

Going Down with the Ship

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Author of the novel

Cayman Cowboys

Chapter 2

The jukebox in the corner thumped out a country tune that Jackson Pauley barely heard and cared about even less. He was hungry. He wanted his food and he wanted to go home. Even though he had successfully avoided the local TV reporter who had questions about his actions on board the dive boat, he had still spent the day talking to police, the US Coast Guard and other authorities. He also had to write up an incident report for his dive training agency's insurance company. The dive center he worked for was covered by liability insurance and they had to make sure everything was in writing in case someone decided to sue. It wasn't unheard of that a business had been sued right out of existence for doing nothing more than trying to help someone in trouble. Jackson didn't think they had done anything wrong, and he heard the woman was doing just fine, but he still had to make sure all bases – and his butt – were covered.

In the excitement at the dock, he had also missed out on getting tipped by the divers and he had had to skip the second trip the fill out his paperwork. While he was paid by the dive center, it wasn't much. The tips helped out quite a bit. Not that Jackson really needed it. He had a pension from New York City for his time as a firefighter, but he tried to stay away from that money and lived on his earnings as a dive instructor. Understandably, he wasn't getting rich, but neither his lifestyle nor his outlook indicated that was a problem.

Jackson stood at one end of the bar waiting on the waitress to bring his burger and fries out of the kitchen. His eyes scanned the neon beer signs and the mirrors that adorned the walls. It could have been any small town bar anywhere in the country. *At least the view outside was nice*, Jackson thought.

And the view outside the bar was nice. It faced out onto the main harbor on Withrow Key. It wrapped around a sleepy marina with dozens of boats owned by locals and travelers alike. Some saw daily duty on the water, others didn't appear as if they had been moved in years. The sun was setting across the water and it bathed everything in a beautiful orange glow.

Walking outside with his food in hand, Jackson placed a hat on his head to cover up his distinctive sand-colored hair – just in case someone was still looking for him – and began walking across the gravel parking lot under the half-bright illumination of the pole-mounted lights. He almost made it to his worn out Jeep Cherokee when he saw something he didn't like.

There were three men harassing a woman. Jackson had hated bullies since he was a kid. He had knocked down more than his fair share over the years. And never, never did he allow a man to mistreat a woman in his presence. Call it his sense of chivalry or whatever. It didn't matter to Jackson. He just knew he didn't like it.

He tossed his sandwich into the open window of his jeep and walked toward the three men. He drew near just as one of the men grabbed the woman by the arm and turned her around roughly. He could see the woman was scared. And that was all it took.

"I think you three need to leave the lady alone," Jackson said, loud enough to be heard, but without raising his voice.

"Just who do you think you are?" one of the three said as he whirled around on Jackson.

"Doesn't matter who I am," Jackson responded, still quiet. "I said you need to leave the lady alone."

"Maybe the lady wants to be with us," the second man said.

"No, I don't," Andrea Perez shouted.

"Sounds like the lady is tired of your company," Jackson continued.

"What're you going to do about it?" the biggest of the three asked, moving menacingly toward Jackson. "There's only one of you and three of us. What're you going to do about it?"

"If you three leave and leave the lady alone, absolutely nothing. If you don't, then I'll do whatever you make me do," Jackson replied, still calm, but bracing himself for action.

The men were confused by Jackson's calm demeanor. He wasn't angry. He wasn't threatening. He was simply calm and speaking matter-of-factly. What the would-be attackers didn't know was that Jackson had learned to fight growing up on the streets of the Bronx. Then, in the Navy, he had learned to channel his natural talents into boxing where he had successfully represented his ship in more than 40 bouts. He had continued boxing as an amateur in a league sponsored by the NY City Fire Department. While he hadn't stepped into the ring since just before September 11, he had kept himself in shape, working on a speed bag and heavy bag at home on his house boat, running and exercising – not to mention swimming and diving nearly every day.

This situation, fighting three at once, harked back more to his days on the streets than in the ring, but it all came together nicely.

The first man charged at Jackson, trying to catch him off-guard. But Jackson was looking out for just such a move. He quickly side-stepped the larger man, and triple-tapped him as he passed, in the stomach, kidneys and ribs. With a loud oaf, the man hit his knees and tried to inhale, but found he couldn't.

The second man approached Jackson more warily, but with the same result. Stepping inside of the man's wild swings, Jackson went straight to the body and doubled the man over, quickly. Jackson had no intention of doing any serious harm, or even drawing blood for that matter. He didn't want this situation to get out of hand. He simply wanted to discourage the men from harassing the woman.

