

A Deadly Bargain— Plan C

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All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

Roy Hastings cut the single Detroit-diesel engine on his 45-foot Fort Pierce dive boat. The storm winds, already whipping with menacing force, beat the rain against his unshaven face like jabs of a thousand tiny darts.

He'd set out from Avalon Harbor as soon as he got word of the storm—bound and determined not to let that stinkin' *El Niño* take his precious *Little Maria* the way it had claimed *The Sweet Life* back in '82.

Not that the *Little Maria* was anything elaborate or notably valuable—at least in the eyes of a marine-craft appraiser. As boats go, she was as common as they come. *She's functional*, Roy remembered thinking to himself the day he bought her. She'd carry all the divers, fishermen, and equipment they'd want to take along on chartered trips. She didn't offer any sleeping quarters, fancy furniture, or shiny chrome and brass points, but she did have a modest galley and a head—that certainly counted for something. No, an appraiser wouldn't put the same value on her that Roy did. To him, she was more than a boat—much more. She gave him independence. She gave him freedom to do what he loved. She gave him life—his life. In his eyes, she was priceless.

He finished tying the last bowline in a nylon rope and struggled to keep a tight hold on the sea anchor attached to it. The wind caught the parachute-like device and threatened to carry it, along with Roy, over the railing into the nine-foot swells, waiting to swallow the vessel in one giant gulp. In the past, Roy used an old surplus parachute to keep his bow into the wind, but this storm gave him a bad feeling. After the devil-sent storms of '82 beat his boat against the rocks until it broke into a thousand pieces of splintered wood, Roy took to weathering the storms at sea. He'd take his chances and go down with the ship if it came to that, but he wasn't about to let the elements take his only means of livelihood, again—not without a fight.

The brand new, bright-red nylon anchor whipped in the wind and the hardware beat against his arms and chest. He swore under his breath and shook his fist at the gloomy, black sky. When he finally had the lines secured, he hurled the big, awkward thing overboard and watched the wind catch it, like a drag-chute on a racecar. The anchor settled itself on the surface, then sank

slowly into the turbulent sea. When the water rose up over his head, he saw the red fabric lurk in the swells like the tongue of a giant boat-eating monster.

He raised his face and scowled at the black clouds that loomed overhead, preying on the *Little Maria*. "You're not gettin' this one!" he swore.

The deck pitched and rolled with the huge swells. Roy clung to the rail as he made his way to the cabin door. A lightning strike off the port side, followed by a clap of thunder, shook him in his shoes. He lost his grip on the rail and fell to the deck. He climbed back to his feet and reached for the door handle. Opening the door, he remembered he'd left his only pair of binoculars on the flybridge. He considered leaving them there to fend for themselves, but common sense reminded him he'd need them. He closed the door and hiked his jacket collar up around his neck to keep the rain from running down his back.

Roy set one foot on the first rung of the slippery ladder and then climbed. Halfway up, his foot slipped and he banged his shin on the hard metal bar. Though he was cold and numb, he was sure it drew blood. He cursed again.

The binoculars slipped off the console and landed under the pilot seat. Roy picked them up, held them to his wind-beaten face, then scanned the roller-coaster horizon. When the *Little Maria* reached the top of the swell, he spotted a yacht in the distance, off the port side. Then his boat fell to the bottom of the wave and he lost sight of the vessel. He waited for the crest of the swell five more times to get a good look at the neighboring yacht, then made his way down to the shelter of the cabin.

The yacht must have been at least a hundred-footer, maybe even bigger from the looks of it. *Some fancy yacht for sure*, Roy thought to himself. *They must be out there weathering the storm, same as me.*

He shed his soaked windbreaker and grabbed a towel from the head to dry his drenched hair. "Long night," he said to himself as he peered out the window and cringed at the solid wall of water facing him.

It was nearly three in the morning before the storm finally subsided. Exhausted, Roy peeled off his soaked clothes and slipped into a pair of dry jeans and a zip-up sweatshirt. He poured a cup of hot coffee from a thermos, but fell asleep before he took the first sip.

He woke, still sitting at the galley table with his head resting on his folded arms. The sun peeked through the porthole and caught him square in the eyes.

He stepped onto the deck and smiled at the clear sky. "Told ya you couldn't have her—didn't I!"

He inspected the condition of the *Little Maria*. She was still afloat—that was most important. His smile turned to a frown when he saw the radio-antenna cable dangling in the breeze—missing the antenna.

