

Grit
&
Lust©

pt. one

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*A Blazing! Adventure
Serial*

This is an original short story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

Publishers
2008

New York

Chapter one

-DEATH at QUINTANA ROO-

Sandy was the last one I'd seen of the old gang. Her hair hung about her shoulders like a spray of an ocean wave cascading down her voluptuous shoulders to her heaving breasts. God, she made me itch all over to be with her. I could still see her in my mind as I stood above the dark black hole. But that was seven months ago.

Narcu yelled up to me, "Señor Rusty, I think we have found something." I swung my arm and legs over the side of the long wooden ladder and made my way down into the pit. The dim light from the lanterns made it difficult to see at first. But within a few moments the night purple in my eyes returned and I could make out the men at the end of the tunnel digging with their pick axes and shovels. Dust from the sand billowed up and fomented a small cloud as I neared them.

"It is here," Narcu said, as he pointed to a small piece of wood that stuck out of the wall. I fondled it with my fingers. That familiar sensation I always got tingled through my body. It had been cut by some kind of tool to form a straight edge and the corner of something. I stepped back and signaled for the men to chip away at the compacted sand that surrounded it. Cascades of sand from their tools brought the rough box out in mere moments. "Is that what you were looking for, Hefe?"

"Perhaps," I said, fingering the metal covered hasps. Another billow of sand caved in the back of the hole. The string of Mexican words stung together too fast for me to recognize. All I knew was that the hole was collapsing and the five workers were dashing for the exit. One fell as he ran by, tripping over a timber that had been dug out of the wall as well. He screamed with pain. As I bent down over him I saw the rest of the rat pack on the ladder, climbing frantically towards the sky and freedom. The wide eyed man at my feet knew he was going to die and crossed himself several times saying

his *Dóminus tecum* over and over.

"Let's see, save the box or save the man's life," I asked myself. Wasn't much of a choice there. Throwing the box towards the bottom of the ladder, I grabbed the man's hand and swung him over my shoulders in a fireman's carry. Thank god he wasn't very heavy. The sand started to really roll in, slowly and steadily filling the back of the cave, pushing towards the front and the bottom of the ladder.

The ladder was difficult to climb with the extra weight and the rungs creaked and groaned under our combined load. Fine clouds of choking dust reached up towards us making it hard to breathe. My progress was slow but sure and, after what seemed an eternity, I felt hands grabbing the weight from my shoulders lifting the injured man to the rim of the hole.

There was no hesitation on my part; I started back down the ladder immediately after my treasure. How long had I looked for this one thing, to come so close, and to lose it?

"I don't think so," I said to myself. It was evidence at long last, of Black Beards presence on the east coast of Mexico. Seven years, seven God damn years I'd looked for this thing. I pulled up my bandana across my mouth to help filter out the choking dust. I was already coughing, but the cloth mask helped. As I reached the bottom of the ladder, the sand was about sixteen inches deep. I dug frantically near the left foot of the ladder only finding the bottom of the cave.

"Where is it, where is it?" I yelled aloud. Garbled shouts from above rained down on me but, with the noise of the ever moving sand and my digging, I couldn't make them out. I felt something wet hitting me on the back, and droplets of water cascaded down. Great, it was raining, two claps of what I assumed was thunder sounded like they hit right on top of the hole. There, five feet away, sinking slowly in the sand was the brown corner of the box. I tried to jump to where it was but found my feet caught by the engulfing sand. I kicked and fought till my feet were free and pounced on the box like a hungry cat on a mouse. It seemed even digging as fast as I could the sand was unwilling to give up her prize. Finally, after what seemed like hours but was only minutes, I wrested it from the grainy tomb. Turning, I saw the ladder was not five feet from

me, but the sand had risen so quickly that I faced a four foot up hill struggle. Straining all my muscles, the box and I made it just to the ladder as the sand started to climb up the rungs towards the top of the hole. Big patches of sand and rivulets of water came cascading down from the top, thanks to the storm above me.

"Jesus Christ!" The box only tried to slip out once, but I carefully jammed it back under my arm and tightened my grip. The last few rungs I could see above me. As I cleared the top and swung off of the ladder, I saw a body lying next to the hole. I assumed it was the man I had saved, but it wasn't. Narcu stood facing me with a four inch thirty eight in his hand.

"Now suppose you give me the box, Señor." His gun waived in a small circle. He smiled wickedly, his one gold front tooth showing. The scene reminded me of an old Humphrey Bogart movie I'd seen once. The rain poured down on us, as if adding some sort of melodramatic point, making things appear surreal.

Then he added, "Or you will end up like Jose there." He pointed the gun barrel briefly at the body then back at me. Through the rain I saw the blood pouring out of two gunshot holes in the man's chest. I knew if I could reach my forty five under my soggy sand encrusted jacket, and it was still in the holster, and not packed with sand, I could kill him. But I never try and draw on a man that already got six lead bullets pointed my way.

