

Going Down with the Ship

By Eric Douglas

Author of the novel
Cayman Cowboys

Chapter 3

As soon as Andrea Perez and Jackson Pauley arrived back at the dock, Andrea took off again, heading straight for city hall. They had just discovered that the planned location for the new artificial reef, the *USS Destroyer Beauregard*, was not a barren patch of sand after all, but actually a living carpet of coral reef. She wanted answers.

She now knew for sure that something was going on with the artificial reef project and the preparations for the sinking. There was no reason to sink the ship right there when there were plenty of other places where it could go. Someone was either asleep at the wheel or up to no good.

Andrea's car nearly slid to a stop in front of city hall, where she jumped out and barged into the city offices. She hadn't stopped to change or shower. She was in a t-shirt and shorts, with her long raven-black hair tucked up under a ball cap. Andrea was looking for Glenn Downing, the man who was organizing the project to sink the ship.

Andrea didn't even bother to speak to the receptionist at the front desk. Instead, she slipped past the counter and headed straight for Downing's office. The middle-aged woman attempted to stop her, but wasn't successful.

"Mr. Downing. We need to talk. I was just diving on the site where you are planning to sink the ship. Have you even been out there?" she shouted. "It's a complete coral reef. It isn't in the greatest shape, but it's a reef."

"Who do you think you are barging in here like this?" Downing reacted, ignoring her shouted question. "You have no right to come in here like this. Get out of here. Mrs. Charles, call the police," Downing said looking past Andrea to the receptionist. Downing wasn't physically intimidated by the petite Latina so he didn't pay attention to what she was saying. A decision he would eventually come to regret.

"Mr. Downing, you can call the police if you want. I'm sure they'll want to talk to you when I explain to them that you're breaking a series of federal environmental laws with what you're planning to do," Andrea said as she stood toe-to-toe with the larger man. Federal and state laws protect most of the reefs around the Florida Keys in one way or another. If nothing else were

deemed applicable, Andrea was willing to see him charged with littering to the largest degree for dropping a ship directly on top of a reef.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Downing replied, attempting to back-pedal a bit. “You must’ve gone to the wrong place. We aren’t planning to sink the *Beauregard* on top of a reef. You’re obviously mistaken.”

“I’m not mistaken. I’m very confident of what I saw,” Andrea retorted.

“And I repeat. You must be mistaken. The company we hired to work on this project is the best available. They come with the best credentials and references,” Downing explained, trying to be reasonable. “These men have come in and set up everything. They’ve guided us through the entire process, and helped us to understand how to work through the myriad federal regulations and ordinances.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that they’ve done everything for you. You’re just the community organizer. You don’t actually know what they’re doing out there. You trust them,” Andrea shouted again, in utter disbelief, her hot temper getting the best of her. “They may have these impeccable references, but did you actually check them out?”

“Yes, they’re doing all the work setting up the ship. We’ve trusted them to take care of it all,” Downing explained. “They take care of everything.”

“You know other places have used mostly volunteer labor to do exactly what you’re paying this company to do for you.”

“True, but most of those places have had problems with delays and run-ins with federal regulators. We didn’t want to deal with that,” Downing said. “But we’re planning to use some last-second volunteer help to get things ready. We’re getting community involvement.”

As Downing said that, two uniformed police officers walked through the door. They hadn’t been too far away – in a small town, they rarely are – and when Mrs. Charles called to say that a crazy woman had stormed into city hall, they had reacted quickly.

Not seeing a violent confrontation, they walked up instead of trying to tackle Andrea.

“Mr. Downing. Mrs. Charles called us to say there was a disturbance. Do you need our assistance?” the first officer said while the second one stopped 10 feet away, preparing to react if things got messy.

Andrea was the first to answer. “There’s no problem from me, officer. I was just leaving.”

“I agree, officer. This has just been a misunderstanding. This woman will be leaving. I’m sorry to disturb you gentlemen,” Downing said.

“Just what are you going to do about what I told you?” Andrea asked as she began to leave the office.

“There’s nothing to do,” Downing said, with a smug grin.