The water, calm and smooth as glass, was a far cry from the horrible monster of the night before. Roy hauled in the sea anchor and spread it out on the deck to dry. He climbed up to the flybridge and scanned the horizon for the yacht he'd seen the night before. She was nowhere in sight.

"Hmm. Probably off to Mexico, by now."

Roy took one last look in the direction of the mysterious boat, then fired up his engine. It would take almost two hours to get back to Avalon Harbor on Catalina Island—back to the safety of the marina.

He'd been cruising along for forty-five minutes when something floating in the water caught his eye. He cut back the throttle and motored up to it. A white deck chair drifted by his bow. Then another. A closer inspection of the area revealed a half-dozen seat cushions, ten adult-sized life jackets, a first-aid kit, and a Jim Buoy throw ring. Something odd bobbed in the water about ten yards away. Roy approached, squinting to focus on the dozen-or-so items floating by his port side. They were flat, about eight inches square, black and white, and marked sort of like a Holstein cow.

"What the heck?" Roy fished one of the strange objects from the water. The small plastic mat dripped a few spots of water on his shoe as he shook it.

Roy opened his equipment trunk and tossed the curious item inside, resigned to discover its purpose later—after he made a more thorough search of the area.

The bright colors on the depth sounder's video screen reminded Roy of a painting he'd seen at an art exhibit in Avalon last summer. Modern art, they called it. No. Impressionist art, that's what it was. Roy's impression was that even a monkey, given the correct colors of paint, could have created it. He drifted slowly around the area, his eyes trained on the screen. The bright red, yellow, and green on the deep-blue background formed abstract shapes, indicating the contours of the bottom of the ocean. Roy knew the geometry of the shape he stared at wasn't a natural occurrence. There was something down there.

Roy dropped his anchor and watched as the nylon rope fed itself into the waiting water.

"Hundred and fifty feet. Pretty deep."

He went below and checked the gauges on the scuba tanks in the racks. He pulled one out and hauled it up to the deck, then unlocked a trunk and pulled out the rest of his diving gear. He peeled off his bulky jeans and sweatshirt, and then he squeezed into the rubber wet suit.

Roy hooked his underwater camera and flashlight to his dive belt, adjusted his mouthpiece, and pulled his mask over his face. He pushed himself backward over the rail and splashed into the unusually warm Pacific water.

He descended as quickly as was safe. It didn't take long for his powerful flashlight to locate the brilliant-white paint of the S.M. Italian Motoryacht. Roy checked his watch. In one hundred and fifty feet, he could only dive the wreck for about ten minutes before he'd have to surface.

The yacht was beautiful—built in the early to mid-nineties, by Roy's estimation. He unhooked the camera from his belt and snapped pictures of the scene. He checked his watch, then slithered through the salon doorway to get a look inside. Even in the dark murky water, the overstuffed sofas, plush carpeting, expensively framed paintings, gold-plated flatware, and a bank of electronic equipment that would have put an aircraft carrier to shame, made it clear this was no poor-man's toy.

Roy checked his watch again. He didn't have much time left. He located the hatch to get below deck and slipped through the opening. Some sort of water-tight containers were stacked along the edges of the hold. Roy knew they must have been water-tight because they pressed against the ceiling, trying to float to the surface.

Roy's interest in the floating containers didn't last long once he'd looked past them. Staring in amazement at the sight, Roy shook his head in disbelief. He checked his camera—only two frames left. He snapped them both, then looked at his watch. His time was up. He began his ascent back to the surface.

The GPS-99P, one of the best investments Roy had made last year, could store two hundred and thirty latitude/longitude positions, allowing him to keep track of all his favorite diving and fishing spots. He punched in the identifier, "elminowreck," and saved the date, time, and location in the electronic navigation system.

Roy took one last look at the floating debris, fired up his engine, and headed for home.

Roy tied the *Little Maria* to her designated buoy. He loaded a tank cart and two dive tanks into his dinghy and motored it to the dock, then removed the equipment from the small boat and headed up the wooden walkway toward Sherman's Dive Shop. The wheels of the cart squeaked as they rolled behind him. In his free hand, he carried the strange rubber mat he'd found floating near the wreck site. He was busy studying the words on the mat and almost walked into a man coming from the other direction. "Oh! Pardon me," Roy apologized.

"No problem," the man replied. He stepped aside to let Roy pass.

