



ALASKA

be

DAMNED!

Robert Hatting

Alaska be Damned!

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Chapter 1

Somewhere on a storm-ravaged rock beach were at least two men and a wrecked fishing boat. When I'd first come on watch I'd heard the skipper's shaky voice, crackling in VHF static, broadcasting his desperate message. The voice on the radio was barely audible due to his transmitting system's low power. I'd responded, but since he kept repeating the same message I knew he couldn't hear me.

I'd located the position of the distress signal with the ADF and instructed my son, Tom, to stay in Tebenkof Bay with our boats, the *Ancient Mariner* and the *Kittiwake*. For the past hour I'd been in my fourteen-foot skiff, the *Wolf Bay*, fighting gale force winds, an erratic sea, the inky black of pre-dawn, and the knifing rain.

"Mayday! Mayday! This is *Seawyfe*. We're wrecked on a rocky beach. Mayday, anybody, we're breaking up on the rocks. We need help!"

"*Seawyfe* this is *Wolf Bay* on channel 16. I read you and am en route. ETA is less than an hour. Do you copy *Seawyfe*?" I held the portable radio to my ear to listen for a response, but the message repeated again.

"Mayday! Mayday! This is *Seawyfe*. Can anyone hear me? Mayday, anybody, we need help!"

The *Wolf Bay* bucked and rolled with the high swells and confused chop. Well aware that lives were at stake, I risked the added danger of bumping the throttle up to gain an extra knot or two. I let the radio dangle on a lanyard around my neck so I could grip the rail on the skiff's center console. I needed both hands to maintain my balance in the rough choppy sea. The spring squall hampered my vision, making my destination, Windfall Island, barely an outline. The name seemed especially appropriate as the fifty-knot wind and the cold, unrelenting rain compounded the element of danger. I'd seen it several days before while scouting the Tebenkof Bay area.

Once the top of an igneous up-thrust mountain, the rocky atoll, shelters Explorer Basin from Chatham Strait. The only landmark was a prominent Sitka spruce that reached high in defiance of its shallow delicate root system. From charts I knew that the island was ringed by deep water right up to its granite boulders. Thinking of the men stranded on the rocky beach, I considered the danger I'd put all of us in if I wrecked the *Wolf Bay*. I was their only hope for getting off the island and they didn't even know I existed.

Drawing closer, I plotted my approach through the maze of boulders. I chose a beach ringed by an escarpment and large driftwood logs. Trying to miss a massive bed of floating kelp, I eased my small skiff through the jutting rocks; sentinels to the rocky beach ahead. A swell pushed my skiff sideways and the outboard died. I reached into the frigid water to find kelp wrapped around the prop. I decided to leave the tangle to slow my forward motion. *One boat wrecked on this rocky island is enough. It won't hurt Mother Nature to help a bit for a change.*

It was still dark and I couldn't see where the water stopped and the beach started even though I was only a few feet away. Miniature hemlock and stunted spruce seemed to beckon me with their eerie, wind-driven gesticulations. Shouldering my rubber knapsack, heavy with survival gear and supplies, I tied a halyard to the bow cleat, took a deep breath, and flung the grappling hook to the furthestmost rock I could see. As it took hold

and I pulled my craft forward, feeling the counter pull from the kelp-snarled prop. In my leap to shore, one foot made it and the other took numbingly cold water to the thigh. This seeped into my brown boot, making the wool sock soggy with foam-encrusted seawater. The squish of my foot in a boot full of water telegraphed through my mustang suit as I hopped from rock to rock like a child playing hopscotch. Bow line in one hand, balancing with the other, I mistook the back of a sea lion pup for a wet rock. He moved just before I planted my left foot where his body once was. Only the bow line kept me from fully submerging. Soaked to the chest, shaken and bruised by the rocks, the radio still hanging from a lanyard around my neck, I crawled from the foamy swells and made it to the first scraggly, wind-blown tree to tie off. I immediately checked my radio, the only lifeline to the outside world. I heard the squawk of the VHF as I scrambled up the steep bank.

“*Ancient Mariner*, this is Coast Guard, Sitka, on 16. Can you give us your ETA to the distressed vessel?”

Knowing that the battery life was short even fully charged, I didn’t want to transmit anything non-essential. Pausing for breath, I debated the pros and cons of responding. Protocol required me to answer. The Coast Guard was more than curious; they had regulations to follow. *Was that enough of a reason for me?* The deciding factor was my unwillingness to waste precious battery time for pointless chatter, no matter what the rules required. I had nothing significant to report. There wouldn’t be any harm in waiting until I reached the shipwreck and talked to the skipper. I could let Tom handle it for now.

“Coast Guard Sitka, this is *Ancient Mariner* on 16. Please switch to channel 22, over.” I heard my son respond.

Crawling the last few yards over lichen covered rocks, I reached an outcropping that sheltered me from the driving rain and wind. As I listened to the conversation between Tom and the Coasties, I studied possible routes over the ridge to where I estimated the wreck to be. Looking back, I could hardly see my fiberglass skiff although I’d covered only fifty yards since coming ashore. *Hope that kelp holds or there’ll be three of us stranded on this little island.* The cold and wet had me shivering. I had to keep moving to retain any body heat. Mostly on hands and knees I made the arduous climb toward the towering spruce.

“*Wolf Bay* this is *Ancient Mariner* on 16. If you copy, switch.” I paused on the slope just shy of my goal and switched my portable to our pre-arranged secret channel.

“Ancient Mariner, this is Wolf Bay.”

“Dad, the Coast Guard choppers are grounded because of a contaminated fuel problem. They don’t expect to assist in the rescue unless you call in one of the cutters. They said it was your decision, over.”

“Yes, son, I copied their transmission. I’m on the island, but haven’t spotted the *Seawyfe* yet. Just stand by and let’s keep the chatter to a minimum. I don’t have a lot of battery left in this portable. Tell the Coasties I’ll report after I get to the wreck.”

“Roger, Dad, but you need to know that since the closest available Coast Guard relief is in Sitka, they’ve commissioned the *Ancient Mariner* as the reporting vessel under some official article. They require us to report on all aspects of the wreck, especially any oil or fuel spill.”

“Yeah, son I know that drill. I’m focused on rescuing the guys on the beach. I’m sure they’re already suffering from hypothermia. I’ll deal with the Coasties later. Leave the recorder on so we can document the situation. I’m back to 16.”

I lingered a moment, partly to pace myself but mostly because I was snagged by one of those rhetorical questions that pop up occasionally. *What if this had happened two years ago? I would have been talking to Nancy, my partner, lover, and first mate. Correction! My ex-lover, ex-partner, ex-first mate.* Pushing away the grief that accompanied the memory, I considered what a rock Tom was. I would never have guessed that he could become such a talented journeyman in such a short time. He'd gone from apprentice deck hand on my 85-foot packer to owner/operator of his own vessel, a high-liner in any fleet, and a damn fine man.

Cresting the ridge, I could see the windward side of the small island, but the wrecked fishing boat wasn't evident. Considering the helicopter's grounded status, I regretted relaying the 'mayday' to the Coast Guard in Sitka. It's an unwritten policy among the fishermen along the entire West Coast that the Coast Guard is a last resort. They can and do save lives, but they're not the elite, respected branch of the armed forces they used to be. For the most part they operate as a marine police force, exacting compliance with rules and regulations that seldom make sense.

Dockside stories abound that describe the perils of calling on them for assistance. Earlier in the spring the *Cape Spencer*, a long-liner boat, was sinking off the Fairweather grounds. A Coast Guard helicopter lowered an emergency pump to the deck and the skipper was able to save his boat. When he made it to port, the Coasties inspected his vessel and cited him for excessive oil in his bilge, unapproved batteries in his survival suits, and an out-of-date inspection tag on one of his fire extinguishers. His fines totaled over fifteen thousand dollars.

I purged the thoughts of the red tape facing me and returned to the task at hand. Continuing along the ridge to the southern tip of the island, I traversed a small ravine and started working back up the ridge. At this higher elevation the wind had nothing to break its speed and my eyes kept watering, making it difficult to focus clearly. Finally finding relief from the gale behind a blown down spruce, I scanned the maze of rocks and driftwood referred to as a beach in Alaska. Looking down, just below my perch, were three seals, huddled with their backs to the wind. I studied them, curious about whether they were oblivious to my presence or just didn't care. Shielding my face from the wind and rain, I looked north, directly into the gale. I could see floating debris but no vessel. I was glad for the reliability of the *Ancient Mariner's* ADF reading, which supported my common sense reasoning that they were close because of my ability to copy their radio transmissions when no one else could.

Then I heard it; a faint metal-against-rock clanging coming from the direction I'd just scanned. I descended to the beach and saw that what had been a vessel had become only wreckage in the space of ninety-minutes. An aluminum fuel tank, partially submerged, was striking the rocks on the beach. The fill pipe was stoppered by an old sock, the diesel wicking out and adding sheen to the frothing surf. *Jeez, I hope those guys didn't stay on board.* The top of what was left of the pilothouse bobbed in the heavy swell, the mounted antennas slapping the water with every rolling swell. The EPIRB was still mounted on what was left of the mast. *So much for lifesaving devices required by the Coast Guard. The poor bastard probably had to eat Spam for a month to afford that damn thing and it didn't work.*

Amid a clutter of floating wood debris, two life jackets were wedged between a rock and a second fuel tank, indicating the presence of mind to avoid any further fuel spill. I

considered the effort someone had taken to protect the environment in spite of their own danger. Further west along the beach I thought I detected movement. For a split second, since I was looking directly into the pounding rain, I thought I might have imagined it. I stared, afraid to blink, and was able to detect movement at the lee side of a boulder outcropping.

I climbed over tangles of driftwood, kelp, and smaller boulders to reach them and their minimal shelter. Two figures were huddled together, up tight against the rock face, staring out to the water as if sheer will power could create a means of salvation for them. What was left of their personal possessions sat in pathetic clumps around them: a rifle, waterlogged books, a few cans of foodstuffs, and the binnacled compass from the auto pilot.

