

A photograph of a sailboat on the ocean. The sun is high in the sky, creating a bright starburst effect. The sailboat's mast and rigging are visible, and the sails are partially unfurled. The water is a deep blue, and the horizon is visible in the distance.

Fair Winds

Chrissy
Munder



I

“THANKS for the ride.” Rudy Haas hitched the fraying strap of his duffle higher on his shoulder as he brushed the newly acquired dog hair off his jacket and shut the car door carefully behind him. The vehicle was of an age with the driver, and the metal groaned and creaked in protest at the movement.

Rudy grunted and gave the door the last bit of lift right before closing that it needed to connect, adding a few rust flakes to the collection of dog hair already covering his jeans. But he made sure to give a grateful wave to the driver kind enough to offer him the much-appreciated ride, even if his ears were still ringing from the unexpected abuse.

“And the conversation.” Now that was stretching things, but he had been raised to be polite to his elders.

Tickled to find out Rudy was heading to Port Huron for the upcoming race, his benefactor had spent the entire forty-five miles telling Rudy about his own adventures sailing the Great Lakes. All Rudy had wanted to do was lean back on the faded afghan that hid the car’s worn upholstery, close his eyes, and sneak in a nap. But talk was a cheap enough price to pay for the ride, especially as twilight approached.

“You’re more than welcome.” The driver grinned, showing a flash of yellowed dentures as he waved back, and then pointed at the deep bands of magenta streaking

through the clouds overhead. “Red sky at night; sailor’s delight.” Pleased by his own wit, he laughed before pulling out onto the road with a spray of gravel. His wife and grandchildren had gotten tired of his stories years ago; a fresh and captive audience was a rare pleasure.

Rudy knew he had been lucky to catch the ride. Thumbing it to save money wasn’t as easy as it used to be. Not only did that stretch of highway have light traffic to begin with, but too many film directors had capitalized on the potential perils. They offered up in graphic detail just what could happen to the unsuspecting motorist who was foolish enough to stop and pick up hitchhikers. Luckily the festival atmosphere leading up to the next week’s Bayview Mackinac Race meant that at least until then, there was no such thing as a stranger.

That simple bit of fellowship left Rudy feeling happily grateful. He loved sailing, and he lived for the competitive thrill of racing, but it was still a richer sport than he could comfortably afford, even with the recent boost in income from his new job.

Just meeting his share of the entry fees for the race had taken a chunk out of his savings, and since Rudy had only been at the new company a few months, he hadn’t accumulated enough vacation hours to take the time off with pay.

Rudy knew he was lucky to have gotten the position as an assistant manager with one of the local big-box retailers. He had never applied himself in school, as sailing had been

his only real interest; even now he was still willing to risk losing the job rather than missing the race.

It hadn't been easy convincing Human Resources to give him the days off even without pay, but Rudy had been determined. He felt lucky that while she didn't compete herself, the head of his department was also a sailing fan.

At least he wouldn't have to worry about the cost of lodgings. Just like the years past, Rudy would stay on the sailboat even when it was in port. Not quite the same as a luxury hotel in town, but it was a win for both him and the other guys. Rudy saved money, and they could rest easy knowing that with a physical presence on board, the risk of a competitor trying something stupid was less.

Rudy grinned, and his brown eyes sparkled with humor. Sailing might be considered a gentleman's sport, but the prestige associated with the race and the desire to win at all costs made for some interesting tales—even if most of them could only be whispered over a few beers. He checked his watch and picked up his pace. Even with the ride Rudy had arrived later than he had planned. Ignoring the activity around him, Rudy hurried to the marina entrance.

The streets of downtown Port Huron were crowded for a weeknight, full of couples and families aimlessly wandering the sidewalks overlooked by a mix of buildings and storefronts. Some showed the signs of urban gentrification; others were left aged and decrepit. Rudy knew the congestion would only increase the closer it got to the actual race.

It was the eighty-fourth running of the popular sailboat race, and just like the race itself, the gathering of spectators seemed to get larger every year. Rudy had been amazed to learn from the early reports that there were already two hundred and sixty-five boats signed up for this year's race. The crafts would range in size from twenty-six to over ninety feet, and they would carry a combined crew of more than three thousand sailors.

Most of the boats would arrive on Wednesday and anchor around the docks of the Black River to better participate in the town's festivities. Thursday night was usually designated Family Night, and the Friday before the race was Boat Night, when most of the seventy-five thousand visitors expected for the event would wander the downtown waterfront. It offered up the best chance to view the race fleet and enjoy the selection of food, beverages, and souvenirs available from the myriad of gaily decorated booths.

The race itself was scheduled to take place on Saturday with the first of the sixteen classes starting before noon and the rest staggered after that. Rudy had arrived early so that he and the other guys on the boat could practice getting back into sync. It took a tight and coordinated team effort to handle the sail changes and rail positioning required for a good run, and it was easy to lose the necessary edge.

"ID?" The bored security guard took his eyes off the crowd of bikini-clad boat groupies gathered around the entrance ramp to the Water Street Marina just long enough to verify that Rudy was male and thus uninteresting. Rudy flashed the laminated badge hanging around his neck on a braided lanyard as a formality.

Without the pass identifying him as a competitor, he shouldn't have been allowed to pass through into the main slip area, but the requirement didn't appear to be getting much enforcement. Rudy stared over the guard's shoulder, his attention caught by the gleam of white hulls and the sight of the towering masts.

When the slips were full, it never failed to take his breath away. Rudy didn't know why, but ever since he was a little boy, he had felt drawn to sailboats. The appeal of their power and romance was as much a mystery to him now as it had been then, and here Rudy could indulge himself like a kid in the proverbial candy store.

No matter how he tried, Rudy never managed to think of enough words to describe the impact. As far as his eye could see, there was sailboat after sailboat dancing gently about on their moorings. Each one was more impressive, breathtaking, and expensive than the last, and all of them were reflected in water set afire by the rosy glow of the setting sun.

It was sheer heaven.

"Hey!" Something wet and cold splashed down Rudy's arm, and he turned in annoyance.

"Sorry about that, my friend bumped me." The words, like the beer, were spilled out with a giggle. Irritated, Rudy brushed the hand not holding the now-empty plastic cup off his waist. Did he really look that stupid? That had to be one of the oldest tricks in the book.

He ineffectively wiped at the wetness soaking into his sleeve and stared at the young woman in front of him. Like the rest of her friends, she was dressed to attract attention, barely covered by her string bikini and tropical print sarong. Rudy was certain the carefully chosen ensemble hadn't been anywhere near the dank lake water.

It didn't matter to Rudy if she wanted to brag about sleeping with one of the sailors in the race or just be able to say she walked along the dock and spent time with the boats and their crew. Despite the faint wrinkles beside her eyes, she was far too young to be hanging out, trying to score with anyone holding a marina pass.

"Sure." Rudy ignored her annoyed exclamation as he headed for the marina. It was a nice try but a tired one that was wasted on him. Apart from the obvious reasons, he was late and still needed to look up the slip number and get his gear stowed.

He scanned the listings posted on the wall outside the door to the marina's main entrance. Richard's Angel was at slip 34. Shaking his head once again at the name of the boat, Rudy headed for the docks. He was beat and couldn't wait to get some sleep.

II

“WHAT the fuck are you talking about?” Rudy asked in disbelief.

Justin Meeks shifted uneasily as he ran a hand through his close-cropped dark hair. He was close to Rudy’s height, leaner and less muscular, but he had held the starring role in Rudy’s nighttime fantasies for the past year. Rudy enjoyed spending time in Justin’s calm and unruffled company and often wondered what would happen between the two of them if he were ever brave enough to make a move.

“Look, we’re sorry.” Justin’s sideways glance included the other three guys standing near him and blocking Rudy’s way onto the deck. “But we’ve already replaced you. You’re off the boat.”

“You can’t do that,” Rudy protested. “I paid my part of the fees.”

“Are you stupid? You heard him.” Of course it was Richard Proctor who spoke next, replacing Justin as the small group’s spokesperson. Rudy thought the short and chunky blond an obnoxious know-it-all, his main contribution being his father’s ownership of the sailboat. In return Richard viewed Rudy as a threat to his friendship with Justin. “We don’t want your kind on board.”

“My kind?” This was beginning to feel like a really bad dream. “What do you mean—my kind?”

“My sister told me all about it.” Richard looked at Rudy, the expression of disgust visible even through the straggling wisps of new beard. “She thought we should know seeing how little privacy there is on the boat. Frankly, I resent like hell you never told us before.”

“Never told you what, Richard?” Rudy said softly. He was beginning to get the picture, and he didn’t like it. Not one bit. “Never told you that I’m a good sailor, and for the last four years I’ve pulled my weight on this crew?”

“You should have said something, Rudy,” Justin said quietly. He refused to meet Rudy’s eyes as he stood there, just kept looking down at his feet, his arms crossed across his chest.

“Why?” Rudy demanded as he looked away from Richard. “How does the fact that I wouldn’t put out for Richard’s drunken slut of a sister have anything to do with my being a part of this crew?”

Maybe he should curb his anger, but Rudy couldn’t believe this. He knew he shouldn’t have let himself get talked into taking Traci to the bar. But she had just moved to Grand Rapids, and Rudy could remember how that felt. When she had called it hadn’t seemed like such a bad idea. At least not until he realized exactly what she had been looking for.

“You really hurt her feelings, but it’s not just that.” Justin shook his head. “To be honest in these close quarters

it makes the guys uncomfortable having you on board, knowing what we know now.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” This sudden coldness between them felt unreal. It was so different from the almost flirtatious vibes he usually received from Justin. Rudy reached out to Justin and felt sick as his friend stepped back to avoid his touch. “How does who I do or do not sleep with change anything? You guys know me.”

“I need to know I can trust the man beside me out on the water,” Richard blustered as he stepped between the two of them. “Right now, I don’t trust you behind me.”

“Is that what you’re worried about?” Rudy grimaced. He struggled to keep a better handle on his temper. No matter how good it would feel to give in to his desire to haul off and finally slug Richard, the bastard would probably press charges. “Well, let me assure you, Richard, I haven’t been tempted to touch your little pin-dick once in all this time.”

Jamie and Todd Stinson had been standing further back on the deck letting the other two talk for them, and Rudy swung around to face them. “Do you guys agree with this bullshit?” he asked.

The two of them wouldn’t look at him either. They just stared at the deck, brown hair falling over their foreheads and hiding the misery evident on their faces. Rudy could almost find it in him to feel sorry for the twins; he did after all know what it was like to have to go along with Richard just for the opportunity to race. But his sympathy vanished with Justin’s next words.

“You know we’ll refund your fees after the race, and Rudy, listen—if you don’t make a fuss, we won’t either.”

Rudy could only stare at the men he thought were his friends, and the man he hoped might have become something more. His mouth opened and closed on words he knew were better left unsaid in reply to Justin’s implied threat before his lips tightened into a thin line, and he turned and simply walked away.

THE seat of the rough, wooden picnic table outside the convenience store was damp, but at least it was in the shadows and offered Rudy an opportunity to stop his aimless walking. The exterior of the store was decorated for the upcoming weekend, and the colorful streamers and banner that read “Welcome Racers” seemed to mock him every time he looked at it. Rudy blinked and wiped at his face with a shaking hand.

Rudy couldn’t remember when he had last been this mad. His emotions were jumbled up inside him, and all he could think was that he really wanted to punch something. He felt so strange, like when he was out on the water and a wave unexpectedly dropped the deck under his feet. Rudy couldn’t believe he had been thrown off the boat for nothing other than what he was at his very core and not for anything he had done.

He supposed he should count himself lucky so far in life. Even in high school, he hadn’t experienced much more

than the occasional joke by a few low-brows about his open preferences, no different than the ribbing they gave the geeks or the stoners.

It simply hadn't been anything he had spent any time thinking about. Sure, Rudy had talked with other guys who had lived it, and he had read articles about discrimination, but to actually experience it himself?

Rudy's head pounded. He pulled at the elastic band that held his hair back at the nape of his neck and released the mass of dark curls he never could remember to have cut. He needed to plan, but all he could think about was how much it hurt when Justin hadn't stood up for him.

So what the hell was he supposed to do now? He had used his available cash to pay all the necessary race fees and had planned to sleep on the boat. In the long run Rudy was pretty sure he'd get his money back. At least, he hoped Justin would keep his word on that.

Not that it helped him right now. Rudy didn't dare charge a hotel room and stress his credit card's already heavy balance. Besides, he had planned to use the miracle of plastic to help pay his regular bills during this unpaid time off.

But without a berth in the race, Rudy guessed he should probably just find a ride back to Grand Rapids and get to work. That would be the smartest thing to do. But he was damned if he'd let them do this to him. Rudy may not have had many goals in his life, but he had one.

He wanted to be an old goat.

The title was an honorary one, given to the small club that had made twenty-five of the exhilarating runs of the Bayview Port Huron to Mackinac Race. It entitled the bearer to free drinks at several of the bars; free turns out on the lake, and the unswerving attention of those they chose to share their tales with. Rudy wanted that kind of respect.

It was hard to explain to anyone who had never sailed competitively about the allure of spending three days sweating and working non-stop in damp, cold, and usually hazardous conditions with little to no sleep.

But to someone who understood—the electricity, the transcendent feeling of being one with the water and the sky, and the pounding rush of adrenaline at the moment when wind, wave, and sail synchronized into one amazing unit—it was worth everything.

Worse yet, Rudy knew that without an opportunity to crew or a chance to prove himself, he didn't have a hope of ever running this race on a decent boat again once the guys got done with him. He didn't trust them to keep their mouths shut, and whatever garbage they spilled would stick even if it wouldn't be the truth.

Rudy knew how it worked. He had seen it before. Personality conflicts were common in the close quarters required by racing, but they could be brushed aside if you were skilled enough. A sailor was only as good as his reputation, after all, his reputation and his last race. Without either of those two things, he was nothing.

III

“RUDY.” The sound of his name startled Rudy before he had come to any real decision about what to do next. The voice was ragged and breathless as if the owner had been hurrying but Rudy recognized it all the same.

Great. Now what? Rudy wondered.

“Justin.” Rudy straightened his spine and tried to look casual as he pressed back against the hard edge of the picnic table. He stared up at the man he thought was his friend, angered by the small bubble of hope Justin’s presence brought. Rudy had to squint to see Justin’s face in the murky shadows although the streetlight behind Justin cast a halo around his body.

“What are you doing here?” Rudy looked pointedly around Justin. He knew Justin would get his meaning. “Richard didn’t try to stop you?”

From the tightening of Justin’s lips barely visible to him in the dark, Rudy knew his cheap shot had been an accurate one. “Richard doesn’t have anything to do with this,” Justin said stiffly as he gestured to the bench Rudy was sitting on. “Can I sit down?”

“What’s the point?” Rudy knew he sounded bitter, but honestly, what was there to talk about? It wasn’t like

Richard was going to change his mind. There had been too much malicious glee in his face when he'd finally found his chance to get rid of Rudy.

"Don't be like this." Justin ignored Rudy's glare and sat beside him anyway. The toe of his tennis shoe pushed Rudy's duffle aside to nudge at Rudy's foot. "You don't have to act like this."

The two of them stared into the street, watching as cars drove by and tourists walked past, anything but each other. The constant chime as the door to the party store opened and closed cut through the silence between them. The music spilled out until it was suddenly cut off, and the momentary illusion of being alone returned.

"Oh, sorry. Excuse me for being pissed off when I've just been kicked off the boat I've crewed on for four years and not knowing how to act." Rudy crossed his arms over his chest. "Look, what do you want?"

For a quick second Justin looked uncomfortable. His hand reached out toward Rudy and then dropped back onto his thigh. "I just want to know you're okay."

"Okay?" Rudy looked at him in disbelief. "I'm low on cash, I've lost my berth in the race, and I've got nowhere to sleep tonight. Trust me, I'm far from okay. But hey, don't worry about it. I mean, we wouldn't want Richard to know you were concerned or anything."

"That's really unfair, Rudy." Justin's eyes stared into his searchingly. It was too dark for Rudy to see their familiar blue color, but he remembered it. The same as he

remembered the sound of Justin's voice as it carried over the quiet waves at night, and the way Justin's body rode the up and down swells of the water with the grace of an athlete.

"Unfair?" Rudy suddenly realized that he wasn't done being angry. "*I'm* being unfair? Does anything about that statement seem a little off to you in light of the events just a short time ago?"

Rudy stood up. He didn't trust himself to be this close to Justin and not do something stupid. "Look, why don't you just go ahead and head back to the boat. Richard and the guys must be wondering where you are."

"You know, I'm really tired of you and Richard constantly putting me in the middle," Justin said as he looked out at the people who walked past them unknowing and uncaring of the small drama taking place. Justin's voice was light and emotionless in contrast to his words. "You don't know how hard that made things for me."

"What?" Rudy wondered just how this had changed from whether he was all right and had a place to sleep tonight to suddenly being all about Justin. Except maybe things had always been like that, only Rudy had never realized it before now.

"It's been so easy for you." Justin ignored Rudy and just kept on talking. His fingers traced the carvings on the tabletop too dark to see. "You just don't understand what it's like having to be careful all the time. Having to watch what you say and what you do. Never sure who's watching."

“Justin, look—” Rudy began uncomfortably. He didn’t want to hear this, didn’t want to lose the hard edge his anger gave him.

“No, really, Rudy.” Justin shifted on the wooden bench, his knee bumping Rudy’s leg. “I want you to understand.”

“That’s just it.” Rudy rubbed at the back of his neck. “I don’t think I understand any of this.”

“I think you do.” Justin had stood up as well, his body too close to Rudy for Rudy’s comfort. “Things could be better this way. If you aren’t on the boat, then I don’t have to worry I’ll give something away. I could maybe see you. You know.”

“Jesus, Justin.” Rudy wondered what it said about Justin that he didn’t realize how insulting that half-hearted offer was. “Do you know what you are asking?” He distanced himself from the picnic table and Justin both, instinctively heading farther into the concealing shadows. “If you care about me why should we have to hide?”

“I like you, Rudy.” Justin followed him. “You know that. But I’ve never been in a position where I could do anything about it. Richard is the one that got me the position with his father’s law firm, I can’t let him down.”

“I’m not following how my being on the boat equals you letting him down.” Rudy felt stifled by Justin’s presence so close to him. He was still angry, but as much as he hated to admit it, excited as well, flattered by Justin having sought him out.

“That’s what I mean,” Justin said eagerly. “With you not being a part of the crew, I don’t have to worry Richard will

find out or tell his father.” Rudy stiffened as Justin’s warm hand gripped his bicep tightly. “We could both get what we want.”

“There are a lot of things I want, Justin.” Rudy tried to shift out Justin’s grasp. “Being your dirty little secret isn’t one of them.”

“It could be good between us, Rudy. You know it could.” Justin stepped even closer, pressing Rudy’s back against the rough brick of the store. This far from the street the only sound Rudy could hear was their breathing, rapid and deep over the whir and buzz of the nighttime insects.

“Justin—” Rudy’s words were cut off by the press of Justin’s lips against his, firm and warm as they shaped and molded against Rudy’s. Rudy gasped as surprise forced the air from his lungs in a quick exhalation, and then Justin’s hand was behind his head. Justin held Rudy still as Justin’s tongue slicked against his, teasing across the sharp points of Rudy’s teeth, wet and hot with promise.

It was the realization of a dream for Rudy. He had spent four years working alongside Justin. His feelings of friendship had warmed to want and then eventually to wonder as Rudy had contemplated just how Justin would feel or taste. Here finally were his answers. Rudy let his body relax against Justin, enjoying the support of Justin’s body and already imagining how it would feel naked against his.

“Can you tell what it would be like for us?” Justin whispered. His words echoed Rudy’s thoughts with pleasing synchronicity. Justin broke the kiss. He licked at his lips and swallowed before he continued. “I knew it would be good

between us. I'll get us a hotel room for tonight, and after the race we can decide how to make this work."

Just like that Rudy's dreams soured. "That's not what I want, Justin."

"I don't have anything else to give you, Rudy." Justin's hand trailed with possessive greed across Rudy's back. "I have responsibilities to my family, to my job. You should be able to accept that."

"No." Rudy pushed against Justin, struggling to break the hold familiarity had on his senses. "I can't accept that, Justin. I deserve a hell of a lot better than that."

For a moment Rudy didn't think Justin was going to let him go, and he wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. He had finally got his wish. All this time of wanting to be close to Justin, and now all Rudy wanted was to get away. Finally Justin stepped back. His chest rose and fell as he struggled to control his breathing.

"I would have protected you from Richard, you know. " Justin's tone was almost conversational, but Rudy recognized the underlying threat. "You know what he's like when he gets mad."

"I'll manage," Rudy said. He was all bravado on the outside, but inside there was a core of anxiety he couldn't shake. "I always have."

IV

THE Corkboard Bar was packed. Smoke rode the cool currents of night breeze and tinged the outside air with the faintest hint of blue every time the heavy door opened, and the curling tendrils managed to escape from the close confines of the interior.

The thick cloud made Rudy cough when he entered and pushed through the room to the back. He knew the bar's ancient namesake could be found on the wall between the restrooms. His eyes had already adjusted to the darkened interior by the time he reached it.

It was a cornucopia of information; note after note, pictures, even postcards. Here were the listings of boats that needed crew and crew that needed a boat. Items for sale, ads for repairs, lost and found. Everything was stuck to the ancient cork courtesy of the pushpins stuck in the wall beside it.

It wasn't the most efficient system, and some forums on the Internet were trying to replace it. But it was yet another time-honored tradition that the racing die-hards weren't going to let go.

Rudy needed a boat, and this was the one place he knew he might find the information he was looking for. Just to make things more difficult, Rudy needed a known boat,

something with an actual chance of winning or at least placing in its class. At least if he wanted to have any kind of reputation once the guys were done trashing him.

Fuck. Who was he kidding? He needed a miracle.

One of the overhead bulbs had burnt out, and Rudy squinted in the resulting low light as he tried to read the overlapping sheets stuck up so haphazardly. As expected, there were far more notices of crew looking for boats than of boats looking for crew, each one written to grab the attention and eye of a prospective team.

Rudy's hopes began to dim as he read the qualifications of those looking for an opportunity to crew. He was skilled, but some of these guys had experience that just blew his right out of the water. Hell, two of the guys even offered to buy all the beer simply for the chance to get on a boat. How could he compete with that?

Doggedly Rudy pressed on, flipping past sheet after sheet, his lips silently moving as he read. Some of the listings had obviously been there a while—their edges yellowed from smoke and age and curled up to hide the faded ink. Those he ignored. He needed something new, something—

Something just like that. It was the handwriting that caught his eye. Strikingly bold and angular with sharp points that indicated an aggressive, direct, and energetic personality. Rudy grabbed at the square of canvas that was almost hidden in the lower left-hand corner of the board, whistling when he saw the name.

This had to be a joke. Rudy knew this boat. Well, he knew its standing. A C&C 41, Devlin's Due had taken first in its class for more years than not over the last five it had finished the race.

The crew was a tight-lipped bunch with a reputation for being unafraid to stand their ground either on the water or on land. Rudy had never seen them, but he had heard plenty. Blood would be spilled for the mere hint of an opportunity to sail with this group.

Rudy let himself dream for just a moment. Man, if he could get on this boat, the guys couldn't touch him. No matter what kind of crap they shoveled out, it wouldn't stand up to the fact that Rudy had successfully crewed on a boat with such a reputation for toughness. He could keep his reputation intact and show Justin he didn't need him.

The problem was the lack of contact information on the small bit of material that held the intriguing scrawl. Rudy pulled the canvas square off the wall, not wanting anyone else to get a chance to beat him to the job, and fought a path over to the bar. He clutched his duffle tighter against his side when it was jostled off his shoulder.

"Excuse me." Squeezed between the filled bar stools Rudy waved his hand to get the attention of the older, bleached blonde tending bar at this end. The gaping neck of her tank top exposed her wrinkled cleavage. It also showed off a faded, flowery tattoo and rose from her waist every time she moved, allowing her excess weight to roll up and over the top of her jeans.

“What can I do ya for?” she asked with a practiced smile. She had to shout to be heard over the band that decided now would be a good time to warm up on the small stage. It sounded like country night. That would explain some of the cowboy hats, an incongruous sight in this small port town.

“I’m looking for the crew of Devlin’s Due.” Rudy gestured with the small square of canvas in his hand. “Do you know where I can find them?”

“Oh hon.” Her eyes widened, and then they narrowed slightly, traveling up and down what little of Rudy was visible over the ancient and scratched ledge of the high bar that was almost as old as she was. “What are you looking for that bunch of troublemakers for?”

Rudy couldn’t really see what business it was of hers, and he hated to explain himself, but he did need her help. “They’re advertising for crew. I need a boat.”

Rudy had to lean forward to speak without shouting, and the man on the stool next to him glared when their shoulders brushed before he directed his attention back the young, drunken co-ed he was trying to impress.

“Plenty of other boats looking for crew.” She wiped at the already spotless surface in front of her with her cloth and pursed her lips, her bright lipstick settling into the lines years of smoking had left behind. “Let me see what I can find for you.”

“Thanks.” Rudy tried smiling despite his growing irritation. “Really. But if you could just point me in the right direction, I’d appreciate it.”

The bartender folded her arms across her sagging bosom and stared at him, taking in Rudy’s youthful appearance that not even his mustache and dark goatee could help disguise.

“What?” Rudy exclaimed and pushed at the dark curls that had inevitably escaped from the club of hair caught at the back of his neck. “Is there some kind of problem?”

“Other than the fact those boys will eat a little thing like you for breakfast? No. No problem at all.” She sighed heavily and shook her head. “I’ll give you the same warning I give that bunch. I don’t care who starts it. You fight, and you’re out of here.”

Rudy just looked at her blankly, not sure why she thought the warning necessary. She sighed again and pointed to the back with her bar rag. “Straight back. Table against the wall in the cubby. You can’t miss ’em.”

“Thanks.” Rudy headed in the direction she had pointed, and the spot where he had been standing filled in instantly behind him. Of course, he still didn’t know what or who to look for, but it was obvious he wasn’t going to get any more help from her.

His duffle was a handicap in the busy bar, and Rudy struggled to keep it from hitting those sitting at the tables he passed. The last thing he needed right now was a fight with some drunk. Especially when Rudy added the bartender’s

threat to the mix. He couldn't risk being thrown out now. He could see the small area she had told him about just ahead. It was another room, added on after the original construction.

"Hey, Haas." A hand reached out from one of the tables and snagged his arm. "Is that you?"

Rudy looked down and squinted into the smoke. Short brown hair, blue eyes, and a winning smile. "Mike," he said, relieved he remembered the guy's name. "How's it going?" Rudy nodded politely to the other occupants of the table.

"Not so bad." Rudy allowed himself to be distracted. Mike was an okay guy, and they had run into each other several times over the last few years. "What are you doing here?"

Hell. He really didn't want to get into this. "Just meeting up with a couple of guys I know." Rudy tried to look casual instead of worried. He hoped he succeeded.

"I heard about Richard's Angel, man." Mike had the decency to look like he actually was disappointed Rudy had lost his place on the boat. "Sorry about that."

"Yeah, well." Rudy could feel his expression freeze up. News had gotten out already? Those guys hadn't wasted any time. "You know how it goes."

"Yeah," Mike agreed solemnly before raising his beer in a toast. "I bet you're happy to be done with that asshole Proctor. Still, pretty shitty—him dumping you like that."

Rudy shrugged, his shoulders stiff. “Look, I gotta go. See you around, ’kay?”

Mike stuck his hand out. “You bet. And if something doesn’t turn up, come by and see us. You never know when we’ll have an open berth.”

“Thanks.” His pride stung by the well-meaning offer, Rudy swallowed, and he shook Mike’s hand with a weak smile. “I appreciate it.”

V

RUDY waved his hand in front of his face. The smoke was thicker in the small area at the back of the bar, but at least it was farther from the stage. That gave it some pretence it would be quieter. Either that or the smoke muffled the sound. A collection of mismatched tables and chairs were jammed tightly into the small space, and somehow the owners of the bar had managed to squeeze in a few pool tables as well.

Rudy waited for the man in front of him to take his shot and straighten up before Rudy turned his body sideways to sidle past, holding his duffle over his crotch to avoid the butt end of the pool cue.

Table against the wall, huh? Well, there were three of those. The first table was filled with the owners of the expensive Harleys parked out front; rich weekend biker wannabes all had the same look. Probably a good bet that wasn't the table he was looking for. The second? Well, maybe. But Rudy wasn't getting the right vibe. Now the third one....

Before Rudy could take a good look at the table's occupants his path was blocked as one of the men stood and pushed his chair back. The metal legs screeched loudly against the stained linoleum. A broad chest blocked Rudy's

view of the rest of the table, and throat dry, Rudy looked up—way up—into the dark face.

“You lost, son?” The tone was surprisingly mild, and once assured he wasn’t going to be beaten up on sheer principle alone Rudy found he had a voice after all.

“Sorry.” Rudy wasn’t sure just why he was apologizing, but it seemed like a good idea. “I’m looking for the crew of Devlin’s Due. Any chance you know them?”

“Depends on why you’re looking.” Rudy knew the voice was coming out of the mouth towering over his head, but he heard it from lower down by his level, reverberating inside the big chest.

“Uh.” Damn, this looking up was making his neck hurt. Rudy waved the scrap of canvas again and tried to project an attitude of assurance. “I hear they’re looking for crew. I’m it.”

“You are, huh?” There was that same up and down with the eyes the bartender had done. What was the deal with that? Rudy thought in exasperation. “You’ll want to see Ike, then.”

“Great. Thanks.” Rudy tightened his fingers over the piece of canvas. “Which one is Ike?”

“Ike.” The bellow was deafening, and Rudy flinched at the assault on his ears. “Fella here needs to talk with you.”

The chest in front of Rudy moved sideways, revealing a man sitting with his chair tilted back against the wall. One hand held a smoldering cigarette; the other was casually curled around the bottle of beer resting on the table. A petite

blonde leaned against the wall beside him. She watched Rudy's approach with scornful eyes.

Well, screw you too, sweetheart, Rudy thought before his attention was caught and held by the man himself. Justin might have been attractive, but he didn't hold a candle to the raw sex appeal of this guy. All Rudy could think was that the bartender had been right; he just wasn't a big enough boy to play in this league. Damn. Based on his first look at the man before him, Rudy sure wanted to be.

It hadn't been that long ago since Rudy had taken a punch to the gut in some stupid fight in some stupid bar he had gone to with Justin. The feeling—the force with which the air left his body, leaving him dazed and slightly nauseated—had been disorientating. He felt the same right at that very moment. Just from his first glance at the man who stared back at him, his dark eyes exotic and expressionless.

While not as big as the guy who slowly ambled off into the crowd, the man sitting with his chair tipped back and resting against the wall had shoulders that were broad and wide under his long-sleeved navy T-shirt. A goatee and mustache, darker than his own and not as well groomed, hid most of the lean face from Rudy's suddenly interested gaze. But the sharp cheekbones over which those dark eyes tilted were bare enough for him to see that there was a faint bruise gracing the pale skin. Even in the dim light of the bar, Rudy could see the delicate brush of purple and greenish yellow that indicated the mark was almost healed.

Maybe the bruise explained the odd behavior of the woman tending bar. Rudy wondered what had happened to mar the striking looks, and somehow at the same time, he instinctively knew the owner of the bruise didn't care about it one way or another.

Long fingers pushed a thick chunk of hair back behind one ear. The movement seemed as habitual as Rudy's own. The smoke from his cigarette drifted slowly upward as Rudy watched in fascination, and all Rudy could imagine was how that hair would feel under his fingers, how soft it would be as it brushed against his lower belly.

"What?" Rudy murmured before he blinked and looked around in embarrassment. Had someone said something to him? That was all he needed, to be caught staring when he hoped to be taken on as crew.

But it was rare that someone grabbed his interest so hard and fast, sending him spiraling into lust with a capital L. Rudy could feel it now, warm and low in his belly. It left his boyish admiration of Justin nothing but a swiftly fading memory.

"Pull up a chair." The muscular blond sitting at the same table grinned at him, obviously not having missed catching his fascinated gaze. At least nobody looked like they were going to kick his ass for staring.

One booted foot lazily kicked an empty chair from under the table, barely missing Rudy's knees. This guy looked like a reject from a Viking film, as pale as the first man Rudy had spoken with was dark.

Rudy shook his head to clear it. There were three other men sitting at the table, the condensation from their drinks pooling on the dark wood table. He didn't know how he had missed seeing them, but he had, all his attention riveted on the man with his chair to the wall.

"I'm Micah Robinson." The big blond tossed his hair back over his shoulder and gestured to the others seated around the table. "That's Desmond Crowe and Luther Boggs. You passed Mr. Tyson Mayfield on his way to the can. And then there's Ike Ujarka." The last point of his thumb had been toward the dark-eyed man.

The rest of men all lifted their beers to Rudy as he nodded and stumbled over his duffle before he finally managed to awkwardly sit down on the torn vinyl of the orange chair Micah had pushed toward him. "I'm Rudy." He cleared his throat. "Rudy Haas."

His hands trembled, and Rudy wiped them on his pants leg. He was thankful no one wanted to put their drinks down long enough to shake hands. They were all staring at him. Rudy told himself he was just stressing over the need to find a boat; his unexpected reaction didn't have anything to do with the man across the table.

Really.

"I understand you guys are looking for a man?" Rudy couldn't seem to help how his voice rose at the end of his sentence.

"Yeah, our number six was in a car accident last week and broke his leg. You got experience?" The question came

from Luther; he was a match in size for Tyson, the man Rudy had almost run into. Both of the men were big and dark and had the calm geniality that came from the comfortable knowledge that few would be willing to cross them.

The other guy, Desmond, was harder to get a handle on, mainly because he wore some weird driving cap on his head that kept Rudy from getting a good look at him. Rudy gave him points for the self-confidence needed to carry that look off. Actually, each of these men was confident and attractive in his own way. But none of them came close to appealing to Rudy's baser instincts like Ike Ujarka.

"Yeah." Rudy coughed into his hand and wiped it again on his thigh. "Four years running the Bayview. G class, though." He felt it better to be as up front as possible. "A couple of Caribbean runs, three times on the Chicago to Mackinac."

Rudy stared in fascination as Ike whispered into the ear of the woman beside him, gently pushing her toward the bar. Then he turned his attention back across the table to stare silently at Rudy.

Rudy couldn't help but wonder if Ike's eyes were really that dark or if their solid color was just the result of the poor lighting. Whatever the cause, they were disconcerting with no apparent separation between the pupil and iris. Damn, he really needed to focus.

"How about your certifications? Experience with ORM? First aid?" The questions suddenly were flying at Rudy from everyone except the man his gaze was locked with.

Back on familiar territory, Rudy forced himself to look at the other men as he detailed the methods of overboard recovery methods—both the Reach/Tack/Reach and QuickStop methods, and when an ORM should be attempted under power.

Rudy silently blessed his years of experience, few though they were, when he was asked to describe the differences between sailing by the lee, jibing, and feathering as well as his understanding of heavy weather sailing, proper sail trimming, and shaping techniques.

The questions seemed endless, and Rudy's voice grew hoarse as he struggled to respond quickly and carefully. This was his chance, and he didn't want to risk blowing it. Tyson came back to the table, and he joined in as well. All of the men except Ike drilled him like a third-grader at a spelling bee.

After what seemed like a lifetime, the questions finally slowed, and Rudy took a deep breath. He swallowed, his throat dry, and he wished that despite his lack of ready cash he'd been smart enough to get himself a drink.

The opened beer sliding across the table brought his head up sharply. Ike took another draw off his cigarette and gestured for Rudy to drink. With any other man Rudy would have hesitated on the grounds of general all-around grossness. But something about the commanding eyes made his hand close around the bottle, and Rudy brought the bottle to his lips despite the fact he knew the others were watching.

Rudy's tongue licked at the cool glass bottle, and he wondered what the hell he was doing. He took a deep swallow despite the fact Ike had drunk from this same bottle, and despite the knowledge Ike's lips had touched the rim exactly where Rudy's now rested.

It had been a long time since Rudy had been that intimate with someone. He shuddered as the cool liquid hit the back of his throat.

"You talk the talk." Ike spoke for the first time since Rudy had walked up. The pitch of his voice was calm and level, and even though he didn't raise his voice, Rudy could hear it over the background noise from the bar. "But what you haven't told us is why you are looking for a new boat."

If Rudy hadn't already swallowed he would have spit beer out all over the table and the men watching him. Damn, he should have expected the question. He wiped his hand across his mouth and sent the bottle sliding back across the table to Ike.

"Thanks," Rudy said. His mind raced as he looked around the table and considered what to say. Somehow he didn't think these guys would buy any story about looking to increase his experience in a different class. It was time to man up.

"I sailed with my last boat for four years. I sweated, bled, and lived alongside the rest of my team. This week they found out something about my personal life that has nothing to do with sailing. They didn't care for it, and they kicked me off the boat without a second thought."

Rudy could hear the bitterness in his voice, but he was too tired for bullshit. “I could tell you it was just a personality conflict, or I could give you the graphic details. You tell me which you’d prefer.”

The five men just looked at each other in unspoken communication. They all stood, leaving the rest of their drinks on the table and pushed back their chairs. Rudy’s shoulders slumped. Well, he guessed that was that. Rudy reached down to gather up his duffle but paused when Micah’s hand rested heavily on his shoulder.

“Slip one-twenty-two at the Bridge Harbour Marina. Be there tomorrow. Bright and early.”

VI

MORNING came far too bright and far too early for Rudy's comfort. He would have sworn the sunrise with the keening cries of the lake gulls and the familiar sounds of the marina coming to life around him would have woken him. But it was the toe of a worn tennis shoe nudging his ribs that finally forced his eyes to peel open.

"Wha—?" Rudy questioned groggily. He groaned as he unfolded himself from his bed on the hard surface of the dock. With no place to go once he left the bar last night, he had used his laminated pass to con his entrance into the secured harbor where Devlin's Due was tied up.

He hadn't felt comfortable going aboard on his own, though, and had just used his duffle as a pillow on the wooden dock, curled up between the white rectangular locker and the bumpers that protected the boat's polished hull from scuffing.

"Coffee?" The smell that wafted to his nose from the Styrofoam cup made him lightheaded. He was such a slave to caffeine it wasn't funny, and without further thought for polite behavior, Rudy grabbed.

"Thanks." It took a couple of sips before Rudy could open his eyes and look into the cheerful face above him. "Uh—Luther. Right?" Brown eyes smiled down at him from

the man's dark face, highlighted by the bright sun behind him.

"Right." Another brilliant smile as Luther's hand rubbed the top of his shaved head. "Or Cue Ball, if the urge strikes you."

Rudy snorted, wiping at his face when he sprayed coffee out his nose. Gah, that burned. "You're kidding."

"Naah." Luther reached out and gave him a hand up. "Dez, the bastard, thought it was funny." The smile he gave Rudy was positively evil. "I got him back, but the nickname stuck."

A twist to the side let his vertebrae crack back into place, and Rudy grabbed up his duffle. He could see Ike and the rest of the guys walking up the dock.

Rudy brushed at his clothes even though it made no impact on the wrinkles. He felt grubby, and his teeth were covered in what had to be a matched set of tiny hand-knit sweaters. Either that or the dog hairs from the old guy's car.

He probably smelled too, and while his heavy jeans and long-sleeved shirt had kept the worst of the bugs from biting at his flesh last night, Rudy now felt overdressed compared to others dressed in their all-weather pants and tank tops that exposed a variety of muscle.

"Bright and early it is." Micah greeted him with a hearty slap across the back, and Rudy nodded cautiously to Dez and Tyson, who nodded back.

He was the only one with a bag of gear, which made sense; their stuff must already be on the boat. It amused Rudy to see that they all clutched their travel mugs of coffee as if their very lives depended on it. He could definitely relate to that.

“Nice manners,” Ike said casually as he easily clambered onto the deck of the boat and gestured for Rudy to join him. “Welcome aboard.”

Rudy could feel himself flush, the color rising up beneath his tanned skin as he realized Ike understood that he had slept on the dock rather than on the boat—and why.

It shocked him, how much Ike’s approval meant, and Rudy smiled, pleased he had made the right choice by not jumping aboard last night. He struggled to juggle his coffee and duffle until Luther and Tyson got tired of waiting and took hold of him, one on each side. Rudy was surprised at how effortlessly they lifted him up off the dock and onto the boat.

“Aww, he’s such a cute little thing.” They grinned down at him from their superior height. “Ike, can we keep him?”

Rudy flushed even harder when he stumbled as they released him, and his coffee slopped out onto the white deck. Great. Not the impression he wanted to make, blushing, and stumbling around like a kid. One of the reasons he had grown the goatee was to hopefully hide his involuntary reactions. At this rate he needed a full beard, something on the Grizzly Adams scale.

“We’ll see.” Obviously the one in charge, Ike wasted no time heading toward the cockpit and navigation station. “What kind of gear did you bring?”

There was a moment’s pause before Rudy realized that Ike’s question had been directed at him. “Sorry. Uh, the usual.” He shrugged. “Strobe, tether, my foul weather gear, and some lighter stuff.”

“Everything you need but packed light? Smart boy.” Ike grinned, his dark eyes lightening. It stunned Rudy. Even with the scruff of beard, Ike appeared years younger in spite of the bruise that stood out even sharper in the bright morning light. “Did you bring your own PFD?”

“Absolutely.” Rudy cleared his throat, trying to steer his thoughts away from the suddenly tight fit of his jeans due to the stiffening of his dick. Think about your personal flotation device, Rudy told himself, not Ike’s unexpected smile. His gear was one area Rudy didn’t spare any expense.

“Good.” Ike grunted and began checking the equipment shadowed under the vinyl bimini. Rudy could see the lights flicker on as Ike flipped switches. From where Rudy stood he could see a brand name GPS with a moving map, and if he wasn’t mistaken, that was a system which would display over the companionway and mast as well as in the nav station. *Nice*. There was more equipment, of course. It looked like Devlin’s Due had all the bells and whistles a sailor could hope for.

Ike gestured to the entry to the cabin. “Stow your gear below, and let’s get ready.”

Rudy could feel the vibration of the motor used to power them out of the slip under his feet as he quickly passed through the main galley and seating area toward the sleeping quarters. They were wasting no time heading for the open water.

“You gonna grab that or what?” That was Micah’s voice, audible through the open windows of the cabin area. “Dez, leave Luther alone and get on that line.”

“I’m just asking if he knows where my mug is, that’s all.” Rudy could hear the irritation in Dez’s voice.

“Still can’t find that?” Micah’s laugh boomed out, big and hearty.

“No. Not since the last trip out.” There was a lull in the conversation, and then Rudy felt the vibration from the engine die as the sails suddenly caught, and the boat moved under wind power alone. “You know my mom gave me that coffee mug. I got plenty of sentimental association with that mug.”

“Well, your momma ain’t here right now, big boy, so give me a hand.”

The cabin area was a dream. It had been designed with a maximum utilization of space and paneled in rich, polished teak. One of the things Rudy loved about sailboats was the sense of order and how there was a place for everything. Granted, they hadn’t yet been out for any length of time, but the crew appeared to keep things orderly, and he appreciated that.

There were some expensive touches as well, and Rudy admired the thick rug underfoot as well as the laminated wood flooring. He paused outside the doorways and stared into the small rooms carefully laid out with a series of tiered bunks.

Rudy hesitated, unsure where to stow his duffle. He didn't want to infringe on anyone's space. Finally Rudy just tossed it into the small cabin that appeared to be used for storage. They would tell him if he had guessed wrong.

With a longing glance at the head and a brief thought for his toothbrush, Rudy grabbed his safety harness and PFD out of his duffle and headed back topside. He paused at the deck, reaching behind his head to finger comb his dark curls before dragging them back into the usual club at the nape of his neck. It would help keep most of it from tangling in the wind. The boat gently rocked beneath his feet, and Rudy spread his legs for balance, relishing the buoyant feeling.

"Rudy."

His head jerked up at Micah's yell, and he quickly walked across the deck in response to the big man's wave. It was going to be a beautiful day out on the water. The sun was already burning through the clouds, and Rudy couldn't help his smile when he saw the blue-green water surrounding the boat.

A gull passed overhead, calling out to the sailors below, and all of Rudy's nervousness vanished as the unmistakable smell of the big lake filled his nostrils and he heard the slap

of the waves on the hull. For this brief moment, Rudy felt at home. Life just didn't get any better than this.

VII

RUDY'S arms shook from his exertions as he reached overhead in the galley and pulled down some plates. New guy makes dinner. Well, he could live with that. He just hoped it was their usual policy on board and that the guys hadn't sent him below out of pity.

Jesus, was he going to be sore tomorrow.

Once they were out in the open water, they got right to work immediately running a series of drills that tested both Rudy's skills and his stamina. Rudy understood the necessity, especially with a new man. They needed to learn how to work together and how to communicate with a minimum of words. But he didn't think he had ever worked so hard on a boat in his life.

Ike and Micah showed no mercy as they directed the sheet handling practice and sail changes. They made the crew raise and lower the Dacron sails again and again. It wasn't the actual up and down that was so difficult. It was that each sail that came down had to be repacked and made ready to go back up. Rudy couldn't remember when he had repacked so many sails in one day—and they had timed him as well, demanding faster and faster responses as his fingers grew numb and stiff.

They had worked on the rail changes too. Each of the crew's weights had been noted and argued and considered when positioning was called out. They raced to drop what they were doing and assume the desired position on the rail to test the boat's response at Micah's commands.

He had been embarrassed at one point when his jackline got tangled with Dez's during a rail change. It was a green mistake, and Rudy knew he flushed when Ike called him on it. He could feel the heat in his cheeks, and he cursed his response as he picked himself up off the deck and apologized to Dez.

"It's alright, kid." Dez had just grinned at him and swiped a hand over Rudy's dark curls. "That's what we're out here for, to get all this stuff behind us."

Rudy didn't have time to worry further about his mistake as Micah yelled at him to check to the lines for chafing. It was all so different from his experiences on Richard's Angel.

Instead of just one man yelling out commands it seemed that on Devlin's Due everyone had a say. But there wasn't any overlapping or contradictions. These guys were such a smooth running machine they seemed to read each other's minds.

Despite the intensity of the drills, they kept up a steady stream of laughter and jokes. At first Rudy felt weird, coming from Richard's Angel and the lack of physical contact. These guys kept hugging and touching and playing around. But beneath the horseplay, this crew was dead serious when it counted.

Take how they worked on the basics. Richard and Justin just assumed everyone was competent. It surprised Rudy to see the experienced crew practicing beating, transitions, and reaching and rounding until he thought they'd be bored out of their mind. Then they did it all over again.

The coffeepot gurgled at him, reminding him of what he was supposed to be doing. Rudy poured the hot liquid into the huge vacuum thermos he had found. He struggled to balance it all as he picked up the hamper of sandwiches and finger foods he had made to take topside. They were anchored at the moment. Sunset was approaching, and the water seemed eerily smooth. Rudy welcomed the chance to rest.

The others sat quietly on the deck, talking and laughing, and Micah jumped to his feet when Rudy struggled up the steps to the deck with his load.

"You can put the thermos here." He smiled at Rudy. "Then it won't get knocked over in the stampede."

"Thanks," Rudy said. He started to circle the small group with the hamper, realizing as he did so he didn't see Ike anywhere in the growing darkness.

"Food!" Tyson cheered. He had been the quietest of all the men so far, but he grinned at Rudy as he took four of the sandwiches out of the hamper and ignored the plates.

"You hog," Luther offered up his opinion as he cheerfully took three of the sandwiches himself.

“I’d say you both are in danger of wasting away,” Dez chimed in as he took his own share. “Better hope the kid made enough.” Dez had finally removed his cap, and Rudy was surprised at the wealth of silvery gray hair that tumbled about his shoulders.

“Where’s Ike?” Rudy asked softly as he gave Micah a choice of tuna salad or turkey on rye.

“Nav station.” Micah took two of the tuna salad sandwiches and gestured with his shoulder. “Always fidgeting with something.” He gave Rudy a considering look. “Why don’t you take him one of the turkey ones? He likes them.”

“Okay.” Rudy felt his stomach flip-flop with nerves, and he stepped past Tyson and Dez, who were in the middle of another argument about Dez’s mysteriously missing mug.

“I’m telling you, it was here.” Dez complained.

“Dez, you’d lose your head if it wasn’t attached. How do you know where you had that mug last?” Tyson replied in exasperation.

“I know because I don’t leave my shit lying all around like some people I know,” Dez insisted as he pulled the hamper away from Tyson and started rummaging through the remaining sandwiches once Rudy had pulled out a couple for Ike. “My shit is always exactly where I leave it.”

“Well, your shit is gone this time.” Tyson tugged the hamper back over to him and absently handed Luther another sandwich before taking one for himself.

“It ain’t right, man. My mom finds out I lost that mug, and she’ll kick my ass,” Dez complained as he crumpled up the wrapping and tossed it at Tyson’s head.

The final crimson rays of the sun were fading. The stars were just starting to peek through the endless overhead of sky. Even once the sun dipped below the horizon, it seemed to take longer to get full night out on the water.

Rudy let the rest of their conversation drift over him as he carefully stepped over to the nav station where Ike was working by the illumination of a portable lantern rather than turning on the big floods. It was quieter here, separate from the other men.

He loved this part of being out on the big lake. There was no land as far as the eye could see, and Rudy could pretend he sailed one of the great oceans. Perhaps an ancient explorer adrift on the currents; waiting on the mercy of the gods to bless him with fair winds and smooth water.

“I brought you a couple of sandwiches. Are you hungry?” Rudy stood hesitantly to the side; he didn’t want to disturb Ike. Rudy couldn’t see his face, just hanks of hair falling down over his face and blocking Rudy’s view of those dark eyes. Rudy fought against his desire to push the hair behind Ike’s ears just to feel it under his fingers.

Ike grunted. The noise could have been an acknowledgment or it could just have been something else. Rudy didn’t know what to do. He looked back over at the others and noticed with discomfort that Micah watched them with an amused expression on his face.

“Would you rather have some coffee? I made a fresh pot.” Rudy felt like he was on his first sail all over again, uncertain of what to expect but still filled with a sense of breathless anticipation.

Finally Ike spoke, his low voice almost a physical shock to Rudy after the lengthy silence. “Nah. I’ll come over in a minute. I just wanted to do a final check on the systems.” He stood up and arched his back. Rudy could only stand there and watch hungrily as Ike flexed and stretched.

Rudy’s eyes lingered on the play of light and dark shadow against Ike’s skin. It highlighted the defined muscles of the arms and the shoulders Rudy longed to explore. Rudy knew he shouldn’t stare, but he couldn’t help it. It had been a long time since he’d come across a man that appealed to him so strongly.

“You did all right today; better go get yourself something to eat before those gorillas eat it all.” Rudy couldn’t tell from Ike’s casual comment if Rudy’s obvious admiration bothered him.

“Thanks.” Rudy’s throat tightened at the praise, and for just a moment he didn’t feel so out of place. When Ike didn’t say anything further, just bent back down and began fiddling with the controls again, Rudy took that as a sign to leave and headed back to the others. He didn’t realize he still held the sandwiches in his hand.

“Good coffee, kid.” Dez flashed him another engaging smile, and Rudy smiled back. The others took that as their cue to continue drilling him on his knowledge of navigation rules and the federal requirements for recreational boaters.

“Didn’t we cover all this last night?” Rudy protested as he finally filled his own mug with hot coffee and unwrapped one of the sandwiches he had offered to Ike. He liked the turkey ones the best too.

“Ike’s rule number twenty-seven,” Luther intoned smoothly. “Practice makes perfect.”

“Ike’s rule?” Rudy questioned. “Just how many of Ike’s rules are there?”

“As many as there needs to be.” Rudy didn’t have to turn around to know that Ike had come up behind him. A flannel shirt had been thrown over his broad shoulders as the night air turned chilly. The unbuttoned cuff pulled up his muscular forearm as Ike reached down and casually took Rudy’s coffee mug from beside his foot. Without hesitation, Ike raised it to his lips and took a large swallow. “Dez is right. You make good coffee.”

For a moment there was nothing but the gentle sound of the water lapping against the hull, and then Micah spoke up. “It’s a damn sight better than the swill Luther tries to make.”

The men all burst out laughing, and as Ike sat down between Luther and Tyson, the moment relaxed into casual storytelling by the light of a small deck lantern.

Each tale of Great Lakes adventure grew larger and wilder than the next, and Rudy listened with fascination. The stars overhead illuminated the dark surface of the lake, their sparkling light reflected in the slight roll of the water.

“So there we were, just screaming into the mark with a couple of other boats beside us, when Tyson dropped the

kite. We jibed, and then the boat took off like a raped ape.” Dez leaned forward in his enthusiasm, his hands gesturing as he told his part of the story. “We took it wide and then came around tight, rounding and then running boat for boat—”

It was nice to just sit and bask in the warm camaraderie of the other men. There was a lack of physical space between them that at first seemed odd after Rudy’s experiences on Richard’s Angel. But after a full day spent with the crew of Devlin’s Due it now felt natural.

Tyson leaned casually back against Micah, and Dez and Luther had managed to sit behind Ike with their heads together to argue over something once again. Only Ike and Rudy seemed to be the odd men out.

Rudy would have liked to spend more time listening. He enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere, and he wanted to hear more of their stories, but he couldn’t stop yawning. The fresh air and activity had worn him down, and with regret he picked up the now empty hamper and thermos and took them back down below.

VIII

RUDY stood at the small sink and yawned again as he rinsed off the few dishes they had dirtied. He realized that he had forgotten to ask where he would sleep. There had just been too many other demands on his attention.

The guys had worked him hard. He could see why the crew had consistently placed so high in the standings; they were as serious about their sailing as he had hoped. Today had shown him how much he still had to learn.

He felt the change in the air first, a disturbance almost tangible. Rudy didn't have to turn around to know that Ike had come down into the small galley to stand behind him. Rudy could smell him. Some people might have found that offensive, but Rudy appreciated the earthy appeal found in the heady and comforting mix of honest sweat and lake.

Man, did he have it bad.

"Don't mind me," Ike said. His quiet voice was calm and quiet as always, and Rudy wondered what it would take to get him excited. How would that voice sound then? "I'm just looking for Dez's mug."

He walked up to Rudy at the sink and reached into one of the cupboards to Rudy's right. Rudy could feel the heat that radiated off his body, and when Ike exhaled the warm

air stirred the dark, wayward curls that had fallen from Rudy's confining hair band.

Ike fumbled in the cupboard, stretching forward and pressing his chest against Rudy's back. Rudy's hands gripped the edge of the sink, his fingers tight and knuckles white with the effort required to resist the overwhelming urge that swept over him. All he had to do was spread his legs and lift his ass higher. It wouldn't take much to press back into the firm contact Rudy could feel stirring to life behind him.

"Is this some kind of a test?" Rudy managed to murmur over the throb of his pulse when Ike didn't step away. In four years of sailing with the other guys on a smaller boat and in closer quarters Rudy had never felt the level of desire that had him trapped against the sink in such turmoil.

"A test of what?" Ike breathed the words into Rudy's ear this time, his hips rocking for just an instant against Rudy's ass, and Rudy bit his lip to stifle his moan.

Rudy knew he should protest. He should walk over to the table or just *do* something, but it was all he could manage to stand there and battle his own desires. He had never felt this intensity around Justin. Hell, he had never felt this around anyone. If this was a test of his willpower, Rudy had already lost.

Ike's hand dropped from the door to the cupboard and traveled down Rudy's shoulder and arm in a slow and thorough caress. Just when Rudy thought his nerve endings were going to short-circuit, Ike covered Rudy's hand where it

gripped the counter with his own before finally letting it slide further down to grasp Rudy's hip.

"I see you watching me." Ike whispered as he tightened his fingers slowly and deliberately pulled Rudy back against him to feel the thickening flesh pressed between them.

Ike's voice stayed quiet, but each word was crisp and clear to Rudy's over stimulated senses. "Your eyes all big and hungry when you think no one is looking. I know what you want from me. What you need."

Rudy shuddered. The words caused a physical clenching in his gut that left him breathless as Ike continued to whisper into his ear with a voice that dripped sin and temptation like warm oil. "You just have to decide if you're man enough to take it."

"What about the blonde?" Rudy found the strength to question.

"Darlin', from the moment you walked into that bar, there wasn't anyone but you." Warm lips touched the back of Rudy's neck and then were gone.

Rudy stood trembling at the sink after Ike had walked out of the small galley and back onto the deck. Christ, but that had gotten him hot. Just the feel of Ike's work-roughened hands on his body and the sound of his voice had sent Rudy into overdrive. If the other man hadn't walked away, Rudy probably would have come right there and then.

By the time Rudy managed to finish drying the dishes and put them in the cupboards his hands had stopped shaking. He pulled a bottle of water out the fridge and sat

down on one of the benches around the small table. This was one of those times he almost wished he smoked.

He could handle this, Rudy told himself firmly. It had been a while, but this wasn't the first time he had felt an intense attraction toward someone. It didn't matter if you called it chemistry or pheromones. Whatever you wanted to attribute this sensation to, Rudy had felt it a time or two before in his life. Just never this intensely.

Yeah, and never before had he been fronted on it like that. Rudy took a drink of water, his throat dry as he remembered how it felt to have all that hot and hard muscle pressed up against him. So did that mean Ike shared Rudy's interest or was he just pushing Rudy's buttons for the hell of it?

Rudy's lust drained away as he considered the possibility. This was only a trial run. Rudy hadn't been given any indication he was accepted as one of the crew, and yet here he was alone on the water with these guys. Big guys, all of them. What did he really know about them?

Sure, everybody talked all that bull about the fraternity of sailing, but when it came right down to it, nobody knew where Rudy was, and it would be his word against theirs if their idea of letting off steam before the big race included a bit of gay-bashing.

Rudy took another swallow from his bottle of water and told himself to stop being paranoid. Just because the guys he'd known and sailed with for years ended up being homophobic jerks didn't mean these guys would too. He was just stressed and overtired.

The gleaming wood surface of the table in front of him looked awfully appealing, and Rudy let his head sink down onto his crossed arms. Over the years he had slept in worse places. During a race you snatched sleep where you could, usually ending up on the deck somewhere with a winch or block sticking into your ass.

A couple of the ports were wide open, and there was a soft breeze blowing through along with snatches of the conversation on deck. Rudy had acclimated to the motion of the boat, and his body rocked up and down with the waves. The slight movement of his head as it rolled over his arms helped to lull him to sleep.

“How’s the kid?” The question teased at Rudy’s fading consciousness, and he felt like a child again, tucked under his blankets and dozing in his bed while his parents conversed in the living room. He could hear the mingled voices rising and falling in an unintended lullaby.

“He’s good.” That was Micah’s cheerful tone. “You owe him one, Dez. He’s doing the cleanup down below.”

“I guess nobody bothered to tell him if he cooked, someone else cleans.” Tyson’s deep rumble that time.

“Just maybe we forgot to mention that.” Rudy could picture the smile in Dez’s gray eyes, and his body relaxed even further as he let his uncertainties leave him.

“What do you guys think?” Luther had joined the conversation.

“The kid’s all right.” That was Dez again, his response quick and ready. “Might be a little stunted growth-wise, but he’s not afraid of work.”

There was a low murmur of agreement that made Rudy feel good. Then Rudy held his breath as Micah asked another question. “What do you think, Ike?”

The chatter on deck died down, and Rudy knew that all attention had turned to the quiet man in the shadows as they waited for Ike to weigh in with his opinion.

“He’s not so bad.”

Rudy’s lips lifted in a small smile as he heard the faint praise uttered in that low but carrying tone. It was the last thing he remembered before he fell asleep.

“RUDY.”

A warm hand brushed at the loose curls covering his forehead, and Rudy smiled as he pushed his cheek into the touch. “Hmmm?” he questioned. His eyes stayed closed as he waited for a better reason to open them than just the sound of his name.

“Wake up.”

“Huh?” Rudy blinked. His head felt muzzy, and his eyes gummy with fatigue. It was dark in the small galley, quiet except for the sound of someone’s loud snoring, but he

recognized Ike's voice—Ike's touch. Both had already become familiar in such a short time. "What's going on?"

"You should come see this." Ike's hand brushed lightly against Rudy's cheek and then disappeared. Rudy groaned as he unfolded himself from the table. He stood up slowly and winced, tilting his neck to the side with caution as he felt the pull. "Remind me not to fall asleep there again."

"There's usually not much sleeping going on during the race." Even in the dim light Rudy could see flash of white teeth from Ike's smile, and without thinking about how he knew it was there, he took Ike's proffered hand in his, allowing the strong grasp to pull him up the steps and onto the deck without question.

Rudy glanced at the illuminated face of his watch. One-thirty a.m. He could hear the creak of the boat over the snores from below deck, the mesmerizing sound of the waves below that. "Watch." Ike pointed him toward the eastern horizon and stood behind him with his forearms clasped loosely about Rudy's neck and chest.

At first Rudy couldn't think past the casual embrace. But then the red glow on the distant horizon caught and held his attention. It was too early for the sun to be rising, but the strange light continued to grow in intensity.

"What is it?" he asked finally. Rudy's pulse raced at the slow, absentminded stroke of Ike's thumb against his neck.

"The moon is passing through the Earth's horizon. I've only seen it a couple of times." Ike murmured the words

softly into Rudy's ear, and Rudy shivered at the touch of Ike's breath once again.

He was strangely addicted to that feeling. But right now instead of sparking lust, the soft exhalation against his skin was soothing, and Rudy settled back against Ike's broad chest to watch the natural wonder unfold before him.

The glowing light finally resolved into a fiery red sphere; a bloody moon that hung in the starry sky like an Oriental lantern. Rudy had never seen anything like this phenomenon, and the sheer beauty left him stunned.

Ike continued to hold him close as the moon rose higher in the sky. The lake, already alight with the brilliance of the stars, took on a surreal glow. The moon loomed overhead, larger than Rudy had ever seen it. Even larger than a harvest moon as it changed from the deep red to the more familiar gray and white coloring.

The atmosphere created a strange magnification, and the craters and features on the moon's surface were clearly visible to Rudy's naked eye as everything paused in the moment. Even the water seemed to still and calm, smoothing out to resemble the surface of a mirror. Then the cool night breeze blew across his face, and time resumed.

"That was beautiful. Thank you." Rudy couldn't bring himself to speak louder than a whisper, pleased that Ike had shared the amazing moment with him. He stood motionless, unwilling to shatter and leave behind the sense of awe and peace that filled him.

“You’re very welcome. I thought you might like it.” Ike’s arms tightened around Rudy as his cheek rubbed against the top of Rudy’s head. “God, Rudy—”

Rudy waited for Ike to finish the sentence he started, but there was only the sound of the water. “Ike?”

“I just want you to know, I—” Ike broke off once again, and Rudy amazed himself by smiling at the awkward moment. It actually made him feel better about the uncertainty of his feelings when a man as self-assured as Ike suddenly fumbled for words.

“It’s okay.” It didn’t seem odd for Rudy to be the one to offer comfort. He patted lightly at Ike’s hand where it held him close and repeated himself. “It’s okay.”

“I have certain responsibilities.” The words left Ike in a gush, mumbled against the back of Rudy’s head and disappearing into his hair.

“So you’ll tell me about them, sometime.” Rudy appreciated the effort, but he didn’t want any intrusions from the real world into this moment. He was confident Ike Ujarka wouldn’t treat him like Justin had, and for now he just wanted to keep reality at bay. “Tell me about the bruise, instead.”

Ike laughed and followed Rudy’s lead. “It’s a hell of a shiner, isn’t it? Someone was being rude to Dez. Let’s just say I showed him the error of his ways.”

Rudy nodded, the offhand dismissal exactly what he had expected. Despite his best intentions, Rudy yawned, his

jaw stretching widely. But he was unwilling to go below and lose the unexpected connection between the two of them.

Ike pulled Rudy closer before he sighed and let his arms drop. Rudy was unable to stifle his instinctive protest, and Ike chuckled softly.

“We have time to figure this out. Go below and get some sleep.” He gave Rudy a push toward the cabinway. “You’re going to need it.”

IX

IN contrast to the day before, the next morning rolled in with the heavy waves and brisk wind of an approaching storm. The sky, so clear and cloudless the night before, darkened to a sullen gray, the low clouds heavy with threat.

Someone else had started the coffee, and Rudy woke to find Dez, Tyson, and Luther already sitting at the table and looking down at him with amusement. Rudy pushed his dark hair off his face and glared at them, feeling at a disadvantage once again. “Haven’t you guys ever seen a man sleep before?”

There was a suspicious snort from Micah. But all Rudy could see was his back. The tall blond was at the coffeemaker pouring the dark liquid into the mugs set out on the counter, and Luther stood up to help, swaying slightly from the rougher than usual motion of the boat as he passed out the mugs.

“Well, most people seem to try a bed rather than the kitchen table, but each to his own.” Tyson grinned cheerfully at Rudy and nudged him playfully with his elbow. “You better wake up and look lively. It’s going to rain hard today.”

Rudy grunted and grabbed at the mug Luther set in front of him. Hot. Wonderful. Liquid gold. Coffee by any other name. God, his muscles hurt. After leaving Ike on the deck last night it hadn’t seemed odd to stumble back to the table

and resume his position. The entire episode still seemed dreamlike.

“Is this the one you were looking for, Dez?” Luther asked innocently as he handed the heavy mug over.

“I can’t drink out of that!” There was no mistaking the horror in Dez’s voice.

Rudy looked up from his own mug of coffee to see what the problem was and sputtered when he saw the bold printing on the enameled white surface. *Eat salmon. The other pink meat.*

Tyson laughed, and Micah joined in as Dez just looked at them all sorrowfully. “It ain’t funny, man. That’s why my mom gave me my own mug. She wouldn’t like me to use something like that.” The big man shook his head. “You fellas just got no respect.”

Rudy woke up enough to take a look at his own mug and smiled at the comic fish grinning on the surface and the question *Does this make my bass look fat?*. Rudy made a mental note to check out Fishboy.com next time he was near a computer.

“Ike already topside?” Tyson asked as he held out his mug for a refill. Hemmed in between him and Luther, Rudy didn’t have to struggle to read the blue letters that proudly proclaimed *Sailors always get blown offshore.*

“What do you think?” Micah shook his head. “We’d better join him, otherwise he’ll have all our asses.” He looked over at Rudy. “I’d grab your foul weather gear. It’s looking to be a bad one.”

DESPITE the weather, Rudy's day on deck started out a repeat of the day before. This time though, the basic drills were made more difficult by the cold spray and biting wind that buffeted them as the boat fought through the rougher water, and they worked hard to compensate.

Rudy shivered. His layers of quick dry fabrics were soaked through, leaving him wet and cold. Yesterday his fingers had been stiff and clumsy; today it was his entire body. It didn't help that they were all double-tethered and using the jacklines for safety. That alone required more concentration. The boat dipped low after a swell, the churning water sending another cold wave up and over the side. Just like the wave before, it soaked his legs and deck shoes.

It was hard to believe that only a few hours before he'd been in this same spot with Ike watching the moon set the sky on fire. But that was part of the charm of the big lake, one minute it was smooth as glass—the next as wild and untamed as anything imaginable.

Speaking of which... Rudy peered around the edge of his jacket's hood toward the nav station. "Where's Ike?" he asked Dez as they battled to repack the wet fabric of the sail. Rudy gave the pile of material an extra kick. It had been a bitch to take down in the wind.

"Micah sent him below to warm-up. He's been out here longer than any of us." Dez laughed, the spray glistening on

his wind-reddened cheeks. “Not that he really ever gets cold. Ike was born with ice in his veins.”

“What do you mean?” Rudy asked. He was eager to learn all he could about the man who attracted him so strongly, and he had to admit Dez was an interesting guy to be around even if he did seem to have a few mother issues.

“Ike was born and raised in Alaska. That’s where the old man found him years back. Ike was working as a welder on the pipeline, spending months on end out on the tundra doing nothing but getting drunk and chasing moose tail.” Dez grunted as he pressed his knee against the wet fabric.

“The old man?” Rudy wiped at his face, but his hands were so wet it didn’t make any difference.

“Burke Devlin,” Dez answered. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the wind and the hiss of the water as the boat cut through the waves. “Rich bastard. He owns this boat and a shitload of other toys besides. Somebody recommended Ike for a welding job on one of Devlin’s merchant ships, and next thing you know the two of them were sailing hard and drinking harder.”

Rudy staggered as the boat dipped again, and another wave struck at his legs. But he was too enthralled in the story Dez was unfolding to move to a more secure position. “Devlin got hurt a few years back and can’t sail competitively anymore, but he puts up the funds for Ike to keep the dream alive for him, and Ike hired the rest of us.”

“You mean that all you guys do is sail?” Rudy was awed at the concept. It was his idea of heaven on earth, and just as impossible in his mind. “That’s unbelievable.”

Dez laughed and threw his head back, holding his hands up to the heavens as if to embrace the spray-soaked wind. “Where else can you be this close to God and get paid for it?”

“What about your families?” Rudy prodded, curious now about the members of the Devlin’s crew. “Wives, girlfriends? Kids?”

“This is our family.” Dez smiled knowingly at Rudy. “You’ll see.”

“Hey, you guys paying attention?” Micah’s voice boomed at them, cutting through the sound of the wind, and Rudy hurried over to the rail where he was pointing.

No wonder these guys were such a formidable team. This was all they did. He had to make the most of this opportunity. But even as he applied himself Rudy couldn’t help wondering if Burke Devlin was one of the responsibilities Ike had mentioned.

THE rain didn’t let up. The waves churned higher, and the wind picked up several more knots. After several hours atop deck Rudy was colder than he had ever been, but he refused to show any sign of weakness. He had to show these guys he could hold his own.

Had his face not felt so stiff Rudy might actually have cried with relief when the pace of the boat finally slowed, and Ike waved them all in after they had finished raising the tri-sails Ike preferred to use during heavy weather. These small, thick, and durable sails would provide little power but helped ensure the boat maintained maximum maneuverability if needed.

“No sense burning ourselves out before the real thing. Plenty of time to show our balls then.” Diamonds of water glistened in Ike’s beard, and his hair hung around his face in tangled, wet snakes, but he appeared impervious to the chilling bite of wind. He grinned as his shivering crew hustled past him and into the small cabin.

Rudy was surprised they had reached an anchoring point, but Micah set him straight. “Ike’s always got a plan. He knew the storm wasn’t going to break so he steered us here. It’s one of the few places where it’s shallow enough to drop our anchors but still leaves us a couple of miles of drift so the storm doesn’t push us aground.”

They all huddled around the galley table to thaw and drip dry. Even though they had stripped off their outer layers, they were still wet enough to leave individual pools of water under their chairs.

The rough motions of the boat as it passed over the choppy water made everything rock and sway. Rudy could hear a faint jingling in the background. It served as an accompaniment to their groans of relief as the warmth of the heater and more coffee helped the drying process along.

The smell of wet clothes and hot chili filled Rudy's nose, and as he finally warmed enough to show an interest in his surroundings he realized the cupboards had all been fastened shut with specially made closures. It was a nice touch; on Richard's Angel they used to just duct-tape them closed in bad weather to keep the contents inside.

"Nobody makes chili and cornbread like Tyson does," Luther said as he filled his bowl for the third time. "It makes the cold and wet almost worthwhile."

"Just the chance to sail makes the cold and wet worthwhile," Dez corrected as he sprinkled more shredded cheese over the top of his generous serving.

Rudy just looked at his own bowl of chili and wondered if the steam coming out of his ears was visible to anyone else. He wasn't cold any longer, but hot didn't even begin to describe the sensation inside him.

It had started slow; just warming at first. The delicious flavor of the chili had lulled him into taking a bigger bite that he probably should have. That was when the heat started, building to such a point Rudy was now afraid the top of his head was going to blow off.

Ike placed a galley mug in front of him; the base flared out wider than the top to keep from spilling in the rougher water, and the bottom had a rubberized coating to keep it from sliding across the table as the boat rocked. "Milk," he explained to Rudy's questioning and slightly panicked glance. "It will work better than anything else."

Tears ran from Rudy's eyes as he drank, but he didn't mind. The other guys were laughing with him, not at him, and once he got over the burn, the chili was some of the best he'd had. Actually, Rudy could compare the feelings he got when Ike touched him to the sensation of the chili, warming and slow building. Rudy could only imagine the resulting burn would be as intense.

With the flavor of the chili cooled down, Rudy wiped at the moisture on his cheeks. He looked up in surprise when Dez started chuckling. "What now?" he asked uncertainly. Did he do something wrong?

"You'd better go wash if you don't want your face to peel right off." Dez gestured with a grin that parted his lips and showed his white teeth.

Rudy squinted at him and then got up to walk over to the head. Once he closed the door, he looked at his reflection in the mirror and realized he had somehow gotten dirt and grease from one of the winching mechanisms for the anchors on his hands—and now all over his face.

He ran a small amount of water into the basin, unsure of the holding capacity of the water tanks on the boat or when they had last been filled—something Richard put off until the last minute—and fumbled for the small nail brush beside the soap.

The voices of the other men were a low rumble as they laughed and shared their thoughts of the day. It wasn't until Rudy heard his name that his hands stilled, and he strained his ears to listen. He felt uncomfortable about eavesdropping

again, but he told himself it was impossible to avoid it in the close quarters.

“I’d say the kid’s proved himself. I’m willing to give him my vote.” Dez’s support made Rudy feel good, and he scrubbed harder at the black grease under his nails. “It’ll be hard to find someone that fits in as well this close to the race.” Tyson and Luther both offered their agreement to Dez’s suggestion.

“I only have one question.” That was Micah, and to Rudy’s surprise, his voice was much more serious than Rudy had heard it yet.

Rudy dropped the washcloth he had been using to rub at the marks on his face and stepped closer to the door. He wanted to hear what Micah had to say.

“Is he going to be a problem for you, Ike?” Micah’s question was direct and to the point, and Rudy found himself once again breathless as he waited for Ike’s answer.

“No problem.” Ike’s reply was smooth and almost overridden by Luther’s immediate question.

“What? Why would the kid be a problem?”

“Come on, Luther.” Tyson voice held equal amounts of affection and exasperation. “Don’t you have eyes? When’s the last time Ike shared his beer with anyone?”

“Oh. That kind of problem.”

Rudy stared at his reflection in the mirror, his eyes wide at the implications.

“What will Burke say?” It seemed Micah wasn’t done, and Rudy’s hand tightened over the wet cloth as everything got even quieter.

So quiet, in fact, Rudy could hear the click of Ike’s lighter as he lit another cigarette. Ike really did smoke too much. Rudy’s thoughts bounced aimlessly around in his head as he squirmed nervously.

“Burke wants to meet him as soon as the race is over.” Ike didn’t sound angry, just matter-of-fact and practically smug.

“Hell, he already knows?” Micah laughed, his palm smacking the table in his enthusiasm. “You bastard. What did you do, call and tell him the first night you laid eyes on the kid?”

The rest of the guys joined in Micah’s laughter. Rudy just stared down at his hands and wondered what it all meant.

X

RUDY lay in the small bunk and glared at the overhead he knew was above him in the darkness while he listened to the sound of Tyson's snoring in the quarters next to him. Well, make that Micah and Tyson's snoring.

Rudy had come out of the head to find the rest of the guys joking around with no sign of the discussion that had just taken place. He even began to wonder if his tired mind had made the entire conversation up.

When Rudy had started nodding off in the middle of one of Luther's stories, Micah had shown him to one of the small cabins off the galley area. At first Rudy had fallen onto the soft mattress positive he was tired and sore enough to fall instantly asleep.

But he hadn't. Instead his mind raced over the events of the last two days and the changes wrought both in his life and within his very being. Rudy couldn't imagine how he had gone this long without knowing Ike and the other members of Devlin's Due.

Even if all he would ever have were these three days of practice, or, if he were very lucky, this one race, Rudy felt as if everything in his life had expanded. Possibilities and options he had never considered suddenly seemed everywhere, and it left Rudy too exhilarated to sleep.

It was still raining. Rudy could hear the drops thud as they pelted the top of the deck and were blown against the side of the cabin by the wind. He was grateful that the constant tossing of the boat on the tumultuous waves hadn't left him feeling sick. He had seen it happen to experienced sailors before.

Rudy twisted onto his side with groan. He wasn't getting any sleep just lying there. All he could think about was Ike, that moment in the kitchen, and the night out on the deck. Before he could change his mind, Rudy slid out of the bunk and back into his still-damp gear. This was crazy, he told himself, but he got dressed anyway.

The very idea of leaving the safety of the cabin in the middle of the night and going outside on a strange boat in heavy weather fell under the height of foolishness. But Rudy was too restless to resist the urge that pulled at him. It forced him out of the cabin and over toward the stairs that would take him back up onto the deck.

Whatever madness had taken hold hadn't totally eradicated his good sense, and Rudy made sure his jackline and tether were hooked in place before he stepped from the cabinway and onto the slippery deck.

Unlike the night before, the sky was dark with clouds that hid the stars and any hint of the moon. The wind whipped past Rudy, tugging at his hair and sending the blood rushing to his cheeks. Spray stung his exposed skin, chilling pellets of water that ran down his neck, soaking into his clothing as the boat rocked on the rough waves.

He was nuts. Certifiably nuts. But there was something about being alone on the deck while the world threatened to turn itself upside down around him that was electrifying.

Except Rudy wasn't alone.

Through the wind-whipped rain Rudy glimpsed a light coming from the nav station, and he carefully walked toward the dubious cover of the vinyl bimini at the cockpit to where Ike stood in the shadows cast by the lantern. His dark eyes were closed, and his face lifted toward the storm much as Rudy's had been only seconds before.

The tempest that rained down from the skies was no less powerful than the storm of desire that ripped through Rudy and led him to throw a lifetime of caution out into the winds. Without pause, Rudy walked up in front of Ike, raised his hands, pushed Ike's water-soaked hair out of his face, and drew his head down so Rudy could press his trembling lips urgently against Ike's cold and wet mouth.

Dark, bottomless eyes opened and watched Rudy with no sign of surprise. Rudy let the wildness of the storm seep into his soul and take him over. Ike made no move to either assert control over the kiss or to back away. He simply stood there and gently kissed Rudy back with lips that gradually warmed to life. It was left up to Rudy to decide when to press their lips open and when their tongues should meet and twine together. The knowledge that Ike chose to leave it all in Rudy's hands was one hell of an addictive rush.

Rudy felt feverish. Ike tasted so good, Rudy couldn't get seem to get enough. Unlike his desire to get away when Justin kissed him, Rudy wanted to crawl inside Ike's skin.

He needed to be closer to the heat he could feel radiating from Ike's core.

There was only a thin layer of wood and fiberglass separating them from the other men, but Rudy didn't care as Ike's hard body pressed close to his once again. Here on the deck there wasn't a chance anyone would be able to hear the soft, liquid sound of their kisses over the raging wind. No possibility anyone would be able to see them in the thick blackness of the cloudy night.

This was what had kept Rudy from sleep and had driven him from his bunk in the storm-swept night. This strange sense memory, burned into his brain during those brief and intense moments in the galley. Made bold by Ike's lack of resistance, Rudy let his hands travel across Ike's body, searching and finding the warm skin beneath his water-soaked gear.

His fingers trembled as they slid beneath Ike's PFD and slowly slipped the buttons from Ike's flannel shirt. Rudy could feel the shaking in his hands increase as they stole under the layering tank to explore the thin skin over Ike's ribs and brush up against the tightening nipples.

Rudy was breathing heavily as he dropped one hand out from under the shirt and brushed it across the front of Ike's pants. He groaned when he felt the swelling beneath his palm and roughly pressed his hand closer.

"Relax." Ike's low whisper brushed across Rudy's ear. "We have plenty of time."

Rudy shivered. Maybe they did, but he couldn't stop now. If there was the slightest chance this was all Rudy would get, then he wanted to grab as much as he could before Ike called a stop. He wanted to absorb everything that was Ike right here and now while the elements surged around them and lent Rudy this amazing sense of freedom. There was nothing bad that could touch him in this moment.

Rudy dropped to his knees, the wet and hard deck bruising and cold against his skin. His own PFD shifted to push up under his chin as he pressed his face against the crotch of Ike's pants and inhaled deeply. Ike had worn these same pants for two days of hard work and the combined scent of sweat and male musk layered together into something so tantalizing that Rudy could only groan.

Ike finally responded to Rudy's urgency. His hands moved with deliberation to push his pants down, allowing Rudy access to lean in and brush his fingers across the clammy skin of Ike's hip, mapping the exposed skin that had, up to now, been denied him.

One large hand settled like an iron bar on the back of Rudy's neck, pushing the PFD down in the process, and Rudy welcomed the increase in mobility as he opened his mouth and took everything Ike was willing to give.

It had never been like this for Rudy. He didn't have to think about what he was doing, where he was touching or how his partner was reacting. His mouth knew what to do, and his hands knew where to touch as they stroked over the soft hair that covered Ike's muscular thighs.

He had to have Ike, just once, or he would regret it forever. The knowledge spurred Rudy on. He pulled his mouth back, letting his tongue slide and stroke over the swollen head of Ike's cock, savoring the taste that only made him crave more. It was ridiculously easy to relax his throat and swallow Ike down even farther.

Rudy was cold, but he didn't care. His body shivered in the wet and the wind that continued to blow the spray over the rail. It drenched them as they stood only half-concealed by the bimini, but his only response was to pull Ike closer to him, refusing to let even the wind come between them.

In contrast to the rest of him, the inside of Rudy's mouth was hot, warmed from the inside by the molten heat that was Ike's cock as it filled him. Rudy let his head tip back, raising his eyes so he could look up and stare at the image above him. The beauty of Ike's face, the tension that filled it as Ike struggled to hold back, made Rudy feel powerful and in control.

"I want to fuck you." Rudy didn't know how he managed to hear Ike over the rubbing sound of their PFDs and the whistling wind and rain, but he did. The words slid down into his ears and made him tingle. "Just like this." Ike kept talking; his eyes closed, his hips moving steadily back and forth while Rudy just kept sucking.

"God, you'd be so tight, and I'd just ease into you." Ike pushed forward slowly, driving himself that much deeper down Rudy's throat, aided by the pitch and heave of the boat. "We'd start slow like this, and then I'd slide a little deeper, move a little faster—"

Ike's stream of words trailed off into a rough groan. "Oh fuck." He gripped at Rudy's hair, and his motion stilled as his body shook with desire. "I'm gonna come."

He was giving Rudy a chance to pull back, but Rudy didn't have any interest in acknowledging it. He just sucked harder. He needed to take everything he could from this moment.

Rudy had to know how Ike tasted.

Ike swore, his hips jerking as he poured himself down Rudy's welcoming throat. Rudy's dick throbbed, interested in finding its own relief, when the whooping klaxon of an alarm became audible over the wind.

"Damn." Ike cursed again as he pulled himself back from Rudy, sparing only a moment to touch Rudy's cheek before he pulled up his pants and ducked back into the cockpit.

XI

“WHAT is it?” Rudy yelled. He was dazed, still savoring his new knowledge: the powerful memory of Ike’s face at the moment he came down Rudy’s throat.

“Proximity alarm. I set it to go off if anything got near us,” Ike barked. He wiped his hand over his head, pushing his hair back from his face as he studied the radar. The gesture highlighted the strength of his features, the angled cheekbones and the dark, tilted eyes. “Do you have your tether on?”

“Yeah.” Rudy shook his head to bring himself back to reality. “Of course.”

“Get on the floods.” Ike gestured toward the bow.

Rudy pulled his hood up over his face and slid over the wet deck to the controls for the huge floodlights as the boat rose and fell heavily in the choppy water. He flipped the switches and directed the high beams toward the water, scanning the darkness that surrounded them as the door to the cabinway opened and the rest of the guys hastily spilled out of the cabin.

Just like in everything else the crew of Devlin’s Due behaved as a trained unit in an unpredictable situation. Micah joined Ike under the bimini at the cockpit, and Dez

slithered over to Rudy at the floods while Tyson and Luther headed to raise the anchors.

“What have we got?” Dez yelled into Rudy’s ear.

“Nothing yet,” Rudy grunted as the boat pitched sharply beneath their feet and the wet metal handles from the flood lights slipped in his grip. His knuckles knocked against the cold steel, and Rudy felt the sting as his skin broke and began to bleed.

“Son of a bitch.” Dez pounded on Rudy’s shoulder. “Christ, do you see that?”

Rudy stared through the sheeting rain, his eyes straining until he saw another boat careening through the darkness and the pounding waves as plumes of spray shot off their bow. “What are they doing?” he questioned. “Their sails are still up; they’re going too fast for this weather.”

“Unprepared and inexperienced,” Dez muttered grimly. “It happens all the time.”

“Look at that!” Rudy’s biceps bulged as he muscled the heavy light around, pointing the beam so they could see the man with one arm wrapped tightly around the shrouds. He strained to control the spinnaker sheet as the water roiled and ripped past his boat. “Where’s the rest of his crew?”

“There, there they are.” Dez pointed, and Rudy could now see the helmsman and other crewmembers as they struggled to keep the boat from going over onto its side.

Ike and Micah were doing their best to command Devlin’s Due, and Rudy didn’t have to hear them to know

that one of them would be on the radio. They would need the help of the Coast Guard for this mess.

Even at this distance the brilliant lights flooded the deck of the other boat, and Rudy could see the fear on the face of the man in the shrouds. “Trim! Trim! Trim!” Rudy didn’t know if he actually heard the man scream out the words or if he just knew what he would yell as the man fought for more tension on the sheet and worked to keep the large spinnaker under control.

“The winds are too high to get that down.” Rudy didn’t know if he was talking to himself or to Dez as the drama played out before him. He watched in horror as the boat rammed straight into the backside of an amazingly large wave, the bow burying under the water with enough weight to abruptly bring the boat to a near stop.

“Blow the sheet! Blow the sheet!” Rudy could hear Tyson yelling as if the crew of the other boat could hear him. Once the pressure in huge spinnaker no longer drove the other craft forward, the boat was pushed over toward the water, nearly capsizing as the sheet finally released.

Rudy watched the men on the boat cling to whatever was nearest and prayed everyone wore their tether as the deck went near vertical. The spinnaker cracked and popped uncontrollably in the fearsome power of the wind. It sounded like gunshots, the sharp crack of the fabric audible even over the pounding rain.

“They have to get those sails down,” Dez yelled again, and while Rudy agreed, he didn’t know how they were going to manage in the high winds. There were a lot of different

takedown procedures, and hopefully the crew had practiced as hard and often as the crew of Devlin's Due. But it was different during a real emergency with the wind blasting at you and the deck shifting beneath your feet when you least expected it.

Rudy was once again grateful for Ike's calm experience that had turned the difficulty of their day into just another routine drill practice. He watched in shock as the alternative unfolded before him.

"Christ, their rigging is fouled." Dez's fingers dug into Rudy's shoulder, and Rudy tried to hold the light as steady as he could, difficult under the circumstances. He hoped it would help the crew aboard the embattled boat as they fought to slow it down and bring it back under control.

"Oh hell, no!" Dez's running commentary seemed unnecessary, but Rudy had to agree with the sentiment. The crewman in the shrouds had decided to try and climb the mast, most likely in an effort to do something with the rigging. It would be an impossible task in this wind.

The lake finally took pity on the beleaguered boat, the intensity of the howling winds lifting for just a few seconds. Rudy could hear Micah behind him on the radio in the unexpected lull, spitting out details as fast as he could.

The sudden lessening of wind gave the crewman incentive to try and quickly scramble up the mast. Rudy watched, stunned, as the fierce wind picked back up just as quickly as it had died down.

The tremendous crack as the mast itself flexed and bent was heard even across the distance. One of the struts snapped under the pressure exerted by the man's weight and the tangled rigging, and the mast fell toward the water, knocking the man from his precarious perch.

Later Rudy swore he would never forget the image of that white hand as it reached up and out in the darkness, desperate in its attempt to grasp anything solid in the empty air as the man fell from the mast and went over the side into the churning lake water below.

"Man overboard!" Dez's voice became a stentorian bellow, and Rudy immediately assumed the role of spotter. Rudy pointed the flood toward the dark water to keep the crewman in sight. The man's harness kept him afloat, but the waves battered and tried to bury him beneath their churning. Those left aboard the damaged vessel were tossed about.

Rudy's mind immediately started ticking down the proper procedures for a recovery. He knew at Dez's first shout Ike would have hit the man overboard button on the GPS to mark the initial position, and the five short blasts on the Devlin's warning horn proved him right.

Rudy grunted as a flotation ring hit him on the side of his head. Dez worked to toss the seat cushions and multiple life rings stored on the deck into the water as well as prepping the life sling. Rudy didn't think much of Dez's aim, but there wasn't time to even rub at his stinging cheek.

Marking the position to help Rudy keep his eye on the downed man, the flotation devices were as much to litter

the water as they were for anything else. He kept the light trained on the struggling figure as Devlin's Due seemed to shudder beneath his feet.

Ike was already steering Devlin's Due into the correct position to attempt the recovery. Micah, Tyson, and Luther were following Ike's directions on the boat handling. It was a difficult maneuver—Rudy knew that there was a tremendous amount of skill required in the procedure—but he was secure in Ike's ability.

There was no doubt Ike was head and shoulders above any sailor Rudy had ever known, and that gave Rudy the confidence he and Dez needed to work on the recovery itself. Rudy thought he should have been more afraid, but there was simply too much to be done to let the fear take hold.

The next few minutes passed Rudy by in a blur as anything that could be considered textbook about the rescue attempt went right out the window. The Devlin's Due pitched sharply in the water, and plumes of spray shot over the side, drenching Rudy where he stood. The life sling tangled, twisted about by the wind and rain as Dez struggled to get it ready. It was obvious the man in the water was injured. Rudy lashed the handles of the floodlights to the post to hold it in position and slowly slipped and slithered over to help Dez. He had almost made it when another wave came over the rail and knocked his feet out from under him.

Rudy slid across the deck, his hands grabbing and slipping as he traveled with the wash of wave toward the rail. The water felt like a living thing, pulling and urging him toward its churning black surface.

He grunted and strained for a handhold and could only gasp and choke as he spit out what felt like gallons of water until he finally managed to hang on long enough for the rush of the water to let him go. It swirled past him toward the rail and reluctantly disappeared over the side of the boat and back down into the depths.

“You okay?” Dez yelled when Rudy struggled to his feet beside him.

“Yeah!” Rudy yelled back, determined now to get the upper hand over the elements. “Let’s get this bitch done.”

XII

THE Corkboard Bar was packed. Thick blue smoke rose lazily up toward the ceiling, floating on the moving currents of air every time the front door opened and shut. The crowd was undoubtedly over capacity. But with the majority of the local law enforcement dancing on stage as they sang a karaoke version of “My Heart Will Go On,” Rudy doubted anyone would make a fuss over the local ordinances.

Rudy sat in the back of the bar at the same table where he had first met the crew of Devlin’s Due. He stared at the beer on the table in front of him. He hadn’t bought one since the evening started. He didn’t have to.

The rescue by the men of Devlin’s Due and the Coast Guard had been big news in the small port town. Especially as both the mayor’s son and the local police chief’s son had been aboard. Everyone considered them lucky to have made it through the storm without injury.

The crewmember who had fallen into the water was doing well. Hypothermia had set in, and his arm had been broken, but other than some additional cuts and bruises his prognosis looked good.

The Coast Guard’s cutter arrived just as Rudy and Dez had managed to lift the downed man from the water. By the time they had checked his airways and wrapped him in

blankets the Coasties were already moving him off the Devlin and onto the cutter with the rest of the rescued crew.

The once proud and beautiful sailboat was now at the bottom of the big lake, and from what Rudy had heard, the Mayor refused to buy his son another one until he took some basic courses in seamanship.

Ike and Micah had been afraid that Devlin's Due had sustained some minor damage during the recovery, but their fears proved groundless. She was in prime condition for the upcoming race.

The crew of Devlin's Due was still riding high on a wave of exhilaration and admiration, yet Rudy couldn't seem to manage to share in the celebration. He knew he should be happy; he had faced one of the toughest trials a man could face on the water; he had proved himself once and for all.

But Rudy hadn't been able to see Ike alone since that breathtaking moment on the deck. He didn't know if he would be sailing on the Devlin for the upcoming race, and all this free beer made him a sad and soggy drunk.

Hell, he still didn't have a place to sleep.

Rudy hadn't a chance to draw a breath since the rescue, things happened so fast. They had followed the Coast Guard cutter through the remnants of the storm and into safe harbor. There each of them had been interviewed and re-interviewed until Rudy thought he was going to pass out from the repetition.

At least the Coasties had given him a place to shower and some clean sweats to put on, even if they were too big.

Rudy pulled at the gaping waistband once again. Everything Rudy had brought had been soaked when a couple of the seals on the Devlin had failed, letting water into the cabin area.

“Rudy, my man.” Dez came back to the table and slapped Rudy on the shoulder. “Cheer up. I just won thirty bucks off Luther at pool. You going to join me on the next game? We can tag team him and Micah.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.” Rudy tried to muster a smile, but not even the broken chorus from the stage seemed able to break through his sullen mood. He wondered what would happen if he just came out and asked the guys if he was going to make the race with them, but Rudy was afraid of how he’d react if the answer was negative.

The round of pool over, the rest of the guys strolled lazily back to the table, stopping to greet and receive the cheerful congratulations from the other patrons. Everyone save one member.

Rudy tried not to say anything, but he couldn’t help himself. “Where’s Ike?” he questioned. Maybe with Ike there, Rudy would find the balls to ask about his status.

The group at the table looked at each other, but it was Micah that answered. “He needed to call the old man, let him know what happened before the news hit the wires. Didn’t want him to worry.”

“Nice of him,” Rudy muttered. He wondered what it would be like to have Ike worried about him.

Micah gave him an odd look and then grinned at their waitress as she brought over another round of beers. Unlike the old gal tending bar, Rudy had noticed last time the skin exposed by her gaping tank top was smooth and firm.

“Compliments of the guys from the White Tiger.” She grinned back and set the bottles down on the table.

“I’ll be right back.” Rudy stood abruptly and pushed through the crowd to the head.

There was less smoke in the men’s room, but the floor was sticky and the small space smelled of stale beer. Taking a piss did nothing to clear his mood; neither did splashing cold water on his face at the sink. Rudy squinted up at the cracked mirror. He didn’t even look the same as he did three days ago. Something within him had changed on a fundamental level.

Be that as it may, everything else in his life still looked the same. Rudy dried his hands and left the bathroom. It looked like he was just going to have to go back to Grand Rapids and take his lumps. If that was the case, then he was going to take his leave from the other guys like a man. Rudy tried not to think about never seeing Ike again.

He was grateful for his time on Devlin’s Due. He had learned a lot, both about sailing and about himself, and Rudy was going to give the other guys the respectful goodbye they deserved without making a scene. So he planned to go back to the table, grab his duffle, and head on out on a good note.

He wanted them to think well of him, even if he apparently didn't meet their standards for crew. Rudy didn't know what they were going to do for a sixth man for the race, but they wouldn't have any trouble filling the position. Especially with the publicity from the rescue.

The bar seemed even more crowded, and Rudy fought through the press of bodies only to stop in his tracks when a familiar and unwelcome face blocked his path.

"Hey Rudy." The last thing Rudy wanted to see was Richard's familiar sneer. Rudy's internal filters were down, but he had enough common sense to turn away from trouble.

"Don't you walk away from me, you little shit." Richard grabbed at Rudy's arm.

"Don't you get it, Richard?" Rudy said as he shook Richard's hand off his arm. He welcomed the rush of anger, the outlet for his unsettled emotions. "I don't have to listen to you anymore."

"Well, maybe you'll listen to a few of my friends, then." Richard made a gesture with his hand. Rudy watched as two men he didn't recognize walked over to stand behind the short and stocky blond.

"Give it a rest, why don't you?" Tension gathered in Rudy's neck. These guys were big. Rudy decided discretion would be the better choice. He trusted that Dez would take his gear back to the boat if he didn't return to the table, and he could pick it up later from the Devlin's slip. Rudy turned

to leave only to find his escape blocked by two more of Richard's so-called friends.

"See, I talked with some guys on some of the other boats. They aren't happy with your kind coming here and causing problems." Richard's voice carried through the bar, and the crowd around them began to quiet.

Rudy shook his head in disgust. "Christ, Richard. The only one causing any problem is you. You wanted me off the boat; I'm off the boat. You got what you wanted, now leave me alone."

Richard wouldn't get out of Rudy's face. He leaned closer, and Rudy wanted to gag at the aroma of alcohol heavy on Richard's breath. "You need to pay for the way you made fools out of us. A punk like you has no business—"

Enough was enough. Rudy was drunk, he was sore and tired, and he had nothing left to lose as he interrupted Richard in a voice that was just as loud.

"A man like me? Why don't you say it, Richard? Let's tell everyone. Just say the words. I'm gay, and you sailed with a gay man for four years. Are you that afraid of what anyone might think?"

Richard's face flushed a deep red, and the crowd backed away, leaving them in a circle. Rudy's words hung like the smoke in the suddenly quiet bar; even the group singing karaoke stopped to see what was about to happen.

"Oh, fuck it." Rudy doubled up his fist and swung. He had a few seconds of bitter satisfaction at the crunch of

Richard's nose under his fist, and then the crowd erupted around him.

XIII

The grass felt soft, if wet beneath Rudy's back. He could smell the earth, the unmistakable odor of dirt and worms that had been drawn to the surface by the heavy rain. The music from The Corkboard, tinny at this distance but still audible, rang in his ears.

He looked up toward the sky. No moon yet, just dark clouds that clung close to the earth. They were the only reminders of the storm that had rained down with such fury and then passed as if it had never been.

Rudy raised his hand and flexed it carefully, turning it this way and that to view his bloody knuckles before gingerly touching his jaw. He dropped his hand to his ribs and repeated the gesture. It was probably a good thing he had drunk as much as he had. If he hurt this bad right now, he had a real bad feeling about how things were going to feel tomorrow morning.

"Damn, that was fun." Micah reached out from his patch of grass and gave Rudy's shoulder a rough punch. "Any more friends of yours we can hang out with before we sober up?" The big blond grinned recklessly at Rudy, his ancient warrior blood calling for more.

Rudy decided he should try to sit up. He twisted and then moaned at the result before he pressed himself upright.

He stared at the crew of Devlin's Due lying on the grass beside him, then over at the bar they had been tossed out of. "What the hell just happened?"

"Bar fight," Dez contributed happily from his own place on the grass as he wiped the smear of blood from his nose onto the earth beside him. "A good one too."

"Yeah," Luther grunted as he rolled over onto his side and pushed himself up on his knees. "Ike'll be pissed he missed it. Hey, Tyson. You okay?"

Tyson just groaned and rolled over onto his stomach to vomit. Luther crawled over toward him, his knees leaving wet smears on the grass in his wake. "Sucker punch," Luther commented to Rudy as he went past him, and Rudy solemnly nodded his understanding.

"Somebody want to explain to me why we didn't get arrested this time?" Micah shook his head and winced at the movement. "Ow. Better yet, somebody remind me not to do that again."

"They were all in a hurry to get back on stage," Tyson mumbled into the ground beneath his face. "Next song up was 'I Got You, Babe'."

"Hell." Rudy snorted as he wrapped his arm around his side to hold himself still. "Don't make me laugh."

"How are your ribs?" Dez asked cheerfully, if somewhat nasally. He had his fingers pinched over the bridge of his nose in an attempt to stop the bleeding, but still had blood and grass streaked over his forehead and hands. The color

gleamed wetly, a dark black in the streetlights and his white teeth gleamed through the gory mask.

“Sore,” Rudy admitted. Dez’s macabre appearance made him slightly queasy in a way the waves never did, but he knew it wouldn’t be smart to say anything. “I didn’t think Richard had it in him.”

“Folks can surprise you like that.” Dez let go of his nose and tried to wipe his hands clean on the grass. He held them upright with a grimace and then shrugged and wiped them on the front of his shirt. “Still, you gave him plenty to remember you by.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Rudy felt a warm glow settle over him as he remembered how Richard had looked on the floor of the bar. That memory was going to stay with him for a long time. “I can’t believe you guys jumped into that mess.”

“I resent that.” Micah struggled upright, his palms slipping on the slick ground. “I don’t know what you’re used to, but the crew of Devlin’s Due sticks together.”

“But I’m not crew.” Rudy bit down on his tongue and then winced when that hurt as well. Hell, he hadn’t meant to say that.

“Of course you are,” Tyson rumbled from his prone position. “Did that punk scramble your brains?”

“But—I mean—” Rudy stammered as he tried to force the words out. “You guys never said anything.” He felt like an idiot.

“Just figured Ike told you.” Dez wiggled his eyebrows. “You know, pillow talk?”

Rudy flushed. He knew his cheeks were bright scarlet. Lucky for him it was too dark for any of the guys to see. They knew.

“Oh man, don’t tell me he’s doing the Neanderthal thing.” Micah fell back against the soggy grass with an exaggerated groan. “You’ll have to work on him.”

“You guys don’t mind?” Rudy looked around at the men who had stood by his side in the bar. No one had ever done anything like that for him before.

Luther shrugged. “We’re all pretty flexible when it comes to our love lives. As long as you and Ike are happy, why should we care?”

Rudy blinked. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but not this total disregard. Then his dazed brain fixated on Luther’s comment. “So, you guys think I make Ike happy?” Could that be right? They had only known each other a few, short days. Sure, Rudy felt like something was between them, but these guys acted like it was all a given.

“Sorry, Rudy, but we are so not going there. That’s for you and Ike to figure out.” Ignoring Rudy’s protests, Dez squelched over to Micah and ran his hands over his friend’s torso. “Looks like you took a couple of pretty good hits.”

“Ribs are fine,” Micah replied absently, his eyes closed as Dez prodded at his temples. “But that chair to the head really hurt.”

“Aww, you big baby.” Dez cuffed Micah on the back of the head. “You’ve had worse.”

“Is it going to be a problem for you guys when people find out I’m gay and, you know, on the Devlin?” Rudy couldn’t help but ask the last question that was bothering him.

“Kid, I don’t quite know how to tell you this, but after that scene in the bar, everyone in town knows you’re gay.” Tyson and Luther both started laughing, their levity momentarily drowning out the sounds from the bar. “Trust me, no surprises left there.”

Before Rudy could respond a pair of white, tennis-shoed feet paused on the sidewalk in front of him. He craned his neck upright for a better look and swallowed. Yep, it was definitely a good thing he was drunk.

“Well, fuck.” His evening was definitely going from bad to worse. “Hey, Justin.” Rudy managed to say brightly. The glob of blood he spit out afterward ruined the effect only slightly. “How’s it hanging?”

“I don’t believe this, Rudy.” Justin shook his head when Micah and the rest of the crew started chuckling at Rudy’s greeting. Rudy stared up at Justin; he couldn’t help but compare his old crush with Ike. What a child he had been. Justin didn’t even come close.

“What the hell are you up to now?” Justin took in the rest of the crew of Devlin’s Due with a sweeping glance. “Do I even want to know what kind of trash you’re spending time with?”

Rudy's knew his mouth gaped open, but honestly, where did Justin come off, spouting this kind of garbage? Four years spent in and out of each other's pockets, and only now did Rudy realize how little he knew Justin. The guys stirred beside him, various rumblings letting Rudy know that Justin's comment wasn't appreciated.

"You're never going to find another boat to take you on if you act like this." Justin managed to look both pleased and dismayed as he shook his head at Rudy again. "I thought you were heading back to Grand Rapids. Does this mean you've changed your mind about that offer I made you?"

"Rudy doesn't need another boat. He already has one. And trust me; he's not interested in *anything* you're offering."

His head jerked over to the calm voice that cut through the night, and Rudy couldn't help the welcoming smile that spread across his face. Ike Ujarka stood there; arms folded across his broad chest as he challenged Justin and then looked at his crew sprawled out on the lawn.

"You guys couldn't wait for me?" he asked, easily dismissing Justin as not worth his time. "Besides, what part of 'race first, fight later' didn't you understand?"

"You know how it is, Ike," Luther rumbled a response from his reclined position. "So many assholes, so little time."

Rudy couldn't help the snicker that escaped him, and Dez jammed an elbow into his ribs. "Hey, man. That hurt!" Rudy objected.

"You might want to reconsider who you have on your crew." Justin, it seemed wasn't done spreading poison.

“There’s a few things I could tell you about Rudy that would change your mind.”

“We know everything we need to know about Rudy,” Micah replied sharply. “Who the hell are you anyway?”

“Nobody,” Rudy interjected from his seat on the grass. It felt good to know he spoke the truth. “He’s nobody.”

“Fine,” Justin said. Rudy was stunned at how much he resembled Richard at that moment. “I’m sure you guys are just some two-bit operation anyway. Rudy should fit right in with a bunch of losers like you.”

“Son, your mouth is writing checks you can’t afford to cash.” Tyson rolled over and looked up at Justin. “Ike, you going to put up with that?”

“He’s not worth the effort. And he’s definitely not the one I want to spend my evening with.” Ike walked over and reached his hand out to Rudy. “You about done playing around here?”

Rudy placed his hand in Ike’s and smiled again as Ike effortlessly lifted him to his feet and held him close. He had missed the feeling of Ike’s muscular body next to his. The only other place he had ever felt so at home was out on the lake. “You got somewhere better to be?” This time Rudy couldn’t blame his dizzy and disoriented feeling on the booze.

“I could have an icepack with your name on it.” Ike nodded at him, a knowing twist to his lips, dark eyes smiling at Rudy in a way that made him feel warm all over.

“Look out, Rudy!” Dez hooted, still on his knees. “It’s the old icepack ploy.” Micah lunged at him, grabbing him in a headlock and wrestling him down to the grass while the other guys just laughed even harder.

“You’re all crazy.” Rudy was surprised to realize he had forgotten about Justin. He stood there, his expression an odd mix of dismay and envy as he watched Rudy and Ike banter back and forth.

“Probably,” Ike acknowledged. “But that’s half the fun.” He gave Justin a final, measuring glance. “Maybe someday you’ll grow up and learn that yourself.”

Ike turned his back to Justin and gestured to his crew. “Come on, you guys. We still have a race to run.”

Rudy couldn’t help but feel a momentary sadness at the lost look on Justin’s face. “Goodbye, Justin,” he said softly as the crew of Devlin’s Due groaned and staggered to their feet.

“See you in our wake, Rudy,” Justin replied harshly before he walked to the bar entrance.

“Whoo.” Micah snorted. “What a threat.” He and Dez nudged each other and laughed. “Baby face never learned how to deal with rejection, huh?”

Rudy looked into Ike’s dark eyes and felt the thrill of uncertainty over what lay ahead. They had plenty to discuss, Rudy had no doubts on that score. But there was also plenty to discover as well. The winds of life might have blown Rudy off course, but fair winds had carried him to safe harbor. A sailor couldn’t ask for more than that.

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