

“This is a beautiful neighborhood, huh, Laz?” I asked as he allowed me to push him as we headed out. Before the hurricane, Laz rarely allowed me to push him. I guess all of the changes had brought us even closer and he would now let me assist in his mobility.

For December, the temperature was perfect, not hot and not cold! I had this wonderful feeling that I always get when anticipating something that held great meaning for me. The streets were lined with all sorts of magnificent trees. There were Sabal Palms, Royal Palms, Coconut Palms, and Queen Palms, plus fruit trees such as orange, grapefruit, tangerine and avocado everywhere. Some citrus fruit even hung over the fence offering their sweet flavor to anyone wishing to pick one from the branch. I told Laz that we shouldn’t pick any unless we were first given permission and he agreed.

The first thing that was quite noticeable was the lack of kids in the area where Mariella lived. There was zero. I was amazed that down the road from the street she lived on there was a park that was void of life except for a squirrel or

two. The silence was kind of neat. I felt like shouting, “Susie!” at the top of my lungs but squelched that thought.

“Is this some kind of retirement community, Jay?” Laz asked as we passed house after house with nobody to ask if the Jamers lived in the area.

“I guess, Laz. Look there’s Mariella’s,” I pointed out. “We’ll have no trouble finding it on Saturday afternoon, “I said as we turned to head back to the boathouse. You could tell it was her house because of the sailboat in the backyard at the dock. This was visible as you looked from the front of her home down the side into a portion of the backyard.

“Jay, that was her sailboat we saw between the houses, right?” Laz asked.

“Yes, Laz,” I answered reassuringly. Changing the subject I asked, “I know you don’t want to be late for the cookout. Which girl are you interested in?”

“Both of them, they are seriously major attractions!” he laughed.

“Before we go, let’s look across the canal from Mariella’s to see if the Alice Bley does, in fact, dock there.” I said. We continued two homes down the street and looked between the houses to confirm what I already knew. From that vantage point, you could clearly read the name on the stern of the net boat. It was the same boat, the Alice Bley.

“That’s it,” Laz proclaimed.

“Yeah, ok, let’s get a move on. We need to get to the boat so we can set up our stealth surveillance tactics.”

After about ten blocks, a kid finally appeared. He was in the front yard of his house sitting in the grass playing with a dump truck.

“Hey, kid,” I shouted from the sidewalk. “Know any girl who lives around here named Susie?”

“What?” the little one replied.

“Susie, know anyone named Susie who lives near here?” I yelled at this obviously hearing impaired kid.

“Toosie, Shoosie, what?” he answered.

“Forget it, okay?”

“Kay, Shoosie, Toosie?” he asked.

“Go, Jay, go. Get out of here,” Laz cried and I began to push Laz at a very rapid pace to escape the little kid.

“Hey, don’t go,” the obviously lonely little crumbsnatcher pleaded as we vanished into the neighborhood.

When we were beyond the little kid’s voice range, we stopped to rest for a second.

“That little kook has a problem,” I said.

“Jay, the kid wasn’t even three. He probably hadn’t developed sufficient articulation skills to be able to decode our inquiry.” Laz once again uttered in his funny man role.

“Yeah, that’s it.” I answered as we blazed our way out of the area.

The rest of the trip home was without major incident. We did stop outside of a fence where three juicy tangerines were just within picking range and asked the lady raking leaves in her yard if we could have one of the fruit each. She looked like such a nice lady; yet, looks can be deceiving. Her unexpected reply was, “No. They are mine. Go home, fools!”

“Wow, she must be the little kid’s grandma or something,” Laz said.

“Thank you!” I yelled to yard lady and we continued on to the sanity and serenity of our boathouse.

We arrived around three thirty and decided to eat before we set out in the boat for surveillance duty. I opened two cans of spaghetti and made some toast.

When we were finished, we did our dishes and set out for the end of the dock where our super secret water surveillance craft awaited our mission. As I ambled across the dock, I perceived a distinct sea type smell in the air. That smell coming from the river, as well as, the rustling sound of the wind in the fronds of the palm trees growing by the water would be etched into my memories for life. There would be days in the future that I would yearn for that smell and to hear the soothing sound of the whispering palms once again.

“We should’ve darkened our faces like real commandoes before we departed,” Laz said as he got into the lift and I lowered him into the skiff. He transitioned to the boat with ease as I climbed aboard, started the engine and set off on Mission Snook Gillnet Liberation.

I cruised very slowly through the waterway so as not to draw any attention to us from the shoreline. I had Laz throw out his lure and we trolled or pulled it behind the boat about fifty feet. To our great surprise, Laz caught a trout so I tossed mine out and I caught one too. What a place this was. I so wished that I could live here. I shut off the motor and drifted as we caught ladyfish, trout, and Laz even caught a cow ray that nearly took all of his line. I had the toughest time dislodging the hook from that ray’s mouth.

It was nearly dark and I didn’t want to stop fishing. Only the fact that the fish quit feeding made me realize that we were there to look for the net boat returning to its moorings and needed to move on.

When Mariella’s canal came into our sights Laz said, “Jay, the net boat is there now.”

“They must have just arrived at the dock because they are unloading crates. I’m going to paddle down the canal and try to get to the bank of the vacant lot next door to them so I can climb up the bank and hide in the shrubs alongside their house. That way I can make certain they have snook and also get the house

number so that when I make the call to the wildlife hotline, I can give them correct information” I had already looked up the number to report violations, and I was more than prepared to bust those bad boys wide open.

I quietly pulled the boat up to the shore of the vacant lot on the end away from where they were so they wouldn't see us. I instructed Laz to put the tarp over his head to shield him from the pesky mosquitoes that were buzzing around us. Just as I finished my command, Laz held up a can of bug repellent with an enormous grin on his face, he whispered, “Be prepared!”

I sprayed it on my hands and wiped the sides of my face and neck. I then sprayed my arms and wiped them down so as not to leave one spot for the critters to land and munch me.

“I'll see you, amigo,” I said as I scampered up the bank and into the lot. Shrouded by darkness, I crept to the shrubbery on the side of the house. I lay on my stomach in the dirt parallel to the bushes and began surveillance.

