

Bait and Switch

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“I don’t mind telling you guys, I thought I was going to be bored, but I think I’m actually starting to relax,” the first angler said. “I think my body is finally beginning to slow down.”

“I thought you’d like it. That’s why I keep coming back to this little island. Withrow Key is quiet and that’s the way I like it. You get divers and guys coming out fishing, but that’s about it. Not all the hassles with the tourists going down to Key West or the crowds that only make it down to the northern keys,” the second man replied. He leaned back in his fishing chair on the deck of his Hatteras-style fishing boat, the No Account – so named because of his career in banking, and it was what his ex-wife said about him during the divorce hearing.

“So, who needs a beer?” asked the third man as he came out into the bright Florida sun from the enclosed cabin. “You guys can fish all you want, but I just want to lie in the sun and drink my

fill.” Two hands shot up and the third man disappeared back into the cabin to fetch the drinks.

For the three men, it was an opportunity to get away from their busy lives. None of them could spare the time to take a long vacation, but the little island in the middle of the Florida Keys was close enough that they could take off from their Miami homes and businesses and spend a couple days on the water, relaxing before they had to jump back into the fray of their high pressure world. It was quiet out on the water and that was the way they all liked it. One was in pharmaceutical sales, another in banking and a third worked for the company that managed the port of Miami. All were divorced, but none were interested in getting into another relationship. They didn’t have to report their whereabouts to anyone else and they all liked it that way.

“What’s that noise?” the third businessman asked as he came outside, holding the open refreshments.

“Probably a small plane or a helicopter,” replied the second man, who actually owned the boat and was the most experienced on the water. “You get private planes coming across the water from the islands from time to time. Some of these pilots like to fly low to pretend they’re smuggling drugs or something, I guess.”

“Why do you say ‘pretend they are smuggling drugs’?” the first man questioned, as he scanned the sky around the boat. He felt vaguely uneasy about being disturbed; all the more so, because they were totally alone on the water. They had found a spot on the open water, near a drop-off in the reef that provided a good location to fish, but one where most of the hard-core fishermen avoided.

“Oh, I guess they could be smuggling drugs, but they don’t normally make those flights during the day. Too easy to be spotted. Also, the government has done a pretty good job of shutting down the landing strips around here. There are easier, more profitable ways to smuggle pot or coke up into the US,” he explained.

“Oh yeah, I saw that bit on the news about that tunnel out west underneath the border. That has got to be easier than dealing with a plane and all that,” the third man replied. “Wait a minute; I think I see the plane. Boy, those guys are flying just

over the wave tops," he continued, pointing just off the port bow of the fishing boat.

The other two men stood to look at the oncoming airplane. The plane appeared to be coming straight at them. All they could make out was the nose of the plane, two thin wings and two perfect circles for the engines, spaced halfway out from the body. They couldn't make out even the slightest hint of the side of the fuselage that would indicate that the plane was going to pass to one side or the other. The aircraft was moving so fast and so low to the water, the air forced over the wings by the props kicked up a spray, making the plane look like a jet with an enormous contrail following behind. In unison, the three men instinctively looked for floats on the bottom, making sure the plane wasn't going to make a water landing. They came up empty.

They realized the plane was low enough to damage their boat, even if it didn't actually hit the flying bridge of the fishing boat that rose more than 20 feet from the water line. Two of the fishermen ran to the bow to signal the plane. They grabbed life vests and waived them furiously in the air. The boat's owner ran to the pilot house and grabbed his radio. The plane was coming closer and he needed to do something. Unfortunately, boats and airplanes operate on different radio frequencies, so there wasn't much he could do to warn the plane away. The fisherman immediately called the coast guard for help.

"How much longer?" the Latino man in the back of the aging DC-3 asked the pilots as he stuck his head through the cockpit door. He was nervous about what the three of them were doing, and even more so because he had absolutely no control over the current situation. He had set it all up and planned it all out, but he wasn't a pilot. For this part of the job he had to trust others and that didn't come easy.

"The good news is we're almost there. The bad news is, if you startle me like that again, we'll never make it," the pilot said without turning his head. It took every ounce of energy the man had

to focus on the job in front of him. The plane was so close to the water, one sloppy turn or the slightest twitch of his hand could send the plane, all three men and the cargo into the water.

In its heyday, the DC-3 was the pride of commercial aviation. Still in flight 60 years after it rolled off the assembly line from the plant in Long Beach, California the aircraft had seen better days. Over the years, it had changed hands several times. The plane eventually ended up in South America, transporting everything from guns for rebels to bibles for missionaries - occasionally at the same time. The current owners tried to keep it airworthy, but the plane had recently changed hands in a card game and the maintenance records hadn't been included. That was the joke the pilot made, anyway, knowing full well it hadn't seen a qualified mechanic in a long time.

"All right, all right, I'll leave you to it, but let me know what's going on," the man in the rear said as he moved back to his seat.

"When this job is over, I'm going to get out of this business. I'm too old for this," the pilot said, out loud, but not really expecting a reply from his co-pilot. He received a grunt from the other man in response. For the man in the right-hand seat, that was practically a conversation. The co-pilot wasn't given to idle chatter; he barely spoke at all, except what he had to say as part of his duties. The two men had been flying together for three years, but the pilot barely knew anything about the other man, except that he was a good and stable pilot, reliable and smooth. That was all that really mattered. In their line of work, it paid to keep to oneself.

