

*Perils in
Paradise*

By
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Chapter One

100 Eggs

The enormous sea turtle emerged from placid Gulf waters like a prehistoric creature in a mystical dream. Lizzie Grant watched the slow moving loggerhead crawl from the moonlit Gulf of Mexico onto the shell-dotted sands of Archer's Beach Park.

Not wanting to scare the mother turtle, Lizzie settled behind a clump of sea oats to observe the turtle struggle up the beach. It left a trail like a WWII tank track.

Out beyond the turtle, a dark shape cut an iridescent path through the moonlit waters. A boat with no running lights sped

along the coast. Lizzie kept her attention on the turtle. Mysterious boats were only a distraction when a real loggerhead turtle was only a few feet away.

This was a lucky sighting. Lizzie marked turtle nests for the Isabel Island Florida Environmental Conservancy (IIEC). The mother turtles usually completed nests and returned to the water unobserved.

Lizzie wore khaki pants and an olive colored long sleeve IIEC shirt. She would prefer just her white bikini, which was under the shirt and khakis. However, mosquitoes and no-see-ums were intolerable on nights when the winds didn't blow strongly off the Gulf. Her bikini was a symbol of escape from years of being wintered and stifled up North.

After six months in paradise, Lizzie still had no regrets about leaving behind the cold weather and the social climbing of the husband she had abandoned in Maryland. He had been as frigid as the weather.

Her favorite place in Florida was this park because it was beautiful and not overcrowded – an unpopulated stretch of sand beyond the wastefully large homes of the wealthy. The park's

beach attracted tourists during daytime hours, tourists who would trample out the trails left by sea turtles making their nests harder to find.

Tonight the beach was empty except for the mother sea turtle with her eggs and Lizzie with her bag full of posts, ropes, signs, and an infrared video camcorder.

Lizzie began shooting video as the turtle examined the sand, prodding for a site which met its nesting criteria. Scientists weren't sure what those criteria were. The enormous turtle must have known. Using her rear flippers she began strewing sand in all directions, digging a hole for the approximately 100 rubbery, ping-pong ball-sized eggs she would lay.

In spite of her concentration on the sea turtle's efforts, Lizzie was distracted by the approaching boat. It was low and long. It turned and headed in toward shore, headed in directly in front of her.

Lizzie stayed crouched behind the sea oats. After the turtle started laying its eggs, an atom bomb couldn't distract it from its biologically dictated task. She didn't want to spook it before the

eggs started dropping. She hoped the people from the boat wouldn't disturb the mother turtle.

A man jumped from the boat into the water and used a rope to pull the sleek craft in closer to the beach. People began disembarking, wading through the shallow Gulf water as the man held the boat steady. The open boat had two enormous outboard engines.

Lizzie was startled that the people from the boat were all black, all except the man holding the rope. The black people were unloading luggage and passing it to the beach. Then they flopped down on the sand beside their bags as though exhausted. There were four or five families including men, women, children and a couple of old people. Most wore T-shirts, scroungy looking pants, and flip-flops. They were sitting on the trail left by the loggerhead turtle. They didn't seem to notice it. The children were quiet, as if scared. They hugged close to their parents and looked around into the darkness.

Lizzie was so curious about the people she ignored the turtle for a few minutes. After the last person had climbed over the side of the boat, it was easier for the man holding the boat to keep it

steady. Some of the people on the beach looked around apparently confused about where they were. One child noticed the sea turtle. The child's mother pulled the little girl back down ordering her to stay close.

When Lizzie returned her attention to the turtle it had already begun laying eggs. Now Lizzie could stand and approach without scaring the turtle away. She walked around to the beach side and shot video of eggs spewing out of the turtle into the hole in the sand.

After getting several minutes of turtle egg video, she turned her camera onto the people down near the water. She stepped forward to get a closer view of the approximately twenty black people sitting on the Isabel Island beach at 3 a.m. in the morning; certainly not a normal event.

“Hey you, what're you doing with that camera?” It was the white man, the man holding the mooring rope. He sounded angry. His voice was deep and rough.

Lizzie backed up toward where she had left her bag behind the sea oats.

The man called for one of the black men to hold the boat. Then he leaned into the boat and grabbed something.

As Lizzie reached the sea oats, she looked back to see the man stomping up the beach toward her. He was waving what looked like a gun.

