

THE CATCH

A Love Story

BY

Martha Volkov

Dutch Harbor, Alaska

The Bering Sea

Bristol Bay, Alaska

321LUMINA

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First Edition, 2026

Published by 321Lumina · 321lumina.com

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CHAPTER

1

October. Dutch Harbor. I'm standing on the wharf when the Northern Pursuit comes in from the Bering.

The smell hits first — brine and kelp and diesel and the ferrous tang of wet steel and the coffee in my thermos cup and the fish smell that is everywhere here, that gets into everything, that I stopped noticing three years ago and now notice again because I am thirty-four years old and I am yearning to raise a family. The season is ending soon and I am standing alone on this dock.

The vessel moors. Lines go fast and clean. The crew moves with the quiet efficiency of people who have been doing this together long enough to not need words.

Someone comes up beside me with a clipboard.

Oh.

Mid thirties. Lean and steady, the kind of steady that comes from managing chaos long enough that chaos stops being surprising. Dark hair. Eyes that are reading the vessel, the lines, the crew, the dock — reading everything at once and already two steps ahead.

Harbor master.

He glances at me. That professional acknowledgment — you belong here, I see you, carry on.

I nod.

He calls something to the deck crew about the mooring lines, makes a notation on his clipboard, then looks at me properly for the first time.

“Martha Volkov.”

“That’s right.”

“Paul Engel. Harbor master.” He looks back at the Northern Pursuit settling against the dock. “Your vessel is in slip fourteen. Ready when you need her.”

A man who runs this harbor the way I run a deck. Everything seen. Nothing ignored. Two steps ahead of the problem before the problem knows it exists.

The biological clock does not care about harbor masters. The biological clock cares about one thing and I have been standing on this dock for three years telling it to wait.

And yet.

“Thank you,” I say.

He nods. No ceremony. Just a man who did his job and is already moving to the next thing.

He walks back toward the harbor office. I watch him go.

I could build something with a man like that. I could also talk myself out of it the way I have talked myself out of everything that matters and end up alone on this dock in October for the rest of my life.

Both of those things are true simultaneously.

The tide is going out. It always comes back. That is the one thing the ocean never lies about.

I drink my coffee and watch the Northern Pursuit settle against the dock and think about Thursday.

CHAPTER

2

...

The Hydraulics

Three days out on the Bering and the hydraulics start talking.

Not loud. Not dramatic. Just a sound that does not belong — a hesitation in the pot hauler, a half second where the machine thinks about what it is doing before it does it. On a calm day in good conditions that sound means schedule the maintenance when you get back to harbor.

On the Bering in October that sound means pay attention.

I call it to Bree on deck. She listens. We look at each other across the pot hauler with the particular communication of people who have been on the water long enough to not need words for things like this.

We both heard it.

I radio Paul.

“Northern — harbor master. My hydraulics are making a sound I do not like.”

His voice comes back immediately.

“Describe it.”

I describe it. There is a pause on his end — not uncertainty, calculation.

“How far out are you.”

“Fifty miles. Northwest corner.”

“Can you haul your last string and come in.”

“Yes.”

“Then do that. I will have the maintenance crew ready when you arrive.”

...

First Cancellation

The maintenance crew meets us at the dock. Two men who know hydraulic systems on crab boats the way I know the northwest corner — completely, from memory, without needing to look anything up.

Paul is there with his clipboard.

“How long,” I say.

“Two days minimum to do it properly.” He looks at the hydraulic housing. “You have a weather window day after tomorrow. You will miss it.”

I look at my vessel. At the window I am going to miss. At the crab that are running right now on the northwest corner while my pot hauler sits in slip fourteen getting worked on.

“We had plans,” I say.

“We will reschedule,” Paul says. Simply. No drama. Just a man who understands that the Bering comes first and adjusts accordingly.

He understands. That is not nothing.

. . .

Second Cancellation

While the maintenance crew works on the hydraulics I find Dmitri on the dock coiling line. He is using one hand. The other arm is held close to his body in the particular way of someone who got hit by something and is not saying so.

“Dmitri.”

“It is fine.”

“Show me.”

It is not fine. A pot wire caught him on the haul — a laceration on his forearm that went deeper than it should and was not cleaned properly on the water because Dmitri does not stop working for

things like that.

I spend an hour cleaning the wound and closing it properly and telling Dmitri things about infection that he already knows and will not listen to.

Paul finds me at the first aid kit. He looks at Dmitri's arm. Looks at me.

"Tonight is not going to work either," he says.

"Tonight is not going to work," I say.

"Tomorrow," he says.

"Tomorrow," I say.

...

Third Potential Cancellation

Tomorrow becomes the afternoon because the maintenance crew needs me to test the hydraulics under load and that takes three hours and by the time I am done Carla is at the dock with her arms crossed and the expression she uses when she has been waiting and has opinions about the waiting.

"Tavern," she says. "Bree and Diane are already there."

"I have plans."

"You have had plans for two days and canceled them both." She looks at me. "One evening. You can have plans tomorrow."

Behind her I can see Bree and Diane coming down the dock. Bree already talking, Diane already nodding, both of them aimed at me with the particular momentum of women who have decided something.

Paul will be at the harbor office for another two hours at least. The maintenance crew just finished. My vessel is ready.

One evening.

...

The Dilemma

The three of them stand on the dock in a row. Carla, Bree, Diane. Waiting.