As the last man saw his second accomplice hit the ground and fall onto his side, curled up in a ball, he let go of Andrea and began circling in toward Jackson. The two men moved cautiously. The attacker had just seen Jackson take out his two friends and neither of them had even landed a blow. He wasn't sure how to deal with the smaller man, but he knew better than to rush in. The attacker towered over Jackson's 5'11", 175 pound frame, but he was still concerned.

Jackson was in a boxing crouch, preparing himself for the attack when suddenly he stopped, stood straight up and laughed.

“What do you think’s so funny?”

“You’re so worried about me, but you forgot about the other person in this fight,” Jackson said.

“What other person?” the man asked as he glanced quickly to his right and left.

Andrea didn’t go away when the man released her. She just stepped out of the way. Now she stood directly behind the last of the remaining attackers. With a swift kick, putting all of her energy and every ounce of her 110 pound frame into it, she launched a 50-yard field goal and dropped the man to his knees. He was unconscious before his head hit the ground. Jackson knew he was still alive, however, because even unconscious, he continued to groan in pain.

“Certainly looks like you can take care of yourself,” Jackson said with an admiring grin as he turned to go.

“What’s your name? I want to thank you for helping out,” Andrea called after him.

“It’s Jackson, but you don’t owe me anything, so don’t worry about it. I’d just suggest you stay away from places that get you in trouble,” Jackson continued as he opened the door to his jeep and slid inside.

“Look, I don’t know what you think I was doing, but I was just looking for someone with a boat to take me out somewhere when those three goons started harassing me. I hadn’t even gone in the bar. I was on the dock out front,” Andrea continued.

“Well I don’t know what was up, but I’d still suggest taking off before those three get vertical again,” Jackson said as he mentally reviewed the people inside the bar and was forced to concede that he hadn’t seen her inside. “Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“No, I have my own car, over there,” Andrea said, gesturing across the parking lot, toward the main entrance of the pier.

“Well then, I’ll see you around. I’ve had a busy day today and it starts early again in the morning. I’ve got another group of tourists to take diving at 8 a.m. so I need to go home and get some rest,” Jackson said.

“So you’re a dive guide around here?” Andrea asked, hopeful that she had found someone to help her. She was holding onto the door of the jeep and talking to Jackson through the window.

“I’m a dive instructor, but not much call to teach. Mostly just leading dives for visiting divers,” Jackson replied. “I work with one of the bigger operations. I’ve got my own boat tied up at the dock, but don’t get much chance to go out and dive like I’d like to. Too busy working.”

Jackson wasn’t sure why he was talking so much to this woman. He hadn’t opened up to anyone in a long time, especially a stranger he met in the parking lot a few minutes before.

“Look miss, um?” Jackson hinted, as he really looked at her for the first time and realized she was attractive.

“The name is Andrea.”

“Well look, Andrea, I really do need to go now. As I said earlier, I suggest you get out of here and fast. Those guys look like they’re stirring a bit,” Jackson said as he keyed the ignition on his jeep and turned it over. “I’ll see you around.”

“I’m sure you will, Jackson,” Andrea called after him as he pulled out.

Jackson stepped outside of his houseboat at 6 a.m. just as he did every morning. It didn’t matter what he had done the night before. He was always up with the dawn. That worked out

well, because he had to be at the dive boat in an hour to prepare for the tour he would be leading that day.

The only thing he was wearing was a pair of boxer shorts. Normally that wouldn't be a problem since he really didn't have any neighbors. No one else actually lived on the boats they had in the harbor. He had two – the houseboat and a 28 foot Boston Whaler that he had set up as a personal dive boat. He always kept a set of personal dive gear and tanks on board, just in case he got the opportunity to make a pleasure dive, although that opportunity didn't come very often.

Jackson lived in the main marina. It was, in fact, the only marina in the town. It served as the center of town, the main attraction and the location of the only bar and decent restaurant on the key. There were a couple diners near the deepwater dock, but they mainly served the men working on the *Beauregard* and didn't offer anything very appealing. It was also the same place Jackson had stopped the previous night to get dinner. But he lived at the other end, away from the more commercial side, if there was such a thing anymore, and the main entrance to the pier.

“Good morning, Jackson,” Andrea said out of the morning gloom.

Jackson turned around with a start.

“How long have you been there?” he asked, more out of shock than anything else.

“Long enough to see you stretch and scratch, but that's about it,” Andrea giggled. “Kind of cute.”

“How'd you find me? Did you follow me?” Jackson asked, finally getting his thoughts together and immediately becoming suspicious.

