

Going Down with the Ship

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Chapter 4

The sound of the explosive charges rippling across the quiet water propelled Jackson Pauley into motion. The flashbacks that helped him put together all the pieces and realize where Andrea was being kept took only milliseconds. He immediately turned and ran for his houseboat and the Boston Whaler tied up beside it.

Within minutes he had the power boat's twin engines fired up and was racing across the water. When Jackson went to the proposed sinking site for the destroyer *USS Beaugard* with Andrea, he had taken it easy. The trip out took him 15 minutes. This time he was racing across the water with his engines wide open and the throttles all the way to the stops. He knew there was no time to waste if Andrea Perez was on board the *Beaugard*. She would drown in a matter of minutes without his help.

On the previous trip to the site, Jackson had recorded the locations into his GPS system. He was manually driving the boat, but using the GPS system to guide him out. As he flew, allowing the keel of the boat to touch the water occasionally, he also assembled his dive gear. He was able to struggle into a shortie wetsuit and throw his scuba unit over his back while he moved. Jackson always kept dive gear on board the boat and maintained full tanks. He had always wanted to be able to dive on a whim. He just never expected his whim would amount to this.

As soon as he pulled up next to the slowly sinking destroyer, Jackson realized that whoever set off the charges to send the ship to the bottom hadn't done it right. The ship was slowly filling with water and had settled down 10 feet, but he guessed he had a few more minutes before the ship was completely submerged. They must have ruptured the floats attached to the hull to keep the new holes cut through the sides above the water, but they hadn't detonated the explosives below the water line that would send water rushing in, and the ship to the bottom in a matter of seconds.

Before jumping off his boat, Jackson selected a second location on the GPS control and engaged the autopilot. The boat began to move off to a spot about 400 yards away. Jackson had entered that location on his first trip to the site when he was looking for a place to drop anchor.

He leapt from the side of the *Daydreamer* onto an interior deck of the massive destroyer through a hole cut in the hull. The workers had intended the hole as an access for a diver, but never one running in full dive gear while the ship was still above water.

Jackson began to search for Andrea on the second deck from the bottom. He searched down every hallway and in every room he could find. Because the ship was slowly flooding, there was no reason to search the decks that were already underwater. If Andrea were below the water, there was no way he could find her swimming through the rushing water. He had to assume she was in an upper deck that hadn't flooded yet.

Finding nothing, Jackson moved up the stairs to the next deck. He continued his search. He was on the same deck as the room filled with toxic waste and chemicals. As Jackson passed by the room containing the chemicals, he noticed the hatch was open. Shining his light inside, he didn't see any sign that anything had changed other than the door being open. There wasn't much room inside, the containers were stacked high and tight, so he didn't spend time searching it.

As Jackson ran, he called out Andrea's name. The noise of the water rushing in, getting louder and louder, made it almost impossible for him to hear his own voice. He knew it would be difficult for Andrea to hear him, if she were still alive. Jackson played his light back and forth as he ran. He was getting tired, running in full dive gear, with his fins strapped to his BCD, but he wasn't going to give up.

On 9/11, he learned what it was like to go beyond what he thought were his own personal limits. He didn't talk about it, he really didn't want to think about it, but he had run back into those buildings several times himself, trying to get people out. And after they collapsed, he spent hours searching through the rubble for survivors – especially his friends and co-workers.

He continued running, ignoring the aching in his lungs, the pounding of his heart and splitting feeling in his side. Jackson turned left down a corridor and ran to the end. The water was rising on this level, slowing his progress.

The water was only a few inches deep, but Jackson knew it wouldn't be too much longer before the ship reached a critical level and then it would drop. He needed to find Andrea and get back out of the ship before that happened.

"Andrea! Andrea! Andrea!" he yelled at the top of his lungs, as well as he could anyway, as he gasped for breath. Doubt began to creep into his mind. *Was she really on board? Had he let his imagination get the best of him?* "Come on, I need to find you!"

As he turned, he heard something. Or thought he did anyway.

"Jackson," came the faint call.

"Andrea. Where are you?"

"In here. In here. Help me, quick," Andrea yelled back.

Jackson pushed open a door. He saw Andrea tied with a rope to a pipe at the back of the compartment. He ran into the room, sliding down onto his knees as the water level continued to rise. It was rushing in faster and faster.