Paul is in the harbor office. Two cancelled plans. Third one waiting.

I can keep the date with Paul.

Or I can go to the tavern with the girls and break it.

I cannot have both.

...

The Tavern

The harbor tavern smells of fried halibut and the particular warmth of people who work outside in October and need somewhere to be

warm. Carla orders her usual. Bree orders her usual. Diane orders her usual.

The bartender looks at me.

“Water please.”

Carla puts her drink down.

“Water.”

“Water.”

“Martha it is Thursday night in Dutch Harbor.”

“I am aware.”

“Nobody orders water on Thursday night in Dutch Harbor.”

“I am protecting my eggs.”

The table goes quiet. Bree looks at the ceiling. Diane looks at Carla. Carla looks at me with the expression of a woman hearing something for the first time that she suspects she will be hearing for a very long time.

“You are protecting your eggs,” Carla says.

“I am thirty-four years old and I want children and alcohol is not good for egg quality.” I drink my water. “It is a biological fact.”

“She’s serious,” Bree says to Diane.

“I can see that,” Diane says.

We settle in. Two tables over a king crab crew is still in their gear, boots leaving salt rings on the floor. The jukebox is playing

something with too much steel guitar. Carla tells a story about a halibut that got loose on the processing dock. Diane updates us on Walt's vessel which needs a new engine that Walt cannot afford. Bree has opinions about a deckhand on the king crab boat that just came in who she describes as promising.

Paul's name comes up the way Paul's name comes up in Dutch Harbor — because someone saw something and told someone else and now everyone knows.

"Harbor master walked your vessel three times this week," Bree says. Not accusatory. Observational. The way Bree says everything.

"He is thorough," I say.

"He watched your AIS track the whole opening," Carla says.

"He watches everyone's AIS track."

"He watched yours," Diane says, "from the harbor office window. Standing up. The whole thirteen hours."

The table looks at me.

I drink my water.

"You are protecting your eggs for the harbor master," Bree says.

It is not a question.

Carla puts her drink down again. Diane covers her mouth. Bree looks completely satisfied with herself.

I say nothing.

The table erupts.

I sit with my water and my straight face while Carla and Bree and Diane have the conversation I am not having and two tables over the king crab crew is ordering another round and the jukebox has moved on to something slower.

We are mid laugh — Bree doing an impression of the deckhand from the king crab boat that is accurate enough to be dangerous — when a woman appears at our table that none of us invited.

She is perhaps forty. Dark hair. The careful look of someone who has had a few drinks and is managing them deliberately.

She looks at me.

“I heard you mention Paul Engel,” she says. “I know Paul.”

The table goes quiet.

CHAPTER

3

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The Old Flame

She pulls a chair from the empty table beside us and sits down without being asked. Up close she is older than forty. The careful management of someone who has been drinking since before the king crab crew arrived.

“Sandra Teel,” she says. Looks at me specifically. “You’re the captain Paul has been fussing over.”

“Martha Volkov,” I say.

Bree and Carla and Diane are very still in the way women go still when they are paying complete attention to something.

“I heard you mention his name,” Sandra says. “Paul and I were together. Two years. Before he came ashore.” She wraps both hands around her glass. “I just thought someone should tell you a few things.”

...

Too Controlling

“He is controlling,” Sandra says. “Not violent. Nothing like that. Just — everything on his terms. Everything his way. The harbor runs the way Paul wants it to run because Paul cannot stand anything that does not run the way Paul wants it to run.” She looks at her glass. “I thought it was competence at first. It took me a year to understand the difference.”

Carla looks at me. I look at the table.

The fuel ready before I arrive. The maintenance crew standing by. The frayed line on the dock box. The AIS track watched for thirteen hours.

Controlling. Or paying attention. I have known him four days and I cannot yet tell the difference.

...

Bachelor Through And Through

“He will never commit,” Sandra says. “I am telling you this as someone who tried. Two years. He is a bachelor through and through. The harbor is his wife. The fleet is his family.” She almost smiles. “There is no room for an actual woman in that life. He will make you feel like there is. He is good at that. Then one day you will realize you have been waiting for something that was never going to happen.”

Bree puts her drink down.

Diane looks at the jukebox.

Two years is longer than four days. I have known him less than a week.

...

The Brother's Boat

“His brother needed money,” Sandra says. “Paul gave it to him. Most of what he had saved. Didn’t tell me until after. That was the end for us — not the money, the not telling.” She finishes her drink. “He has a brother in Sitka who will always need something. Paul will always give it. That is who he is.” She looks at me directly. “Just so you know what you are walking into.”

She stands. Pushes the chair back to the empty table. Walks to the bar without looking back.

The four of us sit in the quiet she left behind.

Bree speaks first.

“Well.”

“Well,” Carla says.

Diane says nothing. Diane is the one who has been married longest and knows when nothing is the right thing to say.

...

The Dilemma

The jukebox fills the silence. King crab crew at the next table is laughing about something. The bartender is washing glasses.

Sandra Teel spent two years with Paul Engel. She has information I do not have. Four things she said and every one of them landed somewhere real.

I can take what she said seriously. Pull back. Keep Paul exactly where he has been — the harbor master who gets my fuel ready. Nothing more.

Or I can trust what I have seen with my own eyes in four days. The maintenance crew ready before I arrived. The AIS track watched the whole opening.

