Shadow Divers

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CHAPTER ONE
THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

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BILL NAGLE'S LIFE CHANGED the day a fisherman sat beside him in a ramshackle bar and told him about a mystery he had found lying at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Against his better judgment, that fisherman promised to tell Nagle how to find it. The men agreed to meet the next day on the rickety wooden pier that led to Nagle's boat, the *Seeker,* a vessel Nagle had built to chase possibility. But when the appointed time came, the fisherman was not there. Nagle paced back and forth, careful not to plunge through the pier where its wooden planks had rotted away. He had lived much of his life on the Atlantic, and he knew when worlds were about to shift. Usually, that happened before a storm or when a man's boat broke. Today, however, he knew it was going to happen when the fisherman handed him a scrap of paper, a hand-scrawled set of numbers that would lead to the sunken mystery. Nagle looked into the distance for the fisherman. He saw no one. The salt air blew against the small seashore town of Brielle, tilting the dockside boats and spraying the Atlantic into Nagle's eyes. When the mist died down he looked again. This time, he saw the fisherman approaching, a small square of paper crumpled in his hands. The fisherman looked worried. Like Nagle, he had lived on the ocean, and he also knew when a man's life was about to change.

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In the whispers of approaching autumn, Brielle's rouge is blown away and what remains is the real Brielle, the locals' Brielle. This small seashore town on the central New Jersey coast is the place where the boat captains and fishermen live, where convenience store owners stay open to serve neighbors, where fifth graders can repair scallop dredges. This is where the hangers-on and wannabes and also-rans and once-greats keep believing in the sea. In Brielle, when the customers leave, the town's lines show, and they are the kind grooved by the thin difference between making a living on the water and washing out.

The *Seeker* towers above the other boats tied to this Brielle dock, and it's not just the vessel's sixty-five-foot length that grabs one's attention, it's the feeling—from her battered wooden hull and nicked propellers—that she's been places. Conceived in Nagle's imagination, the *Seeker* was built for a single purpose: to take scuba divers to the most dangerous shipwrecks in the Atlantic Ocean.

Nagle was forty years old then, a thin, deeply tanned former Snap-On Tools Salesman of the Year. To see him here, waiting for this fisherman in his tattered T-shirt and thrift-shop sandals, the Jim Beam he kept as best friend slurring his motions, no one would guess that he had been an artist, that in his day Nagle had been great.

In his twenties, Nagle was already legend in shipwreck diving, a boy wonder in a sport that regularly kills its young. In those days, deep-wreck diving was still the province of the adventurer. Countless shipwrecks, even famous ones, lay undiscovered at the bottom of the Atlantic, and the hunt for those wrecks—with their bent metal and arrested history—was the motion that primed Nagle's imagination.

Treasure never figured into the equation for Atlantic shipwreck divers in the Northeast. Spanish galleons overflowing with gold doubloons and silver pieces of eight did not sink in this part of the ocean, and even if they had, Nagle wouldn't have been interested. His neighborhood was the New York and New Jersey shipping lanes, waters that conducted freighters, ocean liners, passenger vessels, and warships about the business and survival of America. These wrecks occasionally surrendered a rare piece of china or jewelry, but

Nagle and his kind were looking for something different. They saw stories in the Modiglianied faces of broken ships, frozen moments in a nation's hopes or a captain's dying instinct or a child's potential, and they experienced these scenes unbuffered by curators or commentators or historians, shoulder to shoulder with life as it existed at the moment it had most mattered.

And they did it to explore. Many of the deep wrecks hadn't been seen since their victims last looked at them, and would remain lost while nature pawed at them until they simply didn't exist anymore. In a world where even the moon had been traveled, the floor of the Atlantic remained uncharted wilderness, its shipwrecks beacons for men compelled to look.

You had to have steel balls to do what Nagle did in his heyday. In the 1970s and 1980s, scuba equipment was still rudimentary, not much advanced past 1943, when Jacques Cousteau helped invent the system of tanks and regulators that allowed men to breathe underwater. Even at 130 feet, the recreational limit suggested by most scuba training organizations, a minor equipment failure could kill the most skilled practitioner. In searching for the most interesting wrecks, Nagle and the sport's other kings might descend to 200 feet or deeper, virtually begging the forces of nature to flick them into the afterlife, practically demanding their biology to abandon them. Men died—often—diving the shipwrecks that called to Nagle.