The first person to come by was the kid Chad. He was toting a crate of what looked like sand perch. Next came his dad with a crate of mullet, so far both were legal. The next person was the captain. He was lugging a crate full of beautiful snook. Some were so large that their heads were protruding over the side of the crate. I could barely control my emotions as he passed within ten feet of my prone surveillance position. The feeling of anger soon turned to pride as I thought of how many snook in the future that would be liberated from the entanglement of the nets of the Alice Bley. Actually, I felt as if Laz and I both were real commandoes in the real army.

The strangest thing happened as I continued to lie in the prone position next to the bushes. I heard two girls talking in the back yard and one of the voices sounded like Susie's. My heartbeat accelerated as I intently listened to the conversation. Just then the kid Chad said, “Susie, give me a hand with this crate,”

and I began to feel that this very well may be the girl of my dreams, but what was she doing here with this band of outlaws? I'd know for certain in less than a minute as they were walking down the side of the house carrying a crate. The contents of the crate didn't matter this time; it was the identification of the person carrying it. What would I do if it were Susie? Would I jump up and hug her? No, I thought, I'd then blow my cover and destroy our entire surveillance mission. The footsteps were very close now and I could make out the figure of a very nice looking girl, but couldn't see her face, when suddenly the crate slipped out of her grasp. Chad turned and asked, "What's wrong with you, girl?" She bent down to pick up the crate and was within a few feet of me and I was able to make a positive ID. It was Susie, my Susie; I so hoped anyway that she was my Susie and not someone else's.

There was another girl carrying a bucket coming up the side of the house on her way to the truck in the front yard where they were loading the crates. She appeared to be our age or possibly a year older.

I made a decision not to jump out and surprise them. I would wait until the truck pulled off and I could see if Susie either stayed in the house meaning she lived there or walked to her house. Whichever happened, I was going to know where she lived for if she left, I would follow her home and then Laz and I would go to her house the next morning to talk to her. I couldn't talk to her this evening for fear of one of the outlaws seeing me as I was going to turn them in before we left for Miami on Sunday.

I waited until the truck took off and then waited on Susie to make a move towards home or remain inside. Finding her was like unbelievable. "How strange life can be!" I was thinking as I waited. What if we hadn't run into Mariella and Jasmin floating in the river because there was no wind to fill their sails? I would have probably never have known where Susie lived or where the Alice Bley was

moored. Then I would have never been here to find her. My thoughts were broken by the sound of the front door of the house opening followed by voices.

The girl with Susie said, "I'll walk you home. Wait a second."

After hearing that, I crawled as quickly as I was able on my belly up to the front of the hedge to where I could see Susie. How gorgeous she was!

The other girl was walking towards her when the door opened again and a lady yelled, "Come back in here, Gail, You're not walking back alone at night."

"Mother, please," she protested.

"No! Get in here," her mom commanded.

"Ok, I'm coming. Bye, Susie." Gail sadly told her and walked back up the walkway to her house.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Gail." Susie called back as she started off down the street.

I waited until she was a block down the street and then rose up as silently as possible to follow her to her house. I did feel like running up to her but had told myself no. I had waited all these months. Ten or twelve more hours wouldn't make that much difference. One block became two, and then three, four, five, six, and finally seven blocks from Gail's house she turned down another street, Oak Avenue. Then about four houses from the corner, she walked up a driveway into a carport, opened the door, and went in. I continued up the street, got her address from the mailbox, 223 Oak Avenue and booked it double time back to Laz.

"Laz must think that I had been captured by the enemy," I thought as I ran like the wind. When I arrived at the boat, Laz was covered with the tarp and was sound asleep. I quietly said, "Laz, Laz." There was no answer so I tapped his shoulder. He did a Hipartner launch straight up out of his chair.

"What, what?" he exclaimed.

“Take a chill pill, dude. You are sleeping on the watch,” I said. “You need to be more vigilant, young man.”

“You were gone like forever, Jay,” he said.

“Yeah, well, wait until you hear what went down tonight. It’s more than I can handle right this second. I’ll tell you as we cruise home.”

I took the push pole from its brackets and shoved us away from the bank. I then walked to the bow, paddle in hand, and quietly rowed us out of the canal and around the corner, because the canal was too deep to use the pole. As we passed Mariella’s house, Laz said that he could see her in the kitchen standing at the window. I didn’t notice her at all since my mind was on Oak Avenue at the time.

On the way home, I told Laz the entire story causing him to flip totally out. He, along with me, could not wait to go to Susie’s in the morning. We would both have a sleepless night due to the intense anticipation of seeing, once again, our dear friend, Miss Susie Jamers.

Chapter 25 – At Last!

The next morning Laz and I were up at daylight.

“Now, what do we do? We can’t wake her up this early,” Laz told me as I came out of the bathroom dressed and ready to roll.

I was dressed in clothes that weren’t suited for fishing and I knew what Laz was about to say before he even opened his mouth; so I answered before he had a chance.

“No, Laz, we can’t go fishing. I just want to wait around here until nine o’clock and then we will go over to her house.”

“Your crystal ball is messed up, because I wasn’t going to ask to go fishing. Let’s play cards, Jay,” he offered knowing full well he wanted to go to the oyster bar and fish.

“Laz, I’m going to sit out on the dock and look at the river and think a while. You play solitaire, okay, dude?”

“Ok, Jay, I understand,” he replied.

I walked out to the end of the dock and actually became very thankful that I could be in such a place after everything in my past. The sun was getting up high enough that its rays were beginning to sparkle on the water causing me to squint from the glare. A stiff breeze fanning my face whisked through the palm fronds creating the rustling sound that was music to my ears. I sat on the edge of the dock dangling my feet over the side and wondered what the next few hours would bring. There were so many questions to ask Susie. Why was she there? Did she realize she was hanging out with and actually helping lawbreakers? Was she going out with anyone? Did she miss me? As I watched the tiny crabs scamper up and down the pilings of the dock, I thought about my number one question. “Will you go out with me?”

I don't know how long I sat there but my legs began to fall asleep and when I got up to walk I almost stumbled. They were all tingly and weak. I caught myself on the chair lift and held tightly until my legs told me that they were good to go.

Turning towards the boathouse, I saw Laz come out and yell, "Let's go!" With that order, we were off to Oak Avenue.

On our way there, we passed the little kid playing in his front yard, his mom or nanny or whoever was still sitting on the front steps just like before talking on a portable telephone. I yelled, "Toosie, wusup?"