I cannot have both. Doubt and trust cannot occupy the same harbor.

...

Goodnight

I finish my water.

“I had a good time,” I say. “Goodnight.”

Carla looks at me. Bree looks at Diane. Nobody says the thing they are all thinking and I appreciate that.

I walk out into the October night. The wind is off the Bering. The dock lights are amber on the water.

Paul is at my vessel with two mechanics. They are packing up their tools. He looks up when he hears my boots on the dock.

“Everything is ready,” he says. “She is good to go.”

“Thank you.”

He nods. Looks at the vessel one more time the way harbor masters look at things — making sure, being certain. Then he looks at me.

“Good night,” I say.

The tide is coming in. Slow and certain and completely itself.

CHAPTER

4

...

Morning Coffee

Paul finds me at the dock at six thirty with two mugs. The harbor is dark and working around us — dock lights amber on the water, the fleet preparing for the day, the smell of diesel and brine and the coffee that is already exactly right without me having told him how I take it.

We stand at the rail looking at the Nadya in slip fourteen.

“She’s clean,” Paul says. “The way you keep her. Everything in its place. Every line coiled the same way.” He wraps both hands around his mug. “I like the way you take care of your boat. Like a mother taking care of a child.”

I go still.

This man has been watching my vessel the way I watch the northwest corner. Completely. From memory. Nothing missed.

“She is all I have got,” I say.

“For now,” Paul says.

He says it quietly. Not a challenge. Just a man being accurate.

We drink our coffee. The harbor breathes around us.

“There is a community dance tonight,” he says. “Eight o’clock at the community center.” He looks at me directly. “I will pick you up at your bunkhouse at seven thirty.”

“Yes,” I say.

Everything is going to need to be perfect to make it in time.

He goes back to his harbor and I go back to my vessel and the Nadya’s engine turns over clean and strong in the October dark.

...

Dmitri’s Arm

The northwest corner in October. The structure exactly where it always is, the crab staging the way they always stage before the migration, the pots coming up full on the first string.

But Dmitri is suffering.

He is working — Dmitri always works — but he is favoring the injured arm in ways he does not know I can see from the wheelhouse. The wound from the pot wire has not healed properly. He is compensating. A man compensating on deck in the Bering is a man one wrong moment away from something serious.

I call him up between hauls.

“You are favoring the arm,” I say.

“It is fine.”

“Dmitri. You are favoring the arm.”

He looks at his boots.

“A little.”

“Light duty for the rest of the opening. Bree takes the hauler. You sort.”

He opens his mouth.

“Light duty,” I say. “Or you go below.”

Dmitri goes to sort.

One person short on the hauler. The opening just got longer.

...

The Hydraulics

By noon the hydraulics are talking again.

Not the same sound as before — the mechanics fixed the original problem. This is something different. A hesitation in the cold that was not there in the warmer months. The system needs calibrating for October temperatures and whoever did the repair did not account for that.

I call Paul on the radio.

“Harbor master. My hydraulics are hesitating in the cold. Post repair calibration issue.”

His voice comes back immediately.

“How bad.”

“Manageable. Slower than normal. Adding time to each haul.”

“Can you finish the opening.”

“Yes. But I am running behind.”

A pause.

“I will have the mechanics ready when you come in.”

“Thank you Paul.”

He does not mention seven thirty. He does not mention the dance. Just — I will have the mechanics ready.

That is the right thing to say.

...

The Northwest Corner

The northwest corner does not care about Dmitri’s arm or the hydraulics or seven thirty at my bunkhouse door.

The northwest corner is delivering.

By four in the afternoon I have more crab than my last two openings combined. The pots keep coming up full. The structure is exactly where I said it would be. The migration has not started yet and the crabs are stacked and waiting and every string I pull is better than the last.

Bree looks at me from the hauler with the expression of someone doing math.

“Two more strings,” she says.

I look at the holds. At the clock. At the two more strings sitting on the northwest corner waiting to be pulled.

It is five thirty. Two more strings means seven thirty at the earliest before we head in. Eight thirty before we dock.

Paul will be at my bunkhouse door at seven thirty.

“Pull them,” I say.

. . .

The Dilemma

Eight twenty-five. The Nadya coming through the breakwater. The dock lights amber on the water. Paul at the dock with the mechanics already waiting.

The holds are full. The crew is exhausted. I smell of the Bering — fish and salt and diesel and thirteen hours of October wind.

The community center is six blocks away. The dance started twenty-five minutes ago.

I can go now. Six blocks. Work clothes. The smell of the ocean and the catch and everything I have been doing all day. Paul said come as you are.

Or I can go to my bunk. Clean up. Put on something that is not fishing gear. Arrive at nine as myself.

I cannot have both. There now and clean are not available at the same time.

...

As Herself

I tie up. Paul checks the lines without being asked. The mechanics move to the hydraulics.

“Good opening,” Paul says. He has already looked at the holds.

“I need forty-five minutes,” I say.

He looks at me for one moment.

“I will wait.”

I go to my bunk. Wash the Bering off. Put on the clean clothes I have been saving since Kodiak — nothing fancy, just clean, just mine, just Martha Volkov and not the Nadya’s captain for one evening.

Paul is leaning against the dock rail when I come out. He looks up.

He offers me his arm.