Andrea walked out under the watchful eye of the officers, but neither made a move to stop her. Andrea drove around for an hour, just debating what her next move should be. This was her first solo investigation for Protect the Reefs and she wanted it to go right. She really didn’t have any proof that Downing or the company preparing the ship planned to do anything wrong, just a lot of innuendo and suggestion. The location wasn’t right for the new artificial reef, but it could be something as simple as a typo in the report. The fact that no one had caught it seemed suspicious, but it was just that, suspicious. She needed to get inside and really see what was going on.

And that was how she found herself back at Jackson’s boat house. She couldn’t get on the *Beauregard* now, especially after she had let her emotions get the better of her while confronting Downing.

“Hi, Jackson,” she said, putting on her friendliest smile and the sweetest tone in her voice as she walked down the dock beside the boat. She needed his help again.

“Hi, Andrea,” Jackson replied. He was working on the upper deck of his houseboat. Any boat on the water, especially saltwater, requires nearly constant maintenance. For Jackson, the maintenance was a pleasure and a responsibility he took very seriously. “I thought I might see you again, especially after the way you tore out of here earlier.”

“Look, Jackson, I’m not going to beat around the bush on this one. I get the feeling you’re a man who prefers to hear it straight,” she said as she stepped aboard the boat and climbed to the upper deck. She liked this quiet, intense man. He wasn’t much for small talk. He would never be a brilliant conversationalist, but there was depth to him. She could tell. “I need your help again.”

“Like I said, I thought I’d see you again. Tell me what you have in mind,” Jackson said, seriously.

Andrea related her dealings with Downing to Jackson as quickly as she could. She told it as straight as possible and tried her best to keep her personal feelings out of it.

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but something smells fishy,” she said as she concluded.

“And you need me to find out what it is,” Jackson said matter-of-factly.

“That’s right. Will you help me?”

“Here’s the deal. I was in the Navy. I actually served on the *Beauregard*. I’m proud of that and I believe she was, well, is a fine ship. If someone is using her for something wrong, I have problems with that. I also saw the same thing you saw today. I agree, there’s something fishy going on,” Jackson said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Downing said they’re using volunteers for the last couple days-worth of clean-up. I can’t do it. They would be suspicious of me. But you could do it. I just want you to get on board and see what you can see. I’ll be working on some other angles, but I need someone on the inside,” Andrea explained. “And with what you just told me, that you actually served on board, I believe they would be eager to have that string of continuity, so to speak - you know, public relations press releases including phrases like, ‘even former crew members helped to ready her for her new duties’ That’s a great connection. There’s no way they would ever turn you down.”

The *Beauregard* was a Sumner-class Destroyer built and commissioned at the end of World War II that saw action in Korea, Vietnam and various other places where the Navy and the US government saw fit to project naval power. Destroyers frequently work as part of a group of ships protecting aircraft carriers, but they also work alone or conduct anti-submarine warfare.

Jackson had served on board in the late 1980s and early 1990s, right out of high school. He left the Navy just before the ship was decommissioned. When he did, he went straight to the New York fire academy.

“I think my boss’ll give me a couple days off if I tell him I want to help out with the ship. We’re already planning a bunch of charters to the wreck. It’ll be a big money-maker for us,” Jackson said. “He’ll be happy to support that.”

“Then you’ll do it?” Andrea said excitedly.

“Yeah, I’ll help out on the ship for a couple days. It’ll be good to get on board her again anyway,” Jackson answered.

“Oh, thank you,” Andrea said as she leaped from the chair she was setting in and hugged Jackson’s neck. Suddenly she was embarrassed, and started to pull back. Their faces were close to each other for a moment and she flushed.

"I'm not promising I'll find anything. I might just do a little work and help these guys sink her so I can dive on her," Jackson said as he pulled back too, a little embarrassed himself.

"I know, but at least you're willing to help. That means a lot," Andrea answered.

"Hello, Mr. Parker," Downing said over the phone to the head of the company preparing the *Beauregard* for sinking. "Sorry to disturb you. I know you're busy."

"What is it, Mr. Downing? I am right in the middle of something, but I felt I needed to take your call," Parker answered curtly.