Even if Nagle's equipment and body could survive the deep Atlantic, he faced a smorgasbord of other perils, each capable of killing him à la carte. For starters, the sport was still new; there was no ancient wisdom to be passed from father to son, the kind of collective experience that routinely keeps today's divers alive. The sport's cautionary tales, those lifelines learned over beers with buddies and by reading magazines and attending classes, were beaten into Nagle underwater at antihuman depths. If Nagle found himself in some crazy, terrible circumstance—and there were countless of them on these deep wrecks—odds were that he would be the one who would tell the first tale. When he and his ilk survived, the magazines wrote articles about them.

Nagle pushed deeper. Diving below 200 feet, he began doing things scientists didn't fully understand, going places recreational

divers had never been. When he penetrated a shipwreck at these depths, he was often among the first to see the vessel since it had gone down, the first to open the purser's safe since it had been closed, the first to look at these men since they had been lost at sea. But this also meant that Nagle was on his own. He had no maps drawn by earlier divers. Had someone visited these wrecks before, he might have told Nagle, "Don't brush against that outboard beam in the galley—the thing moved when I swam by, and the whole room might cave in and bury you if you do." Nagle had to discover all this by himself. It is one thing, wreck divers will tell you, to slither in near-total darkness through a shipwreck's twisted, broken mazes, each room a potential trap of swirling silt and collapsing structure. It is another to do so without knowing that someone did it before you and lived.

The Atlantic floor was still a wilderness in Nagle's prime, and it demanded of its explorers the same grit that the American West did of its pioneers. A single bad experience on a shipwreck could reroute all but the hardiest souls to more sensible pursuits. Early divers like Nagle had bad experiences every day. The sport eagerly shook out its dabblers and sightseers; those who remained seemed of a different species. They were physical in their world orientation and sudden in their appetites. They thought nothing of whipping out a sledgehammer and beating a porthole from the side of a ship, even as their heavy breath hastened nitrogen narcosis, the potentially deadly buildup of that otherwise benign gas in their brains. Underwater, rules of possession bent with the light; some divers cut prizes from the mesh goody bags of other divers, following the motto "He who floats it owns it." Fistfights—aboard boats and even underwater—often settled disputes. Artifacts recovered from wrecks were guarded like firstborn children, occasionally at knifepoint. In this way, early deep-wreck divers had a measure of pirate in their blood.

But not Nagle. In the sport's brawniest era, he was a man of the mind. He devoured academic texts, reference works, novels, blueprints, any material he could uncover on historical ships, until he could have stood in the dockyards of a dozen eras and built the boats alongside the workers. He was a connoisseur of the parts, and

he reveled in the life force a boat took on from the interlocking of its pieces. This insight gave Nagle two-way vision; as much as he understood the birth of a ship, he also understood its death. Ordinary divers would come upon a shipwreck and see the mélange of bent steel and broken wood, the shock of pipe and wire as a cacophony of crap, an impediment that might be hiding a compass or some other prize. They would plant their noses in a random spot and dig like puppies, hoping to find a morsel. Viewing the same scene, Nagle repaired the broken parts in his mind and saw the ship in its glory. One of his greatest finds was a four-foot-tall brass whistle from the paddle wheeler *Champion,* a proud voice that had been mounted on the ship's mast and powered by a steam line. The whistle was majestic, but the most beautiful part of the discovery was that underwater it looked like a worthless pipe. Floating amid the wreckage, Nagle used his mind's eye to watch the ship break and sink. He knew the ship's anatomy, and as he imagined it coming apart he could see the whistle settle, right where that seemingly worthless piece of pipe lay. After Nagle recovered two helms from the British tanker *Coimbra* in a single day (finding one helm once in a career was rare enough), his photograph was hung—alongside that of Lloyd Bridges—in the wheelhouse of the *Sea Hunter,* a leading dive charter boat of the time. He was twenty-five.

To Nagle, the value in artifacts like the brass steam whistle lay not in their aesthetics or their monetary worth but in their symbolism. It is an odd sight to see grown men covet teacups and saucers, and build noble display cases to these dainty relics. But to divers like Nagle these trinkets represented exploration, going off the charts. A telegraph on display in a diver's living room, therefore, is much more than a shiny object; it is an announcement. It says, *If someone had been to this ship's wheelhouse before me, he would not have left this telegraph behind.*

It was only time before Nagle's instinct delivered him to the *Andrea Doria,* the Mount Everest of shipwrecks. The grand Italian passenger liner had collided with the *Stockholm,* a Swedish liner, in dense fog off Nantucket Island in 1956. Fifty-one people died; 1,659 were rescued before the liner sank and settled on her side at a depth of 250 feet. The *Doria* was not a typical target for Nagle.