When he heard my voice, he looked up and this big, wide grin enveloped his entire face. He then became so excited that he started running at us screaming, "Toosie, Toosie, Toosie," in his high pitched little kid voice.

It was hilarious. He remembered us.

Laz said, "Hurry, let's get out of here now!"

I started pushing him at a trot and before the little kook got to his fence, we were gone.

"Wow, slow down, Jay." Laz begged as I was now running. "Are you afraid that the real Toosie is going to move again?" he jokingly asked.

Nearly out of breath I answered, "Funny man returns!"

"There it is, Laz! There it is! I see it. It is Oak Avenue!" I blurted out.

"Calm down, man. You're going to pass out before we get there," Laz ordered.

Within a minute we were traveling up the walkway to Susie's front door.

I ascended her steps two at a time. I stumbled for a second on a mat on her porch that was placed there on which to wipe dirty feet, but regained my balance before crashing into her front door.

“She may not be able to see you until next fall,” Laz the joker called out as I was knocking on the door.

I turned to tell Laz that his joke was older than he was when I could hear footsteps coming to the door. I backed away in case the door opened forward and when it did open, there she was!

“Jay!” she screamed followed by “Laz!” With tears running down her face she embraced me with such force that I thought my eyes would pop out, but that was okay. My eyes popped out every time I saw her anyway. Taking her arms from around me, she ran down to Laz and grabbed him. Wow that felt good I thought as I waited for her to calm down.

When she did she asked, “How did you ever find me?” she asked.

“Let’s say I followed a lead,” I cleverly replied.

“Whatever, I’m glad to see you both,” she told us. “What brings you to Ft. Myers?”

I couldn’t tell her that I was there to find her and that was the only selfish reason that I had; thus I replied, “To visit Bruce’s Aunt V, to stay in her boathouse and to fish for the rest of the week and hopefully all summer.”

“Have you heard from Billy or Timo?” she asked.

“Not a word, Susie, neither of us has heard anything. I think they are somewhere,” Funny Man replied.

We continued our conversation on her front steps for a long time. She asked me why my finger was bandaged and I told her the jammed in the lift story and left it at that. When we finally were at a loss for more questions and answers about school, home, and life in general, I asked Laz to excuse us for a few minutes as I needed to speak with Susie in private.

Laz waited by the steps in the shade of her carport while Susie and I walked out of her yard and down the block. When we were out of hearing range of Laz, I

stopped and said, “Susie, I don’t know how to really say this, but it’s a long story about how I found you,” and I began to tell her the entire tale.

“Laz and I went fishing in Aunt V’s boat a couple of days ago. As we were cruising to the oyster bar where we fished, we saw two girls in a sailboat floating helplessly because there was no wind.”

“How did they get there with no wind?” she interrupted.

“One of the girls, Mariella said that two other boys had towed them out to the channel in hopes that the wind would pick up. It never did and we found them just floating along with help from the tide,” I answered.

“I know Mariella. She rides my bus. She’s in eighth grade,” Susie said. “Was the other girl’s name Jasmin?”

“Yeah,” I retorted.

“Go ahead with your story,” Colonel Susie commanded.

“Well, after we pulled alongside them, we tied their bow rope to our stern and we towed them back to their dock,” I said.

“Yeah, their dock is almost right across from my friends Gail and Chad,” Susie interrupted again.

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed

“How do you know?” She asked.

Let me finish and you’ll know how I knew,” I cleverly replied to her question as we continued our conversation. “I asked if they knew you and Mariella said she knew that you rode her bus but not where you lived. After we talked for a while, we left for the boathouse on the water where we are staying at Bruce’s Aunt V’s. On the way, we decided to stop and fish for a while.”

“So you met two chicks and you helped them out and you talked and you went fishing,” she interrupted again.

“Excellent synopsis, Suze.”

“What’s a synopsis?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s a brief statement giving a general idea of what something is about. It’s kind of like a short summary of something,” I replied.

“Oh, I knew that, Jay. I was just being funny,” she laughed as she brushed her hair away from her beautiful eyes.

“Anyway, we stopped to fish and while we were catching so many fish, the tide went out and we were stuck in one inch of water and couldn’t move the boat. When it got dark, we kind of freaked out and called for help on the radio. That’s when Chad and his dad and the captain of the Alice Bley came to our position and towed us off the bar. While they were pulling the boat, I was in their ship to help get the weight out of ours so it could more easily be pulled off with only Laz in it.” I told her.

Interrupting once again, Susie asked “How did you get in the Alice Bley?”

“I waded out to it and Chad put a ladder down to help me climb in,” I added.

“Chad’s the best,” Susie blurted out.

That was a bit strange as I was hoping that I was the best in her eyes. Oh, well, it could have been conversation rather than a term of endearment.

“This is the sad part of the story, Susie. While I was in the boat, I saw a number of legal fish that you can net and I also saw many illegal fish that you may not take with a gill or cast net called snook.”

“Called what?” she wanted to know.

“Snook,” I replied.

“I wouldn’t know a catfish from a ratfish, Jay.” She confessed.

“Susie, while I was at Mariella’s dock, I noticed the Alice Bley moored across the canal from her house. The next night Laz and I slipped into the canal and I climbed up the bank of the vacant lot next to Gail and Chad’s to watch to

see if they had netted more snook. That's when I heard your voice. I wanted so to talk to you but was afraid because those people are outlaws and I followed you home that night," I told her hoping she wouldn't be angry.

"You stalked me, Jay!" she exclaimed.

"I did not!"

"What do you call it then?"

"I call it following someone you care about to make certain she's safe walking in the dark. That's what. On top of that, I'm calling the state wildlife officers and reporting them," I firmly stated.

"No, Jay, no you can't." she protested.

"Why? They are breaking the law."

"Because, Jay, I don't want to lose Cha, I mean Gail as a best friend. That's why." She cried.

Seeing tears told me that she must like Chad. She almost said his name but stopped a bit short. I had to have a plan but I had no time to stop and think so I blurted out, "Susie, I love you, okay? I don't want you to get in trouble when they bust the place. If you are there you may be taken away, too."

"I don't even know what kind of fish you are talking about, Jay, and I'll tell you one more thing and you had better listen. If you call the law on them, I'll never speak to you again as long as we are on this Earth. Do you get it?" she asked.

"Yeah, I get it. Goodbye, Susie," I sadly said.

"Goodbye," she said as I turned to get Laz.

Now what do I do? I thought as I walked back. Susie stayed where we had been talking and I was getting, like our lives, further and further away from her with every step that I took, but I wasn't about to give up on her. I had swum too far into this net of expectations, and I wasn't gilled yet.

I picked up Laz and started home to Aunt V's. I told him what was said on the entire way home. "What I don't understand, Laz, is why she doesn't want to uphold the law," I said sadly. I paused for a second and then continued, "It must be that she loves Chad and doesn't want to get him in trouble."

"Yeah, that's probably it, but you have a monumental decision to make now, Jay. You have to choose. Do what's right and turn them in or pretend that you saw nothing so that you will at least have a chance to ever go out with Susie," Laz said.

"You're correct, Bro. It is a decision of colossal proportions. I know what I must do, but I can't bear the thought of her never speaking to me again."

With my words still hanging in the air, we turned into Aunt V's driveway and headed towards our boathouse.

Chapter 26 – I See, Manatee!

Neither of us slept well that night for my best friend shared my dilemma with me. I had to make a decision but I certainly wasn't ready right now.

The next morning, Friday, Aunt V came to the boathouse very early and asked us if we would like to spend the day looking at manatees. "Wow! Yes," Laz answered. "I've seen those gentle giants on TV, and read about them, but never did I ever think that I'd get to actually see one."

I was staring out the window at the water that I held so dear thinking about the other loves in my life, and I just couldn't muster the excitement that Laz was exhibiting. So as not to appear indifferent to Aunt V's proposal, I did politely say, "Sure, Aunt V, I'd love to as well."

"Ok, boys, let's leave in about an hour. Tomorrow's your last day and you'll probably want to take the boat out when we get back around noon or a little after. That's why I planned the manatee trip in the morning.

"Thanks, Aunt V. We're both invited to a cookout at the home of one of the two stranded girls whom we rescued and towed home this week. It's going to be at five" I told her.

"How are you getting there?" she asked.

"We were going to ask you if it was ok for us to walk, Aunt V, since they don't have a lift for Laz on their dock," I told her.

"I don't mind a bit. I'm glad you boys have made friends. You are coming back to visit me this summer, aren't you?"

I gulped as I couldn't truthfully answer that very tough question. If Susie wasn't going to speak to me again just because I did the right thing, then I didn't want to be here at all. The memories would be too much to handle. "I, I mean,

we'll be back, Aunt V, as soon as school is out," I fibbed once again, as I wasn't certain of anything at this moment.

"Ok, be up front in an hour. I'm packing a picnic lunch for us so we can spend the entire morning watching manatees. Bring your cameras."

Laz and I just kind of hung out in the boathouse until it was time to go. After an hour passed, we met Aunt V in front of the garage, helped Laz in, put the chair in the trunk, and we were on our way.

As we drove, the beautiful foliage helped to ease the pain in my brain. Aunt V took us to Thomas Edison's winter home and said that this summer we would visit it and see many of his eleven-hundred inventions on display. That sounded very exciting, but who knew what the future would hold for me?

She also promised to take us to the Naples Zoo which was about a half-hour drive south of Ft. Myers. Additionally, she told us that there were boats on Estero Island, where Ft. Myers Beach was located that took you across the Gulf of Mexico to Key West. That was cool for sure I thought as all these promised trips continued to help a bit. Finally, she told us about how we would visit Sanibel Island, where there was fifteen miles of white sand beaches bordered by the bluest water imaginable. There we would find 230 kinds of birds, 50 types of fish, and 250 types of shells. "What a wonderful day we will spend there!" she told us as we cruised eastward towards the manatees.

After about ten minutes, the manatee area appeared on our right. We pulled in and again helped Laz out. We went right to the water which was a long canal that was full of manatees.

"Why are they all here?" Laz asked Aunt V.

"Well, Laz, the power plant right across the road discharges warm water that is channeled from there through the culverts under State Road 80 to here

where it empties out into this canal. The surrounding water in winter here is too cold for manatees, so they come here to get warm,” she explained.

“Wow, that’s neat! Look at all the manatees!” I cried out as there must have been thirty or more there. “This should be a park someday.”

“Yeah, Laz agreed, “and they should name it Manatee Park too!”

“That’s a good name, Laz. I’ve heard talk that soon this area may become a park. Look, there is a baby manatee. How cute!” Aunt V said as she shaded her eyes from the glare of the water on this crisp, cool, but not cold southwest Florida December day.

It turned out to be so much fun and, boy, did I need it. Before I knew it, it was one in the afternoon and we were in the boathouse anxiously awaiting the cookout at Mariella’s house. We sat around for a while and tried to figure out what to do next when out of nowhere Laz shouted out, “I have a capital idea!”

“No, I don’t want to visit Tallahassee,” I joked as I knew that the word capital in the context that he used it meant excellent.

“Wrong,” he shot back.

“I get one more guess,” I told him.

“Okay, genius, give it your best and don’t try to lure me into believing you don’t know what I’m thinking,” Laz replied as he knew that I knew.

“Well, cast a glimpse this way and I’ll mime what you want to do,” I told him as I went through the bodily movements of casting a lure and reeling it in.

“Precisely what was on my mind, angling!” he uttered as he wheeled towards the rod and reel rack where his trusty little pole awaited the grasp of its master.

Chapter 27 – Party Off, Dudes

We spent a few hours of our last day in paradise fishing at our beloved oyster bar. I caught my first snook that day on my little lure that was just like the artificial bait that Laz had. Aunt V's late husband had dozens of small lead-headed plastic tailed jigs in his tackle box. Laz had a clear tail that had silver specks in it. Mine was kind of root beer colored. I guess snook like that color because when we got to the bar, I got out of the boat and waded to the end of the bar. My first cast was just to the left of a small school of mullet. The lure striking the water as I cast it out caused the small silver baitfish to scatter in all directions. Evidently, this either angered the snook because I had frightened its impending meal or it was just about to engulf one when it grabbed my lure. I suddenly felt a "thump" and I pulled back to set the hook. My line flew off my reel as if I had snagged a passing speedboat. The beautiful fish jumped twice but was unable to free itself of the lure. Having run out at least fifty yards of my line straight in front of me, it began to swim to the left. As it did, it came to the surface, its dorsal fin just below the top of the water. Its stunning yellow tail came out of the water as it swam and provided me a sight that I would never forget as the green, green mangrove trees of the shoreline provided the perfect backdrop to this magnificent picture taken by my mind's eye. After a few minutes it became evident the beautiful creature had lost the battle and came easily towards me. Turning on its golden side, I looked as it lay motionless in the clear water surrounded by oyster shells. I became very thankful for this special moment, for I had landed my very first snook! I then gently removed the lure from its sand-paper toothed mouth, turned it up on its stomach, and pushed it as I walked slowly out towards deeper water. I hadn't pushed it six feet when it regained its strength and quickly swam away from the bar. I later told my story of my first snook to a fish biologist who

said that I had taken a “life species”, but I chose not to use those words to describe my experience. It made it sound too technical.

Laz was too engaged in catching trout to have witnessed my experience but we would talk about it on the way home and come to the conclusion that from this day forward we would always be fishermen.

We docked at the boathouse at about four which gave us little over an hour to get ready to go to Mariella’s. Laz and I both put on the best clothes that we had for the cookout. As we were preparing to leave, Laz combed his hair several ways and closely inspected his appearance in the mirror. I could tell by his look whether he approved or disapproved with his different hair styles by his facial expressions. Finally, he placed every hair in perfect order and his grin stamped immediate approval. He even sprinkled on some cologne he found in the bathroom that somebody had left there.

“Do you like one of the girls?” I asked Laz.

“Duh, dude. I like them both!” he replied.

“Ok, I get it. Well, that smell potion will drive them crazy. Then what will you do? They’ll be fighting over you and ruin the entire evening.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” he sarcastically replied and out the door we went.

When we did get there we went around the side of the house because nobody came to the door when I knocked.

“Hi, guys,” Jasmin said as we came into sight of the backyard.

What a nice place this was I thought as I said, “Hi,” to Jasmin and to Mariella.

Cool Laz blurted out, “Que pasa?” and wheeled right over to where the girls were standing.

We talked for about an hour and it was really kind of cool conversing with older girls who seemed to take an interest in both of us. The Alice Bley was not

tied to its dock and I knew it would be returning just after dark. I couldn't keep my eyes from wandering across the canal in hopes of seeing Susie one last time before I left.

Just before dark the girls began to serve the burgers that they had prepared for us. I was getting some chips out of a huge bowl that was on a table next to the grill. Just as I put my hand in the bowl to grab a bunch to munch, I heard the distinct sound of the Alice Bley's diesel engine coming down the canal.

As the net boat pulled into its docking area, another boat came speeding down the canal. It was throwing a wake that rocked every moored vessel tied to a dock in the entire area.

"That guy must have to go to the bathroom!" Laz quipped causing both girls to laugh loudly.

It was no laughing matter. It was the Florida Wildlife Law Enforcement patrol boat for it turned on a flashing blue light that with each revolution strew blue across Mariella's backyard and our faces.

I swallowed hard hoping that Susie wasn't there for I realized exactly what was going down. I also became choked with tears as I knew it was now over forever for Susie and me. She would think that I called and that would be the end of the long road of love down which I had ventured.

Officers were on each side of the house now, as well as, searching the boat. In less than a minute, an officer climbed out of the Alice Bley with two snook, one in each hand. That was all the evidence they needed. We all watched as they handcuffed Chad, his father, and the captain and led them to the front of the house.

Susie wasn't there or at least wasn't outside when the arrest was made. The night was finished for me. I excused myself after telling the girls how sorry I was for leaving and ruining the evening. I promised that I would tell them all about

my reason for departing at a later time and I did. I later wrote them a letter of apology that explained the entire situation. Slick Laz had both of their addresses.

I would have never been able to carry on a conversation for the rest of the night. Laz and I said goodbye and with that, I pushed him home. Neither of us spoke a word on the way to the boathouse for what words were there that would mend a broken heart? Laz was intelligent enough to realize how crushed I was and I felt his pity for me in the expression on his face.

Chapter 28 – The Everglades, a Gift

When we arrived at the boathouse, I opened the door and pushed Laz inside. Taking a seat on the sofa to continue feeling sorry for myself in comfort, I noticed, resting on the table to my left a large book with a glossy cover.

“Laz,” I spoke my first words of the past hour, “did you notice that book on the table over there?”

“What table over where?” he shouted from the bathroom.

“Never mind, I’ll take a look at it,” I yelled back since the door to the bathroom was closed.

I got up and walked to the table. To my great surprise, it was a new book that was called, The Everglades. The picture on the cover was of the beautiful sawgrass marsh, the river of grass, that we had seen from the Trail as we crossed the state on our way here.

I opened it to begin to scan the pictures when I noticed that the inside cover had been inscribed by Aunt V.

The inscription read:

To Jay and Laz,

How wonderful it has been having you stay here during your vacation. Please return this summer as the boathouse, dock, and boat will be lonely. This book is to remind you of your trip here from Homestead.

With all my love –

Your Aunt V

What a super sweet lady to have written such kind words in a book that both Laz and I would cherish for the remainder of our lives.

After Laz returned to the living room, I showed him the gorgeous book's cover and read the inscription aloud. We agreed that we would forever cherish it and that we would periodically exchange it so that it could be equally shared.

Laz announced that he was tired and going to bed. I told him that I was going to stay up and begin to read the new book. I then said goodnight to my best friend as he closed the door to his bedroom. There was no way that I would sleep that night so I took the book from its resting place on the table, sat down on the floor with my back resting against the sofa, opened it, and began to read.

Reading would serve a dual purpose for me. First, it would help to relieve the intense mental anguish brought on by the loss of the love of my young life and it would also serve as a review of the history of the Everglades.

After reading the introduction, I paused for a second to reflect upon the evening. I tried to repel the thoughts but found it impossible. Susie, thinking that I had called the Law Enforcement Officers on Gail's father, Chad, and the captain, would never even consider going out with me. Yet, I would have called on them as soon as I was safely in Homestead, which would have been the next day. I knew that it was my civic duty to report poachers even if it meant losing Susie. So, I would have lost her anyway. It just would have happened a day later. It was now her problem, but what was I thinking? I still loved her. Boy, what a mess this was!

I then turned my attention to the Everglades and I began to read. The book began by stating that since the problems for the Everglades began in the late nineteenth century, the size of the great sawgrass marsh had been reduced fifty percent.

I now had the effect; the Everglades had been chopped in half, so to speak, and one of the halves had been discarded; thus, I began to read about the causes.

Before 1880, the Everglades measured approximately fifty miles wide and one hundred twenty miles long. Rain fell in Central Florida below Orlando and drained naturally into Lake Kissimmee. As the lake filled, water would begin to flow across the Kissimmee River Flood Plain, which was quite large, into Lake Okeechobee. Lake Okeechobee would expand in area during the rainy months and contract during the dry months. As the excess water drained into the lake from the Kissimmee River Basin, it would begin a slow trip to Florida Bay with no obstructions to block what was called, the sheet flow. I remembered Bruce had told us that sheet flow was the very gradual downward slope of the land, less than two inches a mile, towards the south causing a thin layer of water to flow southward to Florida Bay or the Gulf of Mexico. It also stated that some of the water seeped into the ground and helped to fill the Biscayne Aquifer which was the vital water supplier to most of the people in Southeast Florida.

Wow! This was really interesting. I continued to read that the sheet flow of water was prevented from flowing to the east into the Atlantic Ocean by a rock ridge called the Atlantic Coastal Ridge. I guessed it was just high enough that the water couldn't flow over it and was forced, so to speak, to continue its journey southward flowing through Taylor Slough into Florida Bay and westward through the Shark River Slough to the Gulf of Mexico. The sloughs were deeper than the surrounding areas and the water provided a haven for wildlife during the dry seasons of the year. When they said that the water flowed slowly, they meant it crawled! It was said that a drop of water that began its journey in Central Florida would take an entire year to get to the Gulf of Mexico!

I learned, as I read, that several things had contributed to the reduction of the sheet flow and the shrinking of the Everglades. The first was a canal that was cut through the land to connect the Caloosahatchee River with Lake Okeechobee to the east of the west coast and another canal was cut through the land to connect

the St. Lucie River of the east coast with Lake Okeechobee. This created a cross Florida shipping canal for boats, but also began to reduce the sheet flow.

Then in 1926 and 1928 terrible hurricanes caused immense damage and the loss of life for many Florida citizens as Lake Okeechobee flooded. The effect of this damage and loss of life was the government took measures to prevent future flooding by building a levee around Lake Okeechobee to hold in its waters. Now, the water was totally stopped from flowing south as it was sent east through the St. Lucie River Canal to empty into the Atlantic and west through the Caloosahatchee River Canal to flow into the Gulf.

This dried up the land to the south of the Lake as the water was now flowing east and west instead of south. The layers of sawgrass that had accumulated over the years south of the big lake now decomposed and formed super-fertile soil called, muck. With all of this fertile soil available for growing crops, farmers began to cultivate the rich ground. It was learned that sugar cane could grow quite well in this fertile muck and a huge sugar industry flourished south of Lake Okeechobee. The only water now flowing south from the Lake was used by the farmers to irrigate their crops, and to supply the east coast with its water supply.

After all of that, the population of South Florida continued to grow and many more canals were dug that drained even more of the Everglades to create dry land on which to build houses. As more and more people moved here for the wonderful climate, they had nowhere to live but west of the east coast and east of the west coast; thus more land was needed.

One of the final blows to the Everglades happened in the 1960's when a drastic flood control measure was taken. Fifty plus miles of the Kissimmee River was cut off by a straight deep channel that was dredged through the once miles-wide, meandering flood plain of the Kissimmee River Basin. The effect of that

was water now arrived much more quickly into a lake that was smaller than its original size because a levee had been built around it to keep it from flooding.

I was stoked. I mean that I was very excited about getting home to read even more about the Everglades and to think about what could be done in the future to correct the reduction of sheet flow and to restore it to its original state.

One of the last sad things that I read, for it was now three in the morning, was that the wildlife and especially the wading bird population had been reduced by ninety percent because of the draining of the sheet flow and the reduction of their wetland habitat.

The last part of the book read, “The Everglades belong to you and it is up to you to help restore them.” I pledged then that I would do my part.

With that, I closed the book, turned off the light and attempted, in vain, to fall asleep on the sofa.

Chapter 29 – “Anyone home?”

The next morning I told Aunt V that I had become ill at Mariella’s and that Laz and I had come home earlier than we had expected. She asked if I was okay and I explained to her that I was, but it would take a little time for me to fully recover. I then thanked her for the wonderful book on the Everglades and the lovely words she wrote in it, for I was truly moved by her generosity. We then both expressed our appreciation for the gracious hospitality that she showered upon us for the entire week.

I told Aunt V that we would be right on time for Bruce’s arrival, but I had to see a friend before I left. Down the driveway we went as fast as I could walk and Laz could wheel.

“You’re going to be in shape for the track team this spring,” Laz noted as he could see small beads of sweat beginning to appear on my forehead as we traveled.

Having one thing on my mind, reconciliation with Susie, all I could do was answer, “Sure, I’ll be certain to try out.”

Before we knew it, we were in front of our little buddy’s house. As he was playing with a big brightly colored beach ball in his front yard, he looked up, saw us, and once again screamed, “Toosie, Toosie!”

“Laz, I’m going to tell that little kook that I’m not Toosie, okay?” I asked.

“Be nice, Jay. That kid can barely talk. It’s not his fault. You should have never asked him if he knew Susie in the first place.”

“I guess you are right.” I said as he was now right in front of us with only his fence between us. He had the biggest grin on his little face as he asked us if we could play.

“What do you think, Jay? We have a few minutes. It’s obvious the kid adores us. Let’s throw the ball with him for a little while. Come on, lighten up.” Laz said.

“Okay, just for a few minutes,” I replied. “What’s your name, little on?”

“Toosie,” he quickly answered.

“No, your name, not mine. I mean, what you call me. Oh, I’m confused. Laz you try,” I ordered.

“Kid, listen,” Laz calmly asked, “What is your name, you?”

With an even larger grin, he finally caught on. “Frankie,” he answered.

“Frankie, go ask your mom if we can come in your yard and play just for a few minutes, okay.” I told him.

“Ofay,” he blurted out, turned and ran as swiftly as his miniature legs would propel him towards a young girl, who was certainly not his momma. She sat looking extremely bored on his front steps and appeared to take no interest in our program. We could see him talking to her as she turned and gazed through the trees in her front yard to get a glimpse of us as we awaited her answer on the outside of her fence. I made eye contact with her and waved.

Frankie grabbed her by the hand and began to drag her somewhat unwilling frame towards us. As she neared our position, I could see that Laz was more than staring at her, for she was gorgeous. I mean beautiful. She appeared to be our age and as she got within hearing range, I shouted that we would like to throw the ball for a bit with her little brother.

When she heard my request, she scanned us both for a second to, I guess, make an instant decision as to whether we both appeared to be dangerous criminals who had recently escaped from the Ft. Myers Juvenile Detention Center or wherever for that matter. Evidently, she approved of us as she answered, “Sure, come on in. Frankie gets tired of just having me as a playmate. He’s my baby brother and I have to watch him while my mom does house chores. I’d rather be out here than in there, if you know what I mean?”

Before I could even say a word, Laz piped in, “Yeah, me too. I hate doing house type work. I’m Laz and this is my best friend Jay. We are visiting for the holiday break from Miami,” he told her.

“Gee, you must have to go home today,” she said.

“Yeah,” I answered looking at my watch as we had 2 hours and ten minutes left and I still had to get to Susie’s, mend the gaping hole in the net of our love, so to speak, and return to meet Bruce.

“What grade are you in?” Laz inquired.

“Seventh,” she said. “How about you guys?”

Laz thought for a split second and during that minute period of time, I could tell what he was about to say and before he had a chance to utter a syllable, I answered, “Sixth.”

Using the same line he had used at Mariella’s dock, Laz said, “Yeah, but we look old for our age.”

I thought that was such a lame line, but of course, I shook my head in total agreement because that’s what friends do for one another when they say something not so cool in front of a girl that they had just met.

“Yeah, I guess,” was her reply to Laz’s statement. “My name is Myra. I’m glad to meet you both.”

“I bet you have lots of boyfriends,” Laz laughingly stated as I could tell on the inside he was waiting for a certain answer.

“Not really,” was her reply. “I talk to quite a few but there are none that I really like or anything.”

“I know what you mean,” Laz told her. “I’m the exact same. I guess someday I’ll meet someone special but it has happened yet. Jay, here, now he is in love.” Laz said.

“Oh, is she in Miami, Jay?” Myra asked.

“No,” I quickly replied as I was in no mood to explain the predicament that I had been through and in which I was currently involved. Frankie saved me for he kept tugging at my arm begging, “Play, play, play ball.”

“Okay, okay,” I told him. “Go and get ball,” I said and I kicked it to the other end of his yard. He was off like a rocket to capture the rolling multicolored sphere.

He brought it back with the enthusiasm of a golden retriever who would play fetch the stick with its master for hours on end. I knew that I was in for it with Frankie if I didn’t act quickly. He handed me the ball, which was way out of proportion to his size, with both hands by thrusting it up against my chest and excitedly shouting, “Again! Again!” I replied that this was the last time. I then kicked it to the other side of his yard.

As Frankie streaked after the bouncing orb, I shouted, “See you soon, Frankie,” took Laz’s chair handles firmly in grasp as he was in a deep conversation with a young lady whom he appeared quite interested, said goodbye to Myra, and as Laz loudly protested, pushed him toward the gate. Laz turned as we proceeded out of the yard to say, “Goodbye, Myra. I’ll keep in touch.” This meant that in the short period of time that I was Frankie’s surrogate playmate, he had obtained her address and most probably her phone number as well.

By the time I had unlocked the gate and was on the sidewalk, both Myra and Frankie were at the fence. Myra told us how much she had enjoyed meeting us both and for us to hurry back. Frankie, with tears in his little eyes and a look of sadness on his face kept saying, “Jay, back, Jay, back.”

I guessed that meant to come back and I felt a little weird about blazing the little kid but I was on a mission of mending and had to get there quickly.

“Why couldn’t you have left me there, Jay? You could have picked me up on the way back,” Laz asked.

“Because, I need you to back me up when I proclaim to Susie that I had no hand in creating the bust of her friends,” I retorted.

“Yeah, well, I could’ve written you a letter to give to her,” he told me.

“That is no excuse,” I replied.

“Excuse for what? You are mixed up today,” he told me.

“My mind, let’s just say, is elsewhere,” I added as I pushed him swiftly down the avenues and streets towards Susie’s.

When we arrived in front of her house, I mustered up all the inner strength possible, took a deep breath, and started up her steps.

Laz quipped from the driveway where he awaited the appearance of my princess at the door, “Don’t get tripped up in anything like in your past!”

Remembering how I had tripped going up her steps before, I suddenly caught on to Laz’s double meaning and replied, as usual, “very clever.”

I had rehearsed my lines as if I were engaged in a movie scene where I was fully aware that my success in uttering them perfectly would bring me an Academy Award. All I needed now was an audience to assess my performance.

“Here it goes,” I thought as I loudly knocked on Susie’s front door. I eagerly listened for footsteps pounding on the floor and echoing in the rooms and hallways of her house as she sprinted towards the door having seen me through her bedroom window to envelop me in her arms and say that all was well. I guess those kinds of things only happen in fairy tales and novels written by dreamers who are totally out of touch with the comings and goings of a kid’s world because after knocking several times, waiting, and banging on the door again, no one answered my SOS. I was helplessly adrift in a sea of sudden sadness.

I turned, my chin almost resting upon my chest, and descended the steps. Once again, my disappointment was evident and Laz said absolutely nothing as I pushed him down the driveway, into the street, and headed back to reality. The incident at Frankie’s had served as a much-needed break in the seemingly never-ending cycle of hope and despair, yet I knew this time that there would be no more hope awaiting me at the end of my rainbow of expectations. The seahorse was now officially off its chain.

Was she inside not wanting to ever speak to me again pounding her pillow with her fists as if it were my face each time that I knocked? Had she walked to

the detention center to visit Chad who had been incarcerated for violating Florida's game laws? Had she told her parents the entire story and knowing that she had been somewhat of a partner in this crime, an accomplice, if you will, and they turned her in to the juvenile authorities? There were so many unanswered questions going through my mind that I was ready to explode with anguish.

Without even warning Laz, the feelings that I had harbored inside erupted in an explosion of volcanic proportions and I began to push Laz, with no regard for his safety, completely enveloped in self pity, as fast as I could possibly run. Trees and houses and cars whizzed by as I traversed the neighborhood at full throttle. Laz gripped the chair tightly and silently assumed a rigid position in his chair preparing for the very worst as I picked up speed down a long straight away which was the street heading up to Aunt V's driveway. We were home in one-third the time it took to get there.

Having arrived at the gate, I dropped to the soft green grass face down and unable to contain my emotions any longer, began to cry. How long I lay in that prone position, I am unaware but I was snapped out of it by Laz alerting me to Aunt V's presence as she had appeared on her front porch.

I pushed myself up and the tear blurred vision of Aunt V standing on her porch in front of her house reminded me of the kindness she had bestowed upon us both and I regained my composure.

"I'm sorry, Laz," I told my best friend. "I endangered your life."

"So what, Jay. I enjoyed the ride!" he lied.

"Yeah, I'll bet," I sarcastically replied.

"You should have seen the look on Frankie's face as we passed his house at wide open speed. He must have thought it was some kind of race as he was jumping up and down laughing," Laz said.

"It wasn't much of a laughing matter," I told him as I knew that I would never again see Susie. My hopes and aspirations dashed in a flash of revolving blue lights.

“Here comes, Bruce,” Laz shouted as he noticed the van coming down the street towards Aunt V’s gate. I picked up my pace to approach Aunt V for Laz and I had to thank her profusely for her hospitality.

Chapter 30 - Make a Note of That!

With that, Bruce pulled into the driveway. Before he even stepped out of the van, he was yelling through the open window for us to quickly load our luggage as he was in a big hurry to get back. He said that he had a very important job to start and couldn't wait.

Aunt V looked extremely sad as I loaded our luggage and Bruce wheeled Laz towards the van. I promised her that we would return; yet, I knew in my heart of hearts that I couldn't bear to come back. I had been shattered by the events of the last few days and I just couldn't possibly face the memories that another visit would bring.

As Bruce was pushing Laz up the ramp into the vehicle, he asked me if we had a great time. I tried to speak but was unable to utter a word, for I was beginning to feel the very worst feeling that I had ever experienced in my life.

We were leaving the place of which I had dreamed for so long, a place that, for me, was now shrouded with despair. While Bruce backed out of the driveway, Laz and I waved farewell to Aunt V who was standing on her lawn watching us depart. After taking my final look at the boathouse and dock, I turned and stared, watery eyed, straight ahead at Aunt V's lovely home for the last time. Unable to control my emotions, a tear rolled down my cheek and fell onto the front of my shirt.

We were headed for a sad three-hour journey home. I knew that sooner or later Bruce was going to ask me what was wrong and I decided that I would explain the entire situation to mom and him when we arrived home. There was no way that I could do it on the way to Homestead, for I needed time to grieve and to begin what would hopefully be a healing process. I had a lot of thinking to do as we crossed Florida once again.

Just as Bruce had backed into the road, Laz, who had been gazing out the side window getting his last look at the palm lined street in front of Aunt V's suddenly cried out, "Bruce, stop, please stop!"

"What, Laz, what is it? I'm in a hurry, son."

"It's Susie, please stop, Bruce. She is almost to Aunt V's driveway, please," Laz pleaded as Bruce brought the van to a halt.

I turned and saw a very sad-looking young girl standing just a few steps from the entrance to Aunt V's. It just didn't appear to be the same person for whom I had worked so hard to save up money to buy a seahorse necklace but had never earned quite enough to purchase one. She looked tired and worn as if she hadn't slept the previous night. At least we now had something in common, I thought.

As Susie approached the van, Bruce told me that I had only two minutes to say good bye. I certainly wasn't going to need two minutes, for I didn't know what to say or even how to act. Honestly, I felt as if I were about to pass out. While I tried to regain my composure, Susie walked slowly to within six feet of my window and asked if she could speak privately with me. I honored her request by opening the door and getting out of the van. Knowing how very angry she was with me, I prepared myself for the worst.

As we walked out of hearing range of the vehicle, she spoke, "Jay, I want to tell you about last night."

"I know all about it. I was at Mariella's home, across the canal, when it happened. Susie, I didn't call on them. At first, I was going to turn them in when I got home last night, but then I didn't because all of that went down before I had a chance. Please believe me, Susie," my voice cracked as I begged. There was no time to think and to try and act cool as if none of this mattered at all. I still adored her and that became evident by my plea to be believed.

She wiped tears with the back of her hand and said, "It doesn't matter, Jay."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean no one had to call. I knew all along that Gail, Chad, and the entire family were working undercover for the Florida Wildlife Law Enforcement Agency. Gail wasn't supposed to, but she told me everything right after they moved here. That's why I had to tell you in a mean way not to call on them. It was top secret. Just a few people in Tallahassee knew about it. The local Game Enforcement Officers knew nothing about it until a few hours before the bust. The family, who were all working for the government, had moved here, rented the house on the water, and hooked up with the captain of the net boat. They were pretending to be outlaws just like he was so that they could testify in court against him after his arrest to assure his conviction. The captain not only owned the Alice Bley but other net boats as well. They were all poaching the fish you said were illegal to net. The agents were waiting for the perfect time to make their arrest and last night was it," she told me.

"The name of the fish is snook, Susie." I told her as I was beginning to feel a tiny bit better.

"Yeah, snook," she said.

"Anyway," she went on, wiping tears once again, "They had to move this morning. After a bust they move to another state. Chad and Gail are gone."

"Wow," I said, as I began to feel totally like my old self, "That's too bad," I lied big time for I was really jealous of that kid Chad.

"Where were you this morning, Susie? Laz and I came to your house to see you. I knocked and knocked to no avail."

"I'm sorry. My parents were out and I was wandering the neighborhood thinking about everything that had happened since I left Homestead. Jay, are you, are you, coming back here?" she asked as she extended both of her hands.

I stepped closer to her and tenderly placed my hands in hers. As I did, she slipped a note that she obviously wanted no one but me to see into my left hand. I took the note gently from her hand and quickly put it into the left front pocket of my jeans.

“Well, Jay, are you?” she asked again.

“Bet on it, Suze,” I replied. As I gazed into her beautiful, teary eyes, I stepped backwards and opened the door. Climbing into the van while never losing eye contact with the one I so loved, I gently closed the door and we were off to Miami.

THE END