"Jackson, get me out of here," she screamed, almost hysterical, her voice hoarse from yelling for help.

"Hold on. I've got to try and cut this rope," Jackson said as he handed her his light and pulled out his dive knife. He immediately began sawing on the rope. Jackson took excellent care of his

equipment, a throwback to his days as a firefighter, and his dive knife was no exception. He kept the blade clean and ready to use. Its serrated edge began to cut through the rope.

“Why did they do this? What’s going on here? Did you find something?” Andrea asked as he worked.

“Yeah,” he panted. “I don’t know why, but there’s a compartment full of toxic chemicals on board. When I found it, the door was sealed, but now it’s open. I guess they are using the sinking ship to dispose of the waste.”

“Oh, that’s horrible.”

“Ok, you’re free.” Jackson stood and helped Andrea stand at the same time. She was stiff from setting, sore from the blow to the back of her neck and getting cold from the water, but other than that she was fine. And she was mad. She wanted to get back at the people who had ordered her death.

As they made it to the door, suddenly the water came rushing into the ship, flooding the deck and slamming them back inside the compartment. The ship had finally reached the critical point. It was going down. The water was rising too fast.

“There is no way we can get out past this. There’s too much pressure,” Jackson shouted over the terrible noise as the destroyer began to sink. Water rushed into open compartments, slamming doors and wrenching others off their hinges. As rooms filled with water, the ship itself buckled and the steel screamed as if it were being twisted up like a wet dish towel.

“We’ll have to ride the ship to the bottom. Take my alternate air source and hold on tight,” Jackson ordered. “We don’t want to be up in the air pockets as this thing goes down. It will be a smoother ride under the water.”

The water was up to their necks.

“Hold on to me,” he told her as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. “Remember to keep clearing your ears. This thing is going to drop fast, but it won’t seem like we’re falling, until we hit bottom, that is.”

Andrea didn’t have a mask. Jackson hadn’t brought an extra so as the water covered her head, all she could see were vague shapes. The human eye needs an air pocket in front of it to focus properly. Jackson would have to lead her out. It was night, so that wouldn’t make a huge difference, but still it would be more difficult. Jackson glanced up as the remaining air in the room, exploded out into the hallway. Their compartment was completely filled with water.

Jackson could hear Andrea breathing off her regulator. He was impressed. She seemed to be calm and breathing about as normally as possible. The lack of a mask makes it even more difficult for some people to breathe underwater. It takes good breath control to breathe in and out of your mouth when there is water on your nose. Andrea was still holding his dive light so Jackson took it back. The room was totally dark except for that single beam. The only sounds they could hear were the sounds of their own breathing and the creaking and groaning of the ship as it plunged to the bottom. Jackson couldn’t tell how long they had been underwater, until he glanced at his dive computer to check their air consumption and depth. They were at 70 feet and had been underwater about two minutes.

Moments later, they felt the ship strike bottom. Jackson and Andrea had been floating up off the bottom as the boat dropped. As it made contact with the reef, they hit the floor. They were jarred around and then tossed to one side.

The bottom itself was in about 100 feet of water. However, since they were three deck levels from the bottom of the ship itself, they were in about 75 feet of water. After the briefest of

seconds, Jackson signaled to Andrea that they needed to move. They needed to get out. He was concerned the ship would continue to roll and they might get trapped or crushed.

To swim together with both divers breathing off one scuba unit, they have to lock their arms together and swim, almost on top of each other. It is awkward and difficult, but necessary. They swam through the door and Jackson began leading Andrea out by his memory from years spent onboard. Wreck divers normally tie lines off outside the ship so they can find their way back out when they are finished exploring. In this case, however the *Beauregard* wasn't actually a wreck when Jackson entered it. There wouldn't have been any way for him to tie off a line and search through the decks. He was praying his memory held and he could get them both back out.

On top of trying to find their way out of a dark shipwreck at night, he had a time limit to worry about as well. They were both breathing from a single aluminum 80 cubic foot scuba cylinder. At 75 feet, and with the stress of the situation, that air supply wouldn't last very long.

Andrea, of course, didn't have fins, so she couldn't move through the water very efficiently. She did her best, swimming with one arm and her legs as she held onto Jackson, trying to help them move. But then she stopped. She put a flat hand in Jackson's face to signal him to stop as well. They both settled to the deck. As best she could, since she couldn't see, Andrea began giving Jackson signals. She moved her hands like a closing door and then signaled to him, with one hand, making a question mark.