We walk six blocks in the October night toward the community center lights and the music that has already started without us.

CHAPTER

5

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Love's Gonna Live Here

The community center is lit up from half a block away and we can hear the music before we reach the door. The Buck Owens impersonator has the room vibrating — that rolling Bakersfield sound filling the October night, spilling out into the street where a few people are standing outside with drinks and cold air.

Paul holds the door.

We walk in together.

Love's Gonna Live Here.

The floor is full. Every fishing family in Dutch Harbor, every processor worker, every deckhand and captain and harbor hand who has been on the water all week and needed somewhere warm to be. The impersonator on the low stage has the pompadour and the Telecaster and the complete commitment of a man who has been

doing this long enough to mean it.

I feel the room notice us. Not dramatically. Just the small shift that happens in small communities when something new becomes visible.

Paul's hand finds the small of my back. We move onto the floor. We finish the song. Love's Gonna Live Here.

...

My Heart Skips A Beat

The impersonator shifts into My Heart Skips A Beat and the floor stays full and Paul dances the way he does everything — right on beat.

I follow.

Carla is at the edge of the floor with Bree and Diane. Carla raises her drink. Bree says something to Diane. Diane is already smiling.

Captain Jensen is at the bar with two other veterans, their backs to the room, but Jensen is watching us in the mirror behind the bottles. When he sees me notice he raises his coffee.

The whole harbor is watching.

I do not care.

...

Nobody's Fool But Yours

Nobody's Fool But Yours slows the floor. Paul pulls me closer. We move together in the particular way of two people who are figuring out how they fit.

His shoulder is solid under my hand. He smells of the harbor — coffee and salt air and something that is just Paul, steady and certain. When he turns me I follow without thinking.

This is what I want. Not just tonight. This.

The song ends. The room applauds.

And Sandra Teel comes out of the crowd.

She walks straight to Paul. Takes his arm with both hands. Leans into him with the particular weight of someone who has been drinking since before we arrived. She looks up at him with an expression that is performing something she no longer actually feels.

"I'm nobody's fool but yours," she says.

...

I've Got A Tiger By The Tail

I take Sandra by the arm.

Not roughly. Just — firmly. The way you move someone who needs moving.

"He is not yours anymore," I say.

Sandra looks at me. Something behind her eyes that is not quite surprise. More like recognition. Like she knew this was coming and came anyway.

“Martha,” Paul says quietly.

“It is handled,” I say.

I walk Sandra to the edge of the floor. I do not let go of her arm until she is clear of the dancers and facing toward the bar and her feet are pointed in the right direction.

Sandra goes to the bar.

I turn back to Paul. The impersonator has started *I’ve Got A Tiger By The Tail* — fast and irreverent and completely right for this moment.

Paul is smiling at me.

He puts out his hand.

We dance.

...

Act Naturally

The impersonator slows it down. *Act Naturally*. The whole room settles into it — couples finding each other, the floor rearranging itself into something quieter and closer.

Paul pulls me in. We move slowly. The community center warm around us, the harbor outside, the Bering beyond that, the whole world reduced to this floor and this song.

I have to get up early. I want to stay and have more fun. I must decide.

...

The Walk Begins

“I have to be up early,” I say.

Paul does not argue. Does not negotiate. Just nods the way he nods at weather data — acknowledged, accepted, already adjusting.

We say goodnight to the girls. Carla squeezes my arm. Bree says nothing which from Bree means everything is exactly right. Diane smiles the smile of a woman who has been married long enough to know what she is looking at.

Captain Jensen raises his coffee as we pass the bar.

We walk out into the October night.

The harbor is dark and working around us. Dock lights amber on the water. A vessel engine running somewhere. The smell of brine and diesel and the cold that has been building all week.

CHAPTER

6

...

They're Gonna Put Me In The Movies

We walk out into the October night and Paul starts singing.

They're gonna put me in the movies. They're gonna make a big star out of me.

I start laughing. He keeps singing. Completely serious. Completely committed. The Buck Owens impersonator would approve.

"That was fun," I say.

"It was," he says. Still smiling. The full smile that I have been seeing more of since the dance started.

We walk.

...

Six Blocks

The harbor is dark around us. Dock lights amber on the water. Our boots on the dock planking. The cold that has been building all week sharp and clean in the lungs.

“What do you do,” I ask. “When you are not running the harbor.”

“I cook,” he says. “My mother’s recipes. Nothing fancy. Halibut chowder. Reindeer stew.” He looks at the water. “I read. I walk.”

“You walk.”

“I like walking,” he says simply. “Always have.”

A man who likes walking. In Dutch Harbor. In October.

“What do you read,” I say.

“History mostly. Alaska history. The people who came here before us. The fishers who worked these grounds before there were instruments or forecasts or harbor masters.” He looks at me. “What do you do.”

“I sketch,” I say. “Notebooks full. Between seasons mostly. Right now I walk. It helps me unwind.”

“I would like to see them someday.”

...

Someday

“Where would you go,” Paul asks. “If you could go anywhere.”

I think about it honestly.

“Homer,” I say. “I have never been to Homer. I hear the light there is different. The way it comes off the bay.”

“It is different,” he says. “I fished out of Homer one summer. Halibut. The light in July — you cannot describe it. You just have to stand in it.”

“You have been everywhere.”

