

Put it back

A Jackson Pauley/Withrow

Key short story

By Eric Douglas

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The air was still and hot. The humidity was so thick, it felt like oil. The Florida Keys were almost always caressed by a gentle breeze that made it bearable in the summer time. But this day was different. The air had an almost unnatural feel to it; like something was holding the wind back.

“So tell me again how this all happened,” Jackson asked his friend, Randy Littlebear, as the other man sat beside him on the fly bridge of his boat, the *Daydreamer*, a 29-foot Boston Whaler Outrage with twin 250 horsepower Yamaha

four-stroke engines. Littlebear was scanning the water with high-powered binoculars. He was a federal officer with the Bureau of Indian Affairs—a cop. He worked on the Seminole reservation to the north, but he liked to spend his spare time in the keys, diving and fishing. Littlebear and Jackson met when Littlebear was working undercover to break up a drug smuggling ring. A Navy diver who had served with distinction in the first Gulf war, he was cool and focused. Diving wasn't what was on his mind today, though, as he searched the water. He was looking for a body.

“Littlebear,” Jackson barked louder when his friend didn't answer. “Tell me again how we know this guy went overboard?”

“Oh, sorry man. I guess I zoned out for a second,” Littlebear replied, as he dropped the field glasses from his face and rubbed his eyes. “All right. This is all I know. A group of treasure hunters were out here. They've been scanning this

general area for the last few weeks. Supposedly, they had some good indications that a Spanish treasure ship went down around here.”

“With all the coral growth around here, we could be sitting on top of Fort Knox and I don’t know how you’d find it,” Jackson grunted as he steered the Whaler through the search pattern they were conducting. His on-board GPS unit indicated where to turn to complete the pattern with as little overlap as possible. Several boats were out searching for the man who had been lost overboard. Each was working a grid on a pattern laid out by the Sheriff’s Department.

“True enough, but something told them this was the spot. You know how these guys are. Mel Fisher and a few others hit it rich in these waters, but most of these treasure groups don’t think about the years and millions of dollars those ‘success stories’ took before they paid off,” Littlebear agreed. “So anyway, something showed up on their magnetometer so

this guy hit the water and went down to see what they’d found. No doubt they’d done it dozens of times, but you check everything out, or you always wonder if you’ve missed it.”

“You got that right,” Jackson said, silently urging his friend to stop rambling. Normally Littlebear was pretty quiet, but sometimes he got off on a tangent. Jackson knew he would just have to wait it out.

“So, this guy finds this box underwater and brings it up. He handed it up to the guys on the boat and then climbed up on board,” Littlebear continued.

“OK, I got that far, but you said something earlier about things getting a little bizarre, but then never finished it,” Jackson prodded.

“Oh yeah. So, anyway, the guy gets up on the boat and one of the guys hands him the box he’d brought up. The others on the boat all said the boat suddenly rocked back and forth—

pretty violently from the sounds of it. It must've been a rogue wave or something," Littlebear said.

"That sort of thing is pretty rare around here. In the Pacific, I've seen that. Those waves can cross the entire ocean as little more than a bump in the water and then turn into a monster when they get in site of land. Out here, you just don't see that," Jackson said, shaking his head. "At least not when the ocean is this flat and the air is this still. Nothing out here to even cause a rogue wave. I've seen heavy freighters throw off some pretty big wakes when they come plowing through here, but you said there was no boat traffic around, right?"

"I'm just telling you what they told me and no, there weren't any freighters cruising up the coast. So, anyway, this rogue wave hits and the treasure hunter is thrown overboard. He dropped the box to the deck as he fell backward and then he just disappeared below the surface. They said it didn't look like

he tried to swim or struggle or anything. He was just gone," Littlebear finished.

"Did they dive to find him?" Jackson asked.

"A couple of them jumped in the water almost as soon their buddy dropped. They couldn't find anything. They searched the entire area. No sign of him," Littlebear replied.

"Well, that's it," Jackson said as he reached down and took the *Daydreamer* out of gear for a minute. "We've covered the entire search grid and no sign of a floating body."