Her location was widely known, and she had been explored by divers since the day after her sinking. But the *Doria* made siren calls to great wreck divers. She was brimming with artifacts even after all these years: serving sets made of fine Italian china and painted with the ship's legendary Italia logo, silver utensils, luggage, ceramic tiles by famed artists, pewter sherbet dishes, jewelry, signs. In Nagle's day, and even today, a diver could explore the *Doria* and worry only about having enough stamina to lug home the prizes he recovered.

Had the *Doria* only her riches to offer, she could not have romanced Nagle so hopelessly. The ship's real challenge lay in exploration. The wreck rested on its side, making navigation dangerous and deceptive. A diver had to conceive the world sideways to make sense of doors on the floor and ceilings to the right. And she was deep—180 feet at her shallowest and 250 feet where she crushed the ocean floor. Men sometimes got disoriented or ran out of air or lost their minds from narcosis and died on the *Doria*. The wreck was so deep, dark, and dangerous that decades after her sinking, entire decks remained unexplored. Those decks were Nagle's destinations.

Over time, Nagle penetrated the wreck in places long relegated to the impossible. His mantel at home became a miniature *Doria* museum. Soon, he set his sights on the bell. A ship's bell is her crown, her voice. For a diver, there is no greater prize, and many of the greats go a career without coming close to recovering one. Nagle decided to own the *Doria*'s bell. People thought he was nuts—scores of divers had searched for thirty years for the *Doria*'s bell. No one believed it was there.

Nagle went to work. He studied deck plans, books of photographs, crew diaries. Then he did what few other divers did: he formulated a plan. He would need days, maybe even a week to pull it off. No charter boat, however, was going to take a diver to the *Doria* for a week. So Nagle, who had saved a good bit of money from his Snap-On Tools days, decided to buy a dive boat himself, a vessel constructed from his imagination for a single purpose: to salvage the *Doria*'s bell.

That boat was the original *Seeker,* a thirty-five-foot Maine Coaster built in New Jersey by Henrique. In 1985, Nagle recruited five top divers, men who shared his passion for exploration, and he

made this arrangement: He would take the group to the *Doria* at his expense. The trip would be a dedicated one, meaning the divers went with just one objective—to recover the bell.

For the first few days on the wreck, the divers stuck to Nagle's plan. They found nothing. The bell just wasn't there. At that point, even the hardiest divers would have turned back. A single day on the open Atlantic in a sixty-five-foot boat will turn intestines inside out; Nagle and his cohorts had been out for four days in a thirty-five-foot glorified bathtub. But a man is not so inclined to give up when he sees in panoramas. Nagle abandoned the bow of the *Doria,* where he and his team had been searching, and rerouted to the stern. They would now be flying by the seat of their pants, an improvisation on the deadliest wreck in the Atlantic. No one had ever been to the stern. Yet by conceiving the *Doria* as a single, breathing organism rather than as detached, twenty-foot chunks of wood and steel, Nagle and the others allowed themselves to look in unlikely places.

On the fifth day they hit pay dirt—there was the *Andrea Doria*'s bell. The men rigged it, beat out the bell's pin with a sledgehammer, and sent up the prize on a heavy-duty lift bag. Shock waves rippled through the diving community. According to their agreement, Nagle owned half the bell, and the other five men owned half; the last man living among them would own it outright. Nagle placed the 150-pound bell into the back of his wife's station wagon and asked her to drive it home. When she arrived, the bell wasn't there anymore. She called Nagle, saying, "I don't know what happened to the bell!" Nagle nearly suffered a heart attack. He called the highway patrol and asked, "Did anyone find a giant bell anywhere?" Someone had, in fact, made a report, telling the police something like "I found something and I don't know what it is, but it looks like a big bell and it says *Andrea Doria*." Nagle almost had another attack. He retrieved the bell and insured it for $100,000. He was among the immortals.

Soon an idea began percolating in Nagle's imagination. What if he could run the *Seeker* full-time as a charter boat for divers? That would allow him to earn a living doing what he loved most. "I want to be the guy that turns this into a career," he told friends. He could make a half dozen trips to the *Doria* every year, then use his free time to search for the *Carolina, Texel, Norness,* and *Pan Pennsylvania*—

great ships still missing decades after sinking. His wife and two children lived in Pennsylvania, but he resided in Brielle now; he dated other women and kept a bachelor pad, yet his wife held out hope that he would return someday, and she raised his kids to admire him, so that he could do this now, he could make this business happen. He commissioned a second *Seeker,* this one nearly double the length of the first. It would be outfitted to transport divers to the great wrecks, the ones that required a pioneer's heart.