The pilot, Roy Barnes, was in his mid-50s. At one time he was an up and comer, flying for the Central Intelligence Agency. He was young and sharp with bright blue eyes and sandy brown hair. But that was 25 years ago. After leaving the CIA, he stayed in South America, flying for whoever would take him on. The lure of the drugs that were everywhere in the 1980s had been too strong and the very thing he had worked by day to destroy, ended up destroying him. Today, he was simply a shell of himself. Friends from back in the day probably wouldn't have recognized him - tired and worn, underweight with a receding hairline and a

two-day stubble shrouding his face. But, people remarked, he still had those eyes. He could also handle just about any plane in the air.

His quiet co-pilot was almost the exact physical opposite of Barnes. Al Reynolds was tall, with a beefy frame and a thick shock of gray hair on his head. He hadn't shaved in several days either, but that was unusual for him. Not that the two men had ever spoken about it, but they had similar flying backgrounds – they both worked for “the Agency”. Reynolds was known for being cool under fire and never really changed his expression when he was in the cockpit of an aircraft.

That quiet, calm, collected approach was what made it all the more surprising when the man in the second seat suddenly shouted, and then pulled back on his yoke to bring the plane off the deck. Not realizing what was going on, Barnes wasted precious time looking at Reynolds before he looked back through the windshield in front of him and realized the problem. They had been so focused on flying at the wave tops they had failed to notice the solitary fishing boat directly in their path. The DC-3's wingspan, altitude and speed made it impossible to turn the plane in time to avoid a disaster. Their only choice was to climb.

They had planned to make their approach totally unseen. A pass barely over the heads of the people on board would surely get radioed in and a fixed location reported – that wasn't going to help their plan. The long-term affects of the near miss were low on the pilot's priority list, however, as he struggled to deal with the short-term ones and force the old plane off the deck, making it rise like a fighter plane rather than a cargo hauler.

For a moment, the two men at the controls thought they had made it and were safe. Then all hell broke loose. One odd thing about the DC-3, while the entire body of the plane was made of aluminum, the rudder and the elevators on the tail of the plane were made from an aluminum frame that was covered with canvas. The salt water spraying on the aging and dry-rotted material tore the fabric to shreds. The sudden wrenching motion by the co-pilot was more than the canvas could take. It simply disintegrated. First from the right side, then the left. The loss of control

from the elevator caused the plane to lurch downward and to one side. There was nothing the two men in the front could do to stop it. They were both strapped in, which was something the man in the rear of the plane couldn't say.

The wing tip on the crippled right side met the water first, digging in and causing the plane spin like a poorly-thrown Frisbee. That sudden redirection may have saved the plane, for a minute anyway, as it caused the relic to hit the water flat, tail first, as it continued to rotate.

After a second or two -- that seemed like hours for the men in the cockpit -- the water caused the plane to slow enough that the other wing tip dipped down into the water flipping the plane on its back and suspending the pilot and the co-pilot from their harnesses. Water came rushing in.

"Are you all right?" Barnes shouted over the ear-splitting noise produced by the dying airliner and the roaring water as the ocean rushed in.

"Yeah, I think so. Can't unbuckle, though. Must be jammed," Reynolds replied.

"Hang on, I'm comin'," Barnes said as he released the catch on his harness and dropped loose from his seat into the water below. He was disoriented for just a second when he hit the water and found himself kneeling underwater on the airplane's ceiling.

Standing up, Barnes found that the water was already around his waist and the plane was sinking fast. A gaping hole ripped in the fuselage by the force of the crash was allowing the ocean to pour inside at an alarming rate.

Without another word, the pilot wiped saltwater from his eyes and grabbed the buckle on the Reynold's flight harness. It wouldn't budge. The water continued to rise, nearly covering the co-pilot's head. He had to twist in his seat to continue to breathe.

"I don't want to die, man, get me out of here," Reynolds shouted, nearly out of breath from fear.

"Don't worry. Today isn't your day. Not if I have anything to say about it," Barnes barked, although the terrible thought had already formed in his mind. If he couldn't get the other man out in

just another second or two, he was going to have to leave him behind and swim for it or he might die as well.

Bracing his feet against the inverted console, the pilot drove his shoulder into the larger co-pilot and pressed the man against his seat -- taking the weight off the harness. With his free hand, he grabbed the buckle and jerked it open. The suddenness of the desperate move prevented Reynolds from bracing himself or holding on. His body was dead weight as he fell on top of the pilot, pushing them both underwater.

Breaking the surface of the water, the two men didn't waste time talking. Instead they both took the biggest breaths their lungs could hold and dove under the water to swim out of the wrecked airplane.

The cargo hold of the aging plane was full of bundles. It was also totally full of water. The plane was sinking quickly. Both men were confused in the topsy-turvy, jumbled compartment and were on the edge of panicking when the plane began to roll to its side. Suddenly, above them, the men could see light through the hole ripped through the aluminum skin in the side wall of the plane. It was broad daylight above and the sunlight streaming through the crystal clear water showed the two men how to find their way out. They burst out of the plane and began swimming upward. Their only thought was getting to the surface. Their bodies were desperate for air and they were both near blacking out when their heads broke the surface in unison.

Automatically, both men lay back in the water and tried to keep themselves afloat as they caught their breath. In fact, they never heard the fishing boat approach.

"Hey, are you two all right. I can't believe anyone made it out of that crash," one of the men on the fishing boat shouted out as the owner maneuvered in for a closer look. "Grab this line and we'll pull you in."

Unable to speak, the two men in the water shared a look as if to ask, "What now?" but kept quiet. They simply raised their hands and prepared to catch the rescue line.

As they neared the boat, the pilot finally found his voice. "There was a third man on the plane. Any sign of him?"

Barnes asked of the man who had set up this adventure and convinced he and Reynolds to take this risk.

"We haven't seen anyone else, and I can't believe anyone else could survive. It's got to be a miracle that you two got out," the fisherman said. "Now, don't you guys worry. I've radioed in our location and help is on the way. We'll get you taken care of."

