



A MAC TRAVIS ADVENTURE

# WOOD'S WRECK



STEVEN BECKER

# **Wood's Wreck**

By  
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# Chapter 1

Mac leaned back in the chair, exhausted, wondering if it were really true that if you kept doing the same thing over and over again, you were insane. He certainly felt like it, as he drained the last of the lukewarm water from the bottle and tossed it to the deck in frustration. He looked out over the clear blue water, its ripples reflecting the late afternoon sun, and thought about his next dive. It was going to be the same as the last dive, and the one before that ... and the one before that.

For the last week he'd come out to the same spot, anchored in the same place, and dove at least three times every day. And still it eluded him. For years, he had secreted his stash of gold pieces and other valuables recovered from salvage work in a small cavern, concealed beneath three easily identifiable coral heads. It was a well-hidden cache in seventy-five feet of water a couple of miles west of Sombrero Light off Marathon, well away from the tourists who tended to use the mooring balls by the lighthouse. The site was removed from the famous reef surrounding the tower, and deeper than most recreational divers would venture. Even with his experience, he didn't like to dive this deep unless he used Nitrox—a mixed gas that decreased nitrogen in the blood. Because he chose the convenience of his onboard air compressor, the bottom time before decompression stops were required became shorter with each dive.

A week ago, he had come to pull out a few gold pieces to sell. Lobster season had only been underway a month, and so far it was the worst he could remember. He had started the season optimistically, as always, even following the dismal dolphin fish season in the early summer. Now, in the dog days of August—almost a month into the lobster season—he'd had to dip into his reserves to buy fuel.

Reluctantly, he got up and went to the compressor to check the air gauge. The tank was close to its maximum fill of 3000psi. He purged and removed the fill valve and hauled it to the transom, where his equipment lay in a pile on the deck. It would be his third dive of the day and he wondered how badly he was pushing his decompression limits. A trained commercial diver who had years of salvage and engineering work under his belt, he had never used a dive computer. Most of the diving he had done, especially since coming to the Keys in the early 90s, had been working on the bridges connecting the chain of islands and spearfishing the shallow reefs of the Gulf side, usually in less than thirty feet of water. In that depth, you could dive all day without risk of illness or the need for a computer. The more old fashioned dive charts were good enough, and they were ingrained in his memory.

In this case, though, he had to hope for the best. With the help of the app that Mel had loaded onto his phone, he had at least been able to record his dives, rather than wing

it. So far there hadn't been any adverse effects that would indicate decompression sickness, but he knew he was playing around the edges.

Fresh tank in hand, he sorted the pile of gear, slipped the BC over the tank, and attached the first stage. He turned the knob and felt the pressure build in the hoses, checked the gauges, and took a breath to test the regulator. With a tired grunt, he slipped into the harness and buckled the straps of the BC. He stood and moved to the transom, went through the small door to the dive platform, and sat with his legs dangling in the water. Seawater swished around his mask and he spat in it, rinsed it again, placed it over his head, and reached for his fins. Fatigued from the earlier dives, he looked down into the water, stuck the regulator in his mouth, gathered the hoses to his body, placed a hand over the mask and regulator, and rolled sideways off the platform into the warm water.

The crystal clear blue of the water, small particles glittering as the sunlight penetrated it, slipped by unnoticed as he descended with one hand loosely gripping the anchor line. When he reached the bottom, he checked his gauges and finned toward the rock pile. Of the three coral heads that marked the cavern, there was only one still standing; another lay on its side several feet away. He knew what had happened as soon as he spotted the third and largest head almost a hundred yards away with an anchor stuck in its side, the cut line drifting in the current. The Danforth anchor, made for soft bottoms, had its points deeply embedded in the coral head. This kind of anchor was well suited for anchoring in well-known sandy bottoms. Not for bottoms that had coral.

With no way to retrieve it, the boater had evidently tried to drive it out, and in doing so, caused the destruction that had collapsed the cavern. This type of anchor was common on vessels here and anchoring in the sand was the least damaging method of mooring a boat, but also the least effective. Besides being small and lightweight the boat anchor didn't have enough line or chain necessary to provide the correct angle to set the hook properly.

Here, the practicalities of the bottom structure, especially on the deeper reefs, didn't allow this. Grapnel hooks, wired upside down with a piece of light gauge wire, was the preferred method used by experienced divers and fishermen. The safety wire was light enough that even if the anchor caught, it would break before destroying the coral. The damage caused by the boater had changed the bottom structure so drastically that he'd been unable to locate his cache.

The first few days he had been crazed, desperately searching the bottom, wasting time and energy. On the third day, he had laid out his search grids and done everything by the book, but still the cache would not reveal itself. This was going to be his last dive before giving up, at least for a while. At some point, you had to move on. Mel had been brutal in her criticism that a land-based safe would have been smarter, but his had been broken into before, and he believed the sea would hide his secrets. Now, she reminded him, with a full week of soak, his lobster traps should be stuffed ... at least in a good year.

