

4-A LOST FISH

All fifty-three Confederate blockade runners entombed in North Carolina's shell-strewn sea bottom had been meticulously charted and recorded. Add to them the sunken Yankee warships and that brought the number closer to seventy-five. Most of the wrecks lay blanketed beneath deepwater sand, but a few had broken up in the shallows, sometimes visible from the beaches. There was a time when, at low tide, determined swimmers could reach them to pilfer souvenirs.

The coastline stretching northeast as the crow flies from the mouth of the Cape Fear River was so littered with wrecks that the area had been unofficially labeled Civil War Shipwreck District.

Between summers the many inlets creasing the outer banks offered overworked, 21st Century Carolinians quick escape to the peace of the open sea. Then each June, pale-faced vacationers swarmed down from up north, transforming nautical civility into a cluttered mayhem of fishing charters, day cruisers, dive boats, and conspicuous yachts bedecked with half-naked snowbirds, captained by high-rise desk jockeys practicing rusty seamanship in a haze of alcohol.

Dr. Frank Morgan shook his head from the deck of his boat. It was a wonder no one got killed.

And the mess wasn't just on the surface. Thirty-five feet down, the seabed lay marred by plastic waste and vacation debris in a tangled lattice of fishing tackle lost in futile pursuits of the big catch and a no-shit sea story for the nighttime bar scene.

Hurricane Meredith had passed through just weeks before the summertime rush, stirring the shallows and exposing God knows what to snag anything kiting by, including Frank's new sonar towfish.

Standing at the transom of his boat, he rolled the towfish's severed feed cable in his fingers. "How much did you say it cost?" his brother, Charley asked. He had convinced Charley to come out on the water

with him and run the new towfish for a few passes so he could know what he was doing before his autumn graduate students showed up.

“Twenty-eight thousand dollars.”

“I guess you shouldn’t have lost it then.”

“I didn’t lose it. It’s just caught on something.”

“You said you knew how to operate it.”

“Hey, you’re the one who does this every day. Where’s all that expertise I hear about?”

“Well first, you’re not supposed to use the thing in shallow water. Look. Says right here in the manual. See, Frank?”

“I see.”

“You’re not looking.”

“I’ve read the manual.”

Charley flagged the pages under Frank’s nose. “But there’s a picture here. Says don’t operate shallower than 50 feet.”

“I know what it says.”

Charley peered over the side. “How deep is it here? I think I can see the bottom.”

“You can’t see the bottom, Charley.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you set the ballast too nose heavy.”

“It wasn’t nose heavy. I know what I’m doing.”

“Towfish doesn’t think so.”

“The towfish doesn’t think, Charley.”

“I didn’t hear you—” Suddenly the sky opened up with a mighty roar so loud Charley cowered behind himself for cover. “What the hell!” Two matte grey jet fighters ripped through the air overhead so close he could have hit them with his shoe. “They’re kind of low, aren’t they?”

Frank gave them an off-handed glance. “They’re just showing off. They must be training. I guess we shouldn’t be here, really.”

Charley cupped his eyes from the sun. "Oh? And why is that, Frank?"

Frank moped at the water around them and the shoreline about a mile away. "These are restricted waters. It's legal for us to navigate through here. We just can't stay put." He indicated to the shoreline. "The Marine air station is just beyond Bear Inlet there." He swung his arm across the water all around them. "They drop bombs and stuff out here."

"Well that's just great, Frank. Glad you told me we'd be dragging that damn thing back and forth in the Marines' playground. Anything else you don't want to tell me?"

"There's unexploded ordnance down there. That's why there's no fishing allowed here."

"You mean fishing as in dragging a hook through the water hoping to catch a big fish?"

"Something like that."

Charley's gaze traced after the jets shrinking to specks in the sky out over deeper water. "And knowing this—that there are things down there that might not respond so well to us snagging onto them—you decided to make a third pass at that thing down there you saw on your screen, towing a twenty-five pound, three foot long lure behind us."

"As long as we're not sitting around out here."

"Seems to me we're sitting pretty still right now."

"Not for long." Frank looked over the transom into the water and came to a conclusion. "Um, can you go down after the fish?"

"Yeah, well our friends are back." The jet fighter's wings splayed wide as they banked into a slow turn. "I don't think they like us here, Frank. And why can't you go down after it?"

Frank ground his hands into fists. "Because I don't dive."

Charley's tanned face screwed all up. "What kind of marine archaeologist doesn't dive?"

Frank thumbed his chest. "This kind. At least not anymore. Not after..."

Charley squinted into his memory. "Is this about that stupid dive you did going down inside Ptolemy's tomb? Geez, Frank. That was five years ago."

"You weren't there, damn it! I still get nightmares."

The fighters drifted past them again, slower this time. Helmets with beady black visors bugged at them through polished canopies.

"Frank. I think they want their playground back."

"We gotta get the fish, first."

"Why not come back for it?"

"Are you nuts?"

"I think maybe we want to leave here. Like now, Frank."

"I can't go back without it."

"Uh huh. I know that look on your face. You've been testing the rules again."

Frank glanced back from behind a guilty grimace. "The fish isn't just mine. There's a procedure for signing it out. All that bureaucracy for a dumb tool. It's stupid."

"Meaning?"

"If I don't come back with it in one piece, they're not going to be pleased."

"Like your boss?"

Frank faded to green.

"I really like the way I get a choice here, Frank."

"The planes won't do anything with us here."

"Well, what about them?"

Frank traced Charley's finger to a low white craft flopping over the waves, heading their way. A fat band, black-on-red, circled its beltline. "Shit, the Coasties. Quick, get rigged up and get in the water. I'll take care of this."

"Like I said, Frank. I appreciate having a choice."

The Coast Guard let Frank off with a slap on the wrist. They had backed off and were idling in the distance, waiting to see that Frank left the area once he got his tangled towfish aboard. The towfish had come free and was now safe and in one piece, dripping dry on the afterdeck.

Charley was sitting on the starboard gunwale out of sight of the Coasties, hidden by the boat's pilothouse. "That was uncomfortable," he said, pulling a line up from the bottom.

"We're fine. It could've been worse."

"What did you tell them?"

"That I was letting you work the towfish and you caught it on something and that you were down on the bottom fixing your screw up."

"Yeah? Well smartass, I got a pay day down there." Charley hauled up a net bag with something big inside it. "And I'm going back down."

"What? No! Are you nuts? The Coast Guard—they're right there watching us."

"Frank, I gotta. I saw something weird down there, near where I nabbed this." Charley set the net bag down on the deck with a heavy clump.

Frank eyeballed a crusty glob in the bag with the vague outline of a ship's bell. "Charley, it's against the law, bringing things up from these waters."

"Just shut up, will you, and give me a line. Not that one. Give me the heavier one."

Frank mechanically handed over the line. "What kind of weird?"

"There's something else down there. A lot of something else. They're big, and I'm getting us one. We'll just let it hang below the

water by the boat and cruise real easy till those Coast Guard guys get bored and leave. Don't sweat it. I'll be careful. They won't see a thing."

Their boat—a chubby little diesel research vessel named *Badger*—chugged along contently as Charley steered them back to Beaufort. Frank, standing next to him, had his laptop open on the helm. Charley frowned at one of the images recorded by the towfish Frank had on his screen. Crisp and clear was the outline of a ship casting long shadows across an eerie orange bottom.

"She's broken into three pieces." Frank tapped different places on the screen. "This ruffled area here on the bottom separates the bow from the stern. And this jumble in the middle looks like machinery; possibly the engines or the boilers."

Charley chanced a longer look. A field of debris pitter-pattered aft across the bottom to the wreck's stern, which dipped beneath the sand. The jumble in the middle was bordered by two enormous wagon wheel looking things. "Is that a sidewheeler?"

"Looks like it. She could be a blockade runner."

"As in Civil War blockade runner?"

"Yeah. And she's not supposed to be here."

Charley peered over his shoulder at the strange polygon plate he'd brought up. At first he'd left it hanging in the water just as he said, secured with the heavy line to the bulwarks so the Coasties wouldn't see it. He and Frank waved to them and got underway. After they had some good distance between them, they banged themselves up muscling the thing up onto the deck.

It was heavy as shit. Tongue and groove edges traced the long sides of it.

"It doesn't look that old, but there were so many of them—dozens of them—and all of them with that same weird shape."

Frank eyed the dubious plate. "These are busy shores. A lot of junk probably lost or dumped here over the last hundred years. It could be just a coincidence. They were tossed overboard by someone—probably the military—and just by chance they landed all over that wreck down there."

"Nah! I'm not buying it, Frank. Not the way they were laid out. It was like they belonged there. Kind of like those Greek jugs in the wrecks you see in the magazine pictures."

"Amphorae."

"Yeah, those; the way they're always laid out on the bottom all neat and tidy. Well, that's the way these were. Neat and tidy. And ain't that the weirdest thing. Take a look and tell me what you don't see."

Frank scrutinized the plate. "Well...other than the shape and the tongue-and-groove edges, I don't see anything."

"Exactly! There's not a speck of rust on it anywhere."

Frank looked more closely. "You know, you're right." He straightened up and indicated to the plate with an open hand. "That's our answer then, isn't it? They can't be part of the wreck. They haven't even been down there long enough to rust. Now let me get back to these images."

"Fine, Frank. You do that."

Bogue Banks drifted slowly by on their left. Atlantic Beach was straight off their port. Up ahead were the sand dunes clawing up to squat Fort Macon. Any minute now, the fort would pop up off their bow, just to port.

Charley was the first to break silence. "You want to tell me what's bugging you?"

"Nothing's bugging me."

"You haven't said a word in a while."

Frank sighed heavily at the towfish.

"The fish is fine, Frank."

"It's not the fish."

"The plate then. We didn't get caught. We're fine."

"We're not fine. Not yet. Especially me."

"So what then?"

"Badger."

"This boat?"

"I kind of borrowed it."

"You said it was yours."

"It's hard getting my hands on the things I need. Everybody's always competing, so I just grab what I need and run with it."

"I'll bet that goes over well."

"Not usually."

Frank slapped the top down on his laptop and watched the visitors ambling over the grassy knolls surrounding Fort Macon.

"In fact, I'm pretty sure they're going to fire me."