"Well, uh, I'm sorry. I, uh, well the reason I called is, I just had a visit from an environmentalist who has been checking up on this project. She said she had just been out to the site where we are going to place the *Beauregard* and that it was actually an area of reef. I told her she must be mistaken, but I just wanted to confirm things with you."

"She is clearly mistaken, Mr. Downing. I offered to take you to the spot for the sinking, but I believe you had a meeting with someone when we were going out there. The area is a barren patch of sand," Parker said, sounding as patronizing as he could. Downing had had an interview with a writer from a national dive magazine about the project. Parker remembered exactly where Downing was that day, because he knew about the interview before he scheduled the trip to the site. He knew Downing would never pass up the opportunity to get his name in the press.

"Yes, I remember. And I told her that you knew exactly what you were doing and would never do something like that, but I just wanted you to know what was being said," Downing said, backpedaling.

"So, does this environmentalist have a name? Do you know if she's working with someone? Is anyone helping her?" Parker fired off, although he knew exactly who Andrea was and what she was up to. He had already checked her out and had his men talk to her. He was interested to know, however, if she was working alone or with some help. She had received some help from a man when Parker sent some of his workers to scare her off, but he didn't know if that was someone helping her, or just a local with a knight-in-shining armor complex.

"Well, her name is Andrea Perez. She didn't mention anyone local, so I think she must be alone," Downing answered.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Downing for giving me the heads up about this Andrea Perez. Since we have nothing to hide, I'm not the least bit concerned about her, but I do appreciate the information," Parker said, with a patronizing tone to a faithful servant. "I really do need to go now and take care of what I was working on."

"Well, yes, of course, Mr. Parker. I'll be by tomorrow to look over your recent progress. We're very close and I'm very excited about diving on the *Beauregard*."

"Yes, of course you are, Downing. We shall see you tomorrow."

Parker hung up without listening for any further reply from Downing.

Seashore Engineering, the company that was preparing the *USS Beauregard* for its next tour of duty as a home for fish, was allowing local volunteers to help clean up the ship, but they weren't actively advertising for them. Allowing local workers with connections, or the staff of local dive shops, to come on board was much simpler and easier to control.

Jackson Pauley showed up at the work site. They were only two days away from the actual sinking, so he really didn't expect to be given a difficult assignment. All of the heavy lifting and cutting should be done by now. When he told the foreman which dive operation he worked for, and about his previous service on board the ship, he learned his expectation – and Andrea's intuition – was right on the money. That worked out well for two reasons. One, he really wasn't in the mood to be hauling buckets of grease and oil. And two, he needed the ability to search throughout the ship.

The foreman asked him to survey the entire ship with a clipboard and prepare a list of everything that wasn't complete. Jackson was given exactly the duty he needed to figure out if there was anything going on.

As he patrolled around the boat, taking his time and examining nooks and crannies, Jackson recorded everything he saw. He also looked for things that weren't supposed to be there. He was nearly finished before he found what he was really looking for.

It was an odd experience for Jackson. Walking the decks of the Sumner-class Destroyer again, especially considering what the future held for the mighty ship, gave him an unsettled feeling. She was 376 feet long and 41 feet wide, with a draft of 14 feet – small by comparison to today's Spruance and Burke-class destroyers, but big enough to do its job. She carried 5" guns, anti-aircraft guns, depth charge racks and projectors and 10 torpedo tubes. The full crew would have included 345 men working on board – men because in the *Beauregard's* day, there were no women serving on combat ships. Jackson felt the ship seemed eerily quiet as he walked down the corridors. Her high-pressure, super-heated boilers were capable of generating 60,000 horsepower through twin screws, pushing the ship through the water at 34 knots, but now they were silent and incapable of turning a single rotation.

Today, there were only about 20 men and women on board getting her ready to sink. The engines would never turn again and there was no way to restart the boilers. The ammunition for her guns had been removed years earlier.

Jackson was checking out a compartment near the engine room when he discovered a water-tight door that had been dogged down – locked. Everything was supposed to be open and blocked with braces so it couldn't be locked at all. They didn't want divers to be able to get inside a compartment and get stuck. Doors had been removed. Holes had been cut in other panels.