“Not everywhere.” He is quiet for a moment. “I would like to go to Denali. In the summer. When the mountain is out. I have lived in Alaska my whole life and I have never seen Denali without clouds.”

“Neither have I.”

We look at each other.

“Someday,” Paul says.

Someday. He said someday like it includes both of us.

...

We Should Go Dancing Again

We reach my bunkhouse. The walk that felt like it should take longer took exactly six blocks.

Paul stops at the door. Looks at me the way he looks at things he wants to be certain about.

“Thank you,” he says. “For tonight. For the dance.” A pause. “For Sandra.”

“Sandra needed handling,” I say.

“She did.” He almost smiles. “We should go dancing again.”

...

The Dilemma

Two mechanics appear at the end of the dock moving toward us with the particular urgency of men who have found something they did not want to find.

“Captain Volkov.” The older one stops. Looks at Paul briefly then back at me. “The hydraulic repair. There is a secondary seal that needs replacing. We do not have the part.”

“How long.”

“We can fly it in. Tomorrow morning. But we need to install it before you go out.”

There is a weather window tomorrow afternoon. A good one. If the part arrives in the morning and the install takes three hours she makes the window. Just.

I can wait for the part. Safe. Proper. One more day in Dutch Harbor.

Or I can go out tomorrow as is. The hydraulics were slow yesterday and I worked them. Slow is better than sitting at the dock while the fishing is good.

...

Slow Is Better

“Can she run tomorrow as is,” I ask.

The older mechanic looks at his partner. Back at me.

“Slow. Like yesterday. Maybe slower.”

“The fishing is good right now,” I say. “I will go out slow.”

Paul is looking at me. Not arguing. Just reading the data the way he always reads data.

“I will have the part ready for when you come in,” he says.

The mechanics nod and go.

The October night is quiet around us. The harbor working in the distance. The cold coming off the water.

He nods. Looks at me one moment longer. Then he walks back toward the harbor office.

I watch him go.

Someday, he said. Like it includes both of us.

The tide is coming in. Slow and certain and completely itself.

CHAPTER

7

...

Days One and Two

The Nadya clears the breakwater at six in the morning in the dark and I point her north toward the northwest corner and do not look back at Dutch Harbor.

The hydraulics are slow. I know they are slow. The mechanics know they are slow. Paul knows they are slow. But slow is workable and the northwest corner is delivering and I have been fishing the Bering for eighteen years with equipment that was not quite right and I am not stopping now.

Day one. The first string goes down at nine in the morning in the low gray October light. Eight pots on the structure I have been working for three seasons. I know this ground the way Paul knows his harbor — completely, from memory, nothing missed. The crabs are staging exactly where they always stage before the migration. I can feel it in the way the first pot comes up.

Soak time. Six hours. The Nadya drifts on anchor while the crew sleeps in shifts and I stand on the bridge and watch the water and think about Paul.

He will be at the harbor office. Two mugs. The AIS track on his screen showing my position six hours north of Dutch Harbor, stationary, exactly where I said I would be.

The first haul. The hydraulics slow, working twice as hard, the pot hauler groaning in the cold, but the pots come up and they are full and the northwest corner is exactly what I told Paul it would be.

We reset. Soak again. Haul again. The holds filling.

Day two is the same. Slow hydraulics. Full pots. The Bering indifferent and cold and giving up its catch the way it gives up everything — not easily, not without cost, but giving.

Between hauls I stand on the bridge and watch the horizon and think about the walk home. Six blocks. Paul singing. The full smile. Someday. He said someday like it includes both of us.

I do not radio Paul. I handle my vessel.

...

Day Three

Day three the hydraulics are talking louder.

Not failing. Just — insisting on being noticed. A sound in the cold that was not there on day one. A hesitation between each pull that

Bree clocks from the deck without saying anything because Bree has been on my vessel for three seasons and she knows when to say nothing.

Morrison's vessel appears on the horizon at midday.

I clock him through the binoculars. The King's Ransom — Morrison's boat, fifty feet, good equipment, a captain who knows the Bering. He is running parallel to my grounds about two miles out. Not encroaching. Just — present. Watching.

He knows I am here. He knows the northwest corner is delivering. He is making a calculation.

I make my own calculation. The hydraulics are slower today but still working. The catch is building toward something significant. The migration has not peaked yet. Two more days and I will have the best numbers of my season.

I keep fishing.

That afternoon, handling the third string, Dmitri's arm gives him trouble again. He does not say anything. He never says anything. I can see it in the way he favors his right side on the hauler, the way he grits through the pulls that should be routine.

At the end of the haul I tell him light duty again. He goes to sort without arguing which tells me it is worse than he is admitting.

One person short on the hauler. The hydraulics struggling. Morrison on the horizon. The catch too good to stop.

I keep fishing.

...

Day Four

Day four the hydraulics are significantly worse.

The sound is different now — not a hesitation but a complaint. The pot hauler is working but it is working the way an engine works when something inside it is deciding whether to continue. Each pull takes longer. Each string takes twice the time it should.

Bree looks at me between hauls.

“How bad,” she says.

“We are going to finish,” I say.

She nods. She does not look convinced. She goes back to the deck.

The northwest corner is giving up everything it has. The pots come up full on every string, the crabs stacked and waiting the way they only stack when you have read the migration correctly three seasons in a row. This is the catch that justifies everything — the slow hydraulics, the long days, the cold that has been in my bones since October began.

