

Chapter Three, Gary Myron

Miss Behavin' II drifted with the current off Seal Cove, nudged shoreward with each swell, a half mile offshore in that thin band between the inner and outer reefs, just beyond the kelp beds, in 75 feet of water.

Gary Myron, the captain, gave the idling throttle a little nudge to compensate for the current. This was his first season on his own boat after spending a decade as a deckhand. Only twenty feet from stem to stern, Miss Behavin' II was small for a crab boat, but he still felt a certain pride that comes with ownership.

Jessie Barber, his swarthy deckhand, snagged a crab buoy with a boat hook. Then he attached the line to an electric winch and began winding in the line. He was looking over the side when the winch began to labor, then screech. "God damn it," Barber swore. He hit the red kill switch. "Line fouled the winch again."

"Wouldn't happen if you kept your eyes on the spool," Myron said. He spoke in a high-pitched nasal twang that precluded a career in politics or the law.

"I did, it just jammed."

"You'll have to haul it up by hand then. I'll pull her forward and take some tension off the line. At least it's not deep."

Myron gave the throttle a little more thrust.

"Hold it! There, that's good," Barber yelled pulling up the blue line hand over hand. "It's awful light."

Gary Myron cut the engine.

When the stainless steel and wire trap, or pot, was hauled over the side he eyed the meager catch with concern. Eight crabs clung to the wire. He opened the trap and began sorting. The females and undersized males were thrown over the side. Barber put the rest into a water-filled storage locker along the port gunwale. "Four friggin' keepers," Myron said. "This isn't working. We'll barely make expenses at this rate. We'll have to go deeper." He knew Dungeness crab preferred a sandy bottom where the tidal current wasn't too strong, which meant out past the outer reefs at two to six miles offshore where the competition was fierce.

"How deep?"

"150, maybe 200 feet."

To account for tides and swells, a pot in 150 feet of water needed a line of 190 feet. He had 100 pots spread between Pedro Point and the southern edge of Half Moon Bay. He had twenty-five off of Miramar Beach where the take was a little better on most days, but for the past week the gray whales had been moving through the area. They passed in groups of three, the mother, her calf, and an aunt, hugging the coast on their northward migration, and he was obligated to keep his distance, which made tending the pots problematic. So those pots would have to be moved as well. If he took all of them out to deeper water, he'd need almost 20,000 feet of line. He calculated the cost in his head. "It won't be cheap, and it'll take some time, but I don't see an alternative."

“How much time?”

Myron shrugged, pushed the bill of his cap up and spat a wad of bubblegum into the water. “Time is money. We’ll have to do it in stages.” It was a simple fact that he could barely stack sixteen pots on the deck of Miss Behavin’ II, so it would take several roundtrips to gather all the pots. Taking them back out would take longer, as each 1,200-foot bale of crab line took up as much room as a pot. “I don’t know. We might get it done in three days. Maybe it would be best to do half and see how it goes.” He’d figured his small boat would have a competitive advantage being willing to crab in shallower water than the big, deeper draft boats cared to go, and he’d done well enough the first couple months of the season. But the crab count was dwindling. Now he’d have to compete with the big boys.

Barber wiped a sleeve across his forehead. “I suppose this is a bad time to ask for an advance.”

Myron rolled his eyes and let out a small, mirthless laugh. “No time is a good time.”

“Because the thing is, you know Bill Fix? He’s leaving for Oregon, so there’s a spot opening up on the Morpheus.”

The Morpheus, Myron pointed out, paid deckhands only eight percent, while he was paying fifteen.

“Yeah,” Barber acknowledged, “but eight percent of a lot, is a lot more than fifteen percent of nothing.”

“So you’re jumping ship?”

“I didn’t say that. There are other guys want the spot. I just don’t want to turn down any opportunities.” Barber shrugged without apology. “I need some cash to pay rent.”

“I thought you were living with your parents.”

“I am, but Pop’s asking for rent now.”

Gary Myron mulled this over. “Forgive me if I’m not sympathetic.” He’d been living in the cramped quarters aboard Miss Behavin’ II for three months. “Now let’s get as many of these pots pulled up as we can in an hour. Tomorrow morning we’ll pick up the rest here and check the pots off Miramar. Then I’ll go scrounge for more line.”

Myron opened a water bottle and gulped a quarter of it. Then they set to work. It took twelve minutes to free the fouled line. It took another hour to pull up nine more pots, yielding just 53 keepers. Then, the deck piled high with empty crab pots, they sped southwestward through a jarring chop that slapped the bottom of the boat like a car driving down a washboard road, with the occasional pothole thrown in for extra measure.