"All right, I'll call it in," Littlebear acknowledged. "I've heard a couple other boats report in with the same result. Doesn't sound like it's going to be a good day for the treasure hunters."

With that, Jackson headed the boat back to his slip in the marina. He would've helped out in the search for free, but the Sheriff offered to pay him for his time and fuel anyway, and Jackson wasn't going to let that slip by.

A former New York City firefighter, Jackson Pauley had decided to change careers following 9/11. In his mid-40's he took a 20-year pension and moved to where the water was warm and the pace of life was still pretty slow. A long-time diver, mainly off the coast of New York and New Jersey, he became a dive instructor and headed to the Keys. He'd tried out a couple other places in the chain of islands before settling on Withrow Key. He hadn't regretted that decision a bit. The island had been largely ignored by the development of the Upper Keys and Key West. Withrow Key still had the feel of small town America, from a time before the Keys became trendy.

Jackson worked as a dive instructor and dive guide for one of the local dive shops and took things easy. He'd bought the *Daydreamer* when he arrived and got a small houseboat that hadn't been out of the marina in 10 years as part of the

deal. The houseboat became Jackson's home and he tied *Daydreamer* up beside it. In all, it worked out pretty well.

When Jackson docked the boat in the one marina on the island, next door to his floating home, Randy Littlebear jumped off and went to the sheriff's office. He wanted to check in to see if anyone else had had any luck.

After getting his boat's spring lines secured and then going back through and rechecking everything, Jackson jumped in his old truck and went to the one diner in town. It wasn't that far, and he could've walked but he thought he might get some supplies for his house after getting some lunch and so he drove. The diner overlooked the same marina, but he had to drive out and around to get there, forcing him to pass through the one intersection in town with one of the few stoplights in all of the Keys.

As he pulled up, he noticed the traffic lights begin to fade. He watched as they went out completely, then

immediately blinked on again. Just as quickly, the lights flashed in series and then they all flashed back off. Two drivers were so distracted by the light show, they both rolled into the intersection and collided. Neither driver was hurt, but it took a few minutes get things sorted out. By the time they did, the lights had returned to normal.

Jackson walked into the diner a few minutes later and took a familiar seat at the bar, nodding to most of the crowd that was there, although everyone seemed distracted. There was a buzz in the room that made Jackson uneasy. Everyone was talking at once.

“This is totally burnt.”

“You’re lucky. Mine is frozen solid. I can’t eat this.”

“I think mine is spoiled.”

“This isn’t what I ordered at all.”

Everyone in the room was complaining about something. Jackson looked around for a waitress, but it didn’t

look like he was going to get any service and from the sounds of things, he wasn’t sure he wanted anything. Walking back outside, he ran into Randy Littlebear—literally. The man was in a rush and seemed distracted.

“Whoa there, Randy,” Jackson said as he grabbed onto his friend to keep himself from falling off the deck that ran around the outside of the restaurant. “Where are you going? Did they find something?”

“Great, Jackson. It’s you. I was looking for you,” Littlebear said nervously, looking all around as he spoke. “Let’s go get something to eat. I’ve got something to tell you about and I’m going to need a full stomach to do it.”

“From the sounds of it, Duffy’s is not the best place to eat at the moment. Something strange is going on in there,” Jackson said, shaking his head.

“I’m not surprised. It’s started,” Littlebear said without explanation. “I’m afraid strange things are going to start happening everywhere.”

“You’re telling me. I was driving here and the stoplights just started freaking out. Some kind of short in the electrical system, I guess,” Jackson said, pointing his friend toward a bench near the railing.

“It’s not just that. Everything is going to go wrong. We’ve got to put it back. We’ve got to,” Littlebear said, nearly shouting as he looked around quickly, as if he expected something to fall from the sky.

“Man, take a deep breath. You need to pull yourself together. Come over here and sit down,” Jackson said, motioning the tribal officer to the bench. Littlebear hadn’t moved when Jackson did. “You need to a grip, pal. What are you talking about? Put what back?”