He finned through the water, oblivious to the fish, and worked over the same bottom again, hoping for the one little crack that would reveal the cavern. His breath caught—the first sign that his air was about to run out—and he checked his gauges. The air pressure was pegged into the red, and he wondered where the time had gone. Another breath yielded even less air, and he knew he had only seconds to reach the surface.

Cursing himself for not checking sooner, he kicked hard and started to ascend.

Where he would normally have used his BC to bring him effortlessly to the surface, he dared not use the extra air. He kicked again and took the last breath before the diaphragm closed for good. The hull was visible above him now, but the clear water was deceiving; it was probably another forty feet to the boat. Breathing tiny bubbles and

hoarding the remaining air in his lungs, he kicked harder, knowing he was going too fast, but the other option was drowning.

Finally he broke the surface, spit the regulator out of his mouth, and gasped for air. Without the aid of the BC, he treaded water and filled his lungs several times before swimming to the boat's ladder. With one hand securely grasping the rung, he tried to calculate the dive charts in his head.

Tired and disgusted, he hauled himself up the ladder and dropped the tank on the steel deck. He retrieved his phone from the helm and checked the home screen. Just one message from Mel, wondering where he was. Disregarding the text, he went to the dive app and started to enter his bottom times and depths for the dives today. After a quick calculation, the chart showed him to be right above the red line indicating that decompression would be required.

He debated whether he should get back in the water, descend to ten feet and do a safety stop, but decided against it, rationalizing that the app probably had a pretty large safety factor built in. If he *did* get symptoms of the bends, he knew from experience that he would get a wicked headache and painful joints. Even that would be short lived. He was confident that he hadn't crossed into the danger zone, which would require treatment in a hyperbaric chamber.

He looked around, not wanting to make the run in and face Mel, but at the same time tired of looking at this same patch of water. She was right that this was hopeless. Tomorrow, he would grab Trufante from whatever bar stool he'd spent the last week on, and go pull his traps. The engine idled and the windlass groaned as it pulled the anchor from the bottom. The anchor secured, he pressed the throttles forward and pointed the bow toward an invisible spot between the three antenna the government used to broadcast propaganda to Cuba and the Seven Mile Bridge, its hump clearly visible on the horizon. The deck rumbled as the twin diesels picked up power and, without a look behind him, he headed toward shore.

The bow easily crushed the small waves in its path as the boat ran at 25 knots; well below the maximum speed of 45, but Mac was in no rush. What awaited him was what he had feared for the twenty years he'd been here: Having to scrounge a living from salvage and repair jobs. Fishing and lobstering was more fun when you had a stash of gold for backup, but without that, he was going to have to work for a living. It was almost twenty years ago that he had escaped Galveston and settled here under the wing of a local legend. He and Wood had built or repaired many of the bridges connecting the 120-mile string of islands together, and in the process, recovered relics of past wrecks, some dating to before Columbus. They had kept their finds quiet, knowing that revealing them would attract every government agency around. And government agencies liked to shut jobs down indefinitely by labeling them archeological finds.

Mel was another problem entirely. Wood's strong-minded lawyer daughter had moved in with him a year ago. There was a deep love and respect there, but she was having a hard time readjusting to the laid-back Key's lifestyle she had fought so hard to escape. Frustrated by DC politics, she'd allowed herself to be convinced to move back to Marathon and give it a shot, but she went from periods of happiness to those of depression, clearly missing the challenge of her work as an activist attorney.

She needed a cause, and had started volunteering for a non-profit in Key West. Friction had started when the group's good intentions conflicted with Mac's way of life. There was conservation and preservation. The former—although sometimes misguided, like in the case of protecting jewfish that in turn decimated the stone crab population—was generally helpful to the ecosystem; the latter shut down the economy, severely limiting the

use of the protected areas. This only encouraged poaching, as it forced lifelong fisherman to ply their trade illegally.

The boat crossed into the lighter green water, broken by dark patches indicating the small reefs that dotted the shallows. These passed quickly, and the visibility decreased, as he moved into the deeper channel and entered Boot Harbor. The engines dropped to a murmur as he eased off the throttles. At idle speed, he slipped between the red and green markers, past several gas docks and restaurants, before turning left into a canal. Several houses in, he adjusted for wind and current, eased the forty-two-foot boat up to the dock, and shut down the engines. He looped the stern line around the cleat and tied it off, then did the same with the bow.

The boat secured, he stepped onto the dock and went to the back of his stilt-framed house; the bottom housed an enclosed workshop, while the upstairs was his living area. Without entering he went around the side, smiling as he saw the driveway empty. At least he would have a few minutes of peace before Mel got home.

Back at the boat, he checked the lines, adding a spring line to the bow, and hosed off the deck and gear. Despite his current mood, he knew better than to ignore the effects the sea water would have on his equipment. With a beer in one hand and the hose in the other, he worked slowly, in no rush to finish the task and face tomorrow.

**END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER**



**KEEP READING**