

LIVE BAIT

© Sandy Curtis

The fisherman flicked the switch to the hydraulics and watched the trawl nets haul up into the night sky. When the balloon-shaped end of the nets came clear of the water, he moved it over the sorting tray and pulled the release cord.

A flurry of sea creatures spilled onto the white fibreglass tray, and the fisherman cursed as he saw a dark shape amongst the prawns, fish, crabs, sea urchins and coral. A dolphin, perhaps, or a small shark. It should have escaped through the excluder devices attached to the nets. Now he would have to throw it over the side, not a safe task if it were a shark.

The stench hit him as he moved closer. Dead, it had to be dead. As he pulled the shape free of the prawns, the deck lights illuminated a grotesque parody of a human face. Small crabs scuttled from the eye sockets, missing strips of flesh created extra mouths in the cheeks. Horrified, he watched a large sand crab claw pieces from the grey, bloated hands and push them into its mouth.

Rope bound the body's hands together.

Chain looped around the tied ankles.

A few weeks later, Detective Senior Constable Amy Dawson cast an acerbic look at her boss, Dan Callaghan, and asked, "Why me? Why not someone from the Water Police?"

"Because our fishy colleagues don't have the legs for it, Dawson."

The gleam in Callaghan's eyes made Amy cringe. Perhaps wearing that figure-hugging, split-to-the-hip red dress to the Police Ball hadn't been a wise idea.

"The only position available on the cruise ship is for a hostess, and," he grinned, "you'll fit the *uniform* quite nicely. We haven't informed Captain Brownlee that his deckhand was fished out of the ocean, so he shouldn't be suspicious."

He glanced at the gruesome photos on his desk. "The deckie had been charged with break and enter a couple of years back so we were able to identify him from what was left of his fingerprints. We were lucky that fisherman found him before the sharks did."

"So what am I looking for? Drugs?"

"Word on the street is that Brownlee is bringing something into the country, but no-one's saying more than that. Until this body turned up we didn't have anything to base an investigation on. Just look at it as a working holiday, Dawson. Think of the fun you'll have. The *Reef Angel* is a luxury cruise ship touring the Great Barrier Reef. It should be great."

It wasn't great.

It was fabulous.

Amy was shown over three decks of jaw-dropping luxury. Though tiny, her cabin was comfortable, and she sighed with relief to see she had her own shower and toilet. The relief ended when she was presented with her 'uniform' – low-cut gowns for evening functions, short shorts and clinging tee-shirts for deck games, and the bikini she had to wear for island excursions was so tiny it could barely fit the company logo.

Her schedule was so hectic that by the end of the second day she began to wonder if all the crew were worked as hard. If they were it wouldn't leave them much time to carry on a drug-smuggling operation. She fell onto her bunk and kicked off her high heels. Thank heavens the cruise around the islands only lasted seven days. At

least she'd have two days to recover from all this *fun* before doing it all over again. Most of the guests were a pleasure to entertain, but if she had to fight off another over-sexed oil baron who fancied himself a reincarnation of Rudolph Valentino, she'd cap his well for him permanently.

Although she had access to most parts of the ship, she hadn't seen anything that looked in the least suspicious. Except, she mused, that the crew who interacted with the guests must have been chosen for their good looks as much as their job skills. They were all Caucasian, except for one of the other hostesses, a stunning Eurasian. Even the head chef who occasionally trolleyed out one of his masterpieces would have made centrefold in a woman's magazine.

The crew who tended to the day-to-day running of the ship, such as cleaners and waiters, were all Asian, and most of them had limited English.

By the end of the week she'd settled into the routine, and the lure of tropical islands and exotic reef almost made her forget why she was there.

On the last day of the cruise the ship anchored near a cluster of small islands. Amy accompanied a group of Americans and Europeans to the nearest island in one of the luxury inflatable tenders. Just as they reached the island the outboard motor spluttered and died. The driver quickly pulled the tender up on the beach and helped Amy carry the picnic lunch, tables and beach umbrellas to the tree line. While she unpacked, he used his two-way radio to call the ship.

The man who arrived on another tender was someone Amy hadn't seen before. Middle thirties, dark hair, light olive skin. Unlike the other Caucasian crew members, his looks wouldn't have set him apart in a crowd. She wandered down to the beach.

The grease under his fingernails told her more than the toolkit he'd opened to work on the motor. She hadn't been able to check out the engine room and quarters of the below-decks crew members. On her two attempts she had been politely directed back to the higher decks. It might pay to make a friend in the right area.

"Hi. We haven't met. My name's Amy Dawson." She refrained from offering her hand.

The man nodded. "Jack Peterson. Ship's engineer." He continued pulling the outboard apart.

"I haven't seen you before. How long have you been on the *Reef Angel*?"

"Long enough."

"Long enough for what?"

