

*The
Black
Madonna*©

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*A Blazing! Adventure
Serial-*

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BLACK WATER RISING, BLACK WATER DOWN

-)Part Four(-

I used to get asked what my first parachute jump was like. My answer was always the same: I had no idea. Fear snatched my mind away and held it captive. I recalled the second jump vividly, though. I was still scared shitless, but this time my brain was on overdrive. As I exited the C123, I looked up at the plane, down at the ground, back up at the plane, and back down at the ground, again and again. I seemed to be in a time warp. The plane hovered overhead without moving as I floated like a cloud. In real time, I was undoubtedly snapping my head around at risk of severe whiplash.

As I leaped off the rooftop of the Ritz Carlton, instinctively assuming a stable skydive position, it was déjà vu all over again. I was suspended in air. I looked across the great city and saw the bitch goddess Katrina laying waste to New Orleans like a raging Titan. Billboards and signs broke free and sailed through the air like demonic kites. Transformers exploded in showers of sparks. Traffic signals tore loose and hurtled down the streets. Roofs ruptured into debris. Windows shattered. Power poles fell. Power lines morphed into snakes writhing across the ground, spitting electricity as toxic venom. Trees snapped, crackled and fell over uprooted. Detritus choked the madcap winds. The streets were rushing rivulets of water in the deluge. Lake Ponchartrain off in the far distance frothed white in furious waves.

I didn't see my life flash before my eyes. I saw Julia's smile the first time we met. I recalled the first time we made love, and the last time, and seemingly all those in between. Memories of her flooded my mind.

Abruptly, I snapped out of my reverie and realized that I was falling, falling in

slow motion. Below me in the courtyard stood a large white tent used for outdoor parties and receptions - forgotten or disregarded in the crisis. The Ritz Carlton was noted for exceptional quality. I was about to put their tent to the test. If the material was fragile, I'd rip right through and shatter like Humpty Dumpty. If it was strong enough but too taut, it would behave like a trampoline, bouncing my body off onto the stone patio or myriad steel and concrete structures, with injurious or deadly effect. I saw upright center supporting poles threatening to impale me. Sheltered as I was within the enclosed courtyard, the violent storm winds were of no effect on my downward trajectory. I was on target.

I hit the tent. It yielded so much that I lightly touched the ground, then sprang back up, tossing me a few feet into the air, and then collapsed altogether when I came back down. I was back in real time, but still in the grip of unnerving fear. I was safely down, completely enshrouded, unable to free myself. I heard excited shouts and felt persons attempting to assist me. I heard a familiar French voice. As I was extricated from the enfolding shroud, I stood up trembling into Paul's supporting embrace. Three hotel staffers were chattering in stunned amazement at my death-defying feat.

"Mon Dieu!" Paul exclaimed.

I laughed. "Jesus Christ, Paul! You disappear and reappear like a magician's rabbit."

He picked up on my allusion. "*Oui*," he agreed. "*Je me suis un lapin chaud.*" He called himself a *lapin chaud*, a hot rabbit, idiomatic French for playboy.

We laughed in mutual relief and wonder. We headed into the hotel. In the foyer, we ran into three black cops among a throng of guests and staff. "Hold it right there, Sullivan!" the lieutenant barked. It was my old partner, Calvin Smith.

"Cal!" I responded, surprised. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"We got a report of gunshots. What can you tell me about it?"

"Me?"

"Come on, Ty." The cops frisked us. The biggest, a huge Neanderthal and arch nemesis, Nelson "Bull" Carter, roughed me up, slamming me into the wall and punctuating his probe with pain. They found our guns on Paul. "Well?" Cal demanded.

"We both have a license to carry."

"But, not a license to kill."

"Kill?"

"The chief engineer went up to inspect for storm damage and found a body on the roof."

"Check our guns again, Cal. They haven't been fired."

"That proves nothing." He noticed the crowd listening to our conversation.

"Let's go in here!" We all piled into the manager's office.

The hotel manager in the lobby quickly protested. "Hey! You can't..."

Bull slammed the door in his face. He turned to me, his face a study in fury.

"Now I got you, you turn-coat mother fucker. I'll show you what we do to cop killers and rats. I'm gonna have your ass."

"See there, Cal? Didn't I tell you he was a faggot? You just heard him say he wants my ass."

Cal flashed a vanishing smile.

"I'll show you who the faggot is!" Bull roared.

"You stepped over the line."

"What fucking line?"

"You were shaking down civilians and killing innocent people."

"You got no room to talk. You done the same thing."

"They were criminals."

"Oh, I see. You're the judge and jury, huh? You decide where the line is drawn. Who the fuck died and made you king? We got four guys doing life up state because of you, and two dead. You fucking hypocritical rat bastard!"

"Go fuck yourself, nigger!" I wasn't in the habit of tossing racial or sexual slurs around, but I was goading him into a fight. He was an animal, but we had fought to a standstill once before, and I was itching to finish it.

