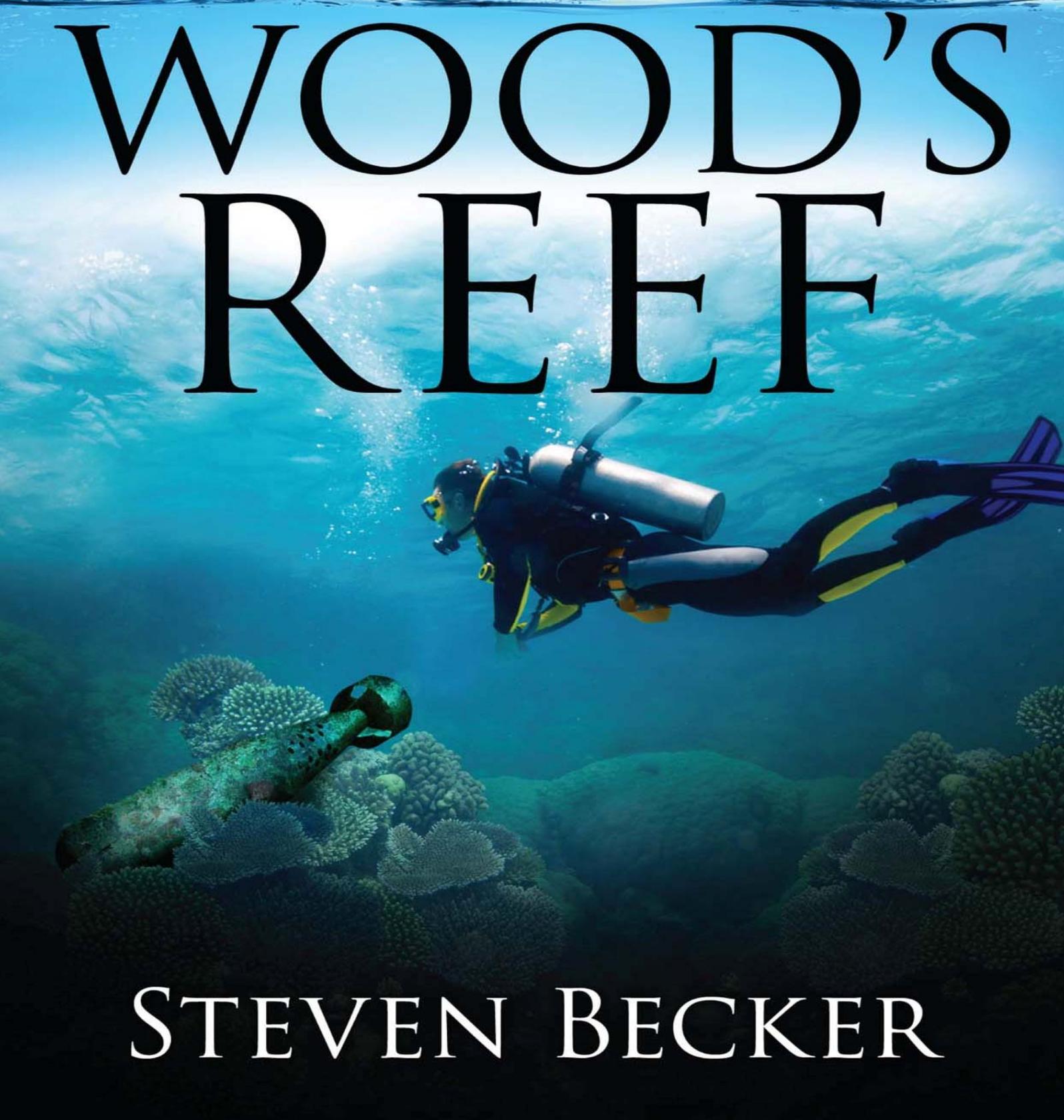




A MAC TRAVIS NOVEL

# WOOD'S REEF



The background of the cover is a split image. The top half shows a tropical island with palm trees and a small boat on the water. The bottom half shows a scuba diver swimming underwater over a coral reef. The diver is wearing a black wetsuit, a yellow and black BCD, and a silver tank. The water is clear blue, and the coral reef is visible in the foreground.

STEVEN BECKER

# **Wood's Reef**

By  
Steven Becker

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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## Prologue

Key West, October 27, 1962

“November, 2442. Truman ATC. Low on fuel, over,” the pilot radioed to the air traffic controller. His hands sweated as he waited, hoping the air traffic controller would respond quickly.

“Truman ATC, N2442. Can you make Key West, over.”