Lizzie ran through clumps of bushes into the woods behind the beach. Burrs and thorns hurt her bare feet. Grasshoppers whirred up as she ran through a patch of grass. Round Australian pine nutlets with tiny ridges pushed into the tender skin of her feet. She ignored the pain. Her heart was thumping with fear. She had to get through the thick beachfront bushes and out of sight. She had to lose the man from the boat. She headed toward the dirt road cleared by Isabel Island Police years ago so they could sneak up on nudists, who used to frequent Archer's Beach.

"Hey you stop," yelled the man.

Lizzie stumbled forward. She found the rutted dirt road and ran down it. She remembered seeing an isolated stilt house back in the woods. Probably nobody would be there off season. She had nowhere else to run.

Lizzie was gasping for breath as she stumbled up to the frame house with grey siding. It looked deserted. No lights were on. She looked desperately for any sign of life. No car was in the parking area beneath the house. She darted toward the tool shed at one corner under the house.

“Hey, stop.”

It was too late. The man ran fast. He was right behind her. She turned to face him.

The short haired, muscular man dashed to within ten feet of her. Then he stopped and looked up and down Lizzie’s slender body. She felt as though he was looking right through her clothes. He chuckled and walked up to her. He held a pistol in one hand while he motioned with the other hand for Lizzie to relax. “Calm down, young lady, just calm down. I don’t want to hurt you. I only want your camera.”

Lizzie backed up slowly until she was against the rough wall of the tool shed. She trembled, too afraid to say anything. She felt nauseated. The air seemed thick and unbreathable.

The man had a glint in his eyes and a sardonic smile on his thin lips. “If you’re not going to hand it over, I’ll have to take it from you.” He looked like he was enjoying himself.

Lizzie started to cry.

The man stepped forward and ripped the video camcorder from Lizzie’s hand. He was so close she could smell his musky manly odor.

“Please don’t hurt me,” Lizzie sobbed. “Please – please – don’t...” Her words caught in her throat as a shape emerged from the shadows beside her. A man stepped around the edge of the tool shed. He pointed something large at the man from the boat.

“Move back and return the lady’s camera,” said the newcomer.

Lizzie wiped tears from her eyes and looked at the man. She was amazed to see an elderly, white haired man dressed in a neatly pressed sports shirt, shorts, and white socks. He looked like he belonged on a golf course, not in the woods holding a machine gun. Lizzie realized that’s what he held, a machine gun.

The man from the boat dropped the camcorder.

“Beat it,” said the old man. He was barrel chested and of medium height. He had a hooked, Roman nose; a lantern jaw; and a bronze tint to his weathered skin. His nose was slightly bent like it had been on the receiving end of a few punches.

The boat man hesitated.

“When I say beat it I mean beat it. I can get off ten shots before you fire one. Beat it, asshole, before I get upset.”

The man from the boat hesitated for another second then turned and silently walked away. He disappeared down the dirt road.

The old man laughed. “That jerk almost shit his pants when he saw my Uzi. You see the macho way he walked away? Inside he wanted to run like hell. Hi, I’m Joe Caunteloupe. That’s spelled different from the fruit. Don’t call me cantaloupe, I ain’t no fruit.” The old man reached out to shake Lizzie’s hand, fumbling his machine gun out of the way.

“Uh, hi, I’m Elizabeth Grant.” She shook his hand. “My friends call me Lizzie.”

“They call me Joey C. I noticed you earlier doin’ somethin’ on the beach.

“I didn’t see you on the beach.”

“People don’t.”

“You have a phone? We should call the police.” Lizzie waved a couple of mosquitoes away from her face. She was finally catching her breath. She backed several steps toward the road, out of the shadow of the house. Lizzie was relieved to be rescued but, still, she was alone with this old man and he was holding a machine gun.

“No need for police, I called Homeland Security. I expect the Coast Guard’ll be here soon.” Joey slapped at his legs. “Fuckin’ bugs.”

“Homeland Security? Not the Isabel Island Police?” Lizzie’s trembling hand wiped at moisture on her face.

“I got a friend at Homeland Security. Don’t mention that to nobody. He ain’t supposed to know me.”

“I was lucky you saw what was happening,” said Lizzie, as she slapped herself on the cheek.

“I don’t sleep too good no more.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s ‘cause I was always a night person up north. A lotta my business took place at night. And I was always around people. It’s kinda lonely here, except for the damn blood suckers.” Joey waved his Uzi around his legs to drive off mosquitoes.

“What did you do?”

“I was a consultant.”

Lizzie looked at the strange weapon Joey held pointed down at the ground. She gestured toward the contraption. “I was in South America once, Peru. That looks like the machine guns the soldiers carried.”

