

A MAC McCLELLAN MYSTERY

DEADLY CATCH

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For Karen

CHAPTER 1

The first cast of the day turned my dream vacation into a nightmare.

A quick flick of the wrist and the lure flashed in the rising sun, arched thirty or so yards alongside the grass flats and landed with a quiet splash barely a foot from the edge. Bull's-eye! During my week of fishing the waters of St. George Bay I'd developed a nice touch for casting, especially for someone who'd hardly wet a line the past twenty years. I closed the bail, gave the rod tip a couple of light twitches, and waited.

I'd hooked and landed some fine speckled trout the past few days, but I still hadn't nailed a bragging-size "gator" trout despite a crash course in speck fishing from Lamar Randall. Lamar is the mechanic and part-time fishing guide who keeps the rental boats at Gillman's Marina in tiptop condition. When I first met him he was wearing an eye patch, and with his goatee and longish hair he bore an uncanny resemblance to a classic Hollywood pirate. He'd recently suffered an injury while working on a boat he was building at home and would have to wear the protective patch for several more weeks.

Lamar is also known as one of the best trout and redfish anglers along the Florida Panhandle. When I'd asked why he was turning wrenches instead of guiding rich tourists full-time to his favorite honey-holes, he laughed.

"I got three kids and a wife to feed. Throw in bad weather, the slow winters, well, you get the picture. Now if I was still single . . ."

After a minute I gave the rod tip another twitch and began a slow retrieve. The lure wiggled and skirted the grassy edge for ten or fifteen

feet when I felt resistance. My pulse raced as I yanked back on the rod to set the hook and started reeling. The rod bent against the heavy weight, and I got psyched for the fight of my angling life. Seconds later disappointment doused my adrenaline rush. Gator trout, my ass. I was hung up.

I lowered the rod, pointed the tip at whatever I'd snagged, and pulled, hoping to free the lure. No such luck. I tried again with the same results. Well, damned if I was going to give it up without a fight. I'd paid six ninety-five plus tax for that *MirrOlure* at the marina shop last evening. I lived just fine on my military retirement, but seven bucks was seven bucks. If it came down to it I'd swim for that lure.

After a few more tries I gave up trying to free the lure. It was stuck fast. The thought of getting wet this early in the morning didn't thrill me, but moving the boat closer to the grass flats would be more likely to spook whatever fish might be lurking around than my wading. Decision made, I released the bail to give the line some slack and leaned the spinning outfit against the gunnels. The clear water looked shallow enough, but just to be sure I grabbed the paddle from its rack. The handle slipped beneath the surface, and the water rose past my elbow before the blade struck bottom. With luck my head and neck would be above water.

I shed my shirt, kicked off my new leather deck shoes, emptied my pockets, and unclipped the cell phone from my belt. There wasn't much wind to speak of, but I knew that could change without warning. So, I crawled onto the bow, unfastened the anchor, slipped the rope through the bow guide and lowered it to the bottom. I gave the anchor line a few feet of slack and wrapped it fast to a cleat. I tugged on the 12-pound test monofilament again to relocate my target. Satisfied of my bearings, I braced my hands on the gunnels and hopped over the side.

The bay was chilly even though June was just a few days away. I stood there a minute getting used to the water, which topped out just below my shoulders. Then I headed for the grass flats using the "stingray shuffle" that Kate, the attractive saleslady at Gillman's, had demonstrated for me should I decide for whatever reason to go wading

in these waters. A trip to the local emergency room to remove a stingray barb wasn't high on my vacation agenda.

I found the fishing line, held it loosely in my right hand, and eased along. I kept my eyes focused on where I thought the lure was, making as little motion as possible. About halfway to the target a light breeze rose and drifted my way. That's when the stench hit, almost gagging me. Iraq flashed through my mind, bodies rotting in the alleys and rubble of Fallujah. Whatever the hell I'd snagged had to be sizeable to raise that much stink. A dolphin or sea turtle, maybe a shark. Lamar had mentioned that this area of the bay was a prime breeding ground for certain species of sharks. Well, if this *was* a shark I smelled, it was in no condition to attack me.

I covered my mouth and nose with my free hand and kept going, breathing as little and shallow as possible. Just a few feet from my objective I lifted the line out of the water and gave it a light pull. Five feet away, the surface exploded. Hundreds of small fish and blue crabs darted and scurried in every direction. I tripped backward and nearly went under before I somehow regained my footing. My heart was racing, and despite the foul air I grabbed several deep breaths to calm myself. Then I saw it—my lure, embedded in the bleached-white underbelly of a large fish sticking halfway out of the grass.

"You chickenshit," I muttered, glad no fishing buddies were along to witness my brave reaction to a bunch of scavengers feasting on a dead fish. I turned my head and took another deep breath and covered the few remaining feet as fast as possible. Pulling the line tight, I reached for the lure. My hand froze in midair and I stumbled back again, heart pounding. Christ on a crutch, this was no dead fish! It was a leg—a human leg!