“Negative. Fuel is low. Truman, request permission to jettison cargo, over.”

“N2442, Truman ATC, if no alternative, permission to jettison granted. Mark location, over.”

“Roger Truman, will do. Permission to land, over” “N2442, Truman ACT. Roger, runway 21 from west. Please note east wind at 18 knots. Do you require emergency equipment, over.”

“Negative Truman, just overweight. Copy that runway 21 from west. ETA twelve minutes.”

“N2442, Truman ATC. Roger that. Call back when you have feet dry and visual.”

The jet took a wide turn toward the west to look for a good spot to jettison its cargo. Below it, the late afternoon sun clearly showed the transitions in color between deep water and shallow. The darker spots indicated deep water — what he was looking for. It was safer to drop the munitions he carried in deeper water. At the apex of his turn, the pilot spotted a 100-yard- long dark brown line indicating a trench. That was the spot. With the low fuel alarm sounding, he dropped altitude to 500’, and air speed to just short of a stall.

The bomb doors opened.

Seconds later, two bombs broke the surface of the water and quickly sank to the bottom.

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The jet taxied to a stop by the service hanger, and two crewmen looked up from their card game, reluctant to leave the shade. Finally they stood and walked out.

The jet and tarmac shimmered in the heat as they made their way to the pilot.

“Heard you had some trouble out there,” Machinist Mate Woodson said to the pilot.

“Spent too much time chasing that Russian B-29 sub off San Juan. We forced her to surface, but I had to stay on site. Took a lot of fuel with that payload.” The pilot climbed down from the opened canopy, the tropical sun reflecting off his visor made the machinist squint. “Had to drop two bombs to get light enough to make it back.”

Aviation Ordnanceman Jim Gillum pressed the release outside the cargo doors and looked in. “You dropped two nukes.”

The pilot came around and looked inside the bomb bay door, surprised. “Well, they must have been loaded wrong then. The nukes should have been on the sides, not the middle.” He wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, suddenly worried. He’d thought he made it home safely, but this ... this was a complication. “This is big trouble boys. There are all kinds of unexploded ordinance at the bottom of the sea, but not nukes.”

Joe Ward was due a promotion, and had no intention of letting this get in his way. He started his less than stellar career as a Naval Aviator at the end of the Korean War. “This is your fault, not mine. Just check them in like they should have been loaded, fudge the paperwork — whatever you have to do. Just make sure no one knows.”

“We can’t just leave two nukes sitting out there,” Woodson said, shocked.

“Why not. Come on Wood. You know they’ll send a demolition team out there as soon as this whole thing cools off and either blow them or bring them back here for disposal,” Gillum said.

“Bullshit,” Wood retorted. “They’ll sit down there until the wrong person finds them.”

“Hopefully by the time they figure there was a mistake in the paperwork, we’ll be long gone,” Ward walked towards the shade of the hanger, helmet cradled under his arm.

“I hope so for your sake.” Wood turned towards Gillum. “You can wipe the brown off your nose now. That son of a bitch doesn’t even know your name.

Ward there, he’s one of those guys that’s just putting this on his resume to run for office - take his old man’s congressional seat.”

“Wood. Maybe that’s the difference between me and you. I’m making allies, you’re pissing them off.”

“You think he cares about a nuke sitting on the bottom of the ocean? That thing blows, it’ll kill everything that swims for miles.”

# Chapter 1

Spray coated the windshield as the trawler pulled up to the first buoy. The wind was rising as quickly as the barometer was falling. It wasn't forecast as a hurricane, but it was blowing 30 knots now, and that was enough to take precautions.

"Tru. First trap, 100 feet out!" The command barely audible over the noise of the wind and motor.

Trufante leaned his 6'5 frame away from the protection of the wheelhouse. He spotted the buoy bobbing on top of a whitecap, breathed in, and faced the inevitable spray. His knee slammed into the gunwale as the wave took the boat, and the bow fell. A stream of spray came over the side, drenching him. He extended the gaff to reach the buoy with one foot in the air, leaning over the gunwale to gain as much reach as possible. The hook grabbed the line and he pulled the gaff in until he could reach the line with his free hand. With a practiced twist he wound the line onto the pulley. The winch motor groaned as it took the load, pulling the trap off the bottom. Trufante guided the trap onto the stainless steel runners.

"This is hardly worth it, dude. There's one lobster in here. My Cajun ass should be on a barstool, not out here in this crap." He untied the knot holding the door open and extracted the lobster. "Pretty small, too."

Mac grunted. "Forget about the lobster. We need to get the traps up and stack them. This wind picks up any more, they'll fill with sand and we'll lose them."