“No, I didn't follow you, but this is a pretty small community. I just asked around and found out who you were. I frankly expected more women would be able to tell me where you lived, but most of them said you keep to yourself,” Andrea explained. Her expression changed as she said, “I'm sorry for approaching you like this, but I need your help.”

“Look, lady, I don't know who you are, but don't make me regret helping you out last night. I've got enough of my own problems. I don't need yours,” Jackson snapped, more forcefully than he intended.

“Boy, you're a surly one in the morning,” Andrea teased.

“What is it?” Jackson said, doing his best to moderate his voice.

“First off, here. Take this. It's just coffee. I thought you might want some,” Andrea said, handing him a large steaming cup.

“Thanks.”

“Second, let me start over. My name is Andrea Perez. I'm an investigator with Protect the Reefs out of Ft. Lauderdale. I'm investigating some things going on around here and I need some help.”

“Ok, Miss Andrea Perez of Ft. Lauderdale. Whatever you're investigating, how do you know I'm not part of it?” Jackson asked.

“I told you I asked around last night. Everyone said you were an upstanding guy, but that you kept to yourself. The fact that you're not local helps quite a bit too,” Andrea explained.

“So what is it you're investigating? And why do you need me?” Jackson asked.

“We've heard rumors about the group preparing the *USS Beauregard* for sinking as an artificial reef. Nothing I can substantiate yet, but there are some irregularities. Chemicals not being used properly. Short cuts. That sort of thing. I want to check them out, but I keep getting stonewalled by all the locals,” Andrea explained.

“What is it you need from me?” Jackson asked.

“I want to check out the place they're planning to sink the ship,” Andrea said.

“So you just need me to take you out on a dive to the coordinates? Is that it?” Jackson asked, surprised. He had expected more.

“That’s it. I’ll even be happy to pay for a private charter. I just need someone to take me out. All the locals I’ve talked to either aren’t interested or aren’t willing.”

“All right. Fine. I’ll do it. I have to work this morning, but I have this afternoon off. Meet me back here at 2 p.m. and we’ll go out. You are a diver, aren’t you?” Jackson asked, looking Andrea up and down and wondering, for an instant, what she would look like in a swim suit. The t-shirt and shorts she was wearing weren’t all that flattering, but gave just enough of a hint to show a tanned and toned body underneath.

“If it makes you feel better, I’m a dive instructor, too. I’ve traveled all over the world diving,” Andrea replied.

“Ok, fine. Meet me back here at two o’clock and we’ll go. And bring lunch,” Jackson said over his shoulder as he walked back inside his houseboat with the coffee Andrea handed him to get ready for his day.

Andrea stared at the doorway Jackson had just passed through for a minute.

“Well, I guess I’m dismissed,” she said with a laugh and she walked back to her car.

“Mr. Parker?” the man said quietly as he poked his head in the room.

“Yes, Rolly?” Parker replied to hulking man leaning through his door. Parker had sent the man, along with a couple other workers from the cleaning crew out to scare the environmentalist the night before. He was expecting this follow up report.

“Mr. Parker, we found that environmental girl you asked us to shake up last night, just like you told us to,” Rolly began, hesitantly. He was nervous and stumbling over his words. They hadn’t done well the previous night and he didn’t want to tell the boss.

“Why am I getting the feeling I’m not going to like the way this story goes?” Parker asked.

“Mr. Parker, we was doing just like you told us to do. We were scarin’ the woman real good, and then this guy jumps in and turns the tables on us,” Rolly began explaining.

“What do you mean, ‘turns the tables’ on you? There were three of you, weren’t there? And you said it was only one guy? Right? So what was the problem?” Parker asked, nearly spitting out his words as he grew agitated. He always spoke faster and more aggressively when he got angry.

“Well, sir, there was really two of them, because when we was dealing with the new guy, the girl got in her licks as well,” Rolly tried to explain.

“So you went out to scare off this woman and she ended up scaring you? What do I pay you men for?” Parker yelled, on the verge of losing his temper completely.

“Sir, I’m a welder and the other guys are pipe fitters and machinists. We ain’t no fighters,” Rolly said, trying to be reasonable.

“Rolly, get out of my sight and get back to work. If you don’t, I might just change my mind and you might not get paid to do anything,” Parker growled. “Now, go.”

Parker watched Rolly retreat from his office and stared at the closed door for a few moments.

“Great. I sent these guys out to scare one woman, and all they accomplished was to let her know that someone was watching her. They might have scared her, or it could have just made her mad enough to keep digging even further,” Parker said to himself, shaking his head. “We shall see.”

