

Pack

Leader

Down

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Nathan B. Tracy

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The Pelican

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Dedication

To my wife, Martha

She raised my biological children, was a foster mother to over fifty children over twenty years, and the adoptive mother of Amanda and Anthony

Nathan Bartlett Tracy II and his wife Amber

Nathan Bartlett Tracy III

Austin Tracy

Toddington Shipley Tracy and Mary Tracy

Emily Tracy

William Tracy

Lark Bliss Holden (Tracy)

Whitney Holden

Forrest Holden

Lois Collier Moffett (Tracy)

Savannah Moffett

Amanda Dawn Sumner (Tracy) and Steve Sumner

Ayden Sumner

Tristan Sumner

Anthony Patrick Tracy (unmarried)

Sandy—biological mother of Bart, Todd, Lark, and Lois

CHAPTER 1

The Ledge

“Cut your power and swing left,” Cowboy screamed toward the pilot station at the top of his lungs. He was aft, working on the tarp covering the fish hold hatches.

Rushing forward, he screamed again, “Do it! Cut power and turn full to port—that’s left to you, stupid! ass.” He was running through the crew quarters and could see the pilot station on the other side of the galley. It was empty. Then he saw the captain, who was supposed to be conning the vessel, pouring coffee in the galley. The next words were too vile to record.

He ran toward the pilot station, shouldering the captain out of the way in the galley, spinning him around in a shower of scalding coffee.

He entered the pilot station at a run. As he reached the spoked wheel, he came to a stop, grasping a spoke with his left hand just as the channel marker slammed against the starboard bow. Then the vessel stopped suddenly as her forefoot struck the ledge. Cowboy was thrown against the wheel. The governor on the V 12-71 GM engine kicked in, feeding power to the propeller, skidding the vessel forward with the sound of grinding timbers and torn metal. Then the stern settled with a crash as the rudder struck, and the propeller thrashed against the ledge. The spoked wheel spun violently as the rudder struck the ledge and twisted as the rudder shaft was pulled from its guard. The spinning wheel caught on Cowboy’s clothing, lifting him off the floor and tossing him to the overhead.

Shuddering from stem to stern, the vessel ground to a stop. The impact threw the captain forward from the galley, sliding him into the pilot station on his belly. He scrambled to his feet by grasping Cowboy’s belt, whose shirt was still tangled in the spokes of the wheel. He hauled himself erect

while grasping the transmission control and jerking it into neutral. The big diesel engine was revving because the shaft had snapped and released the load of the propeller. He pulled the throttle to idle.

Cowboy untangled himself from the now stationary wheel and leaned against the bulkhead, holding his bruised side and trying to work the fingers of his damaged left hand. He turned to the captain and slapped him hard with the back of his right hand, cursing violently. Then he planted his yellow cowboy hat firmly on his head and polished each beige boot by rubbing it on the back cuff of his Levi's.

There was a crunching and grinding sound as the current swung the vessel clear of the ledge.

"We're making water!" a crewman hollered from aft. "The shaft log has broken open and water is pouring in!"

Holding his side and limping, Cowboy made his way aft at a run. "Get the engine pump on line," he shouted. "Pull up an engine-room bilge hatch and check the bilges to see how much water she is making."

He shouted again at a crewman emerging from the engine room.

"Get your tail to the bow and drop the anchor before we get washed aground. Everyone, listen up! With the cargo on board, we will all be in jail by morning if the cops come looking. Let's do what we need to do quickly."

The captain, who was supposed to be conning the vessel, limped aft with blood running from his nose. "Look, Cowboy, I didn't know about that hazard marker. This is my first time up the Anclote River as captain."

"Listen, jerk, you may be the temporary captain of this vessel, but if I ever see you again, you will be a dead man if we don't get this boat unloaded tonight. King may kill you himself. He doesn't like screwups, so make yourself scarce, if we ever make it to the dock."

"Cowboy," a scrawny-looking crew said quietly, "I've seen a glimpse of a big, black boat pulling away from a dock over there." He pointed to the north side of the river. "I mostly come to tell you that the pumps are keeping up with the water, but we have a bellyful already."