"Hold it, hold it, goddamn it!" Cal shouted.

"I can explain everything, Cal," I reasoned, "but this isn't the time. In a few hours you're going to have your hands full with gangs and looters taking the city. You

know where to find me, and you know I'm not going anywhere. After all the years we were partners, you know I won't double-cross you. I'll square this later."

Cal pondered the proposition carefully. "Well..."

"If I did kill anyone, and I'm only saying if, it was justified."

A dispatch call came over the radio. Cal acknowledged it.

"All units be advised," the dispatcher droned, "We have reports that the levees have been breached. Take all appropriate emergency action. Repeat: the levees have failed."

"992 to dispatch, 10-4," he answered the dispatcher. "Holy shit! Okay, get the fuck out of here, Ty. Boys, we need to get everyone to high ground fast."

"I catch you on the street," Bull warned, "you a dead mother fucker!"

"Cal?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Things have changed, Ty. Loyalties shift with necessity. You were warned to stay out of New Orleans. You're on your own. This is the best I can do for you." He returned our guns. His voice softened. "You should get some medical attention, Ty. You look like shit."

We all hustled out of the office. It was dark, all sunlight swallowed up in the storm. Paul and I ran up the street to the Cadillac, taken off our feet a couple of times by the wind. We jumped in soaking wet. I pulled out with tires squealing and raced up the street, looking for an escape route. Rooster tails of water flew from the tires. As soon as we turned the first corner, a Mercedes sedan pulled up alongside. I glanced over to see Paddy at the wheel and his companions with guns out the window. The Cadillac side windows and windshield exploded in a hail of gunfire. I ducked, hit the gas and swerved into the Mercedes. Paul launched himself into the back seat and returned fire with both our guns.

The running gun battle continued into the ninth ward. As I swerved onto a road leading to the freeway, a wall of black water smashed into us, lifted both cars and spun them around. We were swept along out of control. Paul and I bailed out the glassless windows to avoid being trapped. The Cadillac slammed into the Mercedes, flipping it over. Both cars floated well away as Paul and I struggled desperately for safe haven,

swimming for our lives. It is all but impossible to swim in turbulent flood waters, as we quickly discovered. We were swept into the interior of a six-story building under construction. The walls of the building checked the surge somewhat. I snagged an iron soldier beam and Paul grabbed my belt. The water rose over my head. Paul clawed his way up my body to a cross beam, stood up, grabbed my hands and pulled me up with great difficulty. I gasped for air. The water continued to rise. We negotiated our way to the concrete stairs of the future emergency exit and kept ascending until we reached the roof of the building. On the way up, off to our left, I saw the skeleton of the elevator shaft. Reaching the roof top, we collapsed in utter exhaustion. As soon as we caught our breath, we were forced back down to the top floor. The strong winds beating against our wet bodies gave us chills. We huddled in a sheltered corner and silently pondered our fate through most of the night.

I awoke very sore and severely cramped, having slept fitfully on concrete. A strange quiet had fallen over the city. An orange sliver of light on the far horizon announced that the storm was breaking. We took stock of our situation. There were pallets of bricks and building materials on most floors. Looking down from the roof top, I saw the derrick of a small crane, used to hoist heavy materials, rising out of the black, brackish water. I could make out a forklift nearby, almost completely submerged. There was a street broom on pile of trash near a portable toilet lying over on its side. A Burke bar, a six-foot-long pry bar, was sitting atop a pallet of bricks, no doubt used to break the steel bands. Looking out across the city, I saw many other persons stranded on rooftops.

Paul and I looked at each other and shrugged.

"Looks like we're stuck, eh?" he asked the obvious.

"Or, in for a hell of a long swim."

He looked down at the now still flood waters. "*C'est possible.*"

"Yeah, and it may be necessary. I don't like the idea of staying here for long."

"If Paddy is still alive, he will be hunting for us, *non?*"

"Yeah."

"*Et, les gendarmes noires* will kill us if they find us."

"Bull and a few other black cops, yeah."

"We have no food, no water, and we are trapped like rats?"

"Yeah."

"And no weapons."

"Fuck! I hadn't thought of that until you mentioned it."

"Well, there is one good thing."

"What's that?"

"It couldn't get any worse."

We laughed.

Just as he said that, we heard the sound of a motor boat approaching. We walked to the front of the building. A Boston Whaler, employed as a police marine patrol boat, was headed our way. There were two black cops, one driving, and three white men wearing flack jackets and holding rifles, on board. I couldn't imagine who the white men were. Their uniforms were unfamiliar to me until they drew closer.

"Blackwater," I observed.

"Yes, the water is very black." Paul had a quizzical look on his face, confused by my comment.

"No, the white guys. See the bear paw insignias?"

Paul squinted hard. "Yes."