Two o'clock rolled around bright and clear as the sun beat down on the island. Andrea appeared right on time, something that pleased Jackson.

They quickly loaded their equipment, and the lunch Andrea brought, into Jackson's Boston Whaler, the *Daydreamer*, where it was moored in the slip beside his houseboat. The *Daydreamer* was a fiberglass-hulled boat built for fishing and diving. Its twin diesel engines could get it moving quickly. Jackson's houseboat on the other hand, hadn't actually left the dock in years. As a matter-of-fact, Jackson wasn't sure it could move. It was in its slip when he bought it and moved in. Within just a few minutes, Jackson had the *Daydreamer* heading for open water.

Andrea was taking a moment to sun herself on the open stern of the boat. Jackson took a moment to look her up and down. She was an attractive woman, after all. His eye caught on the choker at her throat, however, not her more obvious attributes. It was a locket in the shape of a dolphin, jumping through the air.

"That's an interesting necklace," Jackson said to begin the conversation.

"What's that?" Andrea asked, as his statement drew her back from her distant thoughts.

"That's an interesting locket?" Jackson repeated. "Is there a story to it?"

"Well, sort of. My dad gave it to me a long time ago. He loved the ocean, too, and inspired that in me. We went to the ocean every time we could. I used to love to sit with dad on the sand dunes and watch the waves," she said as she got up and walked back to Jackson. "He would tell me stories about being a diver and exploring the ocean. He died several years ago. That's what got me where I am, today. I feel like I'm honoring him and his work."

"Nice story," Jackson replied. "It's always interesting to hear how people fell in love with the ocean. For most water people, it's usually a better story than their first kiss."

Changing the subject, Jackson got back to the task at hand.

"So, please tell me you have coordinates of the place where they're going to sink the *Beauregard*?" Jackson half asked and half-instructed Andrea.

"I've got the GPS coordinates right here," she said handing him a slip of paper.

"Great. I had heard the general vicinity of where they were planning on putting it down, but not the exact location," Jackson said as he entered the numbers into the digital readout on his GPS guidance system and hit the button to save them, which would also allow the autopilot to steer the boat directly there. He engaged the autopilot, and relaxed in the captain's chair, but he didn't get up. Like most boaters, he relied heavily on the electronics that helped him drive the boat, but he didn't trust any of it completely.

"So, where did you get these coordinates?" Jackson asked after a moment. "I thought they were supposed to be secret."

"They are, but the local organizers had to file them with the Coast Guard to make sure they weren't going to impede shipping channels and that sort of thing," Andrea explained. "You would be amazed what you can find out if you know where to look."

"Hmmm. This is interesting," Jackson said, staring at the GPS screen.

"What is it?" Andrea asked getting up and walking over to look at the display.

"Not sure yet. How recently did you say you got these numbers?"

"Just last week."

“Interesting. This is not exactly where I thought they were going to sink her,” Jackson said. “According to the charts and the GPS readout, this area is completely covered in reef. I thought they were going to drop her further out on open sand.”

“They’re supposed to. It isn’t supposed to be sunk on a reef at all, or really all that close to it,” Andrea replied, peering at the digital display with a troubled look on her face.

Within a few more minutes, they were on the site, as indicated by the GPS coordinates.

“We’re here,” Jackson said. “Let’s get in the water and see what we can see.”

Jackson looked over the side of the boat and stared down into the water for a moment. With the sun high in the sky, he could easily see to the bottom, nearly 100 feet of seawater away. It was covered with reef for as much as he could see. It was a perfect day for a dive.

“I have to drop an anchor somewhere or this boat might take off and leave us behind. It looks like there’s a sandy area a few hundred yards that way. Let me head over there and we can navigate back to this spot,” Jackson said.

He guided the boat until he found a place he could comfortably put down an anchor. It wasn’t just the presence of the pretty environmentalist on his boat that made him want to be careful with the anchor. He understood that people came to visit the Keys for the convenience, as compared to flying to the islands, but also the quality of the reefs. If they all looked like torn up, no one would come here and the dive industry would fall apart. It was up to him, and everyone else for that matter, to take care of it. Jackson chuckled to himself when he thought of the conch walking across the sand floor and how it would handle someone dropping an anchor directly in front of it.

Once he found a good place to drop the anchor, Jackson measured the distance and the direction using the boat’s GPS system and plotted out their dive. Then they geared up and got ready to get wet.