Almost immediately, Nagle struggled with the business. It wasn't that he lacked for customers. It was that he couldn't abide the customers. This was the wrong problem to have in the charter-boat business. On a dive trip, the captain's real job is to schmooze his patrons; at the end of the day, what the weekend, bread-and-butter customer really wants is to bond with a man of the sea. Nagle had envisioned his business as an endless series of trips to deep and dangerous wrecks like the *Doria* or the *Choapa.* But his patrons desired only the easy, nearby sites, wrecks like the *Stolt Dagali,* SS *Mohawk,* and the *Tolten.* To Nagle, these people weren't divers, they were tourists. He watched them climb onto the *Seeker* with their brand-new lime green fins—lime green!—and listened to their giddy plans to take pictures of lobsters or touch the side of a "real" shipwreck, and he could not hide his contempt for them. He had established a business in order to explore, and now he was beholden to customers who were thrilled precisely because they didn't have to.

And Nagle was drinking. Jim Beam didn't like the *Seeker*'s customers any more than Nagle did. Before long, Nagle became surly with his clients. Often, he stood outside the wheelhouse atop his boat and rained down commentary on stunned customers. He'd shout, "This isn't what diving's about!" or "Look at you greenhorns—go to the Caribbean with those green fins!" or "You dive shop guys got balls selling that garbage equipment to these innocents—you're crooks!" At the end of a trip, after he'd been drinking for hours, he might say, "Get these fucking cattle off my boat!" Friends and crew pleaded with Nagle: "Bill, for Christ's sake, you can't talk that way to paying customers. This is a business!" Nagle didn't care. This wasn't what diving was about.

His drinking worsened. During one charter, Nagle unilaterally

decided to reroute to a more challenging wreck, a site that had captured his imagination and begged to be explored. The 150-foot depth of the new wreck was beyond the abilities of the divers on board. The man who had chartered the boat was incensed. "What the hell are you doing, Bill? We're supposed to go to a hundred-foot wreck. My guys can't handle this kind of depth." Nagle growled, "You gotta teach these guys to do decompression diving!" then stormed into the wheelhouse. And that was it. Nagle went where he wanted—he was no goddamn taxi driver, he was no sellout, he would not betray the spirit of diving. But as the 1980s gave way to a new decade, Nagle's drinking began to bleach the greatness of his skills. His shoulder blades became spires on his emaciated frame, his jaundiced skin and stringy hair a goulash of self-abandon. He still swam beautifully, somehow, in the way retired baseball greats still throw gracefully at old-timers' games. But experienced divers noticed that his *Doria* dives had become less strenuous, that he wasn't quite going anymore where no man had been. "Ah, I just gotta get in shape," he'd grumble to his few close friends, which they took as code for "I gotta stop drinking." By 1990, Nagle had made his last *Doria* dive—you couldn't challenge a wreck like that without every ounce of your faculties tuned high, and there had been recent corpses aboard the *Doria* to prove it. Nagle continued to lose customers. Every day, he told the few remaining people he respected about how right things had been in the old days, in the days when diving was great.

This was Nagle's life and business in the late summer of 1991, as Brielle shut down for the season and returned to the rhythms of its regulars. Nagle had spent much of this August day washing the *Seeker* and contemplating his life. Now, with the sun setting, he took a short walk across the dock, through the cratered, dirt parking lot, and into an establishment seemingly placed there for him by God. The Harbor Inn was open late year-round. It served Jim Beam. Nagle was thirsty.

No one quite recalls when they started calling it the Horrible Inn, but everyone can tell you why. Hard-core smokers choked on the

mushroom cloud of cigarette smoke that hovered over the bar. Bathroom smells wafted with impunity into the small grill area. Skin stuck to everything. Drunken fishermen painted the names of sweethearts onto greasy walls. Once, the owner decided to waterblast off years of built-up nicotine. A fully rigged crew showed up. They turned on the hoses. The water blew holes through the wall.

And there was the clientele. The Horrible Inn didn't serve many, but its faithful were hard-core and local. Bikers, fishermen, street toughs, boat mechanics, deep-wreck divers—this was the constant, unshaven dance card at the Horrible Inn. These men—you didn't dare bring a lady here—weren't interested in pinball machines or pool tables, and they didn't question management's policy to refill peanut dishes with leftovers from other peanut dishes. Customers drank beer and booze from plastic cups, then extinguished their cigarettes in same. Fights erupted. Nagle never budged from the Horrible Inn. Once, word spread through Brielle that a bartender had thrown Nagle out of the Horrible Inn for indecent behavior. No one believed it. It wasn't the idea of Nagle misbehaving that seemed impossible to the town; it was the idea that anyone could do anything indecent enough to warrant expulsion from such a place.