“Yeah, it’s an Uzi. It’s sometimes handy to have a machine gun around.”

“Aren’t they illegal?”

“Hey, I’m on my own property. What were you doin’ down there on the beach at three in the morning? Not the best time to get a tan.”

“I was shooting video of a mama sea turtle laying her eggs.” Lizzie held up her camcorder, which she had recovered from the ground.

“Really? Man, that’d be somethin’ to see. I’m from New York where we got just about everything. But we don’t got many sea turtles layin’ eggs in the Big Apple.”

“Come with me and take a look. She’s probably still laying unless the people scared her off. Sea turtles need to be undisturbed and there are more and more people everywhere.”

“Yeah, an excess. I’ve always said there’s a lot of ‘em the world’d be better off without.” Joey shook his large head in disgust and glanced at his machine gun. He had a scar over his right eye.

“Come on then, come with me – please – I’m really nervous about that man.”

“No, I better not. Too much law enforcement makes me nervous. I expect they’ll be showin’ up soon.”

“Okay, well thanks.” Lizzie shook his hand again. She started onto the dirt road but then turned back to the old man. “I owe you my life. If there’s ever anything I can do.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” He smiled at her. He certainly had a lot of wrinkles. “Go protect those turtle eggs.”

“Okay – I wish you’d come with me. I’m afraid that man might still be there.”

“That shit ass? He’s a hundred miles away by now. The young punks don’t got the piss and vinegar we had in my day. Don’t worry your pretty little head none. You’re now officially a friend of Joey C. My friends don’t get hurt.”

“I’ll still be careful to make sure that man’s gone. Thanks again.”

“Any time.”

Lizzie turned to go.

“Oh, hey,” called Joey, “I’d just as soon you not mention seein’ me.”

“Okay, sure.” Lizzie walked back onto the winding roadway which ran behind the beach. She was still trembling from everything that had happened. As she went over it all in her mind, she puzzled over the guy from the boat calling her “young lady.” At 32 she didn’t hear that very often.

The moonlight must make me look younger.

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Lizzie crept along behind bushes bordering the beach. She had been afraid to return but had to retrieve her bag containing her car keys. It was much too far to walk home. She pushed a branch aside and looked up and down the moonlit shoreline. There was no sign of the muscular man or his boat. Lizzie took a deep calming breath to center her chakras and concentrate her life force energy. Then she stepped through a gap between bushes onto the beach.

The families were still huddled together near the loggerhead turtle track. An Isabel Island police officer was now with them. His small, green, beach patrol vehicle sat on the sand a short distance away. Lizzie was relieved to see the policeman. She did not have much experience with black people but did not fear these particular ones because they were so passive and they were in family groups with children. Nevertheless, Lizzie felt tension leave her when she saw the representative of the law. She hurried toward him.

The policeman had his back to Lizzie and didn't see her approach. He told the families gathered in front of him: "Go about a mile down the beach that way." One of the men

translated into French as the officer pointed toward the south. “You’ll see wooden posts with ropes marking the park exit. Walk up that trail to a bus. Everything will be all right. People will meet...” The policeman turned slightly and noticed Lizzie. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I was photographing that sea turtle over there.” She gestured toward the turtle, which was now flipping sand to cover its eggs. Lizzie reached out to shake the policeman’s hand. “I’m with the Island Conservancy, Lizzie Grant.”

The policeman ignored her hand. He had bushy black eyebrows and a thin white scar on his left cheek. “You shouldn’t be here. This is police business.” He towered over her. At five foot two Lizzie was used to that.

She looked down at her empty hand, then dropped it to her side and spoke quietly, “I thought the police should be called. The Homeland Security people will be on their way. Did they notify you?”

“What about Homeland Security?” The policeman sounded hostile. He had an edge to his voice and he glared at her, like that

policeman had glared several years ago when she accidentally went through a red light.

Lizzie tried to keep the tremble out of her voice. “Homeland Security was called. So I guess the Border Patrol or the Coast Guard or whoever should be here soon to help you.”

“Who the hell called them?” The policeman’s head tilted to one side. His eyes were lifeless as he glared at her.

“Well, uh...

“Who else knows about these Haitians? Who else was here?” demanded the officer. He had a metal label on his shirt reading “Sgt. Mulhany.” It was at Lizzie’s eye level.

“Nobody,” lied Lizzie. “My cell phone is over in my bag behind the sea oats.”

A disgusted look came onto Mulhany’s tanned face. His hand went slowly to the pistol on his hip. A helicopter, its blades humming, swept up along the coast. A spotlight from the copter played along the beach. It paused as it lit up Mulhany and Lizzie. The policeman moved his hand away from his pistol.