By the time I was ten feet away I decided that I'd better make my presence known.

"You folks interested in a ride off this God-forsaken rock, or are you gonna just sit here and watch the pretty scenery?"

The man in the rain gear turned his head toward my voice, oblivious to my attempt at humor. He looked to be in his mid-sixties and he held the portable VHF clasped tightly to his chest. The other person, who was wrapped only in a blanket, didn't even look my way. The one in the blanket was shivering uncontrollably and could have already gone into shock.

I went up close and knelt down to assess their situation. The weathered fisherman's eyes were glazed. As I reached my hand to his wrist to check his pulse, another hand clasped my arm before I could make contact. I turned to the blanketed figure and found myself looking into a woman's dark brown eyes surrounded by a blanched-white freckled face.

All she could stammer was, "You're real! I thought I imagined you."

She pulled me toward her as if to burrow into my body for the winter. Though taken aback by her fervent embrace, I automatically put my arms around her small frame to reassure her that I was indeed flesh and blood. Through the wool, olive drab surplus-type blanket I could tell that she wore no clothing. Pinning her body to my soggy mustang suit, she pressed her cheek to mine. Her curly red hair, soggy and disheveled, smelled of saltwater, fish, and diesel fuel. I avoided touching her with my icy hands, but suddenly the melding of our two bodies precipitated a signal from my loins. Ashamed of turning her release of fear and emotional stress into an excuse for arousal, I started to pull away from her.

"Please!" she begged in a hoarse whisper. "Just hold me a little longer. I'm so cold!"

Still holding me tightly, her teeth chattering, she sobbed with relief. The temptation to continue our physical connection was hard to overcome, but I was supposed to be the one in control of the situation. I shifted enough to be able to talk quietly into her ear.

"Miss, I'm happy that I got here in time to help you and your friend. I know you've been through a lot and you both need to get dry and warm before too much more time passes. You're probably experiencing hypothermia already. Let's get you into this Mustang suit of mine till we can find shelter. I have some sweats and rain gear you can put on then."

"What about you?"

“I dressed in layers before I left the *Ancient Mariner* and I can put on the spare rain gear. I’ll be warm enough. Let’s get you into something to warm you up and then we’ll check on the skipper.

That snapped her into remembering that she wasn’t alone. She turned to the man, who was watching us with bemusement, and put her hands over his.

“We’re saved, Uncle Buck! Someone heard your ‘mayday’ and came to rescue us. We’re not going to die!”

I shrugged out of the heavy suit and handed it to her. She let the blanket drop and I saw that she had nothing on except for rubber boots. I have to admit that I noticed the form of her body. She took off the boots and got into the Mustang suit quickly while I put on the rain gear. I dug some wool socks out of the backpack and turned to put them on her feet. They were almost purple with the cold, so I gently massaged each one to restore some circulation before putting a sock on it. She had pretty feet and I took my time. When she noticed what my attention was drawn to, she pulled away a bit. I smiled sheepishly at her and muttered something about being partial to feet. Then I stood up and helped her tighten the drawstring on the suit’s hood.

“What happened to your clothes, miss?”

“They’re on the beach, soaked in diesel.”

“I bet you’re the one who wrestled those fuel tanks onto the beach, aren’t you?”

She shrugged and I let it drop. I supported her while she put on the rubber boots. Afterwards, she stood as still as a well-behaved child while I adjusted the Velcro wrist and ankle bands. Our faces were only inches apart and she watched me, locking her focus on my eyes, as my numbed hands fumbled with the belt buckle to tighten the baggy suit around her slender waist.

The spell was disrupted by the old man. “Mayday! Mayday!” he screamed into the radio. “This is the fishing vessel *Seawyfe*. We’re breaking apart on the rocks! Mayday!”

I knelt to take his hand. “Buck, I’m Ben Reed, skipper of the *Ancient Mariner*!” I shouted over the howling wind. “We’re anchored back inside Tebenkof at Oriel. We need to get off this island fast. Can you make it? Are you hurt?” I looked into his eyes, only to see a rheumy, empty gaze. His breathing and pulse were normal, but his mind was obviously in shock. Sliding my hand under his Helly Hanson and finding that his wool clothing was dry, it was apparent that he’d been in a rain suit before the accident.

“*Wolf Bay*, this *Kittiwake*, switch; over.”

“*Kittiwake*, I copy, over.”

“Dad, what’s going on? I just copied another ‘mayday’ from the *Seawyfe*. Have you made contact?”

“Roger, son. I have made contact, but the old skipper is still in shock over losing his boat. He’s kind of dazed and it hasn’t registered that I’m here. There’s nothing left of the *Seawyfe* except floating debris.”

“Do you need some help with those people? I can bring my zodiac and lend a hand.”

“For now I’d rather have you stay put and look after our boats. I think these people can make it across the ridge to the *Wolf Bay*. I may take you up on your offer, though, if the *Wolf Bay* isn’t where I left her.”

“Dad, I just received an updated fax from the National Weather Service. It confirms what the Coast Guard relayed. They expect this storm to worsen through the day. The wind is supposed to switch and blow northerly instead of northwesterly.”

“Roger, son, all the more reason for you to stay where you are. I’ve got a few things to do here and then we’re headed over the ridge and off the island. I’ll report in when we reach the *Wolf Bay*. Keep it together back there.”

“OK, Dad. I double-anchored *Ancient Mariner*, let out more scope, and side tied my boat to the lee. I’ve dropped my ground tackle to help with the yaw.”

“Good job, Tom. Back to sixteen.” I envisioned the Gordian knot we’d have with three anchors in close proximity. *Well, it can’t be helped.*

The woman was coming toward me with stilted movements brought on by cold, shock, and the Mustang suit that was several sizes too big for her. The look of relief she’d gained had been replaced by apprehension.

“We’re not out of trouble, yet, are we, Mister Reed?”

“No ma’am,” I replied honestly. “When the wind blows northerly, Explorer Basin turns into a cauldron. We need to get out of here before the wind switches or we’ll never make it back in my little skiff. It’s a dandy, but it’s not designed for twenty-foot chop. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Meg. Meg Thompson. Those pieces of wreckage used to be my boat, the *Intrepid*. Something is terribly wrong with Buck, ‘cause he’s been calling in a ‘mayday’ for the *Seawyfe*. She went down four years ago off Fairway Island in Peril Strait and took Buck’s wife, Hattie, with her. They’d been together forty years. My husband, Davy, was working as Buck’s deck hand that summer. He didn’t survive, either.”

Without thinking about what I was doing, I pulled Meg to me and held her again. Was I comforting her or me, remembering the grief of losing my father? The howling, rain-filled wind, our precarious situation here in light of the worsening storm, and an old man driven crazy by a second loss; none of these elements seemed to be as important in that moment as being close to this woman.

Meg raised her face and kissed me on the cheek. “It’s okay. I feel it, too. Just hold me a little longer.” With those words, she canceled my loneliness and the isolation I’d suffered for two years. Not since many years before, when my dad died in my arms, had I felt such a powerful outpouring of tenderness and reverence toward another person. What I was experiencing was a rekindling of life. *I’m here on a rescue mission, but I’m the one who’s being saved.*

“Hey! Who are you? How did you get here?” Buck’s panic-stricken voice let us know that he was conscious of his surroundings. Reluctantly we stepped apart. Meg moved toward her uncle. She knelt by Buck and talked to him gently while attempting to pry the radio from his gnarled hands. He resisted at first, then turned it loose with a shrug and tried to stand. As I reached to assist him, he repeated his questions, which Meg answered.

“Buck, this is Ben Reed. He heard your ‘mayday’ and came to rescue us. He has a skiff on the other side of the island. You’ve been kind of dazed for a while. Are you okay? Can you walk?”

“I’ve been talking to Hattie,” he replied in almost a whisper. She’s fine. Says she wants to be with me again. Mister, do you have a cigarette? I really need a smoke.”

“There are cigarettes and matches in a zip-lock bag in my backpack. Help yourself. I’m going to secure those fuel tanks before we leave.”

The rain had momentarily abated but the wind was howling worse than before. I knew this storm hadn’t reached its full strength yet and we should be getting off the island before it was too late, but I felt compelled to finish the job the woman had started.

Picking my way carefully along the beach, I searched for line, cable, or strapping to lash the fuel tanks to the rocks. Meg came along side me, silent in her private reflections. Together we probed the wreckage and pulled out sections of line, gurdy wire, and even a survival suit that was still in its original poly-bag.

Since it was wishful thinking that we'd get off the island before the storm abated, I suggested that we plan for a longer stay than originally intended. I found a pike pole and began hooking and lifting everything I could back to the beach. Meg assisted, still silent but efficient. Most of the retrieved debris we moved to above high water line. We garnered a hatch cover, another survival suit, blankets, a tarp, and some pots and pans.

A couple of the salmon from the *Intrepid's* fish hold washed ashore in the froth. They reminded me that much had been lost in this wreck, but I was also glad to see them so we'd have more than the jerked meat and trail mix from my backpack. Meg watched this fishing expedition with surprise, but she didn't say anything. Before I could explain, the VHF interrupted. It was the Coast Guard, again, wanting information from Tom. As we eavesdropped on the conversation between my son and the authorities, I secured the tanks to a boulder. Then, on the waterside, I used rocks to build a cairn-like barricade around them.

Wet to the waist, the strong cold winds biting through my wool clothes, I began to shiver. Meg watched with concern. She could see my discomfort and empathized with me, yet all she could do was remain close. I surveyed the area and spotted Meg's diesel-soaked clothes. After rinsing them in the surf, I stuffed them into the sack I'd made out the tarp, along with the new survival suit, several cans of food, and two wool blankets. Leaving the rest of our haul until later, we walked back to where Buck was still motionless by the boulder.

"We need to move; to climb to the ridge, toward that spruce. Can you make it, Buck?"

Buck just nodded, rose to his feet, and started toward the ridge. His walk was wobbly at first and he seemed to be taking each step with great effort. I watched him closely, assessing his strength, wondering how much of the staggering was due to the gale. He seemed to improve as he neared the base of the ridge. Meg followed close behind him, carrying my backpack and radio.

Shouldering the rifle and the makeshift sack, I started up the rise. Buck was having a hard time battling the wind to get to the top. At the halfway point, Meg stopped and looked down, watching my progress. I hurried to catch up. Reaching her position, I stopped for a breather. She handed me the radio.

"Your son just called and said to switch. I didn't know your channel, so I waited."

"Thanks. *Ancient Mariner*, this is *Wolf Bay*, over."

"Dad, the Coast Guard is considering sending a cutter out of Ketchikan. They want to hear from you. I told them all was well and you'd be reporting soon, but they insist that you're required to report directly to them since you have a radio. By the way our instruments indicate a north by westerly gale at sixty-five knots. I'm sure it's blowing harder where you are. Be careful, Dad."

"Roger, Son. I'll call them when I reach the top of the ridge."

"Break! Break! *Ancient Mariner*, *Wolf Bay*, this is U.S. Coast Guard, Sitka. Via scanner we have been monitoring your transmissions on a restricted channel. We command you to cease and desist in your use of this channel. You are violating section-346 article-819 of FCC regulations. Please switch to channel two-two and respond."

Staying on channel 16, I keyed the mike and spoke briefly to Tom. "Go to ground."

Meg eyed me suspiciously as I pulled the radio from its waterproof case and depressed a switch. I explained what I was doing as I replaced the radio.

"I just instructed Tom to go to our scrambled channel. I'm not sure if they can copy our conversation unless they run it through their computer. Let's get going. I want to see what Explorer Basin is like."

"*Ancient Mariner, Wolf Bay*, this is the U.S. Coast Guard on channel 16. You were instructed to respond to our last transmission. You are hereby commanded to respond, do you understand?"

"Dad, what do you want me to do?" Tom asked on the scrambled channel.

"Go ahead and respond, Son. Just keep them mollified for a few more minutes. I need more time. Then I'll report and take the heat. I'm turning the radio off to conserve energy. Tell that to the Coasties. They don't seem to understand that it takes power to respond their commands, instructions, and ultimatums. I'm out!"

I handed the radio to Meg, shouldered my load, and tried to quell the rising rage that was knotting my stomach worse than it already was. *Why do I have such a hard time with authority? I've always been like this. Well, not always; not before Vietnam, or when I was a young, naive cowboy on Granddad's ranch. Not when I was in college. Hell, I'd considered studying law. Yeah, it must have started in 'Nam, but that was just an eye opener. The injustice I saw in Panama when I was a kid, or when I was in the south, made me angry, too. Not to mention my resistance to the blarney fed to me by the church. The anger was there, I just didn't have a name for it.*

Meg and Buck were looking east toward Explorer Basin when I topped the ridge. It was past dawn, but the dense, steel-gray clouds prevented the sun's rays from reaching us. Visibility was better because the rain had abated, but I couldn't see the *Wolf Bay*. The bay was a swirl of swell and chop. Waves were reaching thirty feet, breaking against each new up-welling, creating bewildered, out-of-harmony forces. My skiff was either adrift or tossed high onto the rocks. The drama unfolding before us eloquently told our fate. I didn't have to tell Meg and Buck that we were marooned.

From our vista we witnessed the havoc being wreaked by Mother Nature. Trees and shrubs were permanently bent or uprooted. High on the beach, a number of seals and sea lions had sought shelter from the fierce environment. As predicted, the wind was blowing directly out of the north, accelerating with each prolonged gust. It occurred to me how irrelevant our typical daily problems appear when compared with these kinds of immutable forces. *Will the stock market remain bullish? Will we ever see thee dollar a pound Kings again? Should we paint the house to please our neighbors? Do these shoes go well with this dress? Should I call the Coasties?*

Meg took my arm and leaned against me. It was difficult to breathe, let alone talk. We turned and looked west toward where the *Intrepid* had ceased to be a boat. Chatham Strait was breathtaking. Developing some synch, the waves were compounding with one wave breaking over another breaking wave, reaching heights of up to sixty feet.

I tapped the radio in Meg's pocket, indicating what I needed, then pressed my face to her ear and shouted over the wind. "Looks like we'll be here overnight, so you and Buck find a place to hole up. Look for a cave, blow-down, or anything with southern exposure. We'll be dryer if you stay up high. I'll call the Coasties and Tom on my way down to

retrieve more of the stuff on the beach. Let's meet here in about an hour and you can show me what you've found, okay?"

She nodded her assent, then pressed her face against mine and hugged me hard. "Come back. I need you. Please come back!" she pleaded over the noise of the wind.

I tugged the drawstring tighter around her hood, squeezed her shoulder, and turned to go back down the ridge. My mind contemplated our dilemma, and then skipped to argumentative self-talk. *Of course she needs you. We're trapped on a lonely island in the middle of a hurricane-class storm. She's wet, cold, and scared. Hold on, there. That's not what she meant and you know it. Dig deeper and face facts, bud!. You need her as much as she needs you.*"

Feeling a little lightheaded, I paused under a bent cedar and activated the scrambled channel on the radio.

"Tom, do you copy?" I shouted into the mike.

"Yeah, Dad. Are you okay? Everything is fine here. We're battened down and haven't moved. Our ground tackle is superb."

"Son, we've lost the *Wolf Bay*. It's rolling thirty footers in the Explorer Basin and sixty in Chatham. Looks like we're stuck until this storm blows itself out. I think we'll be all right assuming we can find some shelter. I'm calling the Coasties next. That will use a lot of my power, so I'll turn it off afterward. No use calling me anyway. I can't help you and I trust your judgment. When this lies down, inflate your zodiac and come get us. Okay, son?"

"Roger, Dad. Good luck! I love you, Dad!"

Switching to channel 16 and flipping the power mode to high, I contemplated my son's declaration. I'm always pleasantly surprised, even shocked when my grown son says he loves me. When I'm with my daughter, my eldest, my sweet and wild little girl, she tells me she loves me three or four times a day. With Tom, it's maybe two or three times a year. *My big tough Alaskan son. A man among men who's capable of telling his Dad that he loves him. God, I wish I'd told mine more often!*

"Coast Guard Sitka, This is *Wolf Bay* on Sixteen. If you copy, please switch to channel two-two. Over."

"*Wolf Bay* this Coast Guard, Sitka. We read you five by five. What is your emergency status? Over."

"Coast Guard, all parties are alive and well. No injuries, but we're stranded on Windfall Island. Over."

"*Wolf Bay*, can you give us your exact location; longitude and latitude bearings, and please identify yourself, over?"

"No, Coast Guard, I can't. Look it up on your chart. It's a small island at the mouth of Tebenkof Bay off Chatham Strait. My name is Ben Reed. I'm the skipper of the *Ancient Mariner*."

"*Wolf Bay*, what is the status of the distressed vessel, *Seawyfe*? Is there a significant oil or fuel spill? Over."

"Coast Guard, the vessel in distress was the *Intrepid*. It was smashed against the rocks and nothing is left but debris. I secured the fuel tanks to rocks on the beach. There are no other problems. Over."

"*Wolf Bay*, this is watch commander, Ensign Pullsit. Your transmissions indicated the name of the distressed vessel as the *Seawyfe*. Why is there a discrepancy? Also, we have

transcripts of your conversations on a restricted channel in violation of FCC regulations. These multiple violations have been duly noted and will be forwarded to the FCC, Over.”

I could feel the anger building again, welling from deep within. I noticed the strangle hold I had on the radio. At the same time, I saw the low battery indicator began to flash. *Why am I talking to these fucking idiots? I answer a distress call and now I'm in deep kimchee with the feds. Damn, why does it have to be this hard? Oh well, since I've got the name, I might as well play the game.*

“Coast Guard, Sitka, this is *Wolf Bay*. Listen up, Ensign Pulver, ‘cause this is my last transmission to you. The wind is blowing out of the north at eighty knots and Chatham Strait has breakers upward to sixty feet. This is a Class A storm, Pulver. Do not, I repeat, do not send a cutter, a battleship, or any other type of vessel into this storm. All parties are fine... doing five by five. We have ample supplies and shelter, but the radio battery is almost gone. I will oblige you with paperwork after this is over. Do you read me, Ensign Pulver?”

“*Wolf Bay* this is Coast guard, Sitka, Ensign Pullsit. You were instructed to respond to our call over thirty minutes ago. Do you understand that you have violated United States Maritime Law, as described in Paragraph 7, Section 31? You are hereby commanded to maintain communication to apprise us of any and all developments. Any further violations will be dealt with harshly. Do you copy, *Wolf Bay*? Over.”

“Ensign Pulver, you’ve got me confused with someone who gives a shit! Out and Off!”

I regretted this burst of anger, wasted as it was on an officious junior officer, but I couldn’t take it back. Picking my way down the slope toward the remains of the *Intrepid*, I ran through a few scenarios of how I could have handled the situation differently if I’d wanted to avoid standing before a Captain’s Mast and having my ticket pulled. The Coast Guard’s power to levy heavy fines and encumber vessels was often used for infractions that were far less serious than those I’d racked up today and Tom could be cited, too. I had a wide streak of stubbornness when confronted by rampant bureaucratic stupidity, and I couldn’t convince myself that I’d done wrong. Maybe I could explain things away, using the mitigating circumstances as my excuse. There was one thing I knew, and I was sure that Ensign Pulver or Dullwit or whatever his name was would agree: I had made an enemy.

The rain had started again by the time I made it to the boulders where I’d found Buck and Meg. I barreled from rock to rock, whipped by salt spray, using all my strength to stay moving against the wind. Most all the treasures we had salvaged were gone, swallowed by the rampaging waves. I found the King salmon, a large cast iron pan, the hatch cover, and another blanket. Fashioning a hobo sack out of the blanket, I bundled my meager catch and chose a route back to the ridge that kept the wind and rain to my back. Around a headwall I discovered debris from the wreck that had been flung by the surf into an elevated tide pool. I retrieved a small rucksack, soggy but intact, and a roll of duct tape.

At the base of the ridge I paused for a breather. Even though it was only mid-day, I was exhausted. This was unusual for me, as I was used to working harder, in the face of greater danger, under weather conditions equally as difficult as these were. I sat down, my back to the rain and wind, and closed my eyes. *Something is draining me, and I know what it is. I can't continue to evade the emotions, the memories, the truth about my past,*

the aspects of who I am that don't work. What makes a man put himself, and the ones he loves, in jeopardy over self-imposed principals? Why do people risk their lives, their reputations, and their fortunes to press an issue, defy society, or scorn the law? What were those people thinking when they climbed aboard the British Ship, tossed the tea overboard, defied McCarthy, dodged the draft? Did they consider the consequences, or were they too wrapped up in themselves or their cause to turn a defiant back on the path of least resistance? Were they like me, saying what I needed to say in spite of knowing full well that Ensign Attitude could have me by the balls with the stroke of a pen?

Silhouetted in the rain was a figure in black, moving toward me.

"Ben? Ben, are you okay? I've been searching for you."

Shaking myself out of my self-indulgent reverie, I concentrated on the image, voice, and touch now coming into focus. Meg was shaking me awake, her face close to mine. I felt her touch through the rain gear and layers of clothing. I could hear her voice as it competed with the howling wind for my attention, but I was mesmerized by her eyes. I reached out and pulled her onto my lap. Ignoring the rocks, driftwood, and kelp, saying nothing, we held one another, shivering, swaying gently back and forth.

This time Meg brought us back to reality. "Ben, we found a pretty good shelter. Buck was starting a fire when I left. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I sat down to rest and must have dozed off. I found these on the beach."

"Hurrah! I was more concerned about losing this rucksack than my boat. It has all my personal papers, photos, keepsakes, and, of course, my make-up."

This last was added with a teasing voice. I smiled at Meg, pulled her to her feet, shouldered the pack, and we headed up the ridge. It took the better part of an hour to traverse the crest and drop down to where Buck had built our shelter. Appraising the site selected by the old man, I let him know that he'd chosen well. A south-facing hollow under an overhanging ledge offered natural protection from the northerly gale. Buck had created a windbreak with the canvas tarp and had used branches and smaller rocks as ramparts to deflect the worst of the wind and rain. A rocky ledge supported two spruce blow-downs. A large uprooted cedar was flanked by the top of a smaller spruce and formed the outer boundary for the shelter.

Through the tarp I could see the dancing flames of a small campfire. Either Buck had found the can of kerosene or the canteen of 101 rum. I hoped it was the former. Buck was hunched over the fire, holding his raincoat open to harbor as much heat as possible from the meager flames. Without anyone taking charge, with no need for talk, we shared the tasks necessary for survival.

Depositing my booty outside the enclosure, I started gathering fuel for the fire. Against the outcropping were several dead branches from the storm-shattered spruce. These and a few limbs from the cedar and we'd have enough for several hours. Buck used a large limb across the twin blow-downs to suspend the spare fuel over the fire. I observed my companions while working from above to layer the several green limbs into a makeshift thatch roof to augment the survival suit covering.

Meg was sorting our last remnants of civilization. She had converted the hatch cover to a food preparation surface and cooking implement, then fashioned a reflector and covered the muddy ground with alder boughs, fern, and salal. As I worked directly over her head, I had the chance to notice more about her. She'd pulled back the hood from the sweat shirt and her wild curls were caught in an elastic band she must have found in her

rucksack. Her fine features were set in a narrow face with medium high cheekbones and a strong jaw line. Except for the coloring, she reminded me of a combination between Michelle Pfeiffer and Doris Day. Her long, slender fingers deftly filleted the salmon with the hunting knife I'd given her to use. Her motions were efficient and graceful, as if she was enjoying what she was doing.

Buck was fairly nondescript. He looked to be in his late sixties, but could have been younger due to the weathered skin and three or four days' growth of gray stubble. He seemed fit, except for his gut. His most distinguishing feature was his nose, a prominent schnauz discolored with exposed veins and capillaries, the telltale sign of a hard drinker. His black watch-cap hid his head, but I guessed that he was mostly bald. As I watched him, he began building the bulwarks higher, combining boughs and blankets to shield us from the elements.

"This storm ought to blow itself out sometime tonight," Buck declared. "The bay'll probably be glassier than a millpond by this time tomorrow. How're we gettin' off this here island? The Coasties?"

"Either them or my son. He'll be here in his zodiac as soon as it's safe," I answered from above. Buck nodded and continued with his task.

Meg paused to look up at me and smile a private kind of smile. It froze me in place as I forced me to consider the possible implications that existed once we got off this island. *Is this just a romantic knee-jerk to her loss and fear? And what about me? She's an available, beautiful woman, probably fifteen years my junior. Am I taking advantage of the situation to grasp at the redemption she seems to offer? In spite of our precarious situation, we've both let ourselves get caught up in a few precious moments of total abandonment. I feel such an overwhelming passion, like a death row inmate with a last minute pardon and a newly born hope for life. Am I willing to let myself respond and risk the disappointment if this is only temporary? What if the connection we seem to feel has some depths that we can plumb? That's been missing from my life even when Nancy and I were together. Maybe this is a chance I have to take.*

I must have perched above for some time, oblivious to my surroundings. Finally the wood smoke wafting through my latticework brought the smell of cooking fish. Our camp wasn't even close to comfortable, but it was a damn sight better than the exposed beach. We had some shelter and the mouth-watering taste of fresh Chinook. Famished, we consumed most of the fish in record time. Afterwards, Buck started to talk.

"Kinda reminds me of the time I lost my prop up in Rodman Bay. Hattie and Davy and me was stuck for three days 'cause the weather was so bad no float planes could land to bring that new prop I'd ordered over the radio. Davy and I wanted to go exploring once the wind let up, but Hattie didn't want to come. She was knitting a sweater and let us know that she wouldn't mind us going off by ourselves so she could have a little vacation. Anyway, Davy and I rowed the punt to shore and tied it to a log on the beach. We went up a creek and saw lots of bear sign. We musta dawdled our time away panning for gold, 'cause when we got back to the beach, the tide had already come in and started out again. The log, with my punt, was floating down that long bay and we was stranded. Hattie couldn't do nothing but stand on the deck and yell at us, calling us dumb fools, chechackos, and a few other hurtful names. We lit a fire to keep the bears away. We saw several that night, just prowling around the perimeter. We could tell they was just curious and didn't mean us no harm. The next morning we saw our punt and that log beached

way up at the head of Rodman. We set out walking up the shore when half a dozen brown bears rose up out of a stream bed. We'd interrupted their fishin' and man, was they pissed! We didn't know which way to run 'cause we had water on our left and bears to the front, side, and back."

Buck didn't say another word; just pulled another cigarette out of the pack and lit it. He got that same dreamy expression on his face and I was afraid he'd slipped out of reality. After a couple of minutes I finally asked, "Buck? What happened?"

"Them damn bears just jumped on us and killed me and Davy, that's what!"

This was stated as gospel truth, which made it even funnier. Meg and I both roared with laughter and Buck, obviously used to having his stories appreciated, looked at us as if incredulous that we didn't believe him. I slapped him on the back, though not too hard, and Meg moved over to put her arms around him.

We were silent awhile. I got a few more chuckles from visualizing parts of Buck's story. Meg interrupted my thoughts. "Ben, why are you out here? Meg asked.

"During the season I pack fish for Sitka Sound. We have a small fleet that sells to us, mostly out of Port Alexander. Commercial fishing is relative new to me. My son Tom and I came up here with the *Ancient Mariner* seven years ago. We tried long-lining the first year and did pretty well, but that was the last year of they held the Derbies. I wasn't eligible for an Individual Fish Quota so I've opted to stay out of that part of the fish business. Off-season I moor the *Ancient Mariner* at Fisherman's Terminal in Seattle and broker seafood. I just got back from there last week."

"What about your family?"

"Except for Tom, I don't have family that I'm close to. I got divorced in '79. The kids were quite young. I raised Tom and their mom raised Lynn until she was sixteen."

"Where's your daughter now? Do you ever see her?"

"Bellingham. She's always had the gift of gab and finally found a constructive outlet for it -- selling memberships at the new health club there. We talk every now and then, mostly when I'm in Seattle. I'm not really comfortable with her lifestyle. She seems to think grass is the best source for dietary fiber."

Meg laughed as freely as if we were sitting in the cozy bar in Sitka's Baranof Hotel, enjoying warming snifters of a good brandy. Her voice, a husky alto, was captivating. I wanted to hear more of it. "What about you, Meg?"

"I used to teach history at the high school in Wrangell. During the summer, when school was out, I fished with Davy. Now, when Buck and I aren't fishing, I write grants on a free lance basis. I closet myself in an old cabin on the Stikine River so I can work without distractions. Buck and I are partners; we do pretty well.

Buck looked from one of us to the other. "Meg and I were going to hold our catch till we got back to Petersburg to sell. That's where we were headed. I fell asleep and we went aground. Hell, I still don't even know exactly where we are. I'm sorry, Meg. First I sent your husband to the bottom of Peril Strait. Him and my Hattie, too. Now I've wrecked your boat. I'm a sorry S.O.B."

Meg put her arms around her uncle and attempted to shift him away from his miserable self blame. "Buck, tell Ben about the troller in Petersburg we want to buy."

"Huh? Oh, I'm too tired right now, Meggie. Maybe later. I'm gonna lie down for a bit."

“Okay, Buck. Ben, how about if we get more wood for the fire? It’s getting late and I don’t want to have to go out in this storm in the dark.”

“Good thinking. Besides, the longer the wood has to dry, the better it’ll burn.”

Stepping outside the enclosure, I was surprised to discover how much it really protected us. The wind was strong enough to knock down a strong person and the raindrops were enormous. Meg and I braced each other and proceeded down the slope to a windfall spruce. Without an ax we had to rely on our hands to break off smaller branches. We worked with the wind and rain at our backs, increasing the degree of difficulty of the task. I was impressed by Meg’s willingness to initiate the chore. She worked right along side me, with no complaints or whining. *Why can’t I loosen up and let the feelings in?*

As if she could read my mind, Meg dropped her armload of branches and moved against me, into my arms. She squeezed me tightly, then raised her lips to mine, her mouth open and receptive. Our kiss was deeply passionate; the kiss of lovers. When she broke away, she could barely speak. “We can’t stop now.”

“Meg, I don’t want to stop, but it’s awful out here. Let’s wait till later, when we’re in the shelter and Buck’s asleep.”

“Oh, Ben. I can’t imagine what you think of me from the way I’m acting. I’m not usually like this.”

“I don’t mind. In fact, I kind of like it. I just have to keep things in perspective and pay attention to my responsibilities. I came here on a rescue mission and I need to make sure that I get you to real safety.”

“I appreciate that, Ben. Even though we’re still on the island, I feel safe just being with you. You’re the kind of man who inspires confidence.”

“Aw, shucks, ma’am. I’m just doing what has to be done. But I’m glad you feel safe.”

We gathered the wood into our arms and took it back to the shelter, loading it onto Buck’s drying rack.

Buck was awake and he had the canteen of rum. He wasn’t talkative, so Meg and I left him alone. He took gulps to our sips as he smoked my Camel straights, and once again seemed to slip into another world. Occasionally he spoke to us as Hattie and Davy. Even though he was warm, dry, fed, and relaxed, something told me he wasn’t out of danger. The next time the canteen came my way I corked it and put it away. Buck had drunk enough.

“Davy boy, you go get some rest. I’ll take the helm. Nah, I’m okay, Davy, just had a couple of snorts. Do it all the time. You go get some rest,” Then he was quiet. Meg and I watched him stare blankly into the fire. Not until the cigarette burned down to his fingers did we see a reaction. He snapped the butt into the fire, rolled into a damp blanket, and was snoring almost immediately.

Chapter 2

By the time one of Buck’s ‘maydays’ penetrated my thoughts, my body had become as numb as my mind. The last time I had looked at my watch it was four in the morning.

The sky didn't look any lighter, but I didn't know whether that was due to the storm or because not much time had passed. Though it might have appeared that I was staring out to the water, looking for a sign that someone knew we needed help, I was way beyond that point. I certainly wasn't admiring the raw beauty of wild seas that had lifted my *Intrepid* and smashed her into the rocks. Not that what I was doing was any more productive than that would have been.

Shivering there on the beach, wet, cold, and totally miserable, I guess I was trying to figure out what in my nature was responsible for getting me into this mess. First I'd been angry with Buck for falling asleep, thereby consigning us to the misguided efforts of the boat's autopilot. That had passed after I looked over to where he sat, frantically shrieking into a radio that was probably dead, his face wet with tears and salt spray. He had been my only family for the last four years and we had counted on each other, and the *Intrepid*, for the bulk of our livelihood. *If only I had checked on him. If only I'd made sure he didn't have any liquor on board. If only someone would hear his 'mayday'.*

Considering our circumstances, I should have known without a doubt that we were goners. I kept expecting to feel what I had read about in books; the surrender that comes with the inner certainty that life is at its end. In my life, though, death hadn't been like that. The deaths of my parents, my husband, and my aunt had been sudden and unexpected and they had happened far away from where I was. There were no physical accidents that turned fatal, lingering illnesses with bedside visits, or advancing years that day-by-day stole away vitality. I had no time during which to accustom myself to the reality that any of them would cease to be alive. Life just kept going until it didn't.

Maybe what came naturally to me was thinking about the future, as if there would be a future, until I was no longer able to do any thinking at all. Most of all I wanted to understand the choices I had made at different times in my life and have the opportunity to choose differently. This prompted me to wonder if, even seeing the "error" of my ways, I'd have the internal strength to change my focus? Could I choose personal risk over safety? Could I trust my intuition more than the raised voice of another? Could I live as if I had something important to say? I reasoned with myself that even strong people have moments of weakness; that in each moment to come, if I could choose with awareness, I would at least be living honestly with myself. Otherwise, I realized, I was no different than the *Intrepid*, lost at sea at the hands of a sleeping pilot.

I came out of my reverie and saw that Ben was lost in one of his own. He sat across the fire from me, inhaling slowly and deliberately on a well-worn pipe. The sweet fragrance of his tobacco reminded me of my dad, but that was where any similarity ended. My father had been a gentle bear of a man. Slow to action and to anger, he'd told me once that during his tour duty in Korea he'd seen enough of what anger could do to last a lifetime. From the stories Uncle Buck had told me about their childhood, Dad had always just wanted to live peaceably and do a good day's work.

Ben Reed was an altogether different kind of man. He was charged with an energy that showed up in all of his movements. I had a sense that he'd be ready to fight instantly if we came under sudden attack, even though he was just sitting there, supposedly relaxed. All I'd been able to see of him was his full head of wavy, blond hair, a face that showed some of the hard knocks he'd gotten from life, and his faded-blue-jean eyes. I was surprised to find myself speculating about what Ben looked like under his layers of

clothes and rain gear. This put a mischievous grin on my face and at that moment Ben looked up at me.

“What exactly is going through your mind to prompt that expression, Miss Thompson?”

“At this point, Mister Reed, what I’m thinking and what I’m telling is not the same thing.” Ben smiled to himself, nodded, and reached into his backpack for the tobacco. “The truth is, what I’m feeling toward you has really caught me by surprise. Before you got to us on the beach, I had realized how safe I’ve played my life. I made some ‘if only’ kinds of resolutions that I would take more risks and there seems to be a part of me that’s really putting that in motion. I can’t give you any other explanation for how forward I’ve been toward you. I mean, you’re very attractive, but you’ve rescued a woman who hasn’t even looked at a man, much less desired one, since her husband’s death.”

“You must have loved him very much to go into a four year exile.”

“After all that happened between us, it’s really hard to remember how I felt about Davy. We grew up together in Petersburg. We were high school sweethearts. Except for summers, when Davy and I would hang out together, I spent the rest of the year in Seattle at the U Dub. Every August, Davy would try to talk me out of going back. He could never understand why a degree was so important. My parents were supportive of me, but they were killed in a float plane accident the spring before my senior year. I was devastated, especially since I hadn’t been where I could have seen them one last time. Suddenly all my studies seemed trivial compared to how precious and uncertain life was.

“Davy was a lifeline for me. He shared a lot of my memories of my parents and he made decisions that I couldn’t make on my own at the time. When we would talk about the future, it was a given that we’d be together. There didn’t seem to be a reason to put off getting married once I decided not to return to school, so we had the judge in Petersburg perform a civil ceremony. Uncle Buck and Aunt Hattie were our witnesses.

“Davy and I used the money from my parents’ life insurance policy to buy the *Intrepid*. The first two years we long-lined our boat in the fall and spring and trolled for salmon summers and winters. We had a couple of good salmon seasons back to back and the halibut and black cod prices were better than usual. I decided to finish my degree instead of work. We put aside quite a bit of money, so off I went to Seattle. Davy hired a deckhand and fished the spring openers without me.

Something happened that changed Davy and I never found out what it was. He started hanging out in bars with a rough crowd and he was verbally abusive to his folks and to me. It was very hard to be around him. We had both been so proud of our *Intrepid*, but he wouldn’t help take care of her. It was as if he didn’t have the heart to accomplish anything. The year before he died, I found out that he’d been seeing a woman in Juneau. After that I stayed away from him as much as possible. That’s why I wasn’t on the *Seawyfe* when she went down.”

“Why did you stay with him through all that?”

“Davy had been the son Uncle Buck couldn’t have, so I never told Buck about how Davy was acting. I didn’t want Buck to feel caught in the middle. Losing Davy and Hattie hit him really hard.”

“That must have been a tough act to keep up. I’ve been in trying relationships before but at least I didn’t have to pretend that everything was fine. In fact, Tom was usually pleased when things went sour with whichever woman I was seeing.”

“Was he jealous of them?”

“That’s what I used to think, but then it hit me that in each case I’d seen what I wanted to see instead of what was really there. Tom could see it all along. The last relationship I had lasted three years, which was about thirty-two months past its prime. Nancy was a real piece of work. She loved to be out fishing and she had turned out to be a good hand on board, but every time we’d come into port she’d disappear to spend time with ‘the girls’. I’m embarrassed to admit how long it took for me to figure out the actual gender of her buddies. I thought I could give her a more stable lifestyle than she’d had in the past, so I felt pretty stupid when I realized how little she wanted what I had to offer. After that I decided to take a sabbatical from women, hoping that I’d learn to choose more wisely in the future.”

“My version of a sabbatical was hiding out in a cabin on the Stikine River. After the *Seawyfe* went down, I kept the *Intrepid* for Buck’s sake. I quit my teaching job so I could go out with him during the fishing seasons, but I’ve always wanted to write. Now I partially support myself with freelance technical writing. The cabin gives me a place without distractions to do some writing for myself, too.”

“Whoa! I know the Stikine and your cabin would be more like an exile than a sabbatical during the winter. You really stay out there in the frozen wilds alone, with no way of communicating?”

“Well, it is isolated, but I have a VHF in case I need to talk to Buck. Over the years I’ve stocked it pretty well with food supplies and creature comforts. I play all my jazz and classical CDs that Buck won’t tolerate when we’re on the boat. It’s such a nice change, being cozy and contained instead of out in the elements, physically exhausted. When the spring season comes I’m usually sad to leave my hideaway.”

“I’d go stir crazy in about a day and a half. Have you published anything yet?”

“No, but I have been taken on by a literary agent in Los Angeles who has an impressive track record for getting authors into print.”

“That must feel good. What kind of stuff do you write?”

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“Cross my heart.”

“Well, it’s not what I plan to stay with, but I’m writing a romance novel. Ironic, huh? A celibate widow, in self-imposed exile, who writes about men and women caught up in their passions?”

“Well, I bet your imagination is better than most peoples’ realities. On the other hand, maybe it’s time to test some of your scenarios.”

“What did you have in mind, Mister Reed?”

“Me? I was just remembering how much fun it was gathering wood with you. I’d think that would work into a romance novel just fine. Or, if you’d like, we could sit on the same side of the campfire and discuss some alternate scenes.”

Ben’s suggestion presented the need for me to choose between safety and plunging into the unknown. I wanted to be close to him; to discover what there was to my feelings about him. How trustworthy would my sense of him prove to be? Would he find out that I wasn’t what he thought I’d be, either? Looking into his face across the flames, I knew that if there was a chance that this rescue would become something more, I wanted to let that happen. I smiled at Ben and asked, “Your place or mine?”

In most romantic situations, the woman doesn't have to shed a bulky Mustang suit and sweats. While Ben added some wood to the fire, I took a deep breath and slithered out of the heavy clothes. Buck was still snoring, his breathing regular. By the time Ben knelt down by the side of my blanket, I was eager for the heat our bodies would make together. He had left his rain gear where he'd been sitting. I watched him raise his sweatshirt over his head and our eyes met. I had guessed Ben to be about fifty, but his body was that of a fit and trim thirty-five year old.

Ben winked at me and my mood immediately lightened from intense to fun. "You, know, the last time I was shipwrecked there was a whole crew of guys from an ocean liner. It took me a lot longer to show my gratitude then than it will this time," I said. "Before that, the people who rescued me were two married couples. That was a lot more complicated, but I got the job done. Actually, thanking you for this rescue will be a breeze, if you'll pardon my pun!"

As I kept the banter going, he gently touched my cheek, then leaned close and nuzzled his mouth against my ear. "Are you're suggesting, ma'am, that being in harm's way makes you horny?"

His warm breath sent shivers along my shoulders and down my arms. I stretched up to him and purred against his neck. "Not horny, just appreciative. Are you going to let me show you how very appreciative I am, Mister Reed?"

Ben looked into my eyes and smiled. Then he sat to pull off his boots and socks. The dancing lights I could see in his eyes were only partly from the firelight. I shivered again, this time from the cold.

Once he was undressed, without any preliminaries, Ben scrambled under the blanket cover. Our skin was chilled from the brief exposure to the cold wet air, so we moved into each other's arms. I don't know what I expected from our first contact. Romance heroines are described as feeling hot flashes or rushes of some other electrical energy. What I felt was warmth, strength, and peace. Like nothing else in the world mattered.

At first I was content to let the reality of these new sensations sink in through the layers of emotional insulation I had wrapped around myself. Ben was aroused, but he held himself back until my desire outweighed my need for comfort. When I pulled him onto me, the young girl was ready to be a woman, and we gave ourselves up to our passions. Throughout the early night we made love, two strangers becoming known to one another. Undisturbed by the gusting wind and rain that fell through our evergreen canopy, the hard ground, or Buck's constant snoring, we turned a nightmare experience into a heavenly dream. I craved the release that comes from total surrender and I knew this could happen with Ben. The hesitation I had sensed in him throughout the day was gone, replaced by an urgent need to be subsumed into our union.

Finally, our passion temporarily exhausted, we held each other and Ben drifted into an easy sleep. I lay in his arms, amazed at this surprise that seemed to have been waiting around a corner. *What if I had stayed awake to keep us on course? Right now I'd be asleep on the Intrepid, moored at the fish dock in Petersburg, safe and dry and alone. If I had been asked whether I'd be willing to lose my boat and risk the possibility of death in order to meet a man I could love, would I have said, "Yes"? The old Meg wouldn't have. I hoped the new Meg would take notes from this lesson and learn that the best part of living isn't necessarily a smooth sail.*

This day had been anything but smooth. The assault on my stamina had been as relentless as the waves. I was drained from the long hours of physical stress and the mental and emotional maelstrom I had weathered. Having gone from the edge of death to the edge of bliss, I felt blessed that the worst was over. The last thought I remember was of looking forward to starting the new day with Ben.

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Chapter 3

Reed awakened with a sense of dread, the gnawing breath of silence whispering in his ear. There was no rain hitting the thatch above them, no wind howling as it scoured their rocky shelter, and none of the full-throated snoring that had assailed Ben's restive sleep. The only sound was Meg's light breathing. In the pre-dawn darkness, all he could see of Buck was an indistinct form. The older man was lying on his side, only a few feet away, with his back to them; the blanket was pulled up to his neck. Ben grabbed his clothes from where he'd left them in a pile and quickly dressed. There was no fire, but some live coals remained thanks to Buck's fairly recent tending. Ben topped them with a few small branches to bring them to flames, the whole time sending out silent entreaties like a mantra: *Buck, please be okay. Buck, please be okay.* In the light of the new fire, the dark retreated to the edges of their shelter. Ben knelt down behind Buck and gently grasped his shoulder. Rolling him onto his back, he stared into eyes that had lost all sight of this world. Buck was dead.

Kneeling there, his heart raced with panic and he rocked back and forth, unable to take in the horrible reality. For those first moments, his normal mental processes were short-circuited by the overpowering onslaught of emotions. Fear, anger, sadness, guilt, and frustration competed for pre-eminence in his thoughts: *What will this do to me? Why couldn't Buck leave the rum alone? This is going to be awful for Meg. I should have hidden the canteen. Why couldn't we have a chance to get back on our feet before this happened?* The intense grief he felt when his father died, when Ben was in his late twenties, had taught him that being vulnerable was a risk he didn't want to take. That resolve had been reinforced by his last relationship, when he'd realized that, once again, he'd seen what he wanted to see instead of what was really there. He wondered if he had actually been choosing women all along who wouldn't threaten his emotional seclusion.

Except for his son, he had insulated himself from people who might trespass into the parts of him he kept hidden. Relationships with women had been superficial, acquaintances had never quite turned into friends, and set-back situations in his life had been downplayed or abandoned. Like a tooth that has greatly decayed from time and inattention, his defenses were gone; his nerves were raw from exposure. Tears welled up in his eyes and fell onto Buck's face. He heard a soft, bass keening and realized that he was the source of the strange sound.

Meg's voice saying his name brought Ben up from his emotional pit. He forced himself to sit up, but couldn't turn around to face her. Buck's body was becoming rigid and the canteen of rum was still clutched in one of his hands. Meg said his name again,

this time as a question. Ben took a deep breath, wiped his hands across his face, and shook his head.

Meg was silent and he knew that it would take a little while for her uncle's death to register. He went to sit beside her on the blanket they had shared through the night. As much as he wanted to hold her, he made himself wait. She reached for his hand and looked into his eyes. In hers he saw denial, then sorrow. They held each other, allowing their newly-discovered bond to be a source of strength and comfort. Meg cried quietly, but her shudders and ragged breathing told him how strongly she felt her loss. When she was still, he gave her a tighter squeeze, then moved away to get her clothes. As she had on the beach, she let him dress her. She was shivering from the dampness, so he wrapped one of the blankets around her and added more wood to the fire.

The first words she spoke were those of a lost little girl. "He's really gone, isn't he? He sat here telling us about the bears and I didn't know that would be the last story of his I'd ever hear. What happened, Ben? I thought he was okay; just disoriented from the wreck. What happened?"

"I'm not sure, Meg, but I think Buck got up sometime during the night and scooped the rum. When I found him, the empty canteen was in his hand. Maybe it was too much for his system, with all he'd been through."

Meg stood up and walked to the entrance of their shelter. She hugged herself as she stared into the trees. In a voice filled with resignation and self-loathing she said, "It's our fault, isn't it? We could have prevented it if we hadn't been so wrapped up in ourselves. I feel so ashamed!"

Ben walked over to her and turned her around to face him. With as much conviction as he could muster, he countered her guilt with the truth. "No, Meg. Listen to me. Buck was still alive only an hour or so before I woke up. I could tell that he had fed and stoked the fire because it still had quite a few red coals. We were asleep when he died, not making love. I know it's hard to do, but stop blaming yourself." She grasped at the hope he'd given her for salvation from her own damning judgment. Her eyes drilled into his to make sure that he wasn't just trying to give her an out. Finally, she nodded, pulled away, and went out of their rock enclosure.

Meg's negative reaction had mirrored his exactly. Ben felt the same guilt, shame, and helplessness. He couldn't let go of the fact that Buck had died on his watch, and that terrible black cloud was blocking the sunlight he'd basked in since meeting Meg. *People will assume the worst and their fingers are going to point at both of us in condemnation.*

While Meg was out of the shelter, Ben covered Buck with a blanket. With death had come the inevitable loss of bowel control, and the smell of defecation was growing more noticeable. He didn't want Meg to have this memory of her uncle, so he dragged the body from their semi-enclosure to a nearby outcropping of boulders. In the early morning calm Ben heard the distant whine of an outboard motor that meant his son was coming for them.

As Ben walked toward where Meg stood at the edge of the ridge, his thoughts turned to the feelings for each other that they had discovered yesterday.

Their time out would soon be over and he would have a lot of explaining to do. Buck's death would add a significant wrench to the ordeal he had already created for himself with the Coast Guard. It would be a test for him and Meg that would either bolster their connection or tear them apart. Ben stepped behind Meg and wrapped her in his arms.

In a voice that was more troubled than sad, Meg spoke to Ben without turning around. "I need to talk to you before your son gets here, Ben." She looked up, as if divine wisdom might be hovering above her, awaiting her invitation to descend. "When I first realized that Buck was dead, I was sad that I wouldn't have him in my life anymore. Then I felt guilty that we hadn't watched over him closely enough. What you told me about the coals helped a lot. I was able to accept that it was just Buck's time to go. Once I could do that, I felt a sense of peace about him. It seems pretty selfish that I could put that behind me so quickly, but my biggest concern now is that the awakening I've experienced with you on this island won't have a chance to continue once we're back in the world out there." Meg turned to look at Ben as she asked, "What do you want for us after we leave here?"

Ben took both of her hands in his and put them over his heart, which was pounding from the suspense of not knowing till the last where she had been headed with her words. "Meg, I want many years of what we began last night. Having said that, you need to know that we have more stormy seas ahead, and I don't mean only on the water. What I told you and Buck yesterday afternoon, about what I was bracing for from the Coasties, is going to be intensified because of Buck's death. Are you willing to take on the kinds of stress that we'll have to handle before we ever have some true R & R? I know we want to be together, but you need to be honest with yourself about whether you'd be better off waiting till things die down."

At this, Meg's face became a beacon of stubborn determination. "Maybe I'd have fewer day-to-day stresses to deal with, Mister Reed, but I couldn't live with myself if I let you go through this alone. You're here because of Buck and me, so it seems only right that I be with you to face the Coast Guard. Remember me? I'm the woman who's not going to play it safe anymore."

"I appreciate your passion, little lady, and believe me, I'm glad to have you in my corner. Just know that we're going to be grilled more than a whole steer's worth of steak. I can't emphasize enough how important it will be to tell the truth. We can't hide anything or it'll come back and bite us on the ass. I'm probably preaching to the choir, so I'll stop now. How 'bout if you gather your gear together while I roll out the red carpet for Tom."

He winked at Meg, which won him a burst of smile from her eyes. She kissed him quickly, but passionately, and turned back to the shelter to get ready to leave. Ben climbed down the ridge to the bay. His radio's power was almost gone, so he couldn't risk raising Tom until he had him in sight. Cresting a hummock, he was surprised to see the zodiac already rounding the headwall into Explorer Basin, its running lights blinking dim to bright in the scattered mist of the false dawn.

Ben's life had changed and so had the vista before him. The water had only its normal, foot-high swells and no chop. Froth, seaweed, and debris ringed the basin fifty feet above the high water marks and the resident seals and sea lions were back to their customary fishing and lounging territories. He saw Tom and keyed the radio. "Zodiac, this is *Wolf Bay*, go to ground."

"Roger, Dad!"

After switching to their scrambled channel Ben fired a flare. Turning away from the blistering light, he saw Meg working her way down the slope toward him. Tom let him know that he'd seen the flare and zeroed in on the beach. Hand-in-hand, the two of them worked their way down to a recumbent slab of rock.

When Tom was close enough to toss the bow line, Ben pulled him ashore. Standing with the line in one hand, seeking a solid purchase to tie off above the high tide line, Tom's greeting caught Ben by surprise. His grown-up son was all grins as he hugged him, slapped his back, and clasped his free hand tightly in both of his.

When Tom discovered that the person bundled into the Mustang suit was a woman, he stepped back, doing a classic double-take. The couple laughed, and Ben performed a formal introduction, which Meg followed with a hug. Holding her at arm's length afterward, shaking his head, Tom joined in their laughter.

Climbing back to their camp, Tom let his father know that the Coasties had gone ballistic. Ben was sorry that Tom had been forced to deal with their calls all night and he wasn't looking forward to relaying the news about Buck. When they got to the top of the ridge, Meg went into the shelter and Ben held Tom back. "I don't have time to fill you in on everything, but you need to know that Meg's uncle, Buck Larsen, died sometime early this morning."

Tom's face drained of all color as he looked at the blanket-draped corpse. Even though he hadn't known Buck, his death left him visibly shaken. They exchanged a glance that spoke volumes, then Ben led him into the enclosure.

Meg offered Tom the remainder of the salmon they'd cooked, which reminded him that he'd brought sandwiches and a couple of thermoses of coffee for them, courtesy of Lemma. "Miss Thompson, I'm really sorry about your uncle. I didn't expect it, so I'm still kind of in shock. I didn't take time to eat anything 'cause I wanted to get you guys back to the *Ancient Mariner*. Lemma promised to fix us all a big breakfast." Meg gave Tom the skillet with the salmon fillets and urged him to eat.

Ben pulled a thermos out of Tom's pack and poured some coffee into the lid to share with Meg. Lemma's special blend of Sumatra and Arabica tasted sublime, but then he faced the reality that he could no longer postpone a call to the Coast Guard and the taste in his mouth turned rancid. He regretted relaying the 'mayday' to the Coast Guard in Sitka in the first place.

I just want it to go away. Let's bury Buck, get back to the boats, and disappear. We could do it! The *Ancient Mariner* has enough fuel and provisions to make Japan, Midway, or maybe South America. It'd be great to dive in the crystal clear waters of Truk Lagoon, or beach comb the uninhabited islands in Papua New Guinea. I'd love to see Meg in a bikini on the white sands of Tumon Beach. Okay, bud, you're making it even harder on yourself with these fantasies. Wake up and smell the hot water you're in!

Ben keyed the mike. He had set wheels in motion that would change his life drastically and they were about to roll right over him. Everyone with a VHF radio would be tuned in; especially every authority and news hawk. *Be careful what you say!* "Coast Guard, Sitka, this is *Wolf Bay* on channel 16. If you copy, please switch to channel 22, over!"

"*Wolf Bay*, this is Coast Guard, Sitka. We copy and are standing by on channel 22."

"Coast Guard, Sitka, this is *Wolf Bay* on channel 22"

"*Wolf Bay*, this is Coast Guard Sitka. What is your current status?"

"Coast Guard, we are still on Windfall Island. The severe weather has abated and we have assistance getting off the island. I am saddened to report that there has been a fatality. Buck Larsen, Skipper of the wrecked vessel, died early this morning. Following

this transmission we are moving all parties back to my vessel, the *Ancient Mariner*, anchored in Oriel Inlet.”

“Roger, *Wolf Bay*. We have copied that you have a fatality. Stand by one!”

The radio went dead in his hand while the radioman checked procedures or conferred with his superiors. Meg came to stand beside Ben and put a soft hand on his back. Her silent message sent its intended signal of affection to him and also to Tom, who was watching. The young man’s puzzled look remained even after the radio squawked again.

“*Wolf Bay*, this is Coast Guard Sitka. Be advised that we have contacted the Alaska State Police and will be coordinating procedures with them. You are instructed not to remove or in any way disturb the body or items at the scene. Stand by for further instructions. A helicopter will be dispatched within the hour. ETA your position is approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. Maintain radio contact on channel 16.”

“Coast Guard, Sitka, there is no ‘scene’. The skipper died silently, in his sleep. There is one survivor who needs food, clothing, and warmth. We are proceeding to the *Ancient Mariner* and will remain in contact on channel 16, out!”

The three of them hesitated, knowing the situation had left their hands. Taking only her knapsack, Meg started for the inflatable. Tom raised Corey on the radio while Ben dowsed what remained of the fire. With his backpack and Buck’s rifle, he stepped out of the enclosure, past Buck’s body. Ben felt an aching sorrow overwhelm his being as he imagined Buck packing his own gun, walking ahead of him, starting another story to entertain Tom. *Why does it have to be this way? How can a simple act of minor heroism, sprinkled with a couple of brain farts brought on by misdirected anger, create such a backlash? How different things would be if Buck were still alive!*

Explorer Basin was almost flat calm by the time they reached the zodiac. Tom took the helm, so Meg and Ben sat side by side on the thwart locker. It was a silent ride. Meg was drained and her grief was renewed from leaving without her uncle. Tom concentrated on getting them back to the *Ancient Mariner* safely and quickly. Watching Tom, Ben was proud to have such a damn fine man for a son. In the seven years since they moved to Alaska, Tom had become a talented journeyman. Their first year of fishing, he’d been the apprentice deck hand on his father’s 85-foot *Ancient Mariner* when it was still rigged for long-lining. Their working relationship had continued for a while after Ben converted it to a packer, but then Tom had discovered that his passion was for fishing. In what seemed like a very short time, he’d been able to buy the *Kittiwake* and was now respected as a high-liner in anybody’s fleet.

The *Ancient Mariner* and the *Kittiwake*, tied side by side, were a welcome sight. It seemed like months since Ben had set off for Windfall.

Oriel Inlet, a small, landlocked cove except for its narrow entry portal, seemed overwhelmed by their two boats. It was a perfect anchorage in most weather, but was largely ignored by the fishing fleet because of its lack of maneuverability. Tom throttled back as Ben readied the bowline. Then they heard a plane. Corey and Lemma, Ben’s deckhand and cook, and George, Tom’s deckhand, were standing under the *Ancient Mariner*’s stern canopy. Corey pointed to an area above and behind them. A Beaver floatplane circled them low and descended behind the ridge at the entrance to the inlet.

In an attempt to hide his inner dread, Ben threw himself into the role of joyful host. Introductions made, he escorted Meg to his stateroom. Lemma followed with towels and some of Corey’s clean clothes. After promising Meg that she could have a shower and a

meal before facing the inquisition, he left to attend the boarding party. The Beaver had the insignia of the Alaska State Police and his heart sank from the unexpected arrival of these authorities.

Ben watched from the quarterdeck as the plane readied to tie off, aft, and Tom assisted in the zodiac. Four officers disembarked. *A lieutenant, a sergeant, and two corporals. That's a lot of brass for this situation.* The men coming aboard looked armed and dangerous, both with attitude and firepower. The officer piloting the plane remained in the cockpit, a clear demonstration of strategic positioning. This provided the first clue that these cops had much more of an agenda than a shipwreck investigation.

Ben's dread deepened as he climbed down the companionway ladder to the main deck.

The corporals were backed against the stern bulwark. Both had the snaps off their holsters and hands on their weapons. The lieutenant hovered midway between them and the sergeant, was speaking with Tom and Corey, Ben's deckhand. Lemma and Tom's deckhand, George, were in the galley, grim looks on their faces. In an attempt to reassure them, he waved as he passed by the window to join the group on the back deck. In a voice he hoped sounded confident, he put out his right hand and introduced himself to the lieutenant. Without even a glance to Ben's outstretched hand, the senior officer introduced himself and the sergeant.

Lieutenant Peter Walderman was a tall man in his early fifties. The only soft feature on his otherwise slim frame was a protruding paunch. Even his face was narrow, and he had very little chin. His high forehead was capped by thinning brown hair and his eyes were such a light gray they had practically no color at all. They were the coldest eyes Ben had ever seen and they matched the tone of his voice. "Mister Reed, we have been notified by the Coast Guard office in Sitka that a death has occurred under suspicious circumstances and we're here to investigate. Could I see some identification, please?"

"Lieutenant Walderman, there was nothing suspicious about Buck Larsen's death. He simply passed away in his sleep, sometime early this morning."

"Reed, the State Police will investigate this matter to determine if the allegations are true. All I want from you is your identification. Now!"

Sergeant Bell was ordered to escort Ben to the pilothouse for his wallet. Walderman then instructed Tom to assemble everyone aboard onto the back deck. Moving down the companionway toward the ladder, Ben asked the Sergeant why they were being treated as if a crime had been committed. The trooper didn't respond to this question, but remarked that he should bring his Coast Guard documentation and license, too. "Look, all we did was go to the aid of a vessel in distress. One of the people I rescued died in the night. I shouldn't be in trouble!"

"I guess you'll get to tell that to a judge. We're here to find out what happened. You'd be wise to give us your full cooperation."

Just then a transmission came in over the VHF. "*Ancient Mariner*, this Coast Guard helo on 16. If you copy, please switch and respond on channel two-two, over." Ben ignored the radio. "Sergeant, it sounds as if you've already decided to arrest me or you wouldn't have made that crack about telling it to the judge! What did those Coastie bastards accuse me of, anyway?"

Bell only asked him if he intended to respond to the Coast Guard helicopter. He glared at the stoic cop, switched the channel, and keyed the mike. "Coast Guard helo, this is *Ancient Mariner* on 22, over.

“*Ancient Mariner*, we have landed on the north end of Windfall Island. Can you direct us to the location of the wrecked vessel, *Seawyfe*?”

“Coast Guard helo, the wrecked vessel was the *Intrepid*, not the *Seawyfe*, and I doubt you’ll find much left of her. She was located three hundred yards south of mid-island on the west shore. There isn’t an adequate landing spot, over.”

“Roger, we copy the location and instructions, *Ancient Mariner*. We will proceed by foot to the location. Please be advised that we have been instructed to escort the skipper of the *Ancient Mariner*, the survivor of the *Seawyfe* wreck, and the skipper of the *Kittiwake* back to the Coast Guard Station in Sitka, over.”

“Coast Guard helo, this is the skipper of the *Ancient Mariner*. I copy your request, but the State Police are paying us a visit right now. You’ll have to work it out with them.” He thrust the mike at the Sergeant, taking what pleasure he could from delegating that coordination. Ben tuned out the radio conversation and studied the latest weather fax. Another big wind was heading their way.

When he left the pilothouse, the negotiations between the two agencies were still underway and Ben was furious. He stormed to the back deck to confront Walderman. Meg was in the companionway and she squeezed his arm as he passed her. Ben briefly curtailed his momentum to exchange a look with her. Even in Corey’s faded jeans, which were baggy on her, and an old work shirt, she was a gorgeous woman. A flash of alarm in her eyes signaled that she could see his anger. Ben continued directly up to the Lieutenant, thrust his driver’s license and ship’s papers in his face, and roared at him. “Lieutenant Walderman, either get your men off my ship or stand down! You can’t come aboard my boat and take command! You have no idea what happened on that island and you sure as hell don’t have the authority to intimidate me or my crew without a writ, a subpoena, or a warrant.”

“I’m in charge here, Mister Reed. You’ll do as you’re instructed. If you don’t cooperate, I’ll arrest you on a charge of obstructing justice.”

“Bullshit, Walderman! You’re in charge of an investigation, so go investigate. Nothing happened here! This is my vessel, my home, and my place of business. If you’re so hot to arrest someone, arrest yourself for being such a mean-hearted excuse for a man. My son and I are cold and wet from getting Miss Thompson off Windfall Island. Miss Thompson just lost her only remaining family, her boat and possessions, hasn’t had a decent meal in two days, and is being made to fill out your fucking forms out here in the cold! Would it have slowed down your witch-hunt too much to allow Tom and me the chance to get into dry clothes, eat something, and sit down somewhere warm to have this discussion?”

Lieutenant Walderman was clearly in shock from this insubordination. He was speechless, so Ben took advantage of the opportunity to gain control. “Tom, have Lemma get that breakfast going, then shower and put on something warm. I’m going to do the same. After breakfast you can escort these cops on a field trip to Windfall so they can investigate, but don’t dally. We’ve got to untangle our anchors and be ready to steam out of here by late this afternoon. Corey, you and George show these Gestapo bastards to the salon, then notify all the fishermen in our fleet that there’s another storm heading their way so they should get here ASAP, sell what they have, then run for cover.”

Having issued these orders, Ben turned to walk away. Walderman tried to regain authority by upping the ante in the tense situation. “Ben Reed, you’re under arrest for

manslaughter. You have the right...” Before any more of the Miranda could leave his mouth, Ben turned on his heel and went eye to eye with the weak chinned officer. “You’d better do a quick reality check, Walderman. There are five witnesses here, not counting your men. I’ll have the sky black with lawyers suing you for false arrest. Also, consider where you are. You’re on my 250-ton vessel that has 25,000 pounds of fresh salmon in the hold. This isn’t like arresting a drunk driver and calling for a tow truck to impound his car. Go ahead! Arrest me and impound my boat. But first you should take a good look at those lieutenant’s bars on your collar, ‘cause when I’m finished with you, the only place they’ll be is in your memory.”

The silence was deafening. No one said a word as Ben turned to walk away. He took Meg’s arm and led her to the galley, where he left her in Lemma’s capable hands. As he was leaving, he put his hand on Meg’s shoulder. She responded by pressing against it with her cheek. He looked up and saw that Sergeant Bell was observing them through the window. *That’ll give him some food for thought.*

They were a solemn gathering at breakfast. Given their limited choices for current topics of conversation, they opted to focus on the impending storm rather than the cloud of authority that was awaiting them in the salon. According to the National Weather Service, the northerly was due by midnight. Ben’s goal was to be around Cape Ommaney and into the deep waters of the Gulf of Alaska before it hit. The fish would be worthless if he didn’t deliver them to the processor in Sitka by the following day. The rescue and storm had stretched their schedule to the max.

Tom broached the two subjects they were all avoiding: the cops and the Coasties. They had to talk about it, but Ben could only speak for himself. “Apparently the Coast Guard contacted the State Cops and insinuated that there was foul play involved in the death of Buck Larsen. Coast Guard reports are gospel to some folks, so nothing any of us says is going to convince them otherwise. From what I’ve heard so far, this is a personal vendetta I’ve stirred up. And, since I’ve already pissed them off, I’m going to continue as though it’s business as usual. I won’t be going back to Sitka on their chopper. My only concern right now is time and we have precious little of it. We have to get our anchors untangled and ready the *Ancient Mariner* for the trip back to Sitka. Tom, I suggest that you leave the *Kittiwake* here at Oriel with Corey and George. I’d like you to stay on board with me. Lemma, of course, will stay with us, too.”

“What do you think they’re going to do with me?” Meg asked.

“The State Police want us in Juneau, but the Coasties have been instructed to take you, Tom, and me back to Sitka on the chopper. I’m guessing they’re trying to work it out as we speak. What’s your preference?”

“Preference? My preference is to be on the beach of some remote island in the South Pacific. I’m sick of the way they’re treating us and I’m sick of this whole mess. I wish they’d go away.” No one spoke; all eyes were on Meg. She pushed the remains of her food around on her plate, and then looked up at him. “Ben, my preference is to go with you to Sitka aboard the *Ancient Mariner*.”

Meg’s announcement shocked everyone in the galley. Lemma dropped something in the sink and Corey almost choked on the food he was swallowing. Tom expressed his doubt that she would be allowed to stay with them. Ben appreciated Meg’s loyalty, but he reminded her that in doing so she would relinquish any credibility she had as a victim.

“Refusing to follow their orders by staying aboard the *Ancient Mariner* puts you in league with me. A lot of what they throw at me will hit you. Do you understand?”

Meg was quiet for a moment, as if deciding how much of her would be safe to reveal. The people in the room were all strangers to her and she could have no idea what they’d think of her. Her final decision was stated simply, with no dramatics. “I’m not ashamed to tell the police that this tragic ordeal brought me a man I want to be with. I need you, Ben Reed, and you need me, too.”

Ben didn’t know what to say and neither did the others. They finished their breakfasts in silence. Eventually Tom rose and let them know that he was leaving to guide the cops to the shelter on Windfall. He looked at Meg with compassion and volunteered to let the Coasties know that she’d be traveling to Sitka with his father, to arrive sometime the next afternoon or evening. Only Lemma remained in the galley with Meg and Ben. She sat down and pulled Meg to her with one short, plump arm. Looking across at the two women, Ben admitted the truth to himself: he wanted Meg to stay as much as she did.

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