The pilot stood on somewhat uncertain feet at the stern of the large boat after being pulled on board. Never a violent man, he still knew what he was going to have to do to protect the operation and keep himself and Reynolds out of prison for the rest of their lives. He could tell by the look in his partner's eyes, Reynolds knew it too.

Walking into the dive shop, it took the cop's eyes a few minutes to adjust. The sun outside was blindingly bright, in contrast to the cool shade inside. He stood in the doorway for a moment to catch his bearings before moving again.

As soon as he could see, he picked the person he wanted to speak to out of the customers and store clerks in the shop. The uniformed officer moved quickly through the store toward the classroom in the back.

"Jackson, you got a minute?" Sheriff Yearly said without preamble or greeting. Tanned from years of patrolling the keys, the man could have been any age -- from 30 to 50. His skin was coarse and tough-looking but he was also fit and his close-cropped hair was dark and thick. The one thing he was not was a diver. Even after growing up in the Keys and spending most of his adult life around the water, he had never made the attempt.

"Sure, Sheriff, what can I do for you? I just finished up a class, so I'm done for the day."

"That's good to hear, because I've got a job for you," Yearly began, as he motioned Jackson Pauley back into the classroom. Pauley was a former New York City firefighter/paramedic who had retired after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and decided to take life a little slower working as a divemaster in the Keys. While

many of the dive guides who worked around the island tended to be younger and came and went as they pleased, the Sheriff knew that Jackson was stable. Yearly also knew him as a gutsy operator who could be counted on when things got tough.

"So, what gives?" Jackson asked when the officer closed the door behind him, his 5'11" body immediately getting tense, although he wasn't sure why.

"We've got a report of a plane crash out near Handsome Reef. I want you to go out there and see if you can find anything."

"Sheriff, you're gonna have to give me a little more detail than that. I know the FAA investigates plane crashes. Why do you want me out there?" Jackson asked, still a little uncertain as he ran a hand through his sand-colored hair.

"Couple hours ago, a boater on a private fishing boat called in to say that a big plane nearly hit his boat. Then it crashed. After that, nothing. We can't raise the boat and have no record of a flight plan through the area. The boat gave us his GPS coordinates, but nothing else. I'm not even sure there was a crash. I've alerted the FAA and a couple other agencies, but they don't want to come down without us confirming there was a crash in the first place."

"All right. That makes sense. I've got nowhere else to go this afternoon. I'll get one of the guys to come out with me just in case."

The sheriff produced a paper with the coordinates on it and left to take care of other business.

It didn't take Jackson long to round up a dive buddy and get his boat, the Daydreamer out to the site of the crash. He brought along Randy Littlebear for this trip. A Seminole who served with distinction in the first Gulf War as a Navy diver and had returned home after his military service, he decided to move further south than his traditional home in the Florida Everglades to set up shop. Randy repaired dive equipment and compressors and all

the mechanical tools of diving. Jackson knew that he was also as cool as they came. He never got rattled and always took care of business. Littlebear would disappear from time to time, for a day or two, but then would be back like nothing ever happened. Everyone always assumed he was doing something on the reservation.

Not knowing the plane's depth or condition before they left the dock, they had planned heavy. They brought along more equipment and larger air supplies than they would most likely need, but, Jackson reasoned, it wouldn't do to have to call the dive and come back later.

Both divers had "doubles" strapped to their backs – twin tanks linked together through a special manifold system that would allow them to breathe off of one or both cylinders. The knew the general depth of the area they planned to investigate so had brought along a specially-mixed breathing gas called Enriched Air Nitrox. Supplemented with additional oxygen, it would allow them to stay at depth longer. They were also carrying lights, reels of line and small lift bags that could be inflated with air to move objects underwater.

"Something sure happened here," Littlebear noted as the Daydreamer arrived at the coordinates of the crash, as reported by the missing fishing boat. Debris floated around the general area, slightly down current from their location. Jackson had intentionally approached the scene against the current to see what floated by.

"Whatever it is, it's right over there," Littlebear continued. The water was so clear the divers could see the bottom and could make out the outline of a plane resting on the bottom – right beside a drop off into an underwater canyon.

"Call the sheriff?" Randy asked.

"He'll just ask about bodies and that sort of thing. He can wait a little longer until we've had a chance to lay our eyes on it and see what happened," Jackson replied as he turned to begin gearing up.

"I'm right behind you."

Descending through the water, Jackson and Littlebear took their time. They were focused on the dim image of the plane below them. Bubbles, stirred up sediment and sand rising from the bottom made it difficult to tell exactly what type of plane rested below them, but they could tell it was a plane. The ocean floor came up quickly as the divers approached the bottom at 100 feet.

While not a canyon with extreme depths, Jackson knew that the plane was resting on the lip of a depression that descended several hundred more feet – well below the depths they planned to dive.

Communicating with hand-signals, the divers approached the plane cautiously. They quickly agreed to swim around the perimeter of the aircraft. Its precarious position made both divers wary. Both took their time to survey the wreckage and establish its stability before risking their lives by going in too quickly.

After assuring himself the conditions were relatively safe, Jackson made his way to the cabin door and attempted to open it. It was still secured from the inside and would not budge. Jackson realized the only other way into the plane was through the jagged hole in the fuselage of the plane.

Jackson and Littlebear settled down on the sand beside the wrecked airplane and prepared themselves to penetrate the wreck. As they had agreed before-hand, Jackson would enter the plane while Littlebear stayed outside. Connected to the exit by a nylon line, Jackson would be able to use the line to find his way out if, for some reason, visibility inside the plane dropped to zero. Outside, Littlebear would also be able to monitor Jackson and ensure that he was still moving around. He could provide help if Jackson got in trouble, although they had also agreed that Littlebear would only enter the plane as a last resort.