Out to sea he could see the tiny profiles of bigger boats out in the deep water where the crabs were plentiful. He longed for a boat that would make the whole process more efficient, more fun. He’d worked on such boats, boats like Morpheus that were multi-purpose vessels with wing-like poles that served as stabilizers, and

for trolling when the crab season was over and the salmon season began. A man could make a good living with such a boat.

Chapter Nine, Best Intentions

Highway One bends its two lanes around the point on which the town of Seal Cove is built, effectively dividing Seal Cove heights from the flats. The houses spill down the hill and jump the highway and spread out along the flat for a quarter of mile to the coastal bluffs, where they run out of continent and sit gazing westward at the distant and unbroken horizon. Every house is different, but all are built of wood to withstand earthquakes, and many are two stories high, with decks situated on the ocean side to take advantage of the view.

Now the streets on the flats aren't technically flat. They run shallowly downhill toward the Marine Reserve parking lot and the coastal bluffs. But Emily Abbott still strained to push her 140-pound mother in a 40-pound wheelchair in the uphill direction, which she did with cheer if not enthusiasm on sunny afternoons. Mary Abbott liked a little fresh air and looked forward to getting out of the confines of the house whenever Emily had the time to push her. They were at the end of a block of rising ground and Emily was puffing when they passed a portable elliptical trainer with a FREE sign on it.

Now, those whose jobs take them away from the coast to sit behind desks on the other side of the hill have very little time to enjoy outdoor activities or the

benefits of natural exercise, so they often succumb to the allure of gym memberships and exercise equipment. More often than not their good intentions go for naught. The memberships lapse and the equipment gathers dust in junk rooms and garages until their owners face reality and drag them to the curb in hopes of passing their good intentions on to others. The elliptical had originally been purchased by Chris Cordner who, after watching a late-night infomercial promising renewed youth and vigor, plunked down the first of three easy installments. He never actually took the thing out of the box, and three years later left it at the curb, where it was picked up by an enthusiastic Peggy Hazenstein, who in turn pawned it off on the unsuspecting Roberta Bergerson, who left it for the curious Randy Rasmussen (who used it every day for a week before retiring it to the garage for two years); followed by Louise Lewandowski, in front of whose house it now stood as good as new, except for a thin layer of dust on its black surface. Mary took note as they passed and suggested her daughter could use such a contraption. "It would be good for you to get some exercise," she commented helpfully. "You spend too much time shut up in the house." Emily, whose brow glistened with drops of sweat from pushing the wheelchair said nothing, but in her darker thoughts she imagined stepping away from the chair and watching it roll back down the street picking up speed as her mother's expression formed a silent scream to rival Munch's. It was only a passing thought that she immediately regretted, and Mary was, as has been amply illustrated, entirely and blissfully

oblivious.

The upper story of the Abbotts' house comprised a small kitchen, a living/dining area, a bedroom, and a study. Emily had the run of the place, but she spent most of her time in the study. It was a space of carefree, purposeful clutter. On the windowsill and desk and on top of the bookcases were shells and sand dollars, and inexpensive but beautiful glass paperweights, a geode, an agate obelisk and a piece of petrified wood that had belonged to her grandfather. Books and journals filled the shelves and lay stacked on the floor and the filing cabinets and on the edge of the desk. Emily reveled in the disorder. That her mother would have been appalled only made it that much sweeter.

Emily was a slow but avid reader and a closet novelist. Having no romance or mystery in her real life, she indulged a particular passion for romance and mystery novels. The heroine of one series so caught her imagination that she couldn't wait for the next installment. In anticipation, she wrote a fan fiction knockoff and posted it online for free. It was only a short story and took a different storyline than intended by the series' author, but Emily received so much encouragement from other fans that she wrote a full-length sequel. With the third she struck out on her own, with original characters and storylines cobbled together from all the romances she'd yet read. Six years and seven self-published ebooks later, she was secretly pleased with her progress. She wrote romances under the pseudonym Margaret Pennypacker, and she wrote mysteries under the pseudonym Robert

Cole, because she found it entertaining to masquerade as a man. Both pseudonymous “authors” had developed a small following. Each had a website and a blog.

After lunch Mary Abbott took a nap while Emily retreated upstairs and took up the story of young Derek Law and his Grampa Ed where she’d left off that morning.