Jackson shook his head, at first without understanding, and then in frustration as he realized what she wanted. After shaking his head angrily twice more, Jackson gave in.

He led Andrea down a side passage until he came to an open door. Jackson pulled on the water-tight door to seal off the compartment containing the toxic waste and chemicals. It was slow to move as the water pressure held it open. The door finally swung out, meeting up with the door facing. Jackson slammed the metal door against the knee-knocker seal and then spun the wheel, sealing the hatch. That compartment was flooded, but sealed off.

Jackson continued leading Andrea back to an exit, when he felt water movement on his face. He knew where the main hatch was, but he guessed there might be a closer exit. Jackson shined the light into another compartment. Through that compartment was a hole in the back into blackness. There was a hole cut in the hull as a diver access point. He dragged Andrea to the hole and they burst out of the steel ship into the open water. Jackson immediately began swimming them both to the surface. He didn't rush the ascent, but he didn't dawdle either. He wasn't panicked, but he knew their air supply was getting low. He sneaked an occasional glance at his computer and realized just how quickly the numbers on the digital pressure gauge were dropping.

Jackson was a stickler for completing safety stops after deep dives. Normally, he would insist on a five-minute pause at 15 to 20 feet just to let any built up nitrogen bleed off. But there were a lot of things he was doing on this dive that he wouldn't normally do on a dive, so they ascended directly to the surface.

All together, the dive itself was only 15 minutes long, but the two of them had nearly breathed through the entire tank. It was down to 300 psi when Jackson's head broke the surface.

He immediately dropped his weight belt and inflated his BCD as far as it would go. He needed to give Andrea some support in the water. He unbuckled the jacket and flattened it out so they could each hold on. They both slipped an arm through an arm hole and floated for a minute.

"I can't believe you made me go close the hatch on the compartment with the toxic waste," Jackson said, more in disbelief than in anger.

"I'm an environmentalist. They just landed this huge ship on a coral reef. It was the least I could do to stop the situation from getting any worse," Andrea replied. Then she laughed. She laughed the laugh of someone who couldn't believe what they had just been through. In some ways, it was almost surreal. But it wasn't. Men had just tried to kill her by sending her to the bottom of the ocean with an artificial reef that they had dropped on top of a real one. Jackson joined in after a second and they both laughed hard and long. Finally, the edge gone, they began to get control of their own emotions and Andrea asked a question.

"All right, so how do we get out of here?" she asked. "Swim back?"

"You haven't noticed, but we've been swimming along while you were giggling like an idiot. We're almost to my boat. It's slowly circling, right over there," Jackson replied.

"Wow, you have all the bases covered, don't you?"

"Hey, I came out here to save you, not die with you. I programmed my boat to go over here so it wouldn't get sucked underwater when the *Beauregard* dropped. I didn't want to try and swim back to shore," Jackson replied.

He left her holding onto the floatation device and kicked the last few dozen yards to his boat. He grabbed a handhold and climbed up. Jackson turned the boat, steering it to Andrea, and then placed the engines in neutral. He quickly helped her on board and they both sat down for a minute to catch their breath and collect their thoughts.

Jackson grabbed a towel for Andrea and pulled off his wetsuit. The only lights on the boat that were illuminated were the mandatory running lights and a small dashboard light.

He looked around to get his bearings. He saw the coast and lights from town not too far away. And then he saw one of them move. There was another boat moving around, heading toward the place where the *Beauregard* went down.

"Jackson, I..."

But Andrea never got the rest of the sentence out. Jackson quickly clamped his hand over her mouth. He watched quietly as the boat slowly moved around, almost exactly over top of the sunken ship. Jackson, Andrea and the *Daydreamer* were about 400 yards away floating on the surface. With the engines in neutral, they were almost perfectly quiet. Bubbles continually broke the surface as air escaped from the sunken ship. It continued to cause enough background noise to keep the people on the other boat from hearing them.

There was a problem though. The other boat was between Jackson and the shore. They couldn't run for it, if these other guys were the bad guys, without having to get past them. There was only one entrance to the harbor and the second boat was directly between them and it.

Jackson got out his binoculars, and wished he had invested in night vision goggles like a friend suggested just a few days before. He did his best to see what the people on the other boat were doing.

After a moment, he realized they were preparing to make a night dive onto the ship. He saw them test dive lights and don their dive gear. He whispered to Andrea, telling her what was going on and to hold on.

"Why're they doing that?" Andrea asked.

"Probably going to check on you. They can't very well have people discover you tomorrow with a rope tied to your leg. They'll want it to look as if you were snooping around, set the charges off and died in the process," Jackson replied.

As soon as the other men jumped in the water, Jackson quickly moved to the captain's chair on his boat and slammed the throttle of both engines all the way forward.

His boat leapt up and forward like it was shot from a cannon. Dark and distance had made it impossible for Jackson to see the third man on board the boat. With no regard for his fellows, the man restarted his boat and took off in chase. His reaction time was a little off – he hadn't expected another boat on the scene – and that gave Jackson a chance. Still the other boat was chasing as quickly as it could. Jackson couldn't tell exactly what type of boat was behind him. It was smaller than the Boston Whaler, but the growl of its engines as it came up on plane behind him, told him it was running on gasoline engines and it could probably move faster than he could.

“Coast Guard, Coast Guard, this is Jackson Pauley on the *Daydreamer*, and I have an emergency. Am being chased by a man in a racing boat and I think...” Jackson was forced to duck as a bullet struck his boat, just in front of where he was standing. “Correction Coast Guard, am being fire upon by the chasing boat,” Jackson finished.

“*Daydreamer*, this is Coast Guard. Say again. What is the nature of your emergency?”

“Men tried to kill Andrea Perez on board the *USS Beauregard* tonight and are trying to kill both of us right now,” Jackson yelled into his radio microphone as he attempted to maneuver the boat toward land, while staying away from the cracks of gunfire he heard coming from the chasing boat.

“*Daydreamer*. This is Coast Guard. You said Andrea Perez. We have reports from Seashore Engineering that she is the one who sank the *Beauregard* prematurely. Local law enforcement is currently looking for her.”

“Well, she's with me, but there's a man in an unidentified boat chasing us and trying to kill us,” Jackson yelled. “

“*Daydreamer*. What is your location? We are scrambling boats to your assistance and are alerting local authorities.”

“We are five minutes out from the Nitro Landing dock. We are heading straight in on a heading of 270 degrees. I don't want to turn on any lights, though, because I don't want this guy to get a clear shot at us.”

As Jackson was busy driving and talking to the Coast Guard, he didn't notice the other boat was getting close. He only saw what was about to happen as the man driving the boat surfed his way up on Jackson's wake and tried to drop down on top of the Boston Whaler's stern.

Jackson swerved sharply back across the other boat's path, and then pulled back hard on his engines, cutting off the wake the other boat was riding. The chase boat overshot the *Daydreamer* badly. By the time he had a chance to recover, Jackson had throttled back up and pulled away. Jackson was quickly realizing that the other boat was faster than his own. He needed to do something quick or they might not make it back to the dock or reach the help of the coast guard and county sheriff. He was sure he wouldn't be able to pull that trick again.

The pursuing boat was gaining ground quickly. Jackson heard another report from the pursuer's gun and saw a hole appear just feet ahead of him in the center console of his boat. He was running out of time and space to maneuver. To get back to shore, Jackson had to enter the harbor through an opening in a man-made breakwater. The rocks were piled 20 feet high all along the front of the natural curvature, with an opening to one side.

The man in the other boat was herding him away from that opening. He knew Jackson would have to go that way. Any other place to make a landing was a few miles away and that would mean precious time for the chasing boat to catch him. Jackson continued to maneuver as best he could, but with each turn or twist, the other boat got that much closer. The next time would be it.

He couldn't stay out of his way forever. And obviously, the man had no concern about crashing the two boats together or shooting him.

"*Daydreamer. Daydreamer.* This is Coast Guard. What's your position?"

"We are almost to the opening of the breakwater, but I'm afraid we're going to get cut off. Isn't there anything you can do to help," Jackson shouted over the roaring engines. "Where are you guys?"

"Hold on *Daydreamer.* The cavalry is coming."

Jackson dodged to his left to get a better shot at the opening of the breakwater when the time came. As he cleared the opening, he suddenly saw the entire harbor bathed in light. Even over the noise of his own twin diesels, he heard the overwhelming sound of every boat in the marina heading out to sea with every light on board lit up. The cavalry was coming indeed.

The fastest three boats rounded the corner and headed straight for Jackson. Five more boats broke clear of the harbor in rapid succession. Seeing the oncoming boats, the man in the chase boat broke off and attempted to head south. He was trying to get away. The three fastest boats ripped past Jackson and cut off the fleeing boat. They wanted to head him north, right into the responding Coast Guard patrol boat. Within a few minutes, the chase was over.

Back on shore, everything was in chaos. Glenn Downing was threatening everyone around him – telling anyone who would listen that Andrea had sabotaged his artificial reef ceremony. Finally someone pointed out to him that it wasn't like stealing a 30-foot cruiser. To move a destroyer into a position, any position, took heavy equipment and tug boats. Downing would have known this if he had ever actually done anything with the preparation of the boat, or asked questions of the men from Seashore Engineering. He finally realized it wasn't something she could do on her own. And then the reality of the situation began to dawn on him.

As soon as Jackson's feet touched the dock, he grabbed the closest deputy sheriff and asked to speak to the man's boss. Within minutes, Sheriff Waldo Porter was standing in front of him.

"Son, I don't know what all is going on here, but I'm a gonna get to the bottom of it," Porter said before Jackson got a word out.

"Sheriff, I don't have time to explain, but Andrea Perez here is an investigator with a group in Ft. Lauderdale. She uncovered evidence that the men preparing the *Beauregard* for sinking were actually using it to release toxic chemicals into the ocean to dispose of them. She was kidnapped and left to die on the ship. There are two divers out there right now who, I would guess, were supposed to cut her loose from the rope holding her leg and make it look like she sabotaged the ship," Jackson said, all in one breath, trying to get as much out as possible. "You need to round up the owners of the company, Seashore Engineering, who put all this together. There is kidnapping, attempted murder and dumping toxic waste, just for a start."

"Sounds like you got it all wrapped up, nice and neat," Porter replied with a wry grin.

"No, Sheriff, I don't have a clue what's going on or why," Jackson laughed. "I'm just glad to be back on shore. I never thought I'd say this, but that's one dive I don't ever want to make again – at least from the inside."

Epilogue

It took a while for the police, the Coast Guard and everyone else to straighten it all out, but eventually they did.

Glenn Downing got a lot of media attention and press in the next few weeks, but not the kind he was looking for. He was revealed to be a fool and a complete dupe of the company preparing the ship. While he wasn't criminally responsible, everyone blamed him for being too trusting and naïve. He never worked around the water again.

Colin Parker, the director of Seashore Engineering was charged with conspiracy to commit kidnapping, murder, extortion and fraud. He was also charged with improper disposal of toxic waste. It turned out, Parker's company had been dumping toxic waste at night in the general area of where they sank the *Beauregard* for several years. That explained the overall unhealthy look of the reef. He was planning to leave the country with the final take from this contract, but local authorities caught him at the airport in Miami just as he was boarding a plane. Ultimately, Parker revealed – in an effort to get a reduced sentence – that they had placed the chemicals on board, hoping that it wouldn't leak out for a while, but that the leaking would help cover up the barrels and crates that were already on the site.

Jackson and Andrea hadn't seen the barrels on their first dive because, over time, they had gotten covered up with plant and coral life. The hull of the *Beauregard* striking the bottom exposed several barrels.

Commercial salvage divers were able to raise the *Beauregard* off the bottom and move it away from the reef, onto the patch of sand nearby. As soon as the ship was repositioned, the divers set to work removing the barrels of toxic waste from both the ship and the reef. By all appearances, they would be busy for several months. Local divers were forbidden to dive on the new wreck until it was all cleaned up.

Eventually, the coral reef would recover from the *Beauregard* landing on it. It would probably take years, but it would recover.

Andrea Perez got the media attention that Downing hoped would be his. She attracted new attention to overall concerns with the health of coral reef systems and the importance of protecting them. She was offered jobs all over the country as a consultant to help create artificial reefs.

Jackson Pauley continued diving and working as dive instructor in the islands. He still didn't want to be a hero or be famous and deflected any attention he received for his role in breaking up the plot surrounding the sinking of the *Beauregard*. He just wanted to be left alone. He never made a dive on the *Beauregard* again.

Andrea's career took her around the world. But, she made an effort to get back to visit Jackson whenever she could.