“OK, you’re a dive instructor, but I’ve never been in the water with you, so here’s my normal routine. I hope you take all this as seriously as I do, or we can head back in. I don’t dive with anyone I don’t trust,” Jackson began.

Then he proceeded to show Andrea several of the hand signals he used in the water, and they discussed how they would dive together, when they would turn the dive to return to the boat and the signals for problems. Even among experienced divers, there are different ways to signal the same thing, and Jackson wanted to be sure they were on the same page.

“That all looks good, and thanks for going through that with me. There’s nothing I hate worse than some diver on a boat to tell me how experienced they are and not pay attention to my dive briefing. I’ve had divers brag about making over 1000 dives and then be the worst ones in the water,” Jackson said.

“I know exactly what you’re talking about,” Andrea agreed. “To be honest, I was relieved when you said you wanted to run through a buddy check because I was afraid you were some cowboy, going to jump in the water and run off without me.”

“Fair enough. I’m glad we agree. According to the GPS system, we are about 400 yards from the actual spot where they are planning to sink the boat. This is as close as I could get to your coordinates and find sand,” Jackson said. “I’m not sure what’s going on with that, but I circled around the entire site and this was the closest bare patch I could find. And it isn’t big enough for the *Beauregard*. To get to the actual site, we need to swim 400 yards on a 300 degree bearing.”

“You don’t think your GPS could be off, could it?” Andrea asked.

“I just calibrated it this afternoon when I got off work,” Jackson explained. “Anything’s possible, but I doubt it.”

“Well I’m not sure what’s going on either, but let’s take a look,” Andrea said. “Shall we?”

“We shall.”

Jackson and Andrea back-rolled into the warm clear waters off the Florida Keys. Backrolling is almost always a slightly disorienting experience as you push backwards, holding your gear up tight, and fall into the water, usually a couple feet. You flounder on your back for a few seconds until the air in your buoyancy compensator jacket pushes you back to the surface.

The pair bobbed to the surface for a moment to make sure everything was fine and then they signaled to each other and immediately began their descent.

They were both able to drop quickly through the water, equalizing their ears to the surrounding pressure every few feet. As soon as they got a few feet underwater, Jackson took a bearing and began swimming in the direction they needed to head. There was no reason to waste time dropping straight down and then swimming along the bottom when they could simply swim forward while they descended. The water was clear enough that they were able to see the bottom clearly. Instead of trying to navigate the entire distance, Jackson spotted landmarks along the heading and swam to that spot, before spotting another landmark and repeating the process. Experienced divers learn roughly how far they travel underwater for every fin-kick cycle, or for every 10 cycles. It was an easy exercise for Jackson and Andrea to count their kicks and be able to guesstimate when they had traveled 400 yards.

By the time they reached the bottom, at about 100 feet, they were half way to the spot Andrea had been given for the sinking site. They both swam along for a few minutes, simply looking at the coral formations and the reef fish. While the area wasn't exactly pristine reef, and wasn't perfectly healthy, there was definitely coral there. It appeared to be struggling somewhat, but it wasn't a sand bottom.

The general area of the planned sinking was consistently 100 feet deep. That made sense considering the overall height of the ship itself. What didn't make sense was the coral structure all around. They would never drop an artificial reef on top of an existing reef on purpose. There wouldn't be any reason to do that.

The divers made a broad circle around the area Andrea's coordinates indicated the dive site to be. They were looking to see if they were missing something. As they finished the circuit, they began ascending and swimming back toward the boat, reversing their path on the way out. When they were within 15 feet of the surface, they leveled off and continued swimming back to the boat. When they got to the anchor line, the divers waited a few more minutes at that depth, allowing the nitrogen built up in their systems to escape as much as practical before ascending to the surface.

Back on board the boat, Jackson and Andrea admitted to each other that they were confused.

“Well that's the spot, but I don't see any place where they could possibly sink a ship. I also don't see any sign that they've done any site preparation, either,” Andrea said.

“I agree. I'd think there would be some flags or something marking out approximately how the boat would lie on the bottom. But that would also be on the sand,” Jackson acknowledged. “It just doesn't make any sense.”

“The only way it makes any sense is if we have the wrong coordinates somehow,” Andrea said, echoing the doubts in Jackson's mind. “But I know I copied them down correctly. Unless there was a data entry error or something in the actual report from the Coast Guard, I just don't understand how they could have the wrong spot as well.”

“I have no idea,” Jackson said as he finished pulling up the boat's anchor. He started the twin diesels and headed back for the shore.

“Neither do I, but I intend to find out,” Andrea said.