This evening, Nagle took his usual place at the bar and ordered a Jim Beam. And then another. A half hour later, a thirty-eight-year-old fishing boat captain with a dirty shirt ambled into the Horrible Inn to pay his fuel bill. Everyone knew the man as Skeets. Skeets had been around the dock for years and tied up his boat just a few slips from the *Seeker.* His business was small—he took out only four or five fishermen at a time—but he ran it well, which in the charter fishing trade meant two things: he knew where the fish were; and he knew how to keep his mouth shut.

Finding fish, of course, was critical. Customers who chartered fishing boats didn't come back if a captain took them to the desert. Guys like Skeets had to be able to sniff the air, look at the sky, and say, "Gentlemen, today I smell tuna." And then the captain had to take them there, to little sites recorded in tattered notebooks stashed in wheelhouse bottom drawers. Sometimes, this meant a location along the beach; other times, it meant a long journey offshore to one of the canyons. Most often, it meant a trip to the shipwrecks.

To fishermen, shipwrecks mean life. A mass of steel and wood that might have buried human souls becomes a rapid city of marine biology along the ocean floor. Shipwrecks are where the food chain poses for a snapshot. Tiny creatures attach themselves to solid objects. Those creatures attract predators, which in turn attract their own predators, and so on. Soon the wreck has become its own ecosystem. The pelagics—open-water traveling fish like tuna, codfish, and pollack—visit and get fat. Fishing boat captains get fatter.

Keeping your mouth shut was essential. Every fishing charter captain kept a book of public wrecks, the ones everyone knew and cleaned out regularly. But it was the secret wrecks that mattered, and the secret wrecks made the captain. Over the course of his career, a good fishing charter captain like Skeets might build a repertoire of a dozen shipwrecks known just to himself and a handful of others. He might discover some by scanning his bottom finder for sudden humps while out at sea. He might be gifted a prime location by a retiring fisherman to whom he had been kind. He might even trade sites with another captain he trusted. The more wrecks he knew, the more money he made. The more secret wrecks he knew, the more customers coveted his boat.

Fishing charter captains protected their secret sites. Customers were forbidden to bring aboard navigation equipment or even to enter the wheelhouse, lest they stumble upon a site's coordinates. If a captain spotted another boat while fishing, he would pull up his anchor, move off the site, and wait until the potential spy had passed. If another boat shadowed him out of port, he might zigzag into the middle of nowhere, then fish for nothing until the spy slipped away. All the time, he had to stay sharp or he risked his livelihood. They still talk about a captain from the Viking Fleet in Montauk. The man charged a fortune to take two brothers fishing. When he fell asleep, the brothers tiptoed inside the wheelhouse and videotaped his book of numbers. A year later, that captain's golden sites were Grand Central Station.

For the last few years, Skeets had been fishing a once-in-a-lifetime spot, a site about sixty miles off the Brielle coast. He had come upon the place one foggy day while trolling for tuna, a technique whereby a fishing boat drags monofilament line and lures

through the water to mimic the movement of squid and other bait. Because the fishing boat is moving while trolling, the captain must keep alert for other boats in the vicinity. In the fog, he does this by scanning his radar. Skeets scanned his radar. Soon he spotted another boat on the screen. But its green blip never moved, meaning that this boat was anchored. To Skeets, that meant one thing—the boat on his radar was fishing a shipwreck.

Skeets turned his boat hard to port, then set course for the anchored boat. Before that boat could respond, Skeets had "jumped it" and had the numbers. The boat turned out to belong to a friend. The friend radioed to Skeets: "Don't tell a soul about this site, Skeets. Don't ever tell a soul about any of this. This one is special."

A few days later, Skeets returned to the site, and the place was glorious—fishermen needed only cast their hooks before schools of fat tuna, sea bass, and cod leaped onto their lines. The best part was that only Skeets and his friend knew about it, which meant he could visit anytime without worry that other captains had wiped out the prize.

But a curious thing happened to Skeets whenever he visited this site. Even as he basked in its largesse, he could not stop himself from wondering about the object at the soul of this underwater bounty. It was big—that much he could see by the crude green blob the mass painted on his bottom finder's screen. It was deep—at least 190 feet. And it was made of steel; he could tell that by inspecting the rust flakes that sometimes stuck to his fishing lures. Beyond that he could divine nothing. He was curious. Something about this site pulled on his instincts. Over a lifetime at sea, a fisherman develops a feel for what matters and what does not. To Skeets, this site mattered.