“OK, look. When I went to the Sheriff’s office to report in, I saw the box that the treasure hunter found on the reef before he was lost at sea. We’ve got to put it back,” Littlebear continued to rant.

“Slow down. You’re not making much sense. You saw the box. And that’s what we need to put back? Why?” Jackson asked trying to follow along as best as he could.

“There is a legend about a stone box that has great powers. It holds the remains of a chief and shaman from another tribe. He cursed the men who killed him. When he died it unleashed powers. They were all so afraid, the tribesmen rowed out onto the reef, beyond the site of land and threw the box into the sea,” Littlebear continued, searching his mind for the relevant parts of the story from his childhood. “The story goes that the ocean rose up against the men. Three boats went out and only one made it back. The warriors in the other two boats were never seen again. They just disappeared. The story

ends that once the box sank beneath the waves, things returned to normal.”

“Are you trying to tell me you think this box is full of ancient bones of a witch doctor who cursed another Indian tribe a thousand years ago?” Jackson said, more than a little disbelief in his voice.

“Well, I didn’t say how long ago,” Littlebear replied defensively. “But, yes, I’ve seen it and I know the box is the one from the legends. We’ve got to put it back where it was.”

“So you said, but why? You’re a cop, Randy. You’ve been around too much and seen too many things to believe in curses and ghosts,” Jackson laughed.

“You’re right; I’ve also seen things that I can’t explain. Sometimes there are things we just can’t understand,” Littlebear answered.

Both men jumped when they heard a loud crashing sound behind them. Two women fell through a window behind them and were wrestling over what looked like a piece of pie.

“It’s mine!”

“I saw it first.”

“Liar.”

“You’re the liar.”

Jackson and Littlebear jumped in quickly and separated the two women, pulling them off the ground before either one could get cut too badly by the broken glass strewn around. After the medics arrived and got the two women cleaned up, Jackson and Littlebear walked away from the scene.

“Are you still going to try to tell me that weird things aren’t happening around here?” Littlebear asked.

“Because two women got in a fight?” Jackson asked. “It isn’t exactly common, but I don’t know if I’d call it supernatural.”

“Jackson, they were fighting over a piece of pie. That’s not exactly normal,” Littlebear said with a shake of his head when they got to their cars.

Jackson returned to his houseboat and took care of some boating chores for a while. He didn’t step back outside until almost dusk. He heard a dog barking and it sounded like it was just outside, so he decided to see what was going on. To get a good view, he climbed the inside stairs to the roof of the boat. Living in a marina, he thought the dog might be a few slips away or on land. A dog barking on Withrow Key wasn’t exactly news and this one didn’t sound like it was in pain or anything, but there was just something about the tone and the consistency that made Jackson curious—one loud bark from what sounded like a big dog, every 10 seconds or so.

At the top of the stairs, Jackson faced out over the water for a second. The sun was setting behind him but then that

singular bark made him turn. What he saw froze him in his tracks.

There wasn’t just one dog, but an entire mob of them. There were brown, white and black dogs. Some with spots, others with curly hair. Some dogs had short faces, or round bodies. They were all standing on the dock around his boat and they were all staring at the water, just as he had done. Jackson heard the same barking sound again, but it was coming from a small Jack Russell terrier, not an animal capable of the throaty bellow he’d been hearing. He stood and watched, but none of the animals moved. He kept watching the little Jack Russell, but then a different dog barked; it made the same sound he’d heard before.

“What in the hell is going on here?” Jackson said out loud, without moving. Then a third, different, dog barked—still the same sound. Jackson turned and went back down the steps.

“Someone’s got to be putting me on and I think its time to figure out who,” he grumbled as he walked through the main cabin of the boat and stepped back outside and onto the dock. The dogs ignored him, but continued staring out over the water, into the final rays of the orange sunset. Jackson turned, but couldn’t see what they were all staring at. Only the marina and a few boats were between them and the open ocean.

He stepped toward the animals and shouted “Get out of here. Go home. Go away.”