Roy and Sherman had been friends for nearly fifteen years. Sherman arranged most of Roy's charters—for a small commission. The business relationship was a good one for them both.

The big cowbell hanging on the dive shop door clanked as Roy pushed it open. Sherman, with his long gray hair pulled into a ponytail, glanced up to see Roy stroll in.

"Hey, Sherm. How'd you make out in that storm?"

Sherman put his fingers on his wrist to check his pulse. "Let's see. Yeah, blood's still pumpin', if that's what you mean. But my boat's seen better days. Got a big ol' hole in her hull."

"Sorry to hear it. You ought to do what I do. Save you a bunch of money in repair costs."

"I'd rather risk losing the boat while I sit in my living room and watch Titanic videos than face a storm like that one last night," Sherman said.

"Why, you're nothing but a chicken, Sherman."

"Ain't denying it. Cluck, cluck."

The two men laughed.

A newspaper was spread out on the counter in front of Sherman. "Hey. You hear about Otis? He caught a Marlin up north of Frisco. You believe that? A Marlin. Said the water's so warm, they're catching all kinds of strange fish. *El Niño*," Sherman said.

"Did you actually see it? You know Otis. He's so full of it. I never saw anyone could exaggerate a fish story better than that old coot."

"He ain't tellin' no fish story this time. Look here. It's in today's paper. There's a picture and everything."

Sherman clipped the photo and caption from the newspaper and tacked it to the corkboard on the wall behind the counter.

"Just wait till you see *my* pictures. *El Niño's* up to more than just misplacing a few fish. You'll never guess what I found while I was out there. Some poor, or I should say, rich, son-of-a-gun lost a beautiful yacht in that storm."

"You don't say. Everyone okay?"

"Don't know. No sign of people. Just some deck furniture—usual stuff—except for this thing." Roy held out the small rubber mat he'd fished out of the water. "Any idea what this here is?"

Sherman took it and shook his head. "Roy! Don't you know a mouse pad when you see one?"

"Mouse pad? What the heck's a mouse pad? Some kind of new trap?"

"I swear, Roy. I'm gonna get you caught up to the twentieth century if it kills me. 'Course, by that time, we'll be in the twenty-first, and you'll be way behind—again. A mouse pad's for a computer mouse to move around on. Has a little track-ball inside—needs a clean, smooth surface. Haven't you seen me use mine?"

"Yeah, I've seen it, but didn't know what it was. Why the heck's it called a mouse?"

"Cause, Roy, it sort of looks like a mouse, with a long ol' tail. See?" Sherman dangled the small plastic device by its cord in front of Roy's face.

"Hmm. Too big to be a mouse. How come they don't call it a rat?"

"Now, think about it, Roy. You really think people would want to grab hold of something called a rat?"

"Probably not any more than they'd want to squeeze their fingers around a mouse, I suppose."

Sherman laughed and shook his head. "Guess you've got a point. Anyhow, tell me about this wreck. What happened?"

"Really weird. Boat like that shouldn't have had any problem in last night's storm—but there was something fishy about it. I need to call the Coast Guard to report it. Can I use your phone?"

"Phone's are out. The whole island. Storm wiped 'em out last night. Probably won't have service back till tomorrow, late. What about your radio?"

"Out of commission. Gotta pick up a new antenna," Roy said.

A customer, busy inspecting a rack of snorkel equipment, perked up his ears at the conversation. He set down the mask and walked to the counter. "You say you saw a boat sink?"

Roy turned around to see who spoke. It was the man he'd nearly run over on the sidewalk. "Well, I didn't actually see it go down. I'd seen it last night, during the storm. Then this morning, I found stuff floating and decided to take a look. She was the same boat, all right. Not many like that one—sitting on the bottom in a hundred fifty feet of H₂O and salt."

"That's pretty far down. You must be the divemaster I read about on that flyer," the stranger said.

"One and the same. Roy Hastings—certified and all—the whole shebang."

"Certifiable, you mean," Sherman joked. "Anyone crazy enough to set out alone against last night's storm must have one oar out of the water."

"Hey, I'm still vertical, aren't I?" Roy said. "Anyhow, look who's talking. Any *man* who insists on wearing his hair in a ponytail, especially after his sixtieth birthday, must have *both* oars not only out of the water, but probably on another boat."

The stranger chuckled at the banter between the two buddies, then held his hand out to Roy. "Kent Morrison."