For years, when Nagle had seen Skeets in the parking lot or washing his boat or paying his fuel bill at the Horrible Inn, he had asked this question: "Say, Skeets, you come across any wrecks out there that haven't been hit by divers?" For years, Skeets had given this answer: "Sorry, Billy, nothing." Today, however, Skeets looked over to Nagle and said something different.

"Billy, I've been fishing this site. You can't believe it. Tuna. Pollack. Big fish."

Nagle raised an eyebrow from the bottom of his bourbon. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, Bill. About sixty miles offshore. And deep, your kind of deep, maybe two hundred foot of water. Something's down there. Something big. You should check this thing out. I'm thinking something really big is down there."

Even after several Jim Beams, Nagle knew the difference between dockside chest-puffing and a man's heart. He considered Skeets an excellent captain and a man who knew his ocean. He didn't doubt that Skeets's instinct was pinging properly. Still, Nagle could not and would not request the numbers. Captains had only their reputations, and it would be the reddest violation of professional territory to ask.

Skeets made an offer. "Billy, I'm looking for a little inshore blackfish wreck I know you dive every so often. Give me those numbers, and I'll give you my numbers. But you gotta keep them to yourself. You can't tell anyone."

Nagle nodded.

The two men agreed to exchange the numbers the next day on Nagle's boat. That night, Nagle could not sleep in anticipation of the appointment. The next day, he arrived an hour early and paced the rotted wooden pier that led to the *Seeker*. His instincts throbbed through his body. This meeting was about more than just an object at the bottom of the ocean. This meeting was about the tides turning.

When Skeets finally arrived, Nagle invited him into the *Seeker*'s wheelhouse. The men stood in the tiny compartment, surrounded by hanging navigation equipment, a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam, and the crumpled cowboys-and-Indians sleeping bag Nagle had used since boyhood. They looked each other in the eye.

"Bill, I gotta tell you something," Skeets said. "This site I found is a bad place. This part of the ocean is a bad place, it's a dangerous place. It's in a little depression, there's an edge there, with a huge current coming up over the continental shelf, lots of moving water—"

"Ah, don't worry, Skeets—"

"Really, Billy, it's a bad place. Your guys gotta be top-shelf divers.

You can have dead-calm air and still water, and still the boat could be drifting at three knots. You know what that means, how dangerous the currents are underneath. And it's deep. I'm thinking two hundred feet. I don't know anything about diving, but you better watch your guys."

"Yeah, Skeets, I know, I know. Don't worry. Let's swap the numbers."

Neither man could find a clean piece of paper. Nagle reached into his pocket and pulled out two cocktail napkins from the Horrible Inn. He wrote down his numbers for Skeets—a little blackfish snag south of Seaside lump, just a pile of rocks that made for good fishing. Then Skeets began to copy his Loran-C time differentials across a streak of peanut grease left by Nagle's hand. Captains are not supposed to reveal prize sites. But Nagle could tell Skeets what was down there; Nagle was the one guy Skeets knew who was capable of diving to 200 feet. And Nagle seemed a decent guy, not the kind to blab or sell the numbers to a rival fishing charter.

Skeets handed over the napkin.

"Keep it to yourself," he reminded Nagle. "And for God's sake, be careful."

Skeets let himself out of the wheelhouse, climbed down the steep white wooden stairs, and returned to the dock and his boat. Nagle followed a short time later, pen in one hand, cocktail napkin death-gripped in the other. He walked to the Horrible Inn and ordered a Jim Beam, then began transcribing Skeets's numbers into code on a different napkin. Nagle kept a book of numbers on the *Seeker,* but those were public numbers—go steal them if you want, you son of a bitch. His wallet, however, was reserved for promise. You could kill Nagle and steal his wallet, but those numbers would mean nothing without the code, and Nagle never told anyone the code. He folded the new napkin and tucked it into his wallet, the safe house for his dreams. Then he called John Chatterton.

If Nagle saw himself in any other diver, that diver was John Chatterton, a ruggedly tall and handsome forty-year-old commercial diver whose booming, Long Island–speckled voice had become

sound track to the most important wreck dives of the era. By day, Chatterton worked underwater construction jobs around Manhattan, the kind that required a brass helmet and a ten-thousand-degree Broco torch. By weekend, he masterminded some of the most inventive and daring shipwreck dives ever executed on the eastern seaboard. When Nagle looked in Chatterton's eyes, he saw his own best days staring back at him.

They had met in 1984 aboard the *Seeker.* Chatterton had no particular interest in the destination that day; he had signed up simply to observe Nagle, the legend. Soon after, Chatterton took a *Seeker* charter to the *Texas Tower,* an old air force radar installation about sixty miles offshore. The tower had collapsed in a 1961 storm, killing its crew. Its bottom lay jackknifed in sand at 200 feet, making it too dangerous for all but the most accomplished divers. But its top could be easily explored at 85 feet, appropriate for every diver on this trip.

One man got cocky. He already had a reputation as a hotshot, so he surprised no one by concocting a plan to dive the bottom. Soon enough, one of wreck diving's oldest songs sounded from beneath the waves. The man became obsessed with removing a brass window. His air was short but he tried to finish anyway. He drowned. That's how fast it happens at those depths.

Now there was a corpse on the bottom of a very dangerous wreck. Someone had to go get him. That was Nagle's job; ordinarily, he or one of his assistants—his mates—would make the recovery dive. But they had just completed their own dives and could not return to the water until their bodies had off-gassed built-up nitrogen, a process that would take hours.

Chatterton volunteered. A diver unfamiliar with the bottom could easily get lost and never find his way back to the *Seeker,* so Nagle asked if Chatterton knew the mangled topography of the wreck. "Not really, but I'll go anyway," Chatterton said. That answer spoke to Nagle.

Chatterton reached the bottom of the *Texas Tower* and began his reconnaissance. Soon enough, he found the diver—"Doesn't look too bad for a dead guy," Chatterton thought. He tied the man's tanks to a two-hundred-pound lift bag and inflated the bag with air until

the body began its ascent to the surface. For good measure, he tied a spool of line from the corpse to the shipwreck; that way, if anything went wrong, there would still be a trail to the body.

Something went wrong. During ascent, the rapidly decreasing water pressure caused the air in the diver's dry suit to expand, turning him into a deceased version of the Michelin Man. As the body surfaced, a giant wave collapsed the lift bag, and the man sank back to the bottom. With nightfall approaching, it would be unsafe for anyone to dive again.

Chatterton volunteered to retrieve the body in the morning. That really spoke to Nagle. The *Seeker* stayed overnight; everyone ate Doritos for breakfast. Chatterton found the body again. This time, the poor guy didn't look so good. His eyelids had been eaten away and his teeth showed; he'd become what divers call a "creature feature." Nagle reeled in the body when it surfaced. "You did a good job," he told Chatterton. "You are a good diver." After that, Nagle and Chatterton were friends.

Before long, Chatterton was crewing on the *Seeker.* In 1987, he made his first trip to the *Doria.* He swam around but did nothing more. The wreck was so dangerous, so terrifying, that he vowed never to return. On the same trip, Nagle recovered a two-hundred-pound wooden sign that read KEEP CLEAR OF PROPELLERS, the most beautiful sign Chatterton had ever seen. He shook Nagle's hand, thanked him for the opportunity, and said, "Bill, I've made my trip to the mountaintop. Once is enough." Nagle, however, knew better.

Chatterton couldn't forget the wreck. In contemplating the *Doria*'s tilted grandness, he could glimpse shadows of the secrets great shipwrecks offer those who see with their minds. He returned. The *Doria*'s hugeness overwhelmed him; a diver could spend a decade of twenty-five-minute dives on this wreck and never see it all. Again he returned, and marveled at the feeling of being inside places that didn't used to be places, of becoming present in this vast repository of tiny things that had meant something to people. Soon, the *Doria* ran through his bloodstream full-time. Raking leaves or watching a Giants football game or walking the grocery's dairy aisle, Chatterton stitched together his experiences on the *Doria,* and gradually his eyes adjusted, until the quilt of his separate experiences aboard

that shipwreck formed a single picture in his mind. "This is why I dive," he told Nagle. "This is what I want diving to be."

Soon Chatterton was going places and finding things on the *Doria* no one had before, not even Nagle and his cohorts in the glory days. His reputation wafted across the bows of dive boats along the eastern seaboard. And he continued to absorb Nagle. He marveled at Nagle's instinct to see the big picture, to envision a ship as it had been in its proudest moment, to study deck plans and captain's logs, to put himself into the mind of the ship's navigator, to construct a dive plan that envisioned the whole ship when only a tiny portion of it was currently knowable. He was astounded to bring up meaningless rusty artifacts from hidden corners on the *Doria* only to have Nagle examine them and divine exactly where he'd been.

Most of all, he and Nagle shared a philosophy. To them, diving was about exploration, about aiming for the everywhere of the unknown. There were a lot of impossible places to go when the world was as big as Chatterton and Nagle saw it, but for God's sake you had to try. You were *required* to try. What were you doing alive, these men thought, if you didn't go and try?

The day after Skeets revealed his secret, Nagle asked Chatterton to meet him at the *Seeker.* The men walked upstairs to the boat's wheelhouse, where Nagle locked the door and related Skeets's story to his friend. What could be at the bottom of that site? The men dealt out the possibilities like solitaire cards. Could it be a warship or a war-era merchant vessel? Almost impossible—military records indicated little action in the area during either world war. Could it be the *Corvallis,* a ship reputedly sunk by Hollywood for a 1930s disaster flick? Faintly possible: it was thought that the filmmakers had bothered to note only the most general location for their shoot, an area that included Skeets's fishing site but also several hundred other square miles of ocean. How about a subway car? Also vaguely possible—New Jersey sunk them purposely to promote marine life, but those locations had been reliably recorded.

Less romantic scenarios seemed more probable. It might be a pile of rocks. It might be a worthless pipe barge. Most likely it was

an old garbage barge; in years past, municipalities had stuffed geriatric schooners with trash, cut their masts, and sunk them at no place in particular. Nagle and Chatterton had been to plenty of those.

But maybe, just maybe, it was something big.

Nagle proposed a plan. He and Chatterton would organize a trip to the site. Each would recruit six top divers, guys who could survive a 200-foot plunge into the unknown. It would not be an easy journey—six hours each way in the chill September air. Each diver would pay one hundred dollars to cover fuel and expenses. There would be no promises. Other diving captains offered hush-hush trips to "virgin" sites, but these were always scams; you'd get down there and find a recent diver's orange crowbar on some junky fishing boat, and the captain would actually look you in the eye and say, "Gee, fellas, I had no idea." Not Nagle and Chatterton. They would pitch their trip the way they felt it: It's probably nothing, men, but we have to try.

The trip was booked for Labor Day 1991. Nagle and Chatterton called every good diver they knew. Nearly all of them refused the invitation. Even some of the greats, guys who were supposed to be excited by maybes, turned down the trip. "I'd rather spend my money on a sure thing instead of some wacky pie in the sky" was the standard regret. One diver, Brian Skerry, told Chatterton, "You know what, man? I was born too late. All the really cool wrecks have been found. The age of exploration for shipwrecks is over." That's how it was in 1991. Guys wanted guarantees. Nagle and Chatterton kept calling.

Finally, their lists exhausted, they found their twelfth diver. Chatterton was incensed. "Nobody wants to find anything new! What the hell's going on, Bill?" Nagle, normally bombastic in the face of caution, looked down at the red *X*'s on his list of divers and said to Chatterton, almost in whisper, "These guys don't have the heart for wreck diving, John. These guys just don't get it."

Just after midnight on September 2, 1991, while the rest of Brielle slept, Nagle, Chatterton, and the twelve divers who had signed up

for the exploratory trip stuffed the *Seeker* with tanks, masks, regulators, knives, flashlights, and bundles of other gear. They faced a six-hour ride to Skeets's numbers. Some grabbed a bunk and went to sleep. Others hung around the changing table, catching up on one another's lives and laughing about the folly of paying to chase a pile of rocks. At one A.M., Nagle checked the sign-in sheet against the passengers on board. "Get all gear secured," he called to those still awake, then walked up the stairs and into the wheelhouse. Chatterton gave the signal to switch from shore power to generator. The lights in the boat's salon flickered, then gave way to powerful quartzes that bathed the back deck in white. One of the divers pulled the power leads and water feed from the dock and disconnected the shore-based phone line. Nagle lit the twin diesel engines, which danced to protest—*cough-grumble-POP-chum . . . cough-grumble-POP-POP-POP-rrmmm*—the disruption of their slumber.

Chatterton pulled in lines. "Bow line off! Stern line hold . . . hold . . . hold . . . okay!" he called to Nagle, then slung the heavy ropes onto the dock. Now the *Seeker* was ready. Nagle switched his wheelhouse lights to dim red, checked his VHF radio, single sideband radio, Loran-C, and radar, and engaged the engines one at a time, the choice method for coaxing a lady from her dock. A few minutes later, the *Seeker* was past the railroad drawbridge and nose up into the Atlantic. Most likely these men were chasing a garbage barge. Most likely the age of shipwreck exploration had passed. But as the Brielle dock faded behind them, Chatterton and Nagle saw possibilities on the horizon, and for that moment the world was perfect and right.