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## THE FLOATER

I was floating, peaceful and weightless. Arms and legs outstretched, a human pinwheel. All I wanted to do was float forever. It felt right. This was where I was meant to be, everything was going to be okay. I was just me, without a past or a future. Even as I rose slowly towards the light, everything made sense. I didn't have a care in the world, there was nothing that I couldn't solve, no problem I couldn't handle, as I continued to rise effortlessly towards the blurry, indistinct hand that reached for me.

Breaking the surface, I spat out my mouthpiece and pulled down my mask before kicking leisurely towards the boat and the outstretched arm of my mate Dave, sunnies on, green zinc stripe down his nose. I'm not sure what he thought he was protecting as that schnozz required its own beach umbrella to escape sunburn. I guess it did save him having to sunblock the lower part of his face.

'How many you got, Lach?' he asked as he leaned down to take my string dive bag. Inside were eleven abalone of various sizes and none of them legal.

'Not enough yet,' I said as I reached for the ladder with one hand and tossed my flippers into the boat with the other. It was time for a break, to take the scuba gear off, to drag myself free of the water. As much as I love diving, being immersed and breathing air through a respirator takes a toll. Having spent most of the morning in the water after a pretty crummy night's sleep, I was bushed.

I dropped onto the deck next to my flippers and pulled off my neoprene bonnet. My body weight had returned, making my movements awkward. Getting free was a herculean task. Exhausted, I wiped my hair off my forehead and watched Dave tip my latest contribution into our secret storage tanks under the bench seats. We'd installed those compartments ourselves. The tanks would keep the abalone happy and wet until we got them back onto dry land. Mind you, I've never seen an unhappy abalone.

As Dave screwed the false bottom back in place, I munched on a banana and looked to the shore. There was a momentary glint of light from the bush but then it was gone. I watched the eucalypts for a while to be sure but there was nothing more. Probably just an empty beer bottle catching the sun. Looking back to Dave sitting on the bench seats that guarded the morning's poaching efforts, I knew that if we were ever boarded by Fishery Officers, those seats would be the first place they looked. Then again, we'd never been boarded. I looked for some wood to tap to maintain our good luck but couldn't see a splinter. Fibreglass would have to do.

We were on the ocean side of Shark Island near Port Stephens. Every time I come here to dive, I can't get over the clear waters, the great fishing, beautiful beaches and the ancient concrete toilet blocks. It's a place that few people other than retired locals and grey nomads seemed to know about. Which was fine for us, as catching a camouflaged creature that barely moves is a lot harder than it sounds. In a country where it's hard to make an honest living, a dishonest one isn't much easier.

'How many more, you reckon? Last count has it about seventy in the tank.' Dave handed me an iced coffee from the esky.

‘Few more. An even hundred would be good,’ I said as I looked at the shoreline of Tomaree National Park again. Had that flash just been sunlight glinting from a broken bottle or was it a pair of binoculars? Surveying the edges of Fingal Bay, I heard Dave smacking his lips before declaring iced coffee to be the nectar of the gods.

If anyone was on shore looking at us, all they’d see would be two blokes in a boat out for a spot of fishing. There’d be me: average build, average height, lean like a toned whippet, clambering in and out of the water in my scuba gear. Then there’d be the lanky Dave, sporting the extra weight of a retired footballer. While I was in the water, he’d spend time with rod and line over the side, hoping for something more than a march fly to bite as he applied another layer of zinc to his nose.

Dave took another long pull from his drink. ‘I like the sound of an even hundred, Lachie-oh. Time for a new locale?’

When we had a huge ocean of possible places to find abalone, why stay in the one spot? I shifted my dive belt and leaned back onto my dive tanks, letting the sun warm my salty skin as Dave opened the throttles on his Mercruiser engines. On such a pearler of a day, with the roaring high-horsepower engines ripping through the water and leaving a white funnel of foaming tail behind us, life was good.

Lying on the deck, eyes shut, I drifted off into that place somewhere between sleep and waking, enjoying the prickle of salt drying on my skin. After the time spent underwater, my body thawed as the sun’s warmth crept into my limbs and chest. I know sunbaking is now a capital offence unless you’re slathered in sunscreen but the simple pleasure is as hard to quit

as smoking. Lying there, eyes closed, I felt my muscle memory take control, convincing my mind that I was still underwater, neutrally buoyant once more.

Which was when we heard the thud.

‘What the hell was that? You knock your tanks over?’ Dave called, slamming the throttles into neutral and ducking into the small forward cabin to see if we’d been holed.

Lifting myself from the deck, I peered over the side to look for something in the wake or, heaven forbid, sticking half-in, half-out of the fibreglass hull. I couldn’t see anything. Dave emerged from the small cabin looking just as puzzled.

‘You see anything, captain?’

He shook his head and pointed a thumb at the water. ‘Can you *tsck-tsck*, over the side? Take a squizz?’

Donning my mask and snorkel, I rolled my eyes before dropping backwards into the briny blue. Now that I’d dried out in the sunshine, the water felt much colder. I rose to the surface, blowing air through the snorkel whale-like to clear the pipe of water. Breathing the slow, rhythmical, in-out of the ocean swimmer, I swam around the boat looking for any damage and what might have caused it.

Except there wasn’t any damage, only a few large fish Dave would have loved to drop a line on. When I drifted around to the back of the boat, I noticed something just below the water surface a short distance behind us. It was a rectangle – maybe a suitcase? Except suitcases don’t normally come with a long weighted anchor hanging straight down beneath them. Whatever it was, it was not natural. Surfacing, I spat the snorkel from my mouth and looked up at Dave now hanging over the back of the boat, a sun halo silhouette.

‘Anything?’

When I assured him there was nothing wrong with the boat he clutched his chest and breathed a thank you to the heavens.

‘But I think I saw what we hit. Gonna go take a look.’

Forcing the snorkel back into my mouth, I gave a salute and duck-dived towards the shape still hanging there in the blue. Judging by the tiny barnacles and small growths of weed that had decided the object was a great place to call home, this thing had been in the water for some time. In all my years underwater, I’d never seen anything like it.

I grabbed the rope hanging below the black plastic-wrapped rectangle. There was some sort of weight wrapped in duct tape at the end of it. As I made my way back to the boat, my trophy followed diligently, a fat kid on a fun run – somewhat of a drag but not giving up.

I held up the weird anchor for Dave to hook the gaff into. Hefting the package up out of the water into the boat was tough, but we managed it. Then I hauled myself up, colder and even more tired than the first time.

‘What the bejabbers is that?’ asked Dave, hands on hips, looking at the encrusted rectangle dripping on the deck.

‘Whatever it is, I don’t think the person who lost it is gonna be happy about it,’ I said, tapping a knuckle on the shrink-wrapped plastic. It wasn’t hollow.

‘Open it, ya big girl. Ever heard of salvage? Finders keepers.’ Dave was very insistent, as excited at the discovery as I was alarmed.

Pulling my dive knife out, I cut into the package and struck a thin skin of aluminium. I cleared more of the plastic

away and pressed the point of my knife against the aluminium, feeling the metal resist before it gave way. Twisting the knife slightly, I pushed the blade further in. It came back up covered in a slightly dirty brown powder that, if found anywhere else, you'd think was wholemeal flour.

Dave leaned on my shoulder for a closer look at the powder. 'What is it? Drugs? Is it drugs?'

'Course it's drugs. What else floats in the ocean like this?'

'Drugs,' he said, pausing to contemplate what that meant before going on. 'Coke? You reckon it's coke?'

Shaking my head, I looked at the tip of my blade from every angle. 'Nope. Wrong colour.'

Dave was not keeping up.

'It's heroin,' I said.

'How do you know?'

'I'm guessing. Only two things are gonna be packed up like this and it's the wrong colour for one of them.'

'From where? Afghanistan? Asia?'

'How am I supposed to know?'

'You seem to be a walking Wikipedia on something I wasn't expecting you to know anything about.'

But neither of us needed the internet to know that if the case was full as a goog of this tan powder, then what we had in front of us was a fortune.

Dave grinned. 'Guess that means no more poaching abalone?'

'We're tipping it over the side,' I said.

'What?'

The more I looked at it, the more I wanted no part of it. Where Dave saw dollar signs, all I could think of was how

much someone who lost something like this was going to want it back. Neptune wasn't going to come hunting for two blokes who'd pinched a bag of undersized shellfish from his watery depths, but a drug dealer missing several kilos of imported powder? This was a package full of trouble.

'Mate,' Dave said, 'that is a lot of money. Money we could both use.'

Looking from Dave and his zinc-striped schnozz to the dripping package, I knew that bundle was going over the side. As I began to hoist it up onto the gunwale, Dave grabbed my arm.

'Please, Lach. Come on. Think of me boys. This, it's like we've won the lotto without buying a ticket.'

That was a new one. As I looked at the package perched on the gunwale, ready to head back to a watery grave, Dave's fever began to catch.

'That is a lot of money,' I said, thinking about the gambling debt I was struggling to pay with our abalone hauls.

Dave lowered his sunglasses and looked over the rims.

'But I'm not selling it. You want it, you deal with it.' Even as I said it, I knew that wasn't how it would play out. Dave knew nothing about the world he wanted a part of.

'Sweet. And we'll split it. We found it together, so fifty-fifty, down the line. Fair's fair,' Dave said.

Letting the bundle drop back to the deck, I shook Dave's hand, setting him off on a little happy dance back to the wheel. I wanted to share his enthusiasm. I wanted to feel all happy and clappy, ecstatic and *yes, I'm a winner*. Except I came to Newcastle to stay under the radar. Anonymity is tricky to pull off. Shopping around a trunk of drugs was going to draw the

kind of attention I'd worked so hard to avoid. Even with the Las Vegas-sized dollar signs flashing in my mind, I wondered if they were going to be enough to risk all that.

Dave's dancing at the wheel like he was auditioning for the lead in *A Chorus Line* seemed to say it was. Looking back to the national park shoreline, I hoped he was right.