Kneeling on the sand bottom, able to look inside, Littlebear shined his light through the jagged opening. Jackson held on to the safety line and slowly moved into the opening. Littlebear kept a close watch to ensure that the thin line didn't get caught or cut

on the torn sheet metal. Jackson pushed dangling lines and hoses out of his way as he moved inside. He could taste the leaking fuel in the water as it quickly seeped through his mask and regulator. He didn't want to think about what it was doing to his gear. To his right, he could see the area that would have been used for passengers and now held large bundles. To his left was the cockpit. He decided to check and see if the bodies of the pilots were still there. Maybe I can find some identification, he thought.

Entering the cargo hold of the former airliner, Jackson realized some of the bundles were floating and others were heavy on the floor. He guessed the black plastic coverings on the bails must be holding in air bubbles on some, giving them buoyancy. Others must already be waterlogged, giving them additional weight.

The hole was about halfway back in the airplane. Jackson began swimming forward toward the flight deck. As he moved cautiously, a large bundle floated past him, probably disturbed by the currents or escaping air bubbles, or something, he thought to himself. He pushed it out of his way. That force caused the bundle to roll.

Out from behind it floated the dead, bloated body of a man.

Jackson recoiled in shock. He was expecting to see bodies in the front of the plane, still strapped into their seats, but he hadn't prepared himself to find someone floating around loose. The man was naked. The impact of the crash must have stripped his clothes off of him, Jackson thought.

It was too soon for a large predator to have discovered the body – they wouldn't come close to the wreck for a little while longer until things settled down completely – but small fish had been inside and had obviously began to nibble.

Jackson slowed his breathing and quickly regained his composure. It wasn't the first time he had seen a body in the water, but he wasn't prepared for it to come out and greet him. I'll send the recovery crew back for you, buddy, Jackson thought. You're not going anywhere.

Moving around the floating corpse, Jackson continued to

move to the front. He slowly played his light back and forth and Jackson moved from the relative gloom of the interior of the wrecked aircraft to the brightness of the flight deck. Light filtered in through the windshield to give Jackson a full view of what lay in front of him.

And that was exactly nothing. The seats and panels and control equipment were all in place, just not the main thing Jackson expected -- two more dead bodies. The sound of Jackson's own exhalations filled his mind for a minute as he realized the flight crew had gotten out. How did they manage it? Where are they now?

Jackson grabbed some of the papers he found floating throughout the cabin. He noticed a sea chart with two areas marked in red grease pencil. One showed two small islands, near the far end of Withrow Key. The second was in the ocean, not far from where the plane had crashed, but over the deeper water.

While he floated weightless, Jackson heard a groaning sound. After a millisecond, Jackson realized what was happening. The plane was sliding off the lip of the depression and was starting to roll.

Jackson turned and struggled to get back out the way he came as the plane moved around him. He didn't know how far the plane would slide or what would happen, but he didn't want to be inside to find out.

Arriving at the place in the fuselage where he had climbed through the hole, he quickly realized his problem. The plane had rolled as it had slid and now his opening to the outside world was pointing down and was up against the coral. While he hovered in the water and stared, dumbfounded for a second at the turn of events, a heavy bundle toppled off a stack behind him and slammed Jackson to the un-giving side of the plane.

Jackson was stunned and disoriented, lying on his stomach and side, pressed against the curved side wall of the plane. The large tanks on his back prevented him from turning very far, but he could tell there was a heavy bundle lying on top of him. In fact, heavy packages had fallen all around him.

Trying to push himself up, Jackson could feel the cargo move,

so he was reassured that he wasn't totally buried, but he knew he needed to work fast. Because of the extra air supply he had brought along, Jackson wasn't immediately concerned about running out of air, but he knew it wouldn't last forever. Also, the quality of the water with the fuel and hydraulic fluid leaking into the cabin wasn't helping matters. Jackson's biggest concern, however, was the stability of the plane itself. It seemed to have stopped moving, but Jackson wasn't sure how long that would last. He didn't want to be if the plane slid down the canyon beside it. He would quickly be dragged down to 200 or 300 feet – depths he was not prepared for. The special breathing gas he was carrying would become toxic at those depths, possibly causing him to have a seizure and drown if he wasn't rescued quickly.

He stilled himself so he could think. How can I lift these things off my back? Wiggling his light free, Jackson shined it on one of the bundles beside him. It was approximately three feet long by two feet across, by about two feet deep. It occurred to Jackson that it was about the size of a bail of hay. With his fingers, he confirmed that the bundle was wrapped tightly with black plastic.

He quickly came up with a plan. Jackson struggled to twist his body around. Finally he was able to double over and reach the inside of his leg. With his finger tips, Jackson could feel the hilt of his dive knife. Slowly he unclasped the strap holding it in the sheath strapped to the inside of his leg. He withdrew the blade between two fingers and brought it up to where he could see what he was doing.

Maneuvering himself into a better position, Jackson turned the knife in his hand and then jabbed it into the bundle on his back. As he did, Jackson felt the blade hit something solid and twist in his grasp. Jackson felt the precious blade slide free. He grabbed for it as quickly as he could, realizing that this might be his only chance to get the weight off his back. Barely able to move his arms, and not able to see what he was doing, Jackson flailed around for the knife.

On his third grab at nothingness, Jackson felt a finger tip brush the steel of the blade. Its sharp edge cut his hand, but Jackson ignored the sudden pain. Nothing was going to cause

him to drop the knife again. He grabbed out again and was rewarded with the feeling of his hand wrapping around the hilt.