But this one door was shut tight. Jackson searched for another access, assuming that this door was welded shut, but another hole was opened up elsewhere. He couldn't find anything. That didn't make sense, because they wouldn't want to sink the ship with a compartment filled with air. It might make the ship unstable as it descended, causing it to roll over.

"Now just what's going on here," Jackson said out loud to no one in particular. He leaned against the opposite wall for a minute. The door was latched from inside, but he knew a way to open it anyway. While there were reasons to lock doors from inside in rooms with only one access, there was never a reason to lock one permanently from the inside. Navy safety protocols dictated that there be a way to open the door. Water tight doors are to keep water out in the event of an accident, not people.

Jackson grabbed a screwdriver from his back pocket – he was carrying some basic tools for just such an emergency – and removed a panel from the lock mechanism. From there, it was a simple step to flip the latch and release the door.

As soon as he spun the wheel and released the door, Jackson knew he had found what he was looking for. The large room was filled with crates and barrels of every description. Jackson

entered the room and began to inspect them. He wasn't a scientist and didn't recognize the names on the panels. But what he did recognize from his days as a firefighter were the bright yellow warning panels designating everything in the room as a hazardous material. He wasn't sure he understood the entire plan, but he had a good idea. A quick count and some educated guesses indicated the cavernous room was filled with nearly 2000 containers. And everything he could see was a dangerous chemical.

Jackson had seen enough. They obviously hadn't cleaned everything off of the ship before sinking it. He couldn't believe even half of this came from the ship in the first place. "They must have brought this on board," Jackson said as he replaced the panel on the door.

The good news, Jackson thought, is with that door sealed, the chemicals can't leak out in a hurry. It'll all be protected from the seawater until we can get this sorted out.

Jackson picked up his clipboard, secured the panel and shut the door, then left. When he made it back topside, he realized it was nearly 4 p.m. He had spent the entire day below decks. He needed to get to Andrea and tell her what he had found. On his way out, he dropped off his clipboard showing dozens of things that remained to be finished before the ship could be sent to the bottom. It didn't include the sealed hatch below decks.

Colin Parker, the man behind Seashore Engineering, was determined to get what he wanted and nothing was going to stand in his way. Like most men in his situation, he wanted money and power. Also, like men in his situation, he hadn't come to realize that no matter how much he had of either, it would never be enough.

"Guys, settle down a minute," Parker said as he called his assistants to order. Every afternoon the men sat down to discuss what else needed to be done. Nothing was off the table in these meetings. They all knew exactly what the plan was for the *Beauregard*.

"We just got word from our local organizer that a local environmentalist has been snooping around the ship, trying to find out what we're up to. But you all know that," Parker began and the room dropped to dead silence. They all knew better than to interrupt the boss. They knew he already had it worked out and would have a plan.

"We're going to move up the timetable and take care of a couple different problems at one time. I don't want this to go on another day and give other people a chance to ask questions," Parker explained. "We're going to tow the boat out tonight. We'll tell Downing that we were ready early and wanted to move it into position to get the ship ready. We'll make up some story about wanting everything to be right. Then I want the ship to sink. Send it to the bottom tonight. And make sure this environmentalist is on board. Set it up to look like she was snooping around and set off the charges."

The men quickly got to work. If they were going to move the ship tonight, there were things they needed to set in motion. One of the men went to get some help – he was going to take care of the girl.

"Mrs. Charles," Glenn Downing, the organizer of the artificial reef project, began. "Tomorrow will be a glorious day. They'll take the *Beauregard* out to its place and then everything will be ready. We're going to have bands, government officials, media. It'll be

amazing. We'll assemble all the people on the dock for speeches and presentations and then go out for the actual sinking. I can't believe the day has finally arrived. We're going to pull this off, and my career will take off. I already have interviews scheduled with newspapers and magazines from all over the state and country."

"That all sounds great, Mr. Downing," Mrs. Charles agreed, not really caring about what Downing planned. She moved to the islands 50 years ago. She had seen climbers and schemers come and go. She had seen celebrities and politicians. This was just one more day of big shots, and then hopefully she could return to her little oceanfront home and relax. She liked to work in a little garden by her one-bedroom cottage and swim in the ocean daily.