At sixteen hundred Paul’s voice comes on the radio for the fleet check. Routine. Position, conditions, ETA.

“Harbor master, Nadya. Northwest corner. Conditions manageable. ETA day five late.”

A pause on his end. The pause of a man reading data that does not quite add up.

“Copy Nadya. Hydraulics holding.”

It is not a question. But it is not not a question.

“Hydraulics holding,” I say.

Another pause.

“Copy. Check in at oh-six-hundred.”

I set the radio down. Stand at the bridge window looking at the northwest corner going dark as the October sun drops at half past five. Morrison’s vessel still on the horizon. Still watching.

I should have told him. He already knows something is wrong — that pause was Paul reading my voice the way he reads weather data.

I will tell him tomorrow when I come in.

I go back to work.

...

Day Five. The Failure.

Day five. Night. Twenty-one hundred.

The second haul of the day and the hydraulics die mid-pull.

Not slowly. Not with warning. One moment the pot hauler is working — straining, complaining, but working — and then it is not. Complete silence where the hydraulic motor should be. The line going slack. Three pots hanging somewhere between the surface and the ocean floor, suspended, going nowhere.

Bree looks at me from the deck.

“That’s it,” I say.

She already knows.

I look at the holds. Three days of catch. Good numbers. Not the full week I planned but substantial. I look at the remaining strings — four more sets on the northwest corner, GPS marked, buoys on the surface, crabs soaking in the dark water below.

I look at the horizon to the northwest. The weather system that has been building since yesterday is closer now. I can see it in the way the swells are changing — longer, heavier, the particular movement of water that means serious weather is organizing itself somewhere to the north.

Morrison’s vessel is a mile from my nearest buoys.

I pick up the radio.

“Harbor master. Nadya. I have a complete hydraulic failure. Position northwest corner, standard grounds. I have gear on the bottom I cannot retrieve. Weather building northwest. Morrison’s King’s Ransom is in my vicinity.”

Paul’s voice comes back before I finish the sentence.

“Copy Nadya. I have your position. Are you and your crew safe.”

“Safe. No injuries. Vessel operational. I cannot work.”

“Copy. Stand by.”

I stand by. Thirty seconds. Paul is probably making calls, looking at charts, reading the weather, reading Morrison's AIS track. Being two steps ahead.

"Nadya. I am dispatching the harbor support vessel with a mechanic. ETA your position approximately oh-one-hundred. Weather window closes approximately oh-four-hundred. Do you copy."

"Copy harbor master. Oh-one-hundred."

Another voice on the radio. Captain Jensen. Sixty years on the Bering, gravel and certainty.

"King's Ransom. This is Jensen. You are in Volkov's grounds. Move off."

A pause. Then Morrison's voice, carefully neutral.

"Copy Jensen."

I watch Morrison's AIS track on my screen. Slowly, deliberately, the King's Ransom turns south.

Paul called Jensen before he called me back. He was already two steps ahead.

...

The Night

Oh-one-hundred. The support vessel comes out of the dark with its work lights running, the mechanic already in his gear, ready to go

below. His name is Torres. He shakes my hand and goes straight to the engine room without wasting time on conversation. I appreciate that.

The repair is going to take three hours minimum. Maybe four. The weather window closes at oh-four-hundred. The math is not good.

I go to the bridge. Pick up the radio.

“Harbor master. Nadya. Mechanic is aboard. Repair estimate three to four hours. Window closes oh-four-hundred.”

“Copy Nadya.” Paul’s voice is the same at oh-one-hundred as it is at eight in the morning. Steady. Reading the data. “Weather will be unfishable through the morning. Window reopens approximately oh-nine-hundred. Recommend you hold position until repair is complete and window reopens.”

“Copy.”

“I will be on the radio.”

I will be on the radio. Four words. He is telling me he is not going anywhere. That whatever the night brings he is at the other end of this frequency until I come home.

The Bering at night in October is a different world than the Bering in daylight. The dark is complete — no ambient light, no horizon line, just the vessel’s lights and the stars when the clouds break and the sound of water against the hull that is constant and indifferent and ancient. The swells are building now, the weather system moving in from the northwest, the Nadya rolling in a rhythm that I have known since I was sixteen years old crewing Bristol Bay.

Torres works below. I can hear him through the deck — the sounds of tools on metal, the particular language of mechanical repair happening in a small space in difficult conditions.

Bree brings me coffee at oh-two-hundred. We stand at the bridge window together and watch the dark water.

“He stayed on the radio,” she says.

“I know.”

“Martha.” She looks at me. “I have been on your vessel for three seasons. I have never seen you radio anyone when you were on the water.”

“I know.”

She finishes her coffee and goes back to her bunk.

She is right. I have been fishing the Bering alone for three years. I have handled hydraulic failures and bad weather and gear losses and crew injuries and I have handled all of it without calling anyone because there was no one to call.

Tonight I picked up the radio before the situation was critical. Before it was an emergency. I called Paul because he was there and because I wanted him to know where I was.

That is not a captain making a distress call. That is something else.

Paul checks in every thirty minutes through the night. Conditions. Wind speed. My crew status. Torres’s progress. Short calls, professional, everything Paul does on the radio with every vessel

in his fleet. Except at oh-three-hundred when the weather picks up and the Nadya is rolling harder and he stays on the line for twenty minutes just — present. Not talking about anything specific. Just there.