Roy shook his hand.

"I'd like to take a look at that boat. Could you find it again?" Morrison asked.

"Sure. But, you gotta be certified to make a dive like that."

“Oh, I’ve got a certificate. Used to dive for the Navy. Seen more of this world under water than I’ve seen dry land.”

“Really? Well, okay. Tomorrow all right for you? I’m in desperate need of some food, a shave, and a good night’s sleep.”

“I’ll be here. Six o’clock okay?”

“That’ll be fine. And bring that certificate,” Roy reminded him.

“Sure thing.”

Kent followed Roy toward the exit. Halfway out the door, Roy stopped and snapped his fingers. He stuck his head back into the shop. “Oh, Sherm. I left a couple tanks in the back. Can you fill them for me? I’ll need them for tomorrow’s dive.”

“I’ll have ‘em ready in the morning. But I won’t be out of bed by six. I’ll leave ‘em out for you.”

“Thanks.”

Kent was already in front of the dive shop when Roy arrived. Kent had his gear all set and ready to go. He was as anxious as a kid on Christmas Eve.

“Coffee?” Roy said as he offered a thermos to his newest customer.

“No, thanks. Don’t drink it.”

Roy shot a skeptical glance at Kent. “Don’t know if I trust a man who doesn’t drink coffee.”

Kent chuckled. “We all set to go? Can’t wait to see this wreck. Did I hear you say you took pictures?”

“Yeah. Come on. Dinghy’s tied up at the end of the dock. You bring that certificate?”

“You betcha.”

Roy set the big blue ice chest on the deck. “You can stow your gear over there.” He pointed to a rack designed to hold the bulky oxygen tanks.

“How long till we get there?” Kent asked.

“About an hour. There’s sodas and sandwiches in that ice chest—donuts and juice, too. Help yourself,” Roy offered.

“Thanks.”

Roy disappeared into the cabin. Within five minutes, the diesel engine rumbled and they were on their way. Roy punched in the “elninowreck” identifier on his GPS and let it lead him to the exact spot.

When they arrived at the wreck site, Roy cut the engine and dropped anchor.

“Here we are,” Roy announced.

“This is it?”

“Yep. Ready to gear up?”

Kent nodded. "I'm just gonna use the head first."

While Kent went below to use the facilities, Roy pulled one of the newly-filled tanks from his rack and checked the gauge. It didn't indicate full. "Hmm. Leaky valve," he speculated.

Roy opened his equipment trunk and laid the defective tank on its side, then closed and locked the box. He hung the ring of keys on a hook just inside the cabin door.

Kent returned to the deck, drying his hands on his jacket. "You're out of towels down there."

"Sorry. I'll stock up when we get back."

As Kent sorted through his gear, he glanced at Roy. "I didn't bring my camera. Think we could use yours to take some more shots? I'd sure like to get a few pictures."

"Out of film. I meant to pick up some rolls last night when I dropped off the film, but I forgot."

"Too bad. What kind of camera do you use?" Kent asked.

"Nikon. F3, I think. Pretty nice piece of equipment."

The two men squeezed into their wet suits and hoisted the heavy tanks onto their backs.

Roy recited a brief set of safety guidelines that he expected all his customers to follow. Kent nodded, understanding the rules, and then followed Roy over the edge of the *Little Maria*.

Within three minutes of the dive, Roy knew something was wrong. His vision blurred and he felt lightheaded. He was nauseous and knew he needed to get to the surface. He touched Kent on the arm and pointed up with his thumb. Kent shook his head and continued down. Roy, about to pass out, signaled again. Kent refused to follow. He continued descending on the wreck.

Roy watched him momentarily, then the world went dark. He shook his head to clear his vision. *It can't be the bends*, he thought to himself. He tried to release his weight belt, but his arms and legs were limp. He coughed out his mouthpiece and took his last breath.

Kent watched, unmoved, as Roy lost consciousness. He checked his watch and began his ascent to the surface. He knew he had little time to get Roy's boat to the pre-arranged *rendezvous* to meet up with the others.

At first, Kent was barely startled by the light bump he felt on his back. His line of work demanded nerves of steel in tense situations. He was preoccupied looking at the frayed ends of the line dangling from above. Something had cut or chewed the rope and freed the *Little Maria* from its anchor. He turned to see what had run into him in the dark water—just in time to witness the open jaws of a great white shark, ready to clamp around his body.