Jackson took a minute to catch his breath and think about what had just happened. He studied the bundle beside him and then finally realized his mistake. A metal band ran the length of the bundle. He must have jabbed the blade directly into the strap.

Adjusting his aim, Jackson pulled himself together and tried again. This time, he was rewarded with the gentle resistance of the blade cutting through the protective plastic outer layer.

As a safety back up, whenever he made a dive using the double tanks and would potentially be making a dive that was a bit more extreme, Jackson also carried a pony bottle. The extra cylinder was a completely independent air source with its own regulator he could use in a rescue.

This time, however, Jackson was going to rescue himself. He pulled the pony bottle loose from the straps that held it in place and then pulled the regulator hose free. He placed the knife on the aluminum floor in front of him and took the regulator in the same hand that he had used to cut the bundle behind him. He worked the mouthpiece into the hole he had just made.

When he felt like he had pushed the regulator mouthpiece through the hole in the bundle, he pressed down on the purge valve and began venting air into the bail.

Jackson hoped there would be enough room in the bundle for the air to help him lift the bundle off of his back. After a minute Jackson pushed backward. He felt it begin to move. He reached back up and squeezed the purge valve again, sending more air into the package and he kept pressing with his other hand and his knees. Slowly, the weight that formed his prison gave way and he was able to push himself up.

After he got on his knees and could feel the bundles moving backward, Jackson lurched forward to get out from under the weight.

Just as suddenly as it had struck him, Jackson was free. It was only then that he realized the cargo in the back of the plane had shifted and he was nearly buried by it all.

The plane hadn't moved any further, but Jackson didn't like

the groaning noises he could hear coming from all around him. It was time to get out. Unfortunately, he still faced the same problem. His entry way was still trapped against the reef. He was going to have to open the cabin door. He swam to the doorway and studied the latch. It was a fairly simple mechanical mechanism. With the plane lying on its side, he would have to open the door straight up against the weight of the door and the water above it. He wasn't sure if he could do that.

Jackson released the latch on the door and braced his feet against the bulkhead beside him. He began to push. The door began to move slowly, but Jackson's head began to swim from the exertion.

Jackson paused for a second, allowing the door to drop back down against the frame of the plane with a dull thump. I don't know if I'm going to have the energy to do this for much longer, he thought to himself. After a moment, he pulled himself together and prepared for one last push. I'm not going to die diving if 9/11 didn't get me, he decided.

Anchoring his feet and fins against a bulkhead inside the derelict plane, Jackson began to push with all of his strength. The door began to budge again, slowly, but it was moving. Jackson noticed his breathing was getting difficult, but he didn't seem to be able to draw enough air through his regulator. Suddenly the thought came to his mind; his main tank was running out of air. He didn't know how or why, considering how much air supply he brought with him, but possibly the bundles falling on his back had damaged the manifold between the cylinders. He couldn't spare the effort to switch from his primary system to the pony bottle or he would lose his chance at getting the door open. If he didn't he was going to run out of air.

Just about to give up, let go and switch to the backup, Jackson found himself bolting upward and out of the plane as if by magic. The weight against his shoulder was gone and Jackson was free. Randy Littlebear was there.

It had taken the other man a minute to approach the plane after it rolled, and then another moment to realize where Jackson was attempting to make his exit, but the sound of the door clank-

ing shut had attracted his attention. Arriving by the cabin door, Littlebear saw the door begin to open again. He quickly realized Jackson wasn't going to be able to open it on his own. He had grabbed the door and pulled it backward with all his strength. The weight of the door was no match for the combined efforts of the two men.

Jackson quickly rolled to his side after being pulled through the opening and saw Littlebear kneeling on the plane. Without hesitating, Jackson swam forward and grabbed his friend's alternate regulator and pulled it to his mouth. He took a long, deep breath as he settled down on the side of the plane as well.

Once Jackson's breathing was back under control, he reached around and grabbed the regulator from the pony bottle and switched mouthpieces. He gave Littlebear the signal to ascend and the pair of divers began slowly swimming for the surface.

"Wow, man, that was a gnarly dive," said Hoss, a 6'4" hulk of a man who had moved around the country from surfer to river guide to ski instructor to dive instructor, finally ending up in the Keys. He was known for being a little eccentric. When their favorite bar had banned patrons from bringing their dogs in while they drank, Hoss had walked in with an alligator on a leash. The sign prohibiting dogs had disappeared later that night. Everyone expected one day, Hoss would be gone, off on his next adventure – with his dog. "Good thing Littlebear was there for you."

"No kidding," laughed Jackson from his chair at the outdoor restaurant. He and a couple of the other dive instructors from the local dive shop were relaxing after the day's dives, but instead of talking about the passengers from the day, or what they were going to do that night, they were talking about the plane crash and the investigation going on around the island. FAA investigators had descended on their sleepy little island and it was more activity than they had seen in months, at least since the odd circumstances surrounding the sinking of the USS Beauregard.

The word had quickly gotten out about Jackson's harrowing escape from the sunken plane and everyone wanted to hear about it. Jackson normally kept things to himself, but for some reason, he felt like talking about the dive. He knew his friends would keep themselves in drinks and food tonight as they retold the story, but he didn't mind that either.

"Man, tell me again what it was like inside the plane when the bale fell on you. What were you thinking?" asked Miguel, the newest of the itinerate divemasters on the island.

Before Jackson could answer, all eyes turned and looked at the two strangers who took a table on the patio. Obviously deep in their conversation, the men didn't notice anyone else around them. Jackson waved for his friends to stay quiet for a moment. The men were over-dressed for the islands, even though they had attempted to be more casual; they were still wearing shoes.

"We won't know anything until we bring the plane up, but something about this crash doesn't feel right," Matt said.