I threw the box on the ground several feet in front of him. His smile broadened. Reaching down to pick up the heavy box, he briefly put the gun in his waist belt.

As I watched him closely, I wondered if my gun was there where I thought it was, and was it operational. I put my arm down and felt the holster and gun through my coat. By the time I did this he had re-drawn his weapon.

"I bid you goodbye, Gringo, and gracias." He chuckled at me, backing towards the car the Mexes had come in some one hundred feet away. He never saw the limb that hit him. The man with the broken ankle I had rescued stood leaning against the car. He pulled the limb back under his arm and limped to the front door opening it to sit down on the well worn seat.

In very quick strides I made it to the car, standing over my box. "Thank you,

uh..."

"Philippe, Philippe Juarez," he said with a grin. "Now we are even maybe, I think."

Smiling back I said, "Almost." I handed him and the other two men six hundred dollars American, and stuffed an extra one hundred in Philippe's shirt pocket. His eyes lit up. All the men knew that this was more than they could make all year in the province of Quintana Roo.

"Meet me later at Casa de Flauta, I'd like to buy you all dinner."

"Si, Señor Rusty, gracias." I put my hand up as if to say stay for a moment.

Walking over to my jeep parked behind them, I put the precious box down in the passenger's seat and, picking a small bag out of the back, headed back to the sedan. The rain seemed to lessen as I pulled out a large bottle of Mescal and went back to their car. All of their eyes gleamed with delight. I opened it and handed it to Philippe; he took a long swig and handed it back to me. I took a long pull on the top and tossed it back to him.

"For the ride home," they all laughed. The old green Plymouth started with a grinding whirr and they all headed out down the muddy road to La Esperanza.

Quintana Roo

I couldn't help the dead man on the beach and it looked as though Narco would be staying there for a while. I picked his gun up off of the beach and threw it towards the hole. It hit with a spray of sand and teetered on the edge for a moment before it slid into the sandy abyss. Walking back to my Jeep, I rummaged around in the back, at last coming up with another smaller bottle of Mezcal. I popped the cork and started the engine at the same time.

"Here's to you, Blackbeard," I put the bottle to my lips and took a long draw on the golden liquid inside. Putting the jeep in first and letting out the clutch, I followed

Philipe and the diggers westward into the sunset.

Dinner was great, and we all four celebrated well into the night. Philipe told me his bother in law was a local village policeman and he would take care of the men on the beach. It turned out he knew Narcu from several years ago, he had robbed another tourist for thousands of dollars. The Police had been looking for him for quite a while. Now they had a murder charge on him and they would be looking for him through out the province and all of Mexico.

I hadn't opened the box yet, but was itching to. After bidding my farewells I staggered back towards my Hotel some three hundred yards from the restaurant. Philipe and his friends, Edgardo and Raul, all invited me back down next year for another dig. We laughed and carried on as if all of us were speaking Spanish, I guess the Tequila helped with the language barrier.

I fumbled with my key a bit, but made it back to the room and locked the door behind me, not wanting any unwelcome visitors this late and in the stage I was in. Stripping off my shirt and pants, I flopped on the bed, the fan overhead sending a wonderful cool breeze onto my naked back.

"Room service, Señor," was the next sound I heard. Glancing at my watch, was ten o'clock in what I could only assume was the morning. I sat up quickly, reaching for my forty five. Then I stopped and grabbed my head instead.

"Holy shit," I said out loud, my head felt like a grenade had gone off inside.

"Just a moment," I shouted to the girl, which didn't make my skull feel any better and only amplified the pain. Putting on a pair of pants I let her in. She had fresh towels draped over her hand.

"Fresh towels for you, Señor."

"Sure," I said grabbing them off her hand, only to find a small thirty two underneath pointed at my midsection.

"Jou hurt my boyfriend, now I hurt jou!" she said in a heavy accent. I swung the wad of towels I had taken from her over and down, smacking the gun out of her hand and then unloaded with my right fist in her face, knocking her out of the door and against the wall on the other side of the hallway. Picking up her gun, I called the desk.

Asking for security, they arrived quickly for a sleepy little Mexican town, with the Hotel manager leading the way.

"Your maid tried to kill me." A few Spanish words were spoken between the large security guard and the manager. I understood only a fraction of what they said.

"She don' work for us, Señor. We never see her before." They both were picking her up as the second security man arrived. She shook her head dizzily glaring at me, then began hurling vicious epithets in my direction through a bloody lip. The two security men now had her firmly in their grip as she began to struggle in earnest. I handed the gun the manager.

"I think you will find that the police will be very interested in her when you turn her over."