"Blackwater is a private security firm contracted to protect embassy staff in Iraq."

"What are they doing here?"

"Beats the hell out of me. This is a first. I've never seen private security used this way before. Damn! They must think they're still in Iraq!"

"Pourquoi?"

"Look closely. They have grenades and M16's."

"Maybe they'll give us a ride."

We both began waving wildly and shouting to attract their attention. Paul was whistling loud enough to be heard in Shreveport. They saw us, alright, and gunned the boat in our direction. The black cop in the back of the boat stepped up to the

Blackwater guys and pointed at us. I froze. I frantically tried to get Paul to shut up and stop signaling.

"What? What?"

"It's Bull..."

The Blackwater guards opened full automatic fire. We hit the deck. They weren't going to take prisoners.

My heart was pumping purple panther piss and my mind was racing in high gear. Our chances were slim to none. They didn't know that we no longer had guns, so they'd have to clear every floor on the way up. That would buy us precious little time.

I raced over to the portable toilet and set it back upright. I grabbed a couple of long pieces of wire from the trash pile. I handed Paul one and said, "Door." Paul and I were thinking as with one mind. He twisted one end onto the inside latch. I wrapped three bricks in a rag, bound them together, set them on the toilet seat, and ran the wires out the back through the ventilation screen. I propped the toilet door slightly ajar with a piece of wood, and then went back to spy on the progress of the Blackwater men as they came up. Only two exited the boat. We had one chance in a billion. The time passed agonizingly slow, as though hours passed. As they ascended the stairs toward the roof, I raced back behind the toilet, and laid down. On the way, I pointed toward two pallets of bricks and commanded, "Spot." Paul nodded understanding. He secreted himself behind the bricks. From his vantage point, he could see the men as they came onto the roof, and he could also signal me. I pulled the bricks as high as I could and waited, Burke bar at hand.

I watched Paul intently, nearly blinded by sweat. I was breathing like a runaway locomotive. He nodded affirmative. I pulled the wire to the front door. It closed quietly, but loud enough. The Blackwater team riddled the toilet with 5.56mm rounds. I dropped the bricks, praying it sounded to them like a body dropping dead. Paul nodded yes.

I heard the spring as the door opened for close inspection. I leaped to my feet and shoved the toilet into the men with all my might. I threw the Burke bar like a spear at the guy furthest back, wounding him slightly, and forcing him to release his weapon.

As I came over the top of the toppled toilet, Paul came over the bricks. We were on them before they could fully recover. A desperate fight ensued.

Paul ended up with the bigger man, but he was cutting him to ribbons with blazing fists. He knew many dirty tricks and he was using them all.

I grabbed my man by the vest and head butted him. We punched and fought and grappled. We ended up in a Judo rondure. I managed a hip throw, tossing him toward the edge of the building. He recovered and went for his side arm. I charged like a bull, collided with him, grabbed him in a bear hug, and over the side of the building we went. Second time in two days. If there were a prize for this sort of thing, I earned it.

I had the advantage as we fell, facing down. I braced and took a deep breath just as we hit the water, released the grip of one hand and punched him hard in the throat. He reflexively expelled air and sucked water deep. He went limp within seconds, bubbles escaping from his nose and mouth. He was drowning. I tried to free his M16 from the sling, but I desperately needed air. I touched bottom, and then kicked up to the surface. The first thing I became aware of was the Boston Whaler roaring towards me. The third Blackwater soldier and Bull were blazing away. I saw the squibs of water making a line right out across the water at me. I was watching it all in slow mo' again. I looked around to see that I was trapped between the crane and the forklift. I'd get nowhere fast underwater, too slow to evade bullets. Climbing would be suicidal, and I can't swim faster than a motor boat. The squibs were dancing all round me now. I was fucked.

Looking everywhere in desperation, something in the corner of my eye caught my attention. I looked up to see Paul jumping feet first off the building down toward the boat. You crazy fucking bastard, I thought. You'll break you're legs dropping into the boat from that height. Thanks for the valiant effort, buddy, but...

Paul's arms were outstretched to either side, forming his body into a cross. As he closed on the boat, I suddenly realized his game. His timing was impeccable. As he dropped into the water immediately alongside the boat, he released a grenade into it.

Holy fuck! It was so beautiful. All three bodies were thrown high into the air in the fiery blast. The boat exploded into flame.

Suddenly, I realized that the burning boat was still coming straight at me, and fast. I dove underwater and forced my way back, finding a narrow escape passage between the construction equipment. I squeezed through just as the boat hit with a terrific impact.

I broke to the surface and swam toward Paul. We were laughing hysterically in relief. We could only nod yes we were okay.

We swam around collecting guns and rounds. We had both M16's and .45's and a shitload of ammunition. We swam leisurely back toward the city. We had one more unfinished bit of business to wrap up. The prey were now the predators, the hunted were now the hunters.

.....to be continued