Nothing happened, at least not a first. He felt it at first more than he heard it, but then the growling rose up. All the dogs took a step toward him and began to let out the same deep guttural growl.

“This is not good,” Jackson muttered to himself, the king of all understatements. *Even if I had a gun there is no way I could stop this many dogs. Dogs can swim, but I don’t think they can swim down*, Jackson thought, not saying anything else

that would cause the dogs to attack. He knew he could easily dive into the water behind him and swim to another boat underwater. The only problem was going to be making it to the water before the dogs made it to him. He’d have to run about 20 feet to get clear of the dock.

Jackson took a side-step in the direction he wanted to go. The dogs shifted as one to block his movement and the growling got louder. He tried it again and the dogs moved with him. They were plainly going to cut off his escape.

Facing the dogs and the island, Jackson almost didn’t realize that the sun had finally dropped below the horizon and night was beginning to settle. In the Keys, the difference can literally seem like night and day, as if someone switched off a light. *Darkness isn’t going to make this any easier*, he thought to himself.

But, he was wrong. The growling faded and the random barking stopped. The dogs began to turn and walk away.

Where they had all faced the same direction, as if one dog, now they sniffed each other and turned in random directions. A few tails wagged and they all walked away as if there was nothing unusual in a pack of dogs watching the sunset—or all sounding alike.

“I didn’t know there were that many dogs around here,” Jackson said to himself, as he let out the breath he realized he’d been holding. “That was weird,” he said as he leaned against a piling on the dock. None of the dogs turned back or gave him a second look.

Jackson almost jumped out of his skin when his cell phone, which had been quiet all afternoon, suddenly began ringing. He pulled it out of his pocket and it showed he had six voicemail messages. And then another call came in.

“Hello,” he said when he thumbed the phone on.

“Man, I’ve been trying to get you for a couple hours. Where’ve you been?” Littlebear asked. “Strange things are

going on all over the island. There are unexplained electrical problems and people are acting weird. I know you don’t believe in all this stuff, but I need your help, now.”

“Don’t worry. I believe something’s going on,” Jackson replied as he watched the last of the dogs walk up the ramp to the shore from the dock. “What do we need to do?”

Jackson was in Littlebear’s car five minutes later.

“All right. From the top again, but explain this to me in simple terms. I’m having a very unusual day,” Jackson said, watching his friend closely. He knew Littlebear was a solid guy, and good under pressure, but there were too many strange things going on. He could only be sure of himself and he wasn’t even completely sure about that.

“I did some checking when I got home. The legend says that the Tequesta people who lived throughout the Keys were constantly at war with the Calusa tribe from the southwest part of Florida. There were more of the Calusas, so the Tequesta

were usually on the losing end,” Littlebear explained. “The story goes that the Tequesta managed to capture a Calusa chief and were going to sacrifice him, hoping to gain power over their northern rivals. Just before they cut off the man’s head, he uttered a curse on the tribe. After they were done, a lot of really strange things started happening to them.”

“You mean like the stoplights malfunctioned?” Jackson joked, still skeptical.

“Like all the fish disappeared. In a single day,” Littlebear answered, ignoring Jackson’s sarcasm. “These people survived on fish and the sea. They didn’t farm, so all the fish disappearing at once was serious stuff.”

“So, they put his head into a box and threw it in the ocean to bring back the fish?” Jackson asked.

“Short version, yes. What I told you before was pretty much right,” Littlebear answered.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but something sure is. If you think putting this box back in the water will straighten things out, then let’s do it. I’d rather not have a visit from my kennel club again,” Jackson said.

“I know what you mean. I saw birds doing the same thing, just looking out to sea,” Littlebear said.

“One thing that bothers me though; why does the spirit in the box want to go back to the water? Wouldn’t it want to be released from the box?” Jackson asked.

“That’s the interesting thing. I believe the spirit in the box is causing all the trouble around here and it will only get worse if someone opens the box, but I think the dogs and the birds are a sign from other spirits on the island, from the Tequesta people, to send it back. That’s why they keep pointing out to sea,” Littlebear explained.