"You want us to turn her over to the policia, Señor?"

"Your God damn right I do, she and her boy friend tried to kill me."

"Ok, si si, Señor."

. "Tell the cops that her boy friend's name is Narcu. They'll know what to do." A flash of recognition crossed the manager's face; I could tell he knew who she was now. A few harsh phrases uttered from his mouth sent his security scuttling down the hall, treating her a little more roughly than they had before.

"I am sorry for the trouble, Señor. It won't happen again." With that, I shut the door locking it, and was back in my room looking for the bottle of Excedrin I kept in my bag, when I heard the second knock.

"Crap," I muttered. How many people do I know in Quintana Roo? I thought of like seven, including the hotel staff. This time before moving to the door, I retrieved my colt and held it with the safety off, just behind my back.

"Who is it?"

"A messenger, Señor." The phone rang at the same time, the tiny bells ringing loud enough to elicit more pain in my head.

"Just a minute," I told the man on the other side of the door. "Yeah," I said as I picked up the phone. The voice on the other end was the manager telling me he was sending someone up to my room with a message for me. I thanked him, hanging up the

phone, while tucking my gun in the back of my pants, then opened the door. A young brown skinned lad held an envelope for me. By his complexion I could only guess he was an Indian Native from the province. I took the envelope and, reaching in my pocket, took out a coin and flipped it to him. It was only a peso, but to him it must have seemed like a fortune. He thanked me over and over as I shut the door, literally pushing him out. I shook my head in wonder of the poverty of the country.

I threw the envelope on the table next to the unopened Blackbeard's box setting on the table. I hadn't opened the box yet, believing I needed a witness as to what I found inside when I did. I tossed back three aspirin, and downed them with a glass of water. The envelope had some sort of official seal on it. As I stripped off my pants again, I casually looked at the return address. It was marked Museum of Antiquities, Mexico City. After that was 'Professor Hernan Patrido'. I hadn't heard from him in years.

The shower felt warm and inviting as I stepped in front of the clouds of steam that billowed out from behind the curtain. I stood with my hand against the wall as I let the hot water roll off of my back and down the drain. I had found the box within just thirty days of being in the country, a record for an old treasure hunter like me, although the time belied how long I'd been searching and the research I had put in. I needed to find a colleague that would corroborate my findings when I opened the box for the first time. I debated the list in my head as the hot water awakened me, the only one that I trusted came to mind was from North Carolina.

The dry fluffy towel sucked the water off of my skin almost as much as the heat of the morning did. Wrapping the towel around me I sat on the bed, retrieving the envelope from the table. I tore the top open and dumped the contents on the bed in front of me. Inside were several pictures of ruins some place in Mexico, and a letter that had been folded over several times and crumpled bearing an imprint rubbing of a crest of some sort. I opened it up. I stared fascinated at the intricacies of the rounded rubbings. I wanted to read the letter but had a phone call to make before I did that.

I was still thinking about Sandy, the long haired beauty, and wanted to call her

before it got too late. The last thing I wanted to do was to stay in Mexico; I wanted to go home and have a hot date with her, and maybe now talk about long term. I shook my head trying to bring my senses back to normal.

"Ow, ow, ow, Jeeze, that hurts." I held my alcohol sodden head between my hands. "I gotta' stop doing that," I mumbled. Getting up and dressing first, I picked up the phone and dialed the operator. The phone rang on the other end three times, then I heard a faint 'hello'.

"Sandy, this is Rusty."

"Hi Rusty, this isn't Sandy. This is her sister, Nicole."

"Good to hear your voice."

"Are you in town?"

"No, actually I'm in Quintana Roo, Mexico. Is Sandy home?" There was a pause on the phone.

"No."

Somewhat impatiently I asked, "Do you know where she is?"

"Yes, she's on her honeymoon." Now I paused, trying to digest what Nicole had just said.

"She loved you Rusty, she really did, but got tired of waiting for you. She was married two weeks ago."

"Oh... well, then, I don't know what to say."

"I know, I hope you don't blame me," she said flirtatiously.

"Nope, not at all. Thanks, give her my best then, I guess."

"You can call me once in while you know. I'd like to know how you are doing as well."

"Sure, sure I'll bring you something back from down here."

"Great," she said softly.

"Well, I've got to go. I'll see you later."

"Bye, Rusty."

I set the phone down softly in the cradle, feeling despondent over the call. I felt like a drink. Locking Blackbeard's Box in the room safe and scooping up the Professors

information from Mexico City, I went downstairs to breakfast. My glumness didn't prevent the waitresses and hostess from being exceptionally nice to me this morning.

I ate slowly, sipping down the black coffee with some assortment of fruits and breads. I really didn't care at this point and was just trying to get rid of my pesky hang over, and the sad feeling about Sandy.

.....to be continued

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