I can let this be what it looks like professionally. A harbor master doing his job. A captain waiting for repairs.

Or I can let it mean what it means at oh-three-hundred on the Bering in the dark.

“Paul,” I say.

“Martha,” he says.

“Thank you for Morrison.”

“Jensen handled Morrison.”

“You called Jensen first.”

A pause.

“Yes.”

The radio hums between us. The Nadya rolls in the building swell. Torres is still working below.

“Get some sleep,” Paul says. “Torres will call you when he is done.”

“I am not going to sleep.”

“I know.” And somehow in those two words is everything — he knows me, he has been watching me for weeks, he knows I do not sleep when my vessel needs me. “Then I will stay on.”

He does.

...

Dawn

Torres comes up from the engine room at oh-five-thirty.

“She will hold,” he says. “Get the gear and go home.”

The weather window is already opening. The northwest system moved faster than forecast — brutal coming through but short. By oh-six-hundred the swells are dropping and the light is starting to build in the east and the Bering is doing what the Bering does when a storm passes — settling into something that looks almost peaceful and is never entirely trustworthy.

I retrieve my remaining gear. Four strings on the northwest corner, GPS marked, buoys right where I left them. The hydraulics running clean with Torres’s repair, the pot hauler working the way it is supposed to work, the pots coming up full because the northwest corner does not care what happened last night.

By oh-eight-hundred the holds are as full as I have ever brought them in. By oh-nine-hundred I am pointing the Nadya south toward Dutch Harbor.

Paul is at the dock in the dark of the early morning. Not the amber dock lights this time — the October dawn coming up gray and cold behind him, his breath visible in the air, two mugs in his hands.

He was there when I left. He is there when I come back.

I tie up. He hands me the coffee. We stand at the rail looking at the holds — the best catch I have brought in since I started fishing Dutch Harbor three seasons ago.

“Torres said she will hold,” I say.

“I know. He called me when he came up.” Paul wraps both hands around his mug. He looks at me the way he looked at the Nadya on the first morning — completely, from memory, nothing missed. “You should have told me on day four.”

“I know.”

“Martha.”

“I know Paul.”

He is quiet for a moment. The harbor waking up around us. The fleet coming to life. The smell of diesel and brine and the cold that never entirely leaves Dutch Harbor in October.

“That restaurant four blocks from the water,” he says. “Tonight. Eight o’clock.”

The weather window is already closing again behind us. I can see it on the horizon — another system building to the northwest, the Bering organizing itself for the next round. By this evening Dutch Harbor will be socked in. No fishing tonight. No fishing tomorrow.

“Yes,” I say.

The tide is coming in. Slow and certain and completely itself.

CHAPTER

8

...

The Restaurant

Five days on the Bering and one night on the radio and now Paul is at my bunkhouse door in his good jacket with his harbor master boots cleaned and I am standing here in the only dress I brought to Dutch Harbor this season wondering when I decided to bring a dress to Dutch Harbor.

He looks at me for a moment. The way he looks at things he wants to be certain about.

“You look different,” he says.

“I brought a dress.”

“You look beautiful,” he says.

We walk four blocks in the rain. He does not have an umbrella. Neither do I. The northwest storm that closed the fishing window is sitting on Dutch Harbor — wind off the Bering, rain steady, the kind

of October weather that means no one is going out tonight. The Bering took the evening away from the fleet and gave it to us.

The restaurant smells of garlic and woodsmoke and the kind of cooking that requires an actual kitchen rather than a galley. White tablecloths. Candles. A menu that is longer than four items. We sit across from each other and for a moment neither of us says anything and that is completely fine.

...

Five Days

We order. The food arrives.

This is what coming ashore buys you.

We talk differently here than we talk at the harbor office or on the radio. Less about the fleet, less about openings and catches and hydraulics. More about before.

“Five days,” Paul says.

“Five days.”

“The northwest corner.”

“The northwest corner.”

He already knows the numbers. He was watching my AIS track. He coordinated Torres. He knows what came out of those holds this morning. He does not need me to explain what happened out there and I do not need to explain it.

He grew up in Kodiak. Father fished. Grandfather fished. The water was never a choice — it was just what his family did. He left for college, marine biology, University of Alaska, came back because the water called him back the way it always calls people back.

“You ever regret coming back,” I say.

“Never. I regret Tommy Reyes every day. I don’t regret the water.”

I think about his voice at oh-three-hundred on the radio. Steady. Present. Staying on the line because I was on the water and he needed to know I was coming back.

“I know,” I say.

...

What She Tells Him

“What about your family,” he asks.

“My father died on the water when I was nine — not dramatically, not a storm, just a mechanical failure on a cold morning that should have been routine.”

“I’m sorry,” Paul says.

“He died doing what he loved. That is what my mother says. She stopped fishing after that. She spent seven years trying to keep me off the boats. By sixteen I was crewing Bristol Bay.”

“To be like him and keep his memory close.”

Nobody has ever said that to me. Not Jensen, not Carla, not the three men I dated briefly in the years before the fishing took everything.

“Maybe,” I say. “Or maybe I just needed to know if I could.”

“Could what.”

“Survive the thing that took him.”

Paul is quiet. Not uncomfortable quiet. The quiet of a man who knows what it costs to survive the thing that takes people. He lost Tommy Reyes. I lost my father. We are sitting in a warm restaurant four blocks from the water and we both know exactly what the water takes.