“So, why did they stop when the sun went down?” Jackson asked.

“I’m not exactly sure, but the spirits probably have less power at night. At least that is the only thing I can think of,” Littlebear answered. “So, we need to take care of this, tonight.”

“Where is the box? How do we get it?” Jackson asked.

“The sheriff gave it back to the treasure hunters who found it,” Littlebear explained.

The county sheriff had kept the mysterious box after the treasure hunter fell into the water, but he quickly realized it had nothing to do with the disappearance of the man, at least not in any way that was criminal or over which he had any jurisdiction. After the search boats had returned and the search itself was called off for the night, he returned the box to the group that found it.

Guessing that the box was sealed against the elements, mainly because they couldn’t hear any water inside when they carried it, they called in an archeologist to help find a way to open it up and conserve whatever was inside. Since the box

was nearly clear of marine growth, they weren’t sure if the box was ancient. Because it was made from stone, rather than metal or plastic, it was a pretty good guess that it was old.

The treasure hunters had basically taken over a small motel at the south end of the key, occupying eight of the ten rooms with their divers, boat captains and crew. They’d gotten a group discount and essentially ran the motel, which suited them just fine.

“So, do you have a plan for this?” Jackson asked Littlebear when they arrived at the Basin Motel, “Or are we just going to wing it?”

“Wing it, pretty much,” was Littlebear’s shrugging reply. “Haven’t had time to come up with a plan.”

At the sheriff’s office, Littlebear had kept close to the action when the treasure hunters came to pick up the box. He’d learned that they were going to put it in the storage building behind motel to keep it safe. The men had argued about it, but

then realized they were all going to go out for a memorial service for their lost friend, at the Bayview Bar just down the Overseas Highway, so keeping it under lock and key with their search equipment made the most sense.

“We’re just going to steal this thing from a locked storage building and then go dump it back in the ocean?”

Jackson almost laughed.

“That pretty well sums it up, I guess,” Littlebear said matter-of-factly.

“But, you’re a cop. How does that part work?” Jackson continued, wanting to make sure his friend had thought this through.

“I’m a cop, and part of that job is to protect the public. I believe there is something bigger going on,” Littlebear answered. His face clouded over for a moment. “This is just something I have to do. There are things that are outside the laws of men. Not stealing, obviously, but the forces that are

tied up in that box are beyond what anyone here can deal with. I just have to protect the people of this island the best way I know how.”

“Let’s go see if we can figure this out, anyway,” Jackson agreed, letting his friend know that even if he was still skeptical, he was with him all the way.

The pair left the car 100 yards down US 1 and did their best to stay hidden in the shadows while they looked for the storage building. It appeared as if everyone was out for the evening, so the motel was quiet. There were metal storage buildings behind the motel, but only one was locked, so they quickly guessed that was the one they needed. That didn’t make it any easier. Metal walls and roof with no windows and one roll-up style garage door was all they could find. Using force to get inside was going to make a lot of noise.

“I don’t suppose you brought bolt cutters for the lock, did you?” Jackson whispered sarcastically. Littlebear simply

gave him a look of disgust at what they'd found and stared at the door again. "Well, I guess I could go get some," Jackson continued when he didn't get an answer.

Littlebear rose up quickly, clamped his hand over Jackson's mouth and pulled him away from the door. "Don't you ever shut up?" Littlebear hissed when they were in the darkness. "Listen."

The motel manager was making his rounds, checking doors and locks. He had clearly been drinking as he staggered his way over the dimly lit grounds, singing to himself. As he walked to the storage building and shook the lock, Jackson and Littlebear could hear the man's keys jingling from the ring on his belt.

The would-be thieves watched the man as he continued on and both had the same thought, but before either one of them could act, the man stopped and walked back to the

building. From their vantage, they could hear him fumbling around and then heard him begin to relieve himself.