"Is the cargo dry?"

"Yes, sir, it's all OK, except maybe in the lazarette. If the bow lifts much, all the water will flood aft and possibly flood the cargo."

"See to it that everything stays dry," he growled.

Cowboy scanned the darkness and made out the low silhouette of a forty footer moving in front of the lights on shore, blinking them out for

a moment. It didn't show any navigation lights. Then he saw a glint of a thin gold stripe that went from stem to stern. It was King's hopped-up vessel.

Cowboy found the captain with the bleeding nose in the galley washing his face in the sink. He hunched his shoulders and appeared frightened of the approaching man. "Your name is Gill, right? You sure aren't a first mate or a captain, and I'm not calling you one."

"Gill, you better be competent with the anchor and a towline if you hope to live. Get forward and rig a towline to a boat coming alongside.

Rig the anchor line to the cathead and get someone to man the clutch while you handle stuff on the bow. Keep the engine at idle so we will have electricity and engine power to the winch."

The man responded by running to the anchor chute, elbowing the other crew out of the way and knocking out the keeper pin and shoving the anchor overboard. When the line went slack, he let some run out and then pulled a loop back to a snatch block and then ran the line to the cathead of the winch and took a turn. He handed the line to the other crew who stood near the clutch handle of the winch.

Then he dropped down through the forward hatch and climbed through the opening into the anchor locker. He pulled out a coil of one-inch nylon and tossed it to the deck. He followed, making the bitter end down on the Sampson post, adding several half hitches to the tail. Panting and still bleeding, he waited for the word to pass the towline.

King brought his vessel alongside and tossed a light line to Cowboy.

He was red faced and scowling with anger, threatening to shoot the entire crew. Cowboy kept his right hand on a bulge under the left armpit of his windbreaker. His damaged left hand lightly held the painter from King's boat, after taking a turn on a cleat.

"Cowboy, I'm holding you responsible for this screwup. If we get caught, you are going to die one way or another. Here is what you do, and you better succeed. Get his boat unloaded and then get it hauled someplace, and get it power-sprayed in and out and from one end to the other before dawn.

"The plan was that this boat would be out in the gulf by dawn and the crew using the pumps to wash it down. Now we change plans. I want all of the crew out of town as soon as we unload. How you get them out is up to you. Pay as much as you need to keep things quiet. You stick around and make sure the boat gets cleaned out. After that you can take off. Screw up again and you are history.

“One last thing, if that insurance adjuster, Bart Casey, gets wind of this, I want him floating out to sea, face down. You got that?”

King finished his instructions and took the towline. The trawler’s anchor was winched into the anchor chute and stowed. At just above an idle, the forty-foot go-faster used its thousand horsepower to pull the shrimper slowly to an old dock, unseen, in a pitch-black lagoon.

A large U-Haul was backed to the edge of the dock, the driver not daring to put any weight on the rotten planks. The driver and his helper, along with the crew from the shrimper, began transferring the cargo.

King backed his boat away and hid behind some brush on the riverbank, watching through his binoculars. Another shrimp boat was standing by to tow *Lazy Boy* away. As the loaded truck pulled out, King eased the black boat into the channel and quietly made his way toward Clearwater Bay.

CHAPTER 2

The Warning

Bart Casey slowed his car down to keep the dust rising from the dirt road to a minimum. The dark waters of Anclote River were on his left, and across the river was a large modern restaurant perched partly over the water. The business center of Tarpon Springs was a single line of old buildings two blocks long. They faced the road which followed the river, edged by seawalls and docks.

Restored sponge boats lined the dock near the seawall, adorned with strings of sponges and brightly colored buoys rigged to the short masts like Christmas decorations. An old diving suit with a brass helmet swayed above the deck, the lead shoes stretching the old material.

There was a lot of bright blue and very red paint on the old vessels, as well as radiant white glistening on the work-worn hulls. It was an effort to capture the romance of fifty years ago. The brightly painted hulls reminded Bart of several heavily made-up ladies that he once saw sitting on barstools in Las Vegas. The display was a bit too garish for his taste but appealing to the camera-toting visitors.