She wasn’t sure where the story would lead, and she was excited to see how it unfolded. Grampa Ed was saying:

“They were almost through making the exchange when the fog suddenly pulled back, leaving them in the open like sitting ducks, with a Coast Guard cutter approaching half a mile to the north, and a revenuer coming around Pillar Point a mile to the south. There was only one thing to do, and that was run, but they couldn’t just gun the engine and make for the open ocean. The skiff was heavy now and low in the water with the weight of the booze. Any sudden movement by the Lady Gay could swamp the smaller boat. They had to wait for the skiff to push off and the men to haul on their oars, and meanwhile the Coastguard and the Revenuers were closing the gap like a crab pinching a minnow, ready to nab both Lady Gay and the skiff. As soon as the skiff was safely away, Grampa Frank backed the Lady Gay around and gave her the gas, but slow at first, trying to lure the Coast Guard away from the skiff, and sure enough they turned toward the Lady Gay. Of course, they couldn’t follow the skiff into shore because the skiff had a shallower draft even with the weight of the booze, and the Coast Guard would have to risk running aground on the reef. So instead they set off in pursuit of Lady Gay, and my Grampa Frank waited until the Coast Guard lays a shot across the bow before turning it on. Man, that Lady Gay could go! She took off like a bat outa hell headed straight into the fog bank, and that was the last the Coastguard ever saw of her. That was the closest he ever came to getting caught.

“Grampa Ed leaned over the bed to kiss his grandson’s forehead. He could tell by the steady breath that Derek was already asleep.”

Emily shut her laptop and for a moment she was caught between two worlds.

The dark bedroom, the grandfather and the grandson slowly faded away and she was suddenly looking out on a bright blue ocean and gulls riding the air currents above the cliff's edge. She opened the French door to step out onto the deck and clear her head. Then she heard her mother call.

"Emily? Emily? Did you buy ice cream? I don't see any ice cream!"

Chapter Twenty-two, It's About Time

That season the coastside seemed a vortex of misfortune. The portents of doom began with the confluence of storms and monster tides that pummeled the coast throughout the winter, biting off great chunks of the coastal bluffs like a ravenous shark. In January Seahorse Ranch experienced two catastrophes. The ranch provides escorted trail rides down to the beach and back. The horses waiting for hire are saddled and tied up in a line in the shade of a corrugated iron canopy. A rare thunderstorm sweeping in from the south brought with it a bolt of lightning that struck the canopy, electrocuting six horses. Not long after, a usually docile trail horse threw its rider and ran onto the coastal highway, where it was struck by a southbound car, killing both horse and driver. Those who believe bad things happen in threes were at a loss to explain the continuing calamities that followed. At the neighborhood badminton court on Stetson Street Warren Bateman stepped in a gopher hole and broke his ankle. A falling branch obliterated Maddie Hedge's playhouse. Christine Blaylock found an aborted gray whale fetus on Montara

Beach. A mountain lion carried off the Dewars' hound. And then came the Birminghams' horrific accident. Everyone was waiting for the next shoe to drop. The whole coast seemed to cower under a cloud.

A couple of weeks after the Birminghams' accident Emily was upstairs when she heard her mother calling from the bottom of the stairs, "You've got a FedEx delivery!"

Emily went down the stairs, trying to remember if she'd ordered anything online.

"It's heavy," Mary Abbott said, eager with anticipation. "Is it my birthday present?"

"No, Mom, I haven't ordered anything yet."

"What is it then?"

Emily took it from her mother's lap. It was only about five pounds. She looked at the return address: Bergan and Olson. "I don't know, let's see." She found a knife in the kitchen and slit open the cardboard FedEx box. Inside was a brown plastic box with a lid that was taped shut. She cut the tape and lifted the lid, and immediately snapped it shut.

"What?" Mary asked.

"Never mind."

"What is it? Tell me, what have you got in there?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"This is my house," Mary Abbott snapped. "Everything concerns me. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Then why won't you tell me? What are you hiding? What are you ashamed of?"

Emily found her mother's meddling persistence annoying, and decided to tell her.

"It's Daisy."

"Daisy?"

"Birmingham."

Mary Abbott crossed her hands over her chest looking apoplectic. "Oh, lord! What are they doing sending her here? How dreadful."

"It's just ashes, Mom."

"I don't even want to think about it. Take her away! Why ever did they send her to *you*?"

"Sorry, I forgot. Doug called last week and asked if I'd hold the ashes until his dad comes home from the hospital."

"I don't want them here. It's bad luck."

"It's not bad luck," Emily chided. "Don't be so superstitious."

"I don't like it," her mother said, because she always had to have the last word.

Which, ironically, is exactly what they were — her last words. The next time

Emily came downstairs she found her mother seated in her wheelchair in front of the television tuned to a soap opera. Emily thought she was sleeping and went about making them both chicken sandwiches for lunch. When she discovered the truth, she lost her appetite.