Jackson shared a look with Littlebear and they both began to move. They went opposite ways around the building. As Jackson peered around the corner, he could see that the man was finishing up, but was facing his direction, although looking down and not at his surroundings. As quietly as he could, Jackson bent down and picked up a rock. He threw it off to one side, hitting a seldom-used lawn mower. Startled, the man looked up to see what made the noise. Littlebear grabbed the night manager from behind, applying pressure to a point between his shoulders and neck. The hold put the man to sleep and Jackson was there to grab him before he fell.

"Nice move. Did you learn that in the Navy?" Jackson asked as he lowered the man to the ground.

"Nah, growing up on the reservation," Littlebear said with a smile. "Get his keys and let's get going."

It took them a few moments to figure out which key on the ring opened the lock, but on the sixth try they found the right one. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the even lower light inside the storage building, but they could just make out the shape of the stone box on a wooden table in front of them. It was about two feet wide by one foot high and one foot deep.

“That’s really strange,” Jackson said, looking at the box.

“What is? That we’re about to steal a 500-year-old artifact and dump it back in the ocean?” Littlebear asked with a smirk.

“No, I’m comfortable with that,” Jackson laughed. “That this thing has been in the water that long, heck even a few days would do it, but it is almost perfectly clean. Nothing is growing on it. Whatever is in there, something has kept the ocean from taking it back.”

“You’re right,” Littlebear said examining the box.

“More interesting, I can’t see how this thing is put together. I didn’t think the tribes down here were very advanced. This is some serious workmanship to build a box like this with no seams that could withstand the water.”

“Hey guys,” a voice called out behind Jackson and Littlebear, breaking them out of their speculation. “What’s going on?”

Both men froze. This was getting more complicated by the second.

“Hey, did you hear me? What’s going on? When are you coming back to the party?”

“Just checking things out, nothing to worry about. We’ll be back in a minute,” Jackson replied, trying to muffle his own voice, realizing the person had mistaken them for two of the other treasure hunters. “Go on back in. We’ll be right there.”

“Okay, sure. I was just looking for that night manager. The ice machine is broken again. If you see him, let him know, all right?”

“Sure. No problem,” Jackson replied, making sure to keep his back to the treasure hunter. He raised his arm and waived.

“Is he gone?” Littlebear hissed after a second.

“I think so,” Jackson replied, risking a glance over his shoulder in time to see the man walking back inside. “He’s gone. Let’s get this thing and get out of here.”

Littlebear grabbed the stone box and carried it outside.

“Lock the door and put the keys back where you found them,” Littlebear said to Jackson. “I’m going to keep moving and get this thing to the car before someone else comes outside.”

“You got it,” Jackson replied. He walked around the corner of the building in time to see the night manager stirring.

Immediately, he decided to keep up his act as one of the treasure hunters.

“Hey, buddy, you all right?” he asked, keeping himself shadowed and out of the man’s direct site as he helped him stand. “You must’ve fallen down, or something. You need to take it a little easier on the booze, pal. Why don’t you get a cup of coffee?”

As he helped the man stand, still clearly confused, Jackson slipped his key back on the ring hanging from his pants. “Oh, by the way, the ice machine isn’t working again.”

With a pat on the man’s shoulder and a comment about being more careful, Jackson quickly turned walked away, hoping the man would be too confused to follow him.

“Wow, we got lucky. Can you believe it?” Jackson asked as Littlebear drove to Jackson’s boat.

“I’m not sure it was luck at all,” Littlebear said, keeping his eyes on the road, trying not to stare over his shoulder at the stone box in the back seat.

Arriving at the dock, it took Jackson a few minutes to get *Daydreamer* fired up and ready to go. They could barely hear the sound of the four-stroke engines. Both men did their best to ignore the box sitting on the stern of the boat.

“Looks like a storm is coming in,” Jackson said, looking out over the water. “The wind is really picking up. You sure you want to do this right now?”

“This storm coming out of nowhere makes me surer we need to do this now,” Littlebear answered.