“And can you,” he says.

“I’m here,” I say.

He looks at me the way he looked at me from the dock this morning. Completely. Nothing missed.

• • •

The Phone Call

Dessert arrives. Paul’s phone buzzes. He glances at it — the harbor master glance, the one that checks whether it is something that cannot wait.

His face changes. Not alarm. Something more complicated.

"I need to take this," he says. "I'm sorry."

He steps outside. Through the window I can see him on the sidewalk in the rain, collar up, talking with the focused stillness of someone receiving information they were not expecting.

He comes back in. Sits down. Looks at his coffee.

"My brother," he says. "In Sitka. He runs a vessel. He has been offered the harbor master position there. He wants to know if I would consider taking over his boat." He looks at me. "Running it myself."

There it is.

The water calling him back. It always calls people back.

...

The Dilemma

The candle between us burns. Outside the rain hits the window steadily.

I am thirty-four years old. I want a family. I want children. I want someone who comes back through the breakwater at the end of every opening and is still here in the morning.

Paul Engel has been that man since October. Harbor master. Present. Two steps ahead. Seeing everything. Staying on the radio all night because I was on the water and he needed to know I was coming back.

His brother's boat is the water calling him back. If he goes he is not the man on the dock anymore. He is a captain following the catch. Always moving. Always gone.

I can ask him what he is going to do.

Or I can say nothing and find out what kind of man he is when the water calls.

...

What Kind Of Man

"What did you tell him," I say.

"I told him I needed to think about it."

"And."

Paul looks at the candle. At his coffee. At me.

"Five years ago I would have said yes before he finished the sentence." He is quiet for a moment. "I built something here. Something that matters. Thirty vessels. Two hundred people." He pauses. "And I am sitting in this restaurant with you."

He sees everything. That is what I want.

"The harbor needs a harbor master," I say.

"The harbor needs a good harbor master," he says. "There are other good harbor masters."

"Paul."

He looks at me directly.

“I am not going anywhere Martha. I want you to know that. Whatever I decide about the boat — I am not going anywhere.”

The tide is coming in. I can hear it in the way Dutch Harbor sounds at night — the water against the pilings, the harbor breathing, the whole maritime world doing what it does regardless of what we decide in warm restaurants four blocks away.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay,” he says.

We finish our coffee. He pays before I can argue. We walk back toward the harbor in the rain, his shoulder against mine, the water always there underneath everything, always moving, always certain, always uncertain.

The storm is still sitting on Dutch Harbor. The fleet is in. No one is going out tonight or tomorrow. The Bering gave us this.

CHAPTER

9

...

The Storm

The northwest storm is still sitting on Dutch Harbor in the morning. I can hear it before I open my eyes — the wind finding the gaps in the bunkhouse walls, the rain against the windows, the fleet pulled in tight and the dock lines straining and the whole harbor hunkered down against the blow.

I pull on my gear and go down to check on the Nadya.

The dock is wet and loud. The fleet is in — vessels straining against their lines, fenders squeaking against the pilings, the whole harbor under the particular stress of a storm that means business. I walk the Nadya stem to stern. Lines secure. Fenders properly placed. Hatches dogged down. She is fine.

Paul comes down the dock with two mugs. His jacket is soaked through already. He does not seem to notice.

“She is holding well,” he says. Looking at the Nadya the way he always looks at her.

“She is,” I say.

He hands me the coffee. We stand at the rail and watch the storm work on the harbor. The rain coming sideways now. The vessels moving in their lines. The Bering beyond the breakwater invisible in the gray.

“I called my brother,” Paul says.

I keep watching the storm.

“And.”

“I told him no.”

...

What Jensen Thinks

Captain Jensen finds me at the fuel dock an hour later. He says it the way old fishers say things they already knew were going to happen.

“Paul turned down his brother’s boat.”

“I heard.”

“First time in five years he has had a chance to go back to the water.” Jensen drinks his coffee. Looks at the harbor. “Man gives up something like that — that means something.”

“I know.”

“Do you.” He looks at me with the eyes of a man who has been reading the Bering for sixty years and finds people considerably easier to read. “Because from where I am standing you have been coming in off the northwest corner with record catches for three seasons and going back to an empty bunk every night and telling yourself the fishing is enough.”

He is not wrong.

“Jensen,” I say.

“I am old,” he says. “I get to say things.” He finishes his coffee. “Don’t let the tide go out Martha.”

...

Eight Days

The storm blows through by the following morning. The window opens and I go out.

Eight days on the northwest corner. The best sustained catch I have put together in three seasons — the migration timing exactly right, the structure exactly where I said it would be, the pots coming up full on every string. Eight days of the Bering being everything the Bering can be when it decides to cooperate.

But this opening is different from every opening before it. Not the catch. What is different is that I know Paul is watching my AIS track from the harbor office. That the fuel will be ready when I come in. That he was on the radio all night two weeks ago and would be

again if I needed him.

Someone is paying attention. That is what I have been missing for three years. Not company. Attention. Someone who sees the whole picture.

Dmitri catches me smiling at the hydraulic controls between hauls. Torres's repair holding clean and strong.

"Good morning," he says carefully.

"Pull the next string," I say.

...

The Helper

Eight days out. Great catch. Coming into the harