

A CARIBBEAN ISLAND ECO-ADVENTURE

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# rare and endangered

JOHN DOWD

*to Judith Hoskins*



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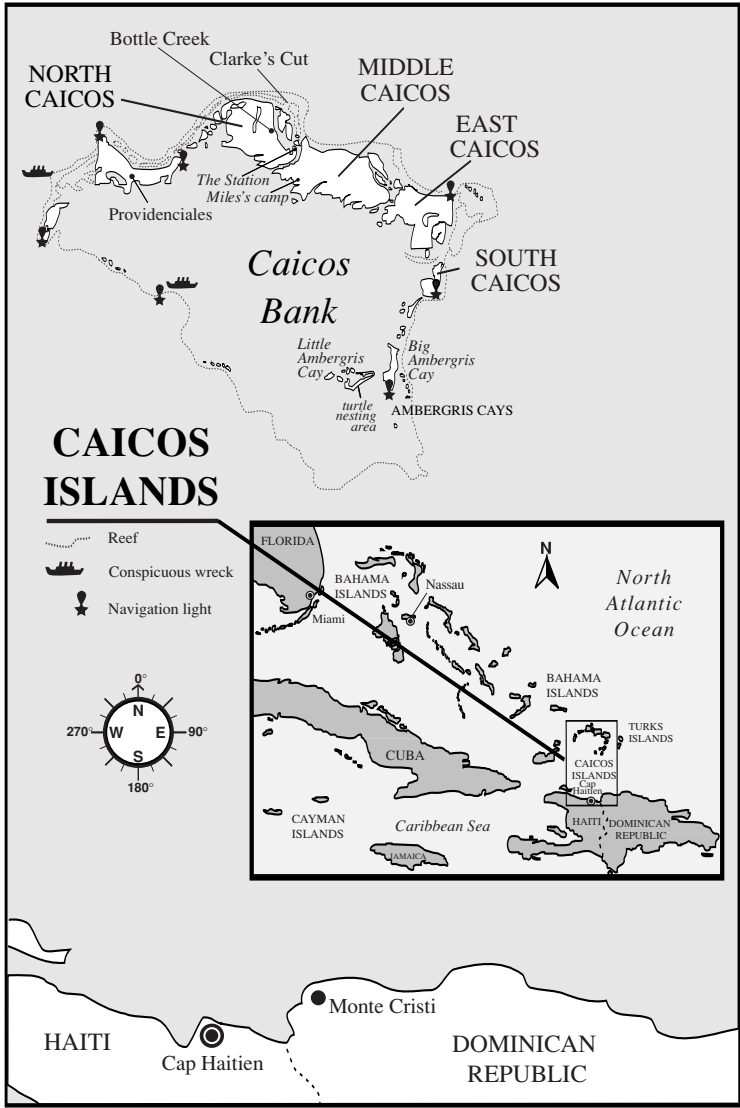
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# Chapter One

## THE STATION

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**B**ottle Creek Marine Research Station, or “the Station” as it was locally known, was probably the best-equipped research lab in the Caribbean. Almost certainly it was the best financed, though from the outside little of this was apparent since it had been built mostly within an old stone warehouse at the southeastern tip of North Caicos Island. The thick stone walls, which originally protected crops of sisal and sugar during the dark days of slavery, now contained tanks of turtles, tropical fish, crabs of all shapes and sizes, and entire communities of coral living under carefully controlled conditions.

A red pickup skidded to a halt on the rough gravel road overlooking the site. Fifteen-year-old Jim Martin rolled down the passenger window and turned his face to the warm trade winds that swept from the Atlantic across the reef—the reef that had so nearly taken his life the previous year. Now that Jim could see the sprawling research

facility, with its nearby bunkhouses for visiting students and the solar power panels arranged like huge displays of sunglasses on the hillside, he began to realize just what an impressive project it was. He felt a surge of pride to know that he had played a part in making it all happen.

“Why the big fence?” he asked, pointing to a sturdy chain-link fence which surrounded the entire five-acre lot.

“Insurance,” George replied, slouching over the steering wheel. “We couldn’t get insurance unless we put up a fence.”

“Too bad,” Jim said. “It’d look a lot more friendly without it.” Jim, still jet-lagged after his flight from Canada, noticed how the hairs on George’s deeply tanned arms had turned golden with the year of exposure to the tropical sun. Even the black curly hair on his head and his beard were streaked with ginger.

“Besides, we have a lot of very expensive equipment inside,” George added.

Jim looked at the two gleaming powerboats tied up at the dock, each with Bottle Creek Research in bold letters on the sides. In the bay, several local fishing boats, half a dozen skiffs, and two sailboats swung at anchor. Jim recognized one as the fifty-foot ketch *San Cristobal*, on which he had spent the previous summer

as George's boat driver and dive assistant. The other was a fiberglass charter boat from the nearby island of Providenciales, or Provo as it was called by the locals.

It felt good to be back in the Turks and Caicos again, like he was coming home in an odd sort of way. Vancouver carried too much baggage for him to be comfortable there anymore. For months after his father had been killed in a car crash several years ago, Jim's house had been more like a shelter for the walking wounded than a real home. It had appeared normal enough to most people looking in from the outside. But for Jim the soul had been snatched from the family and he had spun off in what would have been an inevitable collision course with the law had it not been for George, his father's buddy who had opened the door and let him escape, deflecting him deftly into a life of adventure at sea.

"I hear you have some kayaks," Jim said.

"Yep. We've got a small fleet. The students really like them. There's a graduate from the University of California doing work on the flamingo colony and he swears by them. He even sleeps in one of the plastic doubles sometimes—covers himself with nets and bushes, then parks in the mangrove swamps for days at a time."

"Neat. I didn't even know there was a colony of flamingos nearby," Jim said.

George engaged the clutch and turned the pickup down the hill toward the open gate.

"When's Julia getting here?" Jim asked casually.

"Oh, she'll be in tomorrow. Andreas had a letter from her last week and says she can hardly wait to get back."

"I bet. Has she seen the place since it was finished?"

"Sort of. She went back to Prince Rupert after Christmas, just as the first students were arriving."

"Is Andreas still chartering?"

"Yeah, but he's getting pretty sick of it. He's getting the *San Cristobal* ready for another party now."

As they drove up to the entrance, a burly middle-aged black man wearing white shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals came out of a small gatehouse and greeted them with a broad smile.

"Charlie, this is Jim Martin, from Vancouver, Canada," George said. "Jim's the one I told you about; he's been my boatman since he was eleven." He turned to Jim. "Charlie takes care of security. He used to be a policeman in England."

Jim glanced at the powerful legs, the hard-muscled arms, and the neck, thick as a sea lion's.

"Pleased to meet you," said Jim, holding out his hand.

Charlie's hand enveloped his in a leathery grasp. "Ullo, young fella," he said cheerfully in a strong London accent.



“If you want to take a boat, you’ll need to check with Charlie first,” George said. “Come to think of it, you’d better check with me too so I’ll know where to start looking for you this time.”

“Hey, it didn’t turn out too bad last time. Besides, I have a feeling Charlie keeps a close eye on everyone who uses the boats,” Jim said, glancing back as they drove toward the main building.

George pulled back a sturdy door and led the way into the air-conditioned office. A big window looked out onto the pale waters of Conch Cay and beyond, past the vivid turquoise lagoon to the line of white breakers that separated it from the dark blue of the ocean. A tall woman with light brown skin was sitting at a computer terminal. She looked up and smiled when they entered, but her fingers continued to clack rapidly over the keyboard.

“Molly, this is Jim.”

Molly stopped typing and shook Jim’s hand firmly.

“We’ve heard all about you,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “Seems you have quite the nose for adventure.”

Jim grinned awkwardly. He wondered how much George had been talking.

“Oh, and there’s a message from Miles,” Molly said, tearing off a piece of paper from a notepad near a marine radio that sat on an adjacent desk. “He had

an accident with his water containers and is going to need to be resupplied in the next day or two.”

George grunted, glanced at the note, and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Come on, I’ll give you the grand tour,” he said to Jim.

Together, they set off down the long corridor, opening doors and peering into labs where tanks of reef creatures gurgled away softly. Many of the researchers, George explained, were graduate students. One of them, a young woman wearing glasses, passed them in the hallway. She introduced herself briefly and apologized for having to rush off.

“Great student,” George remarked as they entered one of the labs. “They usually come during the normal school semesters, but she stayed on for the summer.

“This room holds our electron microscope and a machine that can detect minute traces of pollutants,” he told Jim. “Coral leaves us a long-term record of the minerals and pollutants in the sea, and this machine helps us analyze it. As you might expect, we are finding that there’s been a pretty alarming buildup of heavy metal toxins over the past fifty years.”

At the end of the corridor, they paused outside a door marked Dive Locker.

“How does it feel to know you helped make all this possible?” George asked.

"It makes me a little dizzy," Jim admitted. "Have you told anyone?"

"Not a soul. I can't. All people know is that the money comes from an anonymous benefactor. So far, nobody has linked your adventures last summer with the Trust."

"I hear the Colombian drug runners were killed in a prison riot after only two days in jail."

"I bet that was no coincidence," George said, opening the door. "The guys they shot on Hogsty Reef probably had friends who were out for revenge. And besides that, the drug runners' Columbian bosses had lost an awful lot of money."

Jim followed George into a long room where an electric compressor was topping up two scuba tanks that bobbed in a trough filled with water. Rows of yellow scuba tanks lined one wall and bunches of regulators hung from hooks above them. A man with strong, slightly bowed legs was bending over some tanks, checking their pressure. Sensing their presence, he straightened his back and turned.

"Eh, Jimmy!" he cried in surprise, taking Jim's hand in both of his and pumping vigorously.

"Gabriel! But I thought you were chartering on the *San Cristobal*!"

Gabriel, the one-time fisherman from Grenada, had been the crew of the *San Cristobal* the previous year.

He had the ability to fix anything from a frayed rope to a crashed computer.

“Still am, mon, but now we’re on standby charter to de Station. I jes’ about had enough o’ dem booze cruises,” he added. “You like de dive shop, Jimmy?” He waved an arm at the storeroom loaded with racks of masks, fins, and buoyancy compensators. “De best in de whole Turks an’ Caicos.”

“It looks great. Are you going to teach me how to use scuba this summer?” Jim asked Gabriel.

“I’d say you’re old enough. What d’you say, George?”

George nodded.

“You plannin’ to be a marine biologist when you grow up?” Gabriel asked.

“Dunno,” Jim admitted. “Right now, I’m just trying to survive high school. I’m not sure I’m going to grow up, and even if I do, I don’t think I’m cut out to be a scientist.”

Outside, the afternoon sun roasted Jim’s back as they returned to the pickup to collect his pack.

The breeze was warm and laced with the fragrance of drying tidal flats and charcoal smoke from a cooking fire on a brightly painted, native fishing boat.

“The air smells so good,” he said, breathing deeply.

George led the way up the hill to the smaller of two new cement block buildings with windows

commanding a view of the bay. The larger was the accommodation for visiting research students. Proudly, George pointed to a row of red geraniums set in white coral sand.

“We use car tires to make them grow,” he said.

“Car tires?”

“Yep. If you bury old tires under the garden, they hold water for plants. Otherwise, what little rain falls sinks too deep for most garden plants.”

“High tech, huh.”

“Well, we haven’t computerized everything.”

Inside, the house was ordinary by North American standards, with comfortable furniture and a kitchen with a large refrigerator, a microwave, and a gas stove. George flicked a switch and an air conditioner started to blow cool air in through vents in the ceiling. The room Jim chose was simple, with a single bed and dresser, a large window looking over Conch Cay to the reef and open sea, and a small window above a bedside table.

He dumped his pack on the bed and opened the flap.

“Here, my mom sent you this,” Jim said, pulling out a brown paper parcel.

George tore it open and laughed.

“Writing paper! Subtle, huh? And what’s this, sunscreen?”

“She says it’ll keep you from getting skin cancer. She gave me some too.”

Supper was a communal affair in the lounge of the bunkhouse. Only two students from California were staying at the Station over the summer and one of them, Miles, was out in the field. The other student, Carlin, joined Jim and George at their table. Jim had briefly met her in the lab earlier. She looked to be in her midtwenties. She had short blond hair, square, even teeth, and a boyish face with wire-rimmed spectacles that perched on her nose.

Carlin, George explained, was helping with an international study of the life and migration habits of giant sea turtles. Her job was to place minute transmitters on the creatures’ shells. Each transmitter sent out its own unique signal which was received and tracked by a pair of navigation satellites capable of fixing the position of the turtle to within fifty feet anywhere in the Caribbean or mid-Atlantic.

“So when are you heading out again, Carlin?” George asked.

“Early next week if you can spare Gabriel,” she replied.

“Where to this time?” he asked.

“I’ll be tagging on some nesting beaches down south,” she said.

“South?”

“Along the edge of the Ambergris Cays.”

George and Jim pulled up chairs and sat down while Marjorie, the cook who came in daily from the nearby settlement of Bottle Creek, swept in with two steaming plates of rice and spicy fish and set them on the table together with a cucumber salad.

“Marjorie, Jim’s arrived, so you’ll probably have to cook twice as much as usual from now on,” George said.

Marjorie beamed and placed a plump hand on Jim’s shoulder.

“I’m used ta feedin’ young fellas. Got five of my own,” she said. “Yer always hungry, I s’pose?”

“Usually,” Jim admitted.

“Jes’ help yerself if yer hungry, an’ I’ll sort ’im out if ’e gives yer trouble,” she said, nodding toward George. She laughed and returned to the kitchen.

“Well, I can tell who’s boss around here.” Jim grinned.

“You better believe it,” George said. “She’s great, just like a mother hen who fusses and feeds her brood. Don’t ever cross her though. One of last semester’s students did and she made his life hell.”

“What makes you think I’m going to cross her?” Jim asked. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to cause any trouble around here.”

George gave him a funny look, but didn’t answer. After a pause, Jim turned to Carlin.

“How do you put a radio transmitter on a giant sea turtle?” he asked.

“When they come ashore to lay their eggs, you glue it onto their shell,” she said.

“And they just sit there and let you do it?”

“Sometimes,” she said, “but mostly we flip them onto their backs and then put them on.”

Jim thought about that for a moment.

“Do you ever need help?” he asked.

“Always,” she laughed.

“How about a boatman? You ever need a boatman?”

“Well, yes,” she said doubtfully, “but these are remote islands. I don’t know...”

“Jim’s as good a boatman as you’ll find,” George said. “Of course, I wouldn’t want him to hear that or he’d get a swelled head.”

“Julia’s arriving tomorrow,” Jim said, ignoring George’s comment. “I bet she’d like to help too.”

“Who’s Julia?” asked Carlin.

“She’s Andreas’s daughter,” Jim said. “She’s a year younger than me, but she’s pretty tough...for a girl.”