“Got ya,” Jackson answered as he guided the boat forward. He turned to look back and make sure no one noticed their departure and saw a Jack Russell terrier. It was simply standing and staring at them as they pulled away. Jackson didn’t say anything, but he would have sworn he heard the little

dog bark over the Whaler’s Yamaha engines. What he heard, though, wasn’t the high-pitched bark typical of a small dog, but the same deep, throaty bark he’d heard earlier in the evening when the pack of dogs had assembled on his dock. Then he saw the animal nod its head up and down before it turned to go.

Littlebear wanted to return the box to the general area where it was found, but not the exact spot—not that they knew exactly where that was anyway. Instead of just throwing the box overboard as the Tequesta had done 500 years before, they decided to swim it down and find a good hiding place for it in the coral. He wanted to make sure it wasn’t found again.

Jackson navigated using the GPS system as the storm picked up. It hadn’t started to rain, but the wind was blowing spray off of the white caps. The waves had risen to four feet high in a matter of minutes. While Jackson piloted the boat, Littlebear set up their dive gear and pulled out Jackson’s

heaviest anchor. He also rigged a lift bag to the box so they could control it underwater.

Twenty minutes out from the dock, Jackson found a patch of sand at the top of a slope, leading down into a nameless coral reef. Even in a tossing storm, Jackson was careful to protect the coral reef below. He signaled Littlebear and the man sent the anchor over the side. Jackson waited until the anchor hit bottom and then eased *Daydreamer* backward to dig the big fortress anchor into the sand and hold the boat in place. *Daydreamer* was riding the waves, but the Boston Whaler was taking a beating.

“No time to wait for this one. Let’s get over the side,” Jackson shouted over the wind noise. “We’ve got to get this thing on the bottom and then get back to the marina fast. This is really turning into some storm.”

Littlebear didn’t answer; he just focused on his equipment—and the box. A former Navy diver, he’d made

dives in tougher conditions, but both men knew this was dangerous. The boat was rocking up and down in what had increased to six foot seas. The anchor was holding the boat in place, but the line was straining and both men worried about it being pulled lose. They wanted to make sure their ride home was waiting for them at the end of the dive.

The rain began, pouring down in sheets, almost horizontally as it was pushed by the wind.

“Are you ready?” Littlebear yelled. He was sitting in full gear at the boat’s stern. The box rested on his lap with a half inflated lift bag tied to it. Littlebear had also rigged several chemical glow sticks to it to help them find it in the water.

Jackson stumbled and crawled to the other side of the boat in his full gear. The boat had two openings through the transom that would allow them both to enter the water at the same time. “I’m ready. Let’s go on three. Don’t wait on the

surface. Too dangerous. Meet you underwater,” he shouted back as he slipped his fins on his feet.

“Works for me. The box goes in on two,” Littlebear shouted back. “One question.”

“What?”

“How are we going to get back on the boat when we’re done?” Littlebear asked.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Jackson answered.

Together the men stood and started counting. With a heave, Littlebear pitched the box over the side, grabbed his mask and regulator with one hand and then stepped out over the water, nearly falling face first as the boat came up under him. Jackson hit the water a split second later.

Both divers were a little disoriented when they hit the water. They both descended a couple feet to get away from the crashing hull above their heads and then paused to do a quick

gear check and tighten up weight belts and straps. Signaling each other with their lights, Jackson swam to Littlebear.

He had tied a line to the dump valve on the lift bag holding up the box. He pulled in the excess until it got tight and then gave it a jerk to release some of the air. The box slipped below the waves and both men held on tight.

Descending into the inky blackness, the divers could hear *Daydreamer* pounding up and down on the waves overheard, but the storm had obscured any moon light that would have given them some light on the dive. The men couldn’t feel the effects of the storm any longer except the motion as their bodies were pulled back and forth by the waves passing overhead.

Littlebear used his alternate air source regulator to add air back into the lift bag to keep the box suspended and controllable while the men decided where to hide it. Passing 50

feet, Jackson pointed to the side and the men guided the box over the slope and toward the coral field.

Suddenly, both men felt a jerk. The lift bag was completely empty and the box was dropping. Their fingers were caught in ropes Littlebear had rigged to the box as it sank and neither man could let go. They were being dragged down. If they didn't get control quickly, they were going to crash into the jagged reef below.

Just as suddenly, their lights went out.

Simultaneously, both divers reached up and added air to their BCDs. In the darkness, they had to fumble with their inflators for a second, but then they were able to control their descent.

Clipping off their primary lights and switching to their smaller back-up lights, the divers paused for a second to take stock of their situation. *Daydreamer* continued to boom overhead as the waves got rougher and rougher. They were in

90 feet of water and they were on back-up lights, supporting a box that was totally negatively buoyant. Not having a free hand, the divers both traced circles on the top of the box with their lights to signal that they were all right. They both began to search the reef just a few feet below them for a spot to conceal the box. They quickly found a small overhang and what appeared to be a cave below it.

Littlebear began to loosen the lift bag ropes so he could place the box in the cave. Jackson shined his light inside to make sure it was big enough. As he did, a moray eel shot out of the hole and began swimming around their heads. Both men paused to watch the six foot long green moray. Normally not very aggressive, in spite of its disturbing habit of flushing water over its gills by opening and closing its mouth, this moray was plainly agitated and kept swimming faster and faster around the divers.

Moving back to the hole, they came face to face with a large octopus out on its nightly hunt. The normally shy creature waited on the overhang, watching the divers. When the box was free from the ropes, Littlebear began to put the bag away before the two divers placed the box into the hole.

With a jolt, Littlebear began to shoot for the surface. The lift bag had lost all its buoyancy earlier, but now it was full again and pulling him upward. Littlebear's hand was caught in the ropes. He struggled to get his ascent under control, flared out his body and exhaled to avoid a lung injury while he desperately tried to release his hand.

Jackson swam after Littlebear, grabbing a fin tip and pulling himself up his friend's body, dumping air from his own BCD and slowing Littlebear's ascent at the same time. Jackson pulled his dive knife and jabbed it into the lift bag. The strong material was difficult to cut, but Jackson was able to punch it

through. Air billowed out of the torn bag and the pair stopped rising.

Shining lights on their hands, Littlebear signaled that he was all right, if breathing a little heavy. Jackson gave him a thumbs up signal, asking if he wanted to end the dive. Littlebear shook his head and point back down with his thumb. He wanted to finish what they had started.

It took them a few seconds to find the box and the hole, but the still-agitated green moray swimming rapidly around the spot was a good clue. They shoved the box into the hole and moved out of the way. The octopus climbed down on top of the box and waited.

Jackson and Littlebear backed off and ascended slightly. The box was completely obscured from above. They signaled to each other and continued their ascent for the surface.

When they reached 20 feet, both divers paused. They hovered at that depth and swam toward the strobe Jackson had lowered from *Daydreamer's* swim step. The anchor lines had held.

It took both of them a minute to realize that they weren't being pulled around by the waves overhead. *Daydreamer's* thudding against the water with each wave had stopped and the anchor lines were still.

Everything was quiet so the divers waited an extra five minutes at their safety stop before ascending the rest of the way to the boat. They were both a little concerned about the rapid ascent while riding the lift bag and neither one wanted to take any chances.

Reaching the surface, the water was calm and flat while a gentle breeze blew across the surface. The divers were quiet for a moment or two as they climbed back on board the boat.

They put their gear away in the racks and Jackson pulled in the anchor.

Then, the laughter came. Quiet at first, and then louder. Maybe it was the release of the tension. Maybe it was the craziness of it all. Didn't matter. Both men laughed until they couldn't breathe.

After they calmed down, Jackson started *Daydreamer* up and they made their way back to the dock. On the dock, waiting for the boat, stood a single Jack Russell terrier. When the men got close enough to see it, the small animal nodded its head up and down. Then it quietly turned to leave. The spirits on land were happy with what the men had accomplished.

Jackson looked at Littlebear and noticed the other man had turned white as a sheet. "Let's get a beer and never, ever tell anyone about this," Jackson said as he pulled *Daydreamer* into its slip.