"I know you've investigated hundreds of plane crashes for the FAA and I'm new at this, but what's bothering you? We just got one report on it from that local and then took our first look at the plane this morning ourselves," the younger agent, named Jamal, replied.

The federal agents had chartered a local boat to begin surveying the wreckage that morning. It was only a day after the wreck and Jackson's nearly fatal dive.

"I can't be sure until the rest of the salvage crew gets here later today and we can get the plane up, but I don't think this plane crash was an accident," the senior agent explained.

"You think it was an act of terrorism?" Jamal asked, somewhat incredulous.

"Yeah, right. The national security of the United States rests on a derelict DC-3 flying in the Florida Keys," Matt replied with a sarcastic laugh.

"What is it, then?" Jamal replied, blushing visibly in spite of his dark skin.

"Did you notice the cargo in the back of the plane? It was floating all over the place when we opened the door."

"I just remember straw floating loose in the back."

"That's it. The plane's cargo was straw. You would have thought it was pot with bales stacked like that."

"I don't get it. You think someone crashed a plane load of straw?"

"Let me ask you a question. Would you transport straw in an airplane?" Matt asked, bringing the younger agent along. "Obviously, the answer is no. It's too heavy and bulky. You transport straw on trucks or trains, but not planes. All I'm saying is, something just isn't adding up."

"All right, gentlemen, here's your lunch," the waitress said as she walked up with a large tray. The men broke off their conversation and got down to eating conch fritters.

"Guys, what we just heard really makes me wonder," Jackson said to the other divers around his table.

"What is it, Jackson?" Miguel asked.

"The FAA guys think the plane crash may not have been an accident and the one guy just said it was full of straw. I can only think of one way that makes sense," Jackson said, staring off into space a bit. The other divers stayed quiet as Jackson reasoned the situation out in his head.

"Guys, remember I said there were two places circled on that chart I saw in the cockpit before the plane rolled over? The first place was right where the plane actually went down or right beside it anyway. They had circled the deep hole and the plane actually landed on the ledge. The other place was a small sandbar out in the narrows. There's nothing out there," Jackson said. "I didn't think much about it at the time. Then, of course, the plane rolled over and that went completely out of my mind."

"I'm still not following you, Jackson," Hoss prodded the retired firefighter.

"Ok, think about it for a second. Smugglers fly in pot. They take all the chances, but only get paid by the bosses, not what the drugs are actually worth. Maybe this time, they hid the pot and filled the plane with bales of straw to confuse the money men. They fake out their suppliers in South America and then crash the plane to cover up their plan and disappear. Who else

would have access to that much dope that they didn't actually buy? It isn't like the stuff is insured. It doesn't have to work forever, it just has to work for a few days until they make the sale and disappear somewhere. If they had gotten it into the deep hole, the plane might never have shown up."

"Wow, man. Don't know how you put all that together," Hoss said. After a moment's reflection he asked "So what do we do about it?"

"There's no way we can go to the cops with this idea. But, we can go check out the island marked on the chart ourselves and see if anyone is out there."

"You think they would stay close by?" Miguel asked. "If I were them, I'd get as far away from here as possible."

"I was a firefighter, not a cop, but it sort of makes sense to me. The buyers for the pot are here waiting on the plane load at some small airstrip in the swamps, but then it goes down. Our double-crossing smugglers turn up with a load of pot and the buyers are more than happy to take it off their hands," Jackson said. "I know I'm making a big leap here, but if these guys are just pilots taking all the risk, and not reaping the rewards, maybe they got greedy and wanted their share."

"So, when do we leave?" Miguel asked.

"Right now."

Heading toward the island Jackson had seen identified on the map, the three men took stock of their supplies. They had tried to call Randy Littlebear before they took off, but they couldn't track him down, and none of them felt like waiting.

Jackson kept a flare gun, two full sets of dive gear and four tanks on board. The boat was outfitted with radios and state-of-the-art electronic navigation equipment. There were ropes (lines on a boat) and the tools for them to handle basic maintenance away from shore. But that was about it. There wasn't a lot there if they needed to defend themselves. None of the men had any idea what they would do if they actually found what they were

looking for. They were winging it.

Jackson was able to match up the location he saw marked on the chart on the crashed aircraft with two tiny islands on his sea charts. They were really twin sandbars, no more than an acre or two each. Both islands rose 10 or 15 feet above the surface of the water and had a few trees, but that was about it. There was no structure on either island. They were really even too far away from the shore for partiers to come out and spend the night celebrating summer.

Hoss continually scanned the first island with a pair of high-powered binoculars as they approached from the south. When they got close, Jackson backed off on the Whaler's throttles and slowed down, but not too much. He wanted to look as if they were just boaters out having a good time.

"So, do you see anything?" Miguel asked, nervously scanning the horizon. "Maybe your hunch was wrong." The more northerly of the two islands was blocked by the first. Jackson remained silent, his eyes scanning back and forth between the water in front of him, the radar screen and the depth finder.

"I tell you what guys," Jackson began, as he flipped a lever to raise his outboard engines out of the water and steered directly toward a small sandy beach on the island. "Let's beach this thing and take a look. The radar is telling me there isn't anything on this island, but I can't see anything on the second island and I want to get a closer look."

"Sounds good to me, boss," Hoss said from his position on the bow as he rose up and handed the binoculars back to Miguel, then selected a small anchor to secure the boat in the shallows.

Once the boat was tied off, the three men left the boat. They cautiously moved across the middle of the island, keeping an eye out for other people. From the highest point of the first island, they found what they were looking for. The second island was no more than 200 yards away, separated from the first by a shallow underwater sand bridge, but they could see the stern end of an 31-foot cabin cruiser and a larger Hatteras-style fishing boat. Both boats were bow into the beach on the other island on the eastern side, at a 90 degree angle from where Jackson and his

two friends had approached.