He smiled. "To appreciate the chance to get out of the engine room." The glance he gave her said that wasn't the only thing he appreciated.

Amy wondered if he were being deliberately obtuse. Perhaps he had something to hide. "I didn't think any of the below-decks crew were Aussies."

"Guess I'm the exception to the rule." He took out a spark plug and inspected it.

"I wouldn't mind seeing how the engines work." She gave him her most encouraging smile.

His eyes flicked briefly to hers before he turned his attention to another part of the motor. "Don't see you as a grease monkey."

"I've always been interested in mechanical things. My brothers used to let me help them fix their cars. Perhaps you could sneak me down for a look?"

"Sorry. It's against the rules."

Although he appeared to be concentrating on his work, Amy had the feeling Jack Peterson was only too aware of her attempts to glean information from him. Her instincts told her to back off, so she returned to playing hostess to the wealthy.

Apparently it was tradition that on the last night of the cruise the ship's company threw a party. A big party. Even the off-duty crew members were encouraged to attend. Amy kept a look out for Jack Peterson but he didn't show up.

At 2am she crawled into her bunk and went straight to sleep.

Her bedside clock showed 3am when her eyelids fluttered open and her brain tried to follow. She'd been sleeping with the porthole open, and now she realised a noise had woken her. An unusual noise for 3am.

One of the tenders was leaving the ship.

Damn! Why hadn't she thought of that! Of course they'd leave the pick-up to the last night – less chance of being caught with the goods. She scrambled into her tracksuit. Seconds later, gun in pants pocket, pencil torch in hand but switched off, she padded along the gangway on the lowest deck. Only essential navigation lights illuminated the dark water.

Amy slipped quietly over the gate to the stern, and sneaked a look around the corner.

In the daytime, cruise guests would be lined up on the transom, laughing, chatting, waiting to board one of the tenders to go scuba diving or snorkelling, or to picnic on one of the islands. Now an eerie silence filled the empty space, broken only by the slap of waves against the hull and swirling over the transom.

The two large tenders were still in their allocated spaces, but the small one was missing. She figured whoever had taken it wouldn't be picking up a drop too close to the ship, so she should have time to look around. She switched on her torch.

Minutes of fruitless searching later, she was deciding where she could hide to spy on the tender as it returned when she heard footsteps approaching. She opened the door to the ladies toilet and slipped inside. Just as the door closed, she felt a slight movement behind her. Before she could react, strong arms grabbed her and a hand closed over her mouth. A hand that smelled of grease.

A deep voice whispered harshly, "Don't move. Your life could depend on it."

She remembered the autopsy report on the deckhand and repressed her instinctive reaction to use defensive tactics.

The footsteps stopped. She heard the flick of a lighter, and cigarette smoke seeped through the slits in the door.

Amy assessed her situation. Jack Peterson's bare arm was across her breasts and he would have been carved from stone not to realise she wasn't wearing a bra. The friction of fabric rubbing her nipples had caused them to harden, and she felt an answering solidity in the jeans behind her.

The footsteps started again, this time moving away. Amy expected Jack to release her, but his attention appeared to be focused on something else. Just as she was about to kick backwards and damage his kneecap, he whispered, "Don't scream," and his arms lowered. Slowly. His right hand stopped when it moved over the small revolver in her pocket.

"That's not standard issue."

Hell, had he pegged her as a cop already? "You try fitting a Glock in your pants," she hissed.

His chuckle tickled her ear and she decided turning around to face him might not be a wise move in such a confined space. The last thing they both needed at the moment was more friction.

A motor sounded close by. Amy opened the door a fraction. In the darkness she could just make out the shapes as four men clambered across the transom from the tender. The cigarette smoke smell returned, and she saw another man hastily escort

two of the four into the ship's passageway. The remaining men swiftly winched the tender aboard and followed.

Amy waited a few minutes to be sure they didn't come back, then opened the door and she and Jack slipped out. Before she could ask him why he was interested in the tender's night-time excursion, Jack whispered, "I'll have to go before I'm missed. Meet me at the Bay Café when we dock tomorrow."

"Don't skip out on me," she warned.

He didn't scrub up too badly, Amy mused as she watched Jack walking along the wharf to the café the next day. He had the kind of lean but muscular physique that board shorts and tee-shirts were designed to complement. She chose a table furthest from the door while Jack ordered coffees and donuts.

As soon as the boat had docked, Amy had phoned Callaghan and asked him to find out all he could on Jack Peterson. Now she wondered if Jack would divulge anything that would shed light on the night's activities.

She figured he wasn't a man who wasted time on small talk, so she got straight to the point. "Why are you on the *Reef Angel*?"

He gave her an appraising look. "Do we pool information?"

Amy figured that as she had very little to go on, it was probably to her benefit to share. She nodded.

Jack took a long drink of his coffee before answering.

"My step-brother used to work on the *Reef Angel* as the pianist. He phoned me eight months ago and said he needed to talk to me about some strange things happening onboard. He was crossing the road to meet me when a car swerved onto the wrong side, hit him and kept going. He's been in a coma since."

"So you thought you'd try to find out if it was connected to the *Reef Angel*?"

"He's a good kid." Jack's expression hardened. "I want whoever tried to kill him behind bars."

Amy thought of her younger brother and tried to imagine him in a hospital bed, comatose. The image wasn't pleasant. "How'd you get the job?"

"I'm a truck mechanic, and I also did a stint as a deckie on a trawler when I was younger. So I enrolled in a Marine Engine Driver's course, got the qualification, faked it up two grades, and applied after I bribed the ship's engineer to quit the day before they were due to sail," he grinned.

"So what have you found out?"

"Not much. Once a month, on the last night of a trip, and only on the dark of the moon, four men go out and come back in the small boat. They're usually away for about an hour. Something must have gone wrong last night. They weren't gone even half that time."

"Perhaps the drop didn't happen."

"You're assuming they're running drugs?"

"We don't have anything else to assume," she shrugged.

"Then we'll have to follow them."

"How?"

Jack smiled. "It will be easy now I have a partner."

"A partner?"

"You're a cop, aren't you? It should be easy for you to get your hands on what we'll need."

"You're a civilian. I can't have you as a partner."

Jack leaned forward. "Unless you can get someone else on board by tomorrow, Amy, you're stuck with me."

Getting another cop on board as a paying guest was out of the question. With no definite proof of what Brownlee was up to, the Department wouldn't cough up the mountain of dollars needed for a week on the *Reef Angel*.

He was right, she was stuck with him.

"They probably choose the last night of the cruise to go out because everyone's too tired or drunk to notice the tender leave the ship," she mused, then bit into a donut.

"Probably. And they might go out again next week because the moon will still be dark. Now tell me why you're snooping around."

Amy told him about the dead crewman.

Jack frowned. "All the crew below decks, apart from me, are Asian. Most of them don't stay more than a month or two."

"Have you been able to get friendly with any of them?"

He shook his head. "They keep to themselves. They don't have much English, but I got the feeling it was more that they'd been warned to stay away from me. I have noticed though, that one of the long-term members always goes on the night runs in the tender."

She dragged out her notebook. "Got a name for me?" She scribbled as he replied. Then she asked him for details about his step-brother. Callaghan was going to have more checking to do.

Two days later, Amy surveyed the weighty duffle bag she'd brought on board the *Reef Angel*. Convincing Callaghan she needed the gear it held hadn't been easy. A small Zodiac inflatable, night-vision binoculars, portable satellite phone, and tracking device and monitor were hardly standard Police issue, but he'd finally given in.

Callaghan had checked out Jack and the story about his step-brother. He'd told the truth. The young pianist was no longer on life support, but his prognosis wasn't good. The car that had run him down had been found abandoned several blocks away from the scene. Not that it had provided any clues, it had been stolen only fifteen minutes before the arranged meeting time. Police had no leads on the identity of the driver – the man had worn a cap and sunglasses. Jack's insistence that his step-brother had been deliberately run down had been ignored by the local cops who'd preferred their scenario of joy-riding teenagers speeding and losing control.

Amy sighed. No wonder Jack had taken matters into his own hands.

The name of the crew member who always went on the night excursions yielded zilch too. No criminal record, not even a parking ticket.

The week dragged on. Amy had arranged not to meet with Jack unless something important came up. On the last night of the cruise she slipped away early from the obligatory party and went to bed. Nerves tense, she lay fully clothed, sure she would be unable to sleep.

At 2am she jerked awake to the insistent beeping of her wristwatch alarm.

With the duffle bag slung across her shoulder, she sneaked to the stern. Cautiously, she opened the door to the ladies toilet. In the blackness, the room appeared empty. Amy reached for her torch.

"Come into my parlour," Jack whispered from the small space behind the door.

Amy shoved the duffle bag at him, walked in, shut the door and sat on the closed toilet lid. She mightn't feel like the fly to his spider, but there was no point risking too much physical contact, she thought.

The minutes ticked by. Amy checked her gun was secure in her shoulder holster, wondered if they might be staying there all night with nothing happening, and

worried that she might be forced to spend another month working as a glorified people-sitter while her colleagues were chalking up runs on the crime-solved scoreboard.

Jack barely moved. Amy guessed that he must be used to lying under truck engines for long stretches. Standing upright would be a breeze.

Just before 3am they heard the tender being lowered into the water and driven away.

Amy pulled a balaclava over her head and handed one to Jack. As soon as they thought it was safe to do so without being spotted, they emerged from the toilet. Jack unpacked the Zodiac, inflated it, attached one of the spare outboards and fuel tanks kept for the *Reef Angel* tenders, and nudged the Zodiac off the transom.

Soon they were speeding through the night. Jack had placed the tracking device on the tender, and Amy watched its movement on the screen in her hand. For the next twenty minutes she directed Jack accordingly.

The smudge on the eastern horizon soon took shape. "They're stopping at that island," she said, told Jack to slow down, and raised the night-vision binoculars. "Now they're signalling with a torch." The Zodiac wallowed in the waves and she struggled to stay focused. "Two men are walking down to the beach. It looks like they have packs with them. Now they're getting in the tender with the others."

"What the hell's going on?"

Amy could hear the tension in his voice. Her own stomach was twisted in a knot. The ocean wasn't her kind of territory. Not at night-time, anyway. There was something menacing in its blackness and the way an even darker shadow seemed to follow each small white-capped wave. She pulled her balaclava lower and kept looking. "They're coming back. Heading towards us."

"Hunch down," Jack commanded, and sped off at right angles to the tender's course. After a few minutes he turned off the engine and they flattened themselves as best they could on the floor. Without the binoculars Amy wouldn't have a hope of seeing the tender as it sped away, and she was relieved. It meant their Zodiac would be just as indiscernible.

She unclipped the satellite phone from her belt and reported to the Customs boat anchored several nautical miles from the *Reef Angel*, waiting to carry out a raid if needed.

Nothing about this felt right. If Brownlee was smuggling drugs it was a strange way to do it.

Jack started the motor again and followed the tender. Seven minutes later Amy signalled that the tender was stopping. Jack followed suit.

Amy watched through the binoculars, prickling starting in her neck. No, this definitely wasn't right.

Two of the men in the tender drew guns. Then one of the other men tied the hands of two others behind their backs.

Amy suddenly remembered Jack's description of what he'd seen previously. *Four men go out and come back.*

There were six in the tender.

The autopsy photo of the dead deckhand flashed into her mind.

"Head straight for them!" she yelled to Jack. "Top speed."

The Zodiac shot forward. Amy gripped with her feet, her attention fixed on the tender. She barked instructions into the satellite phone. But even with its high speed engines, the Customs boat wouldn't reach them in time.

The men in the boat must have heard the Zodiac's motor. They cut the ropes from the bound pair and shoved them down on the seats. To Amy's amazement, they

all picked up fishing rods and cast out. They even turned on the navigation lights. Must be Plan B, she thought, in case they were disturbed – pretend to fish.

She signalled Jack to slow down, and told him her suspicions about what the crew members were planning.

“Let’s throw a little live bait into the water,” he growled. “Hang on.”

The Zodiac surged forward until it was planing over the water. Amy grabbed the side rope, and drew her gun.

Their night vision impaired by the navigation lights, the men in the tender didn’t realise what was happening until the Zodiac was nearly upon them.

Jack aimed straight for the tender. One man yelled and jumped overboard. Two more followed as the Zodiac veered at the last minute and lifted over the bow of the tender.

The Zodiac’s propeller sliced into the tender’s hull. Air hissed into the night.

Amy fired as one of the men raised his gun. He toppled backwards into the water. Jack spun the Zodiac around and slowed to a halt.

The tender listed as the men struggled to get back on board. Amy saw one man reach into a pack on the floor. “Stop!” she yelled, but steel gleamed in the light as a knife flew towards Jack. Amy’s bullet shattered the man’s arm as the blade struck Jack’s chest.

In the distance she could hear a siren.

It wasn’t until the following afternoon that Amy was able to finish writing up her report. Half an hour later she drove to the hospital, making one stop along the way. In the surgical ward she found the bed she was looking for and held out the box of chocolates she’d bought. She watched as Jack raised an eyebrow, his face almost as pale as the pillows propping him up. “You didn’t look like a flowers man,” she explained.

“So what was Brownlee up to?” he asked. “People smuggling?”

“In a way. He was bringing Asian criminals into the country by swapping them with his crew members who were naturalised Australians but without family ties. Only the crew members didn’t make the return journey. We know where they ended up,” she shuddered. “The crims, Triad members mostly, arrived with enough gold to start up their own little empires. Apparently some of them thought there would be some vacancies in Melbourne because of the criminal gangs there who’ve been bumping each other off.”

“How did they get to that island?”

Amy looked at the chocolate box. Jack took the hint, opened it and offered it to her. She squeezed a likely suspect and popped it into her mouth. “Not sure.” Strawberry cream oozed over her tongue. “Coastwatch is working on that now.”

“So your job’s finished.”

“Yep.”

“Will I be seeing you again?”

Amy licked a smear of chocolate from the corner of her mouth and remembered their closeness in the confined space of the *Reef Angel*’s toilet. “Oh, I think so,” she smiled. “I’ve always wanted to find a good mechanic.”