"I just can't wait until it all gets started. After we sink the *Beauregard*, I'll be in demand all over the country. I've always wanted to go to California and I've already heard they want someone to come there and put together another artificial reef project. This is my big break," Downing continued.

"Yes, sir. If there isn't anything else for today, though, I need to be leaving. I have plans this evening," Mrs. Charles said.

"What? Oh, yes, of course, Mrs. Charles," Downing responded when she shook him from his daydreaming. "I'll lock up shortly. Have a good evening and I'll see you in the morning. Tomorrow will be a busy day for me."

Women were around. In a place like the Florida Keys, with tourists coming in and out, and the other dive instructors and divemasters on the island being just about evenly split between men and women, Jackson had had his fair share of opportunities for dates. Generally, he had stayed out of the singles scene.

After 9/11, he had split up with his fiancée and hadn't been in a relationship since. He just didn't have the heart for it. That, and the fact that most of the women he met didn't challenge him. He wanted – needed – someone as strong-willed and as independent as he was. He was beginning to think he might have found her.

Not wanting to discuss his discoveries onboard the *Beauregard* over the phone, Jackson called Andrea and invited her to dinner. He told her he had something to discuss with her. In reality, it could have been just a business meeting. But, if that was the case, why was Jackson smiling and whistling to himself as he showered and got dressed. He was excited about the dinner.

Jackson was beginning to fall for Andrea. He had always been a bit of a sucker for underdogs and the people who championed lost causes. Underneath his tough exterior, he was a bit of a bleeding heart himself. It was true that Andrea was physically attractive, but that wasn't it. He had known beautiful women before. It was the combination of the looks, brains and spunk that got to Jackson. He began to think he could fall hard.

At least, that was the thought on his mind when he left his houseboat to meet Andrea by the dock to tell her what he knew. Jackson realized that as soon as he spilled his information this evening would effectively be over. He knew Andrea would be too excited to set and eat. He was just hoping he would get the opportunity to do it again when this whole thing was done with.

Two miles away, at her hotel, Andrea was having similar thoughts. She could tell by the sound of Jackson's voice he was excited and wanted to tell her something. She just didn't know what.

While she got ready, she had a brief conversation in her mind that went in a decidedly different direction than talking about the *USS Beauregard*. *He's a little gruff*, she thought, *but I could begin to like this guy*.

Andrea stepped to her car and placed the key in the door.

The solid blow to the back of her neck and shoulder caused her to crumple. She literally didn't know what hit her. Nor did it matter. She was out before she hit the ground.

Andrea was a half an hour late for dinner. Jackson was concerned, but also disappointed. It wasn't like there was that much traffic – it was only a two-lane road running through the middle of the island – so the possibility of a car wreck was fairly remote. She could be having trouble with her rental car, but it was new. He doubted that.

Looking out over the water, Jackson's mind began to wander. *What if she was just using me for information? I thought she was interested, too, but maybe not*, he thought. *Oh, come on. This is ridiculous. Something must have come up. This wasn't a date. This was a chance for me to tell her what I discovered. I know she wanted to hear that, even if she isn't interested in me*.

The internal argument raged in his mind. It wasn't that Jackson was normally emotional, or filled with self-doubt. Typically, he was decisive and confident. It'd just been a long time since he had allowed himself to think about a relationship. He had dated women. He just hadn't allowed himself to think about them in terms other than someone to pass a few hours with. He had already begun to make that mental leap and it was causing him problems.

As Jackson stood looking out over the water, he was startled to see two men coming at him. One of them was one of the three men from the fight in the parking lot when he met Andrea. He immediately began to brace himself for an attack. At least until he realized the man had a heavy bundle rolled up in a tarp over his shoulder. Neither man gave him a second glance, except to say, "How'ya doing" with a simple head nod in the way that men greet each other as they pass on the street.