Bart was known in most marinas and boatyards in the area as an excellent marine insurance adjuster and marine surveyor. He carried an all lines insurance adjuster license and was an active member of a large marine surveying organization. The combination of his adjuster and surveyor credentials was unusual, qualifying him to handle almost any marine claim from yachts to shrimpers to tankers, barges, tugs, sailboats, powerboats, or cargoes. His marine surveyor credential proved his ability to investigate, estimate damages, and report without prejudice on almost any marine casualty. He was technically up to date but loved the older vessels, especially the ones made of wood. His competitors didn't

understand wood construction and its problems and were afraid of the legal implications, leaving the field wide open to him.

Bart remembered the real workboats, weather-beaten and covered with machinery, stained with oil, and bleeding rust from deteriorating fasteners. After a good catch they were laden with sponges, with hundreds drying in the rigging. A sponge exchange across the docks offered bins of sponges of many kinds and quality, selling wholesale to the traders and retail to the usually badly sunburned tourists. That was the era before imitation sponges, when men washed their cars every Saturday with the real thing.

Bart turned his eyes back to the gravel road, slowing in a wide spot and steering his car near a high chain-link fence. Even before he turned off the engine, two German Shepherds and one huge Doberman were bunched behind the gate, barking and not looking friendly. Over their heads, fastened to the gate was a large sign with the words painted in red letters, “Marine Repair—Keep Out—Guard Dogs.”

Bart spoke to the dogs and they backed away slowly, still barking. He visited the yard every few weeks so they were at least acquainted with him, even if not satisfied that he had the right to be there. One was showing a lot of teeth and the hackles at his shoulders were raised. Bart didn’t recognize him. He usually got along with dogs easily, but the Doberman wasn’t responding in a friendly manner.

“It’s OK,” an unseen man shouted. “Let the guy in and we’ll eat him later if he causes trouble.” Laughter followed. The dogs drifted back behind piles of old propellers, nets, damaged trawl doors, stacks of rough-cut two-inch lumber, old winches, outriggers, and a thousand other things. The relics created a visual foreground for the large shrimp boat that was on the left-hand marine railroad and a smaller one about sixty-five feet in length was beside it on the ways to the right.

In order to make repairs or paint the bottom of large boats, it was necessary to “haul” them. This yard used railroad tracks that went into the water to a depth of ten or twelve feet. A dolly was rolled down into the water under the belly of the vessel. A winch then pulled the dolly and the vessel out of the water. Large timbers were placed under the vessel to hold her steady and prevent further damage.

Other commercial fishing boats were moored at the “marine repair” docks that followed the river. Three shrimpers were rafted together, all of them over seventy feet long and twenty feet wide, their masts and outriggers pointing toward the sky.

The big dog, a bulky Doberman, was still snarling and circling around Casey, keeping piles of junk between himself and Casey just as the German Shepherds were doing in a slightly friendlier manner.

Bart scanned the area and then noticed a figure standing on the bow of the large shrimper on the ways. A winch cable was attached to the bow. Wooden blocks chocked the wheels of the dolly. The deck of the shrimper was at least eighteen feet or more above the land, accessed by an aluminum ladder leaning against the hull.

The speaker was standing on the bow with his legs obscured by the high bulwarks that circled the decks of the shrimp trawler. Casey grinned as his eyes followed the lines of the vessel. He loved the utilitarian look of shrimp trawlers.

The high and upswept bow handled rough water, the low amidships facilitated the hauling of nets, and the high stern protected it from waves from the rear. The full rounded belly held the fish-holds, the huge diesel engine, and tanks holding many thousands of gallons of diesel fuel. The heavy timbers of the keel and skeg gave the vessels a strong backbone and protected the bottom from rocks or coral heads. These trawlers were designed for utility, not for aesthetics.

“Hey dogs, shut up. This guy Casey is OK. Casey, that big dog is new and doesn’t know you, so act real casual. Come on up. Once he sees you with me, he’ll calm down.”

The ladder bounced under Bart’s weight as he climbed upward. He smiled back as he climbed above the dog pawing at the lower rungs he had just left. He finally made it to the top, climbing over the bulwarks and dropping to the deck. He went forward around the pilothouse to the bow.

Pete, owner of the boatyard, was the king of this domain. He had one hip against the bulwark and one foot on the anchor chute that held a huge Danforth anchor, the chain dropping through a bronze hawse pipe set into the deck and into the chain locker below.

“What brings you visiting today?” Pete asked the question with a welcoming grin on his leathery face. His last name was Greek and about twenty funny-looking letters long. He was just “Pete” to Bart and the non-Greek patrons of the boatyard.

“I’m here to look at *Lazy Boy* over there on the other ways.” Bart nodded in the direction of the smaller shrimper on the other side. Its name was stenciled on both sides of the bow. “Someone called the insurance company about an hour ago and said she had been damaged. I see she is still dripping, so you must have just hauled her.”

“I hauled her first thing this morning because she was taking on water through her shaft log. I called the owner, and I guess he called the insurance company. She hit that big rock ledge in the channel, bounced her skeg over it, and caught the prop and the rudder. The impact bent the prop and snapped the prop shaft, and that tore out the shaft gland and then bent the rudder shaft clear out of the guard.”

“Nobody has hit that rock in a long time, not since they put that buoy on it,” said Bart.

“It was dark, Casey, about 2:00 a.m., and they was in a hurry and making a swing without lights to unload onto that old dock that’s about falling.

The captain is from down Keys and has only been here once or twice. The jerk at the wheel was having a cup of coffee in the galley. The owner is laid up and real bad off sick, so he let his first mate take over as captain for a trip or two.”

“I guess you have a story to tell about them running without lights, using the old dock, and unloading in the middle of the night and a jerk at the wheel.”

“I’ve got nothing to say, Casey. It’s not healthy these days to ask too many questions.”

“If you don’t mind, Pete, I’ll go over and climb around some. I can look at the shaft gland and make an inspection tour of the inside. The insurance company asked me to look around and give them a report on her general condition as well as handle the claim. She hasn’t been surveyed for several years.”

“We’re friends,” Pete said, as he took off his baseball cap and fingered the bandana tied at his neck. He smoothed his wet hair and put the cap back on with the bill to his back. His dark complexion and prominent nose was signature Greek. He was of medium height, thin and muscular wearing a wide leather belt, the buckle fastened at his hip. He was obviously worried about something. “If I was you, I’d just look at the bottom damage and forget about any inspection of the inside. If I was you, I wouldn’t even look up after you checked the damage.” His voice did not have the sound of humor in it as it usually did, and the serious tone matched his frown-creased forehead.

“You sound very serious, Pete. What’s up?”

“Let’s just say, the crew unloaded cargo late last night and hasn’t had a chance to clean up the ice holds, bow spaces, lazarette, and such. Getting towed to that old dock, unloading, keeping her pumped out, and towed

here has kept the crew busy. They just left an hour or so ago—if they all left. I think one crew member is across the road in that old, derelict fifty footer that's rotting in the pepper berry bushes. The dogs keep looking over there and staying near the fence.”

“Can you explain why they would offload on that old dock, in the dark, and why would they want to clean the bow spaces, lazarette, and such? Sounds like their cargo may not have been shrimp. Nobody puts shrimp or fish in the bow space or the lazarette. Now I see wisps of spray in the air around *Lazy Boy*, so you already have guys pressure-washing the fish hold and probably everything else.”

“We had them cleaning up at first light, just after one of those shrimpers rafted down there pulled her in. I'm not explaining anything, Casey, but I will tell you this that you going on that boat will be real dangerous. You might like to know that somebody—not saying who—may have seen your friend King waiting near that old dock for the *Lazy Boy* to come in. It's said he left quick after a big U-Haul truck pulled in and they offloaded the cargo.”

“Nobody puts fish in a U-Haul truck. Now I'm getting your message, Pete. You know I really would love to tie King into something illegal. He has killed at least four people so far, two of them kids.”

“I understand your feelings, Bart. I know a lot about things going on—mostly about local boys trying to make a living, and with the shrimp off as they are they may be doing a bit of illegal stuff. But they are just guys. King is seriously bad and dangerous. Some say he is big time and may be tied to the rough guys in Tampa.”

“I hear you, Pete. And maybe that guy in the bushes over there is going to report everything he sees and hears, and if he has seen me get too nosy, I might not make it home. That really makes my belly hurt. How do you know for sure he's there?”

“One of the guys on the boat, after unloading, rode it up here to give me my instructions to clean up *Lazy Boy* and to give me a bundle of cash.

They had called me at home at about 3:30 a.m. He had on a beige cowboy hat and beige-colored boots. I have seen him before and it's said he is second in command of King's operations. He's the field man that does the dirty work while King keeps out of sight. They call him 'Cowboy.' Well, the dogs were acting anxious, and when I glanced up I just caught sight of a part of one leg and a beige boot as he sneaked into the cabin of that derelict. For just a flash, I saw him peeping out of one

of the portholes and I think I saw part of his hat. I wouldn't even glance that way, Bart."

Pete said quickly.

"It's hard not to look now that you have told me about it." Bart chuckled. "I take it he is making sure no one gets on board except your guys, or if someone does to get word to King or take care of it one way or the other."

"You got it, my friend. If you go on board that boat and find funny stuff you are as good as dead—believe what I say. You're on thin ice already—as I am sure you know, because of all of your snooping around about King."

"You know I had the claim on King's go-faster that chopped up the two fishermen down in the Narrows. I had to ask around a lot because no one would give me a straight answer," Bart replied.

"I know that, Bart, but I bet that King doesn't know you are working the insurance claim for *Lazy Boy* hitting that rock. My bet is that when he finds out you are here; he will figure out that you are still hunting for evidence for his killing those two guys with his souped-up boat. Casey, the word is that he's serious about putting you down and out of action one way or another."

"How about you? You know a lot more about what goes on than I do."

"I guess I am ashamed to say it, but I know a lot of stuff, but everyone knows I keep my mouth shut and that I mind my own business. I wouldn't even be telling you if you weren't in so much danger. My men won't say a word, and for all I know they may even work for King once in a while.

That's why I hire them. They are true professionals when it comes to not knowing anything about anybody—when asked."

"I sure would like to call the DEA and let them check the *Lazy Boy* and tell them about King being here."

"Look, Bart, you don't know anything for sure. You personally haven't seen, smelled, or heard a thing. The captain and crew are long gone. All that will happen is that the boat will be confiscated and the owner will be ruined. He has troubles enough with his health and is a real nice man and has been thinking about selling the boat. I've been fixing and maintaining the boat since the day he bought it. I don't think he has any idea what his boat has been used for."

"No one will be arrested," Pete continued. "Nothing good will happen, and I will lose a darn good job fixing and redoing the whole boat—which I have already been paid for in cash—by somebody other than the owner.

If you blow the whistle, the owner, who is a dying man, won't have a refurbished boat to sell so that his wife will be able to keep eating."

"You know how to lay it on a man, don't you? I still don't feel right about it but I see your point. The bad guys would all get away. The good guys all lose and I would probably get shot in the process. And as you pointed out, the poor prospective widow would starve to death."

"That's the way of it, and I need to tell you, Casey, one of my guys heard that 'someone' is willing to pay for you to have an accident—the more serious the accident, the more the reward."

"That's scary news, Pete. I never thought that just nosing around about King would cause that much response. For the first time I am actually afraid for my own life. You know, Pete, I have been planning for months to take some vacation. I'm going to sail down to the Keys for two weeks starting this weekend. Now it looks like I'm running away."

"That may be a good thing, Casey. Go for it!"

"OK, Pete. You know best about this kind of thing. Call my assistant, Billy, if anything comes up while I am gone. He's the best guy for shrimp boats."

"Don't sweat it, Casey. I'll be working on *Lazy Boy* for a month or more. I got paid plenty and need to take enough time to look like I earned it. When you get back, we can sort out the cost of repairs caused by the grounding that the insurance company owes. Take your time."

Bart laughed along with Pete, but was still privately wrestling with the morality issue and the appearance of running away. On the one hand, he wanted to call the authorities, while on the other hand, he realized that it would cause more problems than it would resolve. He promised himself to think about it on his cruise to the Keys.

"Here is what I would do," Pete said with a hand on Bart's shoulder.

"I'd climb down, walk over to the *Lazy Boy* and just look at the damage to the shaft and such, and take a few pictures. They want me to pressure-clean the whole boat inside and outside, repaint inside, and repaint all the rigging, topsides, and hull. Once she is all cleaned up, you can come back and do your inspection, and no one will worry because there won't be any evidence of whatever went on."

"It sounds like a practical move," Bart said reluctantly.

"When you are through inspecting the underwater gear, give me a shout and I will climb down and walk you to the fence to act like I am protecting you from the dogs. When we get to the gate, you tell me loud enough for that guy in the bushes to hear that you are taking off for a

two weeks' vacation. I wouldn't mention sailing down to the Keys. He will report to King or someone that you didn't go inside the boat so you couldn't have seen anything, and on top of that you are going on vacation.

It may take you out of their gun sights."

"OK," said Bart, "but how about you? They must know that you know what is going on."

"Don't sweat it, my friend. I have known enough to put half the town in jail and have never said a word. Everyone knows that I have friends that know what I know and that killing me will just take the lid off a lot of stink. Both the honest and the dishonest know that I will do a good job for a good price and they know I just mind my own business, like I told you. It's a standoff and it works. You have to do business different today than what we did before drugs."

As Pete opened the gate, a pickup truck came to a stop in the center of the dirt road. "Hey, Pete," the driver called from his window, "anything exciting happening?"

"Hi, Glenn, you stopping in front of my gate is the biggest news I can think of," said Pete. "It's not often that Mr. Concrete, Glenn Keys, stops to chat. This here is a marine insurance adjuster, Bart Casey. He's got an insurance claim on that little shrimper over there."

"I'm not sure it's smart being this guy's friend, Casey." Glenn laughed at his own wisecrack. "Well, Pete, you promised me a ride on your shrimp boat before I retire and move to North Carolina and turn from being a Cracker to a Tar Heel, hillbilly, mountain man, or whatever. Whatever they call me, I will still be just a red-neck working guy that lucked out."

Glenn grinned and his rugged face glowed in spite of his ruddy complexion and rough skin—cooked by too many years of hard work and sunshine.

"Whereabouts in North Carolina, Mr. Keys?" Bart asked.

"Near Lake Junaluska—just north of Waynesville, Mr. Casey. But Mr. Keys was my father, I'm Glenn."

"Glad to meet a neighbor, Glenn. I'm Bart. I have some land up in Fines Creek, about seventeen miles north of Wal-Mart, a few miles off 209."

"Wal-Mart, that's the local meeting place," Glenn said with a chuckle.

"And I can see 209 from my place."

Just then his CB radio squawked. Glenn said, "We have a big pour about to start—thick slab for a commercial building. Glad to see you

guys, but gotta go. Look me up, Bart.” He waved, put the truck in gear, and left in a cloud of dust.

“That’s one fine gentleman,” said Pete. Then he raised his voice so that the man in the derelict could hear. “Have a good vacation, Casey. I envy you going out of town for two weeks.” Pete winked at Bart. “Sorry, I couldn’t let you on the boat today, but everything will be ready for you to inspect in about a month, so take your time.”

Bart turned his back to the derelict and spoke in a quiet voice.

“Someone is spending a lot of money on an old wooden boat, Pete.”

“Someone hit the jackpot last night with the cargo from *Lazy Boy*,”

Pete replied in a low tone, as he turned to shake Bart’s hand. “Listen, I know that after that talk we had last year about you praying for me, that it’s my turn to start praying for you. Don’t expect much because you know I don’t have a very good connection yet.”

“Pete, once you are connected, the connection is fine, so keep on praying.”

Bart opened the door of his car and started the engine. Before closing the door, he nodded to Pete with a smile and mouthed, “Thanks, friend,” then made a U-turn and headed home.