"I can just see the name on that big Hatteras. It's the No Account. Isn't that the name of the fishing boat that reported the plane crash?" Miguel asked, still holding the binoculars.

"I think you're right," Jackson replied. "The boat never turned up and neither did the men that were on board. I think we might have the answer to the missing fishermen."

Jackson returned to his boat. He turned on the radar and adjusted it to its maximum range. He watched intently for a few minutes as the radar sweep made its circles.

"Guys, it looks like a boat is heading this way. I show a hit on the radar and it looks like it's moving this general direction. They're about 10 miles away right now, so they'll be here in 15 or 20 minutes," Jackson explained. "I think we've got enough to call this into the police now, but I don't know if they'll make it out here in time. The sun will be setting before long and these guys could make their exchange and be gone into the night. I think we need to do something to stall them."

"What do you have in mind, man?" Hoss asked, enjoying the way this day was turning out.

"Come over here. I've got an idea."

Just a few minutes later, Jackson started the engine and backed away from the beach slowly. He moved away from the island about 100 yards and then spun the wheel around to head directly for the other men and the boats.

To make his story more believable, Jackson shut down and raised his port engine and pulled back on the other throttle. He pretended to limp toward the island. His two passengers took this opportunity to go over the side and put Jackson's plan into action.

As soon as Jackson got within earshot, he started calling out to the men on the beach. He knew better than to surprise them.

"Hello on the beach, hello," Jackson yelled out. "I've got some bad gas and my radio's not working. Can you lend me a hand?"

The two pilots from the crashed plane, Roy Barnes and Al Reynolds, stepped out of the shade of the few trees on the island. They began waving their arms and shouting angrily, trying to warn Jackson away. Feigning difficulty with his boat, Jackson ignored them. A third man was on board the smaller of the two boats anchored in the cove. With a deft move, Jackson tossed out an anchor line behind the boat and nosed his bow up against the beach, about 20 feet away. Jackson came to a stop and jumped over the side without acknowledging the men.

"Boy, sure am glad I found you guys," Jackson said as he quickly tried figure out what he was dealing with. "That left motor quit running. With my radio out, I would've been in a heck of a fix if I hadn't seen you guys out here. Name's Jackson, by the way," he said with his hand out. It was completely ignored.

"Mister, you can just get right back on that boat and slide right on out of here. You're not welcome here," the third man said as he jumped down off of his boat and joined the other two on the beach. He was Tony Case, the smuggler's local contact and the one who had set up the double cross, encouraging the pilots to make a big score.

"Yeah, we told you to go away. Now go," Reynolds said. "We don't want visitors out here and you're just in the way."

"Hey guys, I didn't know this was a private island or anything. They show up on my charts as little sand bars. But still, you can't just turn away a guy in distress. Come on. Lend me a hand and I'll be on my way. At least let me call the authorities so they'll be on the lookout for me. I don't want to get halfway across the channel and get stuck without anyone looking for me," Jackson continued to argue, trying to stall for time.

As the three men continued arguing with Jackson, a fourth boat rounded the end of the island and pulled into the small cove. All four of the men on the beach turned and watched the newest arrival. Jackson was curious to see what was going on – the other three suddenly got nervous.

The boat was a 31 foot Grady-White cabin cruiser with two more men on board. The men quickly dropped two anchors in the water – one on the beach and one off the stern – and jumped

into the water. They quickly walked up the beach and toward the men. Both of the new arrivals were armed with Mac 10s and were carrying them in a shooting position. They were taking no chances.

As the two men approached, Jackson realized he knew one of the two – it was Randy Littlebear, his dive buddy from the previous day. Jackson simply stared. Littlebear gave no sign that he recognized Jackson. Both of the men from the new boat were Native American.

"So which one of you is Case?" one of the two arrivals said. "I'm Framer. Let's get this over with."

"I'm Case," the man said. "But, hold on, this guy isn't with us, he just showed up here and I don't know what's going on. We're not going to do anything until he goes away."

"Hey, wait a minute. I was just looking for some help. I don't know what this is all about, but I'll just get out of here and leave you guys alone. Sorry to interrupt," Jackson said with a stammer, trying to back away.

Littlebear moved around behind Jackson and grabbed him, pinning his arms back. "You're not going anywhere, friend," Littlebear said to Jackson. "I know this one. He's a local. Just a dive bum on the island. He's nothing to worry about," he said to the other men.

"I don't care who he is. He's seen all of our faces, and I don't want him talking to the cops," Case said. "If you guys want what we have, then you can take him with you when you leave and drop him in the channel. We'll set his boat adrift."

Before Jackson, or Littlebear and Framer could respond, a fifth boat came circling around the island and entered the cove. The sun was setting and had just touched the horizon as the boat approached the beach. Watching the boat, Jackson thought he saw some movement below the water moving in the direction of the latest arrival, but he couldn't be sure.

"Who in the hell is this?" Case asked, incredulous at the growing crowd. "I thought you guys said this island was deserted and no one came out here."

The newly arriving boat caught everyone by surprise. It

moved in slowly and shined a light in the eyes of the men standing on the beach.

“Well, isn’t this a pleasant little reunion,” a Latin sounding voice called from the mystery boat. “I thought you men were dead, but now I see you standing on a beach, miles away from where you crashed my plane. And meeting with strangers. Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like what’s happening here? You two with your guns out, drop them on the beach. My men are a little nervous and have itchy trigger fingers.”

“Oh, no,” Reynolds groaned. “It’s Carlos. How did he find us?”