As they went by, the man carrying the bundle stopped to adjust his load. He shifted it and repositioned the roll on his shoulder, bouncing it down hard. Then he moved on. The two men made their way to a small runabout boat, painted in Seashore Engineering colors. Jackson guessed they were working on the *Beauregard* and had come to the dock to pick up some supplies. The first man climbed into the boat and the second man tossed the bundle to him. Once they were both onboard, the first man – the one from the fight – started the boat's motor while the other tossed off the bow and stern lines. They pulled away from the dock – faster than they should have, but not quite fast enough to get themselves fined for violating the No Wake zone.

Jackson waited for another hour before he finally decided to go inside and get something to eat.

Sitting at the bar eating a sandwich and drinking a cold beer a few minutes later, Jackson didn't feel like talking. He was quietly watching the television and reading the closed captioning scrolling across the screen. His mind wasn't really registering what was on. Jackson overheard bits and pieces of the conversation going on between the only other two patrons setting at the bar.

“Did’jou hear?” one of the other bar patrons said, with mildly slurred speech. He had been drinking for a couple hours, being sent home early for the day. “They went ahead and towed the *Beauregard* out to the spot where they’se gonna sink her.”

“Nah. They couldn’t’ve. They was planning a big to do out at the dock tomorrow before they towed her out. They wanted all the big shots in one place,” the second man replied.

“I’m telling ya. That’s why I’m here. All the guys that was working on last-second stuff, they sent home with our final paycheck. The foreman said they wouldn’t need us tomorrow,” the first drunk said.

“Works out good for you then. Wanna go fishin' tomorrow?”

Jackson tuned back out to his sandwich. Hearing the man mention the *Beauregard* had perked up his attention, but the conversation didn’t actually register with him.

As he finished his sandwich and paid his tab – not exactly the meal he had planned on – Jackson decided to walk back out on the pier one last time.

“I just don’t get it. What could have caused Andrea to do a complete no-show?” Jackson said out loud to himself as he walked across the wood boards. “I know she wanted to hear what I found out.”

Something shiny caught his eye as he walked. Moving over to pick it up, more out of instinct than interest, he lifted a gold chain and locket off the pier decking. If it had been a quarter of an inch smaller, it would have slipped through the gap between the boards, never to be seen again.

Picking it up, Jackson realized what he was holding. It was Andrea’s dolphin locket from her father. That meant she had been there. And, if she realized she had lost it, she would have moved the entire pier to find the locket. He knew it was that important to her. His mind began to spin.

As if he was actually seeing it in front of his eyes, Jackson saw the two men carrying a bundle. It was about 6 feet long – just long enough to cover the body of a small woman. The spot where he found the locket was just about where the man had adjusted his load and bounced it up and down. In his mind, he replayed the scene and realized he heard a sound, much like the sound of someone getting the wind knocked out of them – but muffled. He had just thought it was the man making the noise, but now he wasn’t so sure.

Then he heard the two men talking at the bar from a few minutes earlier. “They went ahead and towed the *Beauregard* out...”

His mind was in full overdrive now. *What’s going on?* he asked himself. It all began to come together quickly.

The locket belonged to Andrea. She had been in the load the men were carrying. The *Beauregard* was towed into position ahead of schedule.

Then Jackson heard the sound of muffled explosions from out on the water. Someone had set off the explosive charges to send the *Beauregard* to the bottom. And he was certain Andrea was on board.

The feel of the cold metal on her face was somewhat reassuring. Andrea’s world had just shaken violently. And the sound accompanying that movement was deafening. It took her mind a moment to clear. As she shook her head to remove some of the fog in front of her eyes, pain shot through her neck and head. She quickly resolved to never move her head like that again.

By Eric Douglas, Author of *Cayman Cowboys*

“Where am I?” she asked out loud to the surrounding darkness. There was some dim light coming from the hall, but the room she was in was completely dark. She could only make out the doorframe and the cold gray metal she was lying on.

And what is that noise? she thought. It was the sound of water rushing. It seemed to be getting louder as the sound of the rumbling from the explosion died away.

I'm on board the Beauregard, she realized. “And I think it’s about to sink.”

Andrea said the last out loud as she tried to stand and walk to the door. Her head swam. Then the rope on her ankle pulled taught, just as she realized it was there. She nearly fell, but caught herself against the metal wall.

“They’re trying to kill me.”