The spotlight continued along the beach until it illuminated the crowd of Haitians. It stayed focused on them.

“Shit,” exclaimed Mulhany as he turned away from Lizzie and ran over to the Haitians. Lizzie could see the words U.S. Coast Guard on the side of the helicopter.

Chapter Two

Breakfast with Agnes

“This guy threatened you with a gun and you didn’t report him to the police?” Vince “Birdman” Carter was incredulous. Over breakfast in his apartment Lizzie had told him about her encounter with the man from the boat. Lately it seemed Lizzie spent more time in Vince’s apartment than in her own, which was right next door, in the employee housing units of the Isabel Island Environmental Conservancy.

“I promised the old man I wouldn’t mention him to anybody.”

“The guy with the machine gun?” Vince reached down and absent-mindedly petted Agnes, who purred deeply. “You mentioned him to me.”

“I think he meant not to mention him to the police. But my story wouldn’t make sense to the police if I didn’t mention him; so I can’t report any of it.”

“You’re not safe out there alone at night on that deserted beach,” said Vince. “Why don’t you take Agnes with you next time? She would keep you safe and she needs the exercise. You could let her run on that long beach. I feel guilty keeping her cooped up in this small apartment.”

Lizzie laughed as she reached down and offered a sausage to Agnes, whose large teeth took the meat carefully from Lizzie’s fingers. The animal quickly chomped down the sausage. “The police would certainly be after me if they caught me letting a Florida panther loose to run up and down a public beach. But I know it’s a problem for you having her here.”

“I never realized when I helped care for her at the animal hospital that she’d become so imprinted on me she couldn’t be released back into the wild.”

Lizzie reached out and petted Agnes. The large cat rubbed against Lizzie's bare leg. "She'd go up to the first person she saw and try to make friends - probably scare them to death."

"More likely get herself killed. Humans are the dangerous animals. I was talking with Augie about it today. He told me he has some scrub pine land out near his Immokalee farm, said I could use it if I wanted to set up that rural wildlife shelter I always wanted."

"That's great, Vince. He said you could just use his land for free?"

"Yeah."

"Well then what's wrong? You look glum, not happy."

"I've gotten used to you living next door, Lizzie. I love Isabel Island. I love you. And we're talking Immokalee, a backwoods farming community; mostly Hispanics and a few rednecks."

"But you'd have lots of space for all the animals you want to rescue."

"But I wouldn't have you. You're my favorite animal."

Agnes let out a low growl.

"Sometimes I think she understands English," Vince said.

“No, she just wants another sausage,” said Lizzie, reaching down to hand a sausage to Agnes. Lizzie felt the edge of Agnes’s teeth this time as the panther took the sausage. “She almost bit me,” exclaimed Lizzie.

“Jealousy”

“She does make a racket when we lock her out of the bedroom.” Lizzie paused and smiled, remembering something pleasant. Then she tapped her knuckles on the table as if punctuating a decision. “You know, about Immokalee, I might consider it. We could be like Adam and Eve at peace in a world of nature. Or Noah and his wife and their ark.”

“Immokalee’s conservative. You couldn’t wear a bikini everywhere like you do here.” Vince looked down at Lizzie’s white bikini, which she had put back on when Agnes noisily insisted they stop what they were doing and make breakfast.

“How isolated is this scrub pine Augie’s offering you?”

“It’s way back on the other side of nowhere.”

“Then I might not even need the bikini; even better.”

Vince laughed, “And I’d have you all to myself; if there’s anything left after the mosquitoes finished with you.”

“I’m like a magnet to the little blood suckers. I attract them wherever I go.”

“You also seem to attract men wherever you go. Mentioning which, have you noticed there’s a man who parks across Isabel Island Road and follows you when you leave?”

“No, what man? What are you talking about?”

“I’ve noticed a blue Ford parked on the shoulder of Isabel Island Road recently. Yesterday, when you left to go shopping, he followed you when you pulled out. I was worried. But then he wasn’t around when you got back; so I thought maybe it was coincidence. You haven’t noticed him? He hasn’t approached you, said anything to you?”

“No, I have no idea who he is. What did he look like?”

“Average looking, middle aged.”

“Now you’ve really got me worried. It’s the average looking people who turn out to be the nut cases.”

Agnes growled softly.

“I know, Agnes. You’ll protect me.” Lizzie petted Agnes and gave her another sausage. “When are you going out to look over this land?” Lizzie asked Vince.