The conversation was over, and Mac steered toward the next buoy. They worked in an uncomfortable silence for the hour it took to pull the twenty remaining traps.

"How many we got?" Mac asked as the last trap came over the side.

"Probably in the neighborhood of forty." Trufante dumped the last lobster in and closed the cooler lid. "Can we get out of here now? You know we're the only ones crazy enough to be out here in this." He winced as a wave broke over the bow. "Storms got a bite meaner than my grandma's Cajun pepper sticks."

"Say what you want. It's enough to keep you in beer till this blows through, and I won't have to spend a bunch of money replacing traps." Mac hit the wiper switch, and the blades dragged against the plexiglass, rubbing the dried salt before the rainwater started to dissolve it and wash it away.

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The waves and tide were in their favor now.

Trufante went below and came out with a beer. "Finally calm enough I can drink this instead of wear it. What's that?" He pointed toward the Seven Mile Bridge, where a piling

indicated a sandbar, exposed only at low tide. Two yellow dots were visible. Mac altered his course and steered carefully toward the area, the yellow dots now growing into two people in rain slickers, frantically waving. Next to them was a boat run aground.

“Crap. Idiots.”

“Yeah, you think? What the hell are they doing out here in this mess?” Trufante was close enough to see the hull now.

Mac eased his boat up to the edge of the sandbar, invisible in the storm-churned water. He studied the surface, watching the flow that would indicate the deep channel, and waited for his chance. In the meantime, he took the microphone and held it out, signaling for them to call on their radio. The man shrugged his shoulders.

“See if they need help,” he told Trufante as he pulled the throttles back to neutral. He quickly pulled back into reverse, making a correction for the incoming tide. “This tide’s smoking. Hurry up.”

Trufante went forward and yelled at the couple. Mac couldn’t hear the conversation over the wind but had already made his decision. A nicer day, he might have passed right by knowing the tide would float the boat in an hour or two. With this weather he knew he would have to help.

“What’s the deal?” he asked Trufante as the Cajun slid behind the protection of the wheelhouse.

“Cute girl. Dude’s an ass, though.”

“Thanks, that wasn’t quiet the answer I was looking for. Think you can tell them to sit tight. We’ll toss a line and get them off. They need to stay out of the boat.

This is going to be dicey. After we pull it off, we can pick them up on the beach. Take that line and toss it, tell him to tie it to the loop on the bow, not the cleat. He needs to secure it where the trailer winch hooks to. If we try and drag this off stern-first, it’ll swamp. We’ll have to spin it.”

Trufante grabbed the coiled line and headed toward the bow. There, he laid it on the deck and peeled off enough line to make a dozen loops, which he held in his right hand. He wound up and tossed the line, watching the wind catch and stall its progress as it unraveled. It fell into the water twenty feet short of the couple. The man yelled for him to throw again.

Trufante was about to pull the line in when he heard Mac on the hailer. “Go get it. We don’t have time to be messing around, here. You have a radio? Go to channel 16.”

The couple faced each other, clearly fighting. After a few seconds, the man shook his head and waded into the water. He retrieved the line and followed Mac’s instructions to tie it off.

“Get clear!” Mac shouted. He backed the boat into deeper water and turned perpendicular to the grounded boat. Both men lost their footing as the engine vibration resonated through the deck. The line came tight with a crack increasing the stress on the engines even more.

The boat started to turn on the sandbar. Mac eased on the throttle, allowing the line to go slack as he changed course. The line cracked again as it came taught. The boat didn’t move.

“What now? That thing ain’t movin’.” He watched as Mac backed the boat down. He started to swing the boat back and forth.

“Just got to break the suction of the sand. Just a minute.” He revved the engines and steered straight.

The couple watched as the boat slid off the sandbar, catching in the current and swinging dangerously close to the old span of the bridge. The man was screaming something as Mac pushed down on the throttle, gaining control of the boat.

“I’m going to put you on their boat,” he said to Trufante. “Make sure it starts, and pick them up. Follow me into the gas dock at Boot Key.” Mac turned the boat, allowing the current to bring the smaller boat toward his as Trufante brought in the slack line.

The boats were almost touching when Trufante vaulted over the gunwale, landing on the smaller boat. He went to the helm and started the boat. Both boats drifted together as he leaned over the bow to untie the line.

“Can’t get it,” he yelled at Mac. “This guy can’t even tie a knot. It tightened down on itself.”

“Screw it.” Mac said, going for a knife. He cut the line, leaving ten feet drifting in the water. “Tell him he owes me.”

Trufante reversed and nosed into the sandbar.

**END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER**



**KEEP READING**