“What’s going on here? Who is this guy?” Framer asked as he dropped his gun on the sand and moved slightly to the side, away from the men. Littlebear maintained his iron grip on Jackson, but steered him away from the original three men on the beach as well.

“Don’t move too far away, my friends. I assume you’re the buyers for my goods. You must be Mr. Framer. You and I originally had a deal, and then these men double-crossed me and stole my merchandise. They destroyed my plane, but not before they took all of my belongings from it,” Carlos said as he jumped down from the boat and began walking slowly across the beach. His men were closely arrayed around him – there were five of them from the new boat. They were all heavily armed with automatic weapons.

“It’s not true, Carlos. That’s not the way it happened at all. We had nothing to do with this,” Barnes shouted, getting very nervous. He tried to tell the entire story in one breath. “Case put us up to it. He made us drop off the cargo at a small island about an hour away and he brought it all up here on his boat. He showed us where to crash the plane so it wouldn’t get discovered. He set it all up with Juan, but Juan never made it off the plane.”

“Listen, Carlos, this is all a misunderstanding,” Case began to grovel, but Carlos silenced him quickly.

“Quiet,” he barked. “I don’t want to hear your stories. I’ll deal with you shortly.”

Then he turned and looked at the two Seminoles. “Mr. Framer, I assume you brought the money for my merchandise. Is

it the number we originally agreed to?”

“More. These men didn’t tell me they had your goods. They just said they knew I was in the market and needed material to replace what had crashed. They said they could fill my need immediately, but that it was going to cost me.”

“So, you men rip me off, and then raise the price to my buyer? On top of that, you kill my cousin and try to blame him for ripping me off? I’ve got to hand it to you, that takes cajones,” Carlos said with a laugh looking back at Case and the two pilots. “Maybe that is the first thing that should get shot. Too bad, you won’t be able to enjoy the money.”

Littlebear moved Jackson closer to the water’s edge while everyone else was talking and Jackson felt the grip on his arms relax.

“What are you doing here?” Littlebear whispered in Jackson’s ear.

“Just trying to figure out what’s going on,” Jackson replied, trying to be as quiet as he could, although none of the other men on the beach were paying any attention to them. “What about you?”

“Me, too, but it’s my job to be here. You’re just interfering,” Littlebear said. “So you’re not involved with these men at all?”

“No, I just wanted to investigate the other location I saw marked on that chart. I got suspicious when I heard there wasn’t any dope on the plane. It didn’t all add up. What do you mean, it’s your job?”

“I’m a cop from the reservation and I’m undercover. I’m trying to break up a drug ring,” Littlebear answered.

“Framer is a cop, too?” Jackson whispered.

“No, he is my mark.”

“Listen to me really carefully. We don’t have much time. If you think this place is crowded now, it’s only gonna get worse. I called the cops and I can hear the helicopter on the way out now,” Jackson said. When Littlebear listened, he could just hear the sounds of the helicopter moving toward the island.

“When the helicopter gets loud enough that one of these guys notices, we need to make a break for it. Hit the water and swim

for my boat.”

“So, you barge in here unexpected and now you want to run for it?” Littlebear asked.

“Just trust me on this one. I got it covered.”

The men on the beach had continued to argue amongst themselves while Jackson and Littlebear had talked. The men who had double-crossed their employer were trying to save their lives. Carlos and his men were trying to quiet the double-crossers down, while arguing with Framer about how much he should pay for the shipment.

It was Reynolds, the DC-3 co-pilot, who first noticed the sound of the helicopter. As soon as he said something about it, Carlos reacted.

“It’s the cops,” Carlos yelled. “Kill them all.”

The Latino men began shooting wildly, without hitting anything, as they attempted to run for their boat and get away from the island. Framer ducked and then turned to look for Littlebear, only to realize the man he thought was his partner had just jumped into the water with Jackson. He didn’t waste another moment and ran for his own boat. The two pilots and Case, were the slowest to respond after dropping to the sand when the shooting started.

Jackson’s boat was the first to roar to life, before he and Littlebear even got on board. The Daydreamer was floating free. As soon as Jackson and Littlebear grabbed rubber fenders that were hanging over the side, the boat turned around, almost within its own space – shielding the two men in the water from any shooting -- and began moving away from the island.

Hands reached over the sides of the boat and pulled Jackson and Littlebear on board. Hoss and Miguel were on board, wearing diveskins, with grins on their faces.

“Howdy boys. Did you get it all done?” Jackson asked with a laugh and a grin.

“That last one caught us by surprise, but no problems,” Hoss said with a laugh, as he pointed to the stern of the boat and showed Jackson the eight gleaming propellers they had removed from the other boats.

The drug runners – smugglers, suppliers and buyers – had all made it to their respective boats and pulled up their anchors, only to realize that they couldn’t go anywhere. They kept steering back and forth and gunning their engines, but to no avail. The four boats in the small cove began to float into each other as the men struggled to get their boats to respond. The yelling and screaming started only to be covered up by the sound of the helicopter and the arriving police boats. It was all over before anyone went 10 yards.

Hoss was laughing so hard he couldn’t breathe. Miguel was a little quieter, but was grinning from ear to ear at what they had accomplished.

“Are you telling me, these two stole all the props from those boats?” Littlebear asked Jackson.

“Yeah, we all came out to investigate. You didn’t think I would try this alone did you? I knew the buyers – you two – were coming and so I wanted to stall everyone while these guys made it so no one was going to escape. When they were done with their work, they gave me a signal that it was time to leave. But, by that time, you had grabbed me and then Carlos and his boys showed up, so they had to get back in the water.”

“You guys are nuts.”

“We’ve got a quiet little island here. I don’t want anyone to mess that up.”

The End