“Saturday.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Chapter Three

Little Tiny Shrimp

Later that day, after grabbing some sleep, Lizzie used a seine net to check marine life in underwater grasses behind Isabel Island. The shallow waters of the back bay held a wide variety of tiny creatures. A person looking down into the water from a boat saw only gently swaying grasses. However, when Lizzie ran her seine net through the grasses she came up with baby shrimp, small sea horses, pipe fish, puffers, tiny crabs, globs of gelatin, and things she didn't know what they were. She'd only been doing this for a few weeks.

Today she was wearing her green bikini, with the Brazilian style bottom and the triangle top. She also wore her wide brimmed straw hat. She was around the end of Butcher Point in about two feet of water, wading along just beyond the mangroves, hidden from the view of anyone on Beach Road. Lizzie found Beach Road's name ironic. It led to a small park with no beach. There was a parking lot, a strip of grass, an assortment of large rocks, and then the water; not even an inch of beach.

The tiny shrimp Lizzie caught were almost microscopic. Some people thought shrimp with their heads on were ugly. Lizzie thought they were cute. She counted them then threw them back in the water. Soon they would go offshore and grow up to be adult shrimp. In a year or so she might have some of these little fellows for dinner. The thought saddened her.

Lizzie took samples every few feet. She had a note pad, a pen, and her cell phone, all kept in a small wet/dry bag when not in use. The bag was held in front of her by a strap over her shoulder. She made notations in the pad about what she netted

and used the camera in the cell phone to photograph anything interesting or needing further study.

After finishing with the benthic study of one small area, she dumped the subjects of her study back into the water and looked ahead to where she would wade next.

Having finally turned and walked back past the mangroves at the point, Lizzie could see the parking lot at the end of Beach Road. In addition to her own car, there were two vehicles in the lot, parked side by side. One was an Isabel Island police cruiser, the other a black pickup truck. They had their windows down. The policeman was talking across his passenger seat to the man in the other car. They were too far away for Lizzie to hear what they were saying.

Lizzie waded a few feet closer to the park through the underwater sea grass. The man in the patrol car suddenly looked around at her. She recognized him. It was Sergeant Mulhany, who had been with the Haitian refugees on the beach the previous night. Mulhany glared at Lizzie then turned forward in his seat, quickly backed his patrol car out of the lot, and gunned it onto Beach Road.

The departure of the patrol car exposed the side of the pickup truck to Lizzie. Staring at her out the driver's side window of that vehicle was the man from the boat, the short haired, muscular man who had threatened her with the gun and demanded her camera. Lizzie noticed the word "Edge" on the side of his truck

Lizzie's cell phone chimed The William Tell Overture, the theme song from The Lone Ranger. Lizzie grabbed her wet/dry bag to get the cell phone out.

The short haired man was stepping from his pickup.

Lizzie couldn't get the zipper to work on her wet/dry bag. It was stuck. She pulled at it. The phone rang again: *Dump derump, derump, rump, rump.*

The man had walked down to the waters edge. He was staring at Lizzie.

She pulled the zipper frantically. It wouldn't budge. The phone sounded a third time.

The man paused for a moment then stepped into the water. His boots and the bottom of his jeans were getting wet.

Lizzie backed up a step. The cell phone produced its musical alert a fourth time. Lizzie frantically jiggled the zipper then

pulled at it again. It zipped open. Lizzie yanked out the cell phone and screamed “Hello” into it.

The short haired man stopped.

“Hello, Lizzie, this is August Winters.”

The short haired man looked undecided.

“Hello, Augie,” Lizzie responded to her boss, the Chairman of the Board of the Environmental Conservancy. “I’m worried. I’m out here alone at Butcher Point and there’s this man coming toward me.”

The short haired man said “shit,” turned, waded back out of the water, and then stomped back to his truck, got in, and drove off.

Meanwhile Augie was saying, “Lizzie, are you all right? Should I call the police?”

“No, no, I’m okay. He’s leaving. Sorry, Augie, I’m usually not one to panic.”

“It’s perfectly understandable,” responded Augie. “A beautiful young woman out somewhere alone and a man approaches her. In these times and after all that’s happened to you recently, you have every right to be scared.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

“I’m calling because I wondered if you’d have time to drop by my office later, say about three-o-clock?”

“Three this afternoon, your office? Sure, I’ll be there. And thanks again.”

Lizzie clipped the cell phone onto her bikini strap beside her right breast. She turned and looked out along the beautiful mangrove coastline.

God I love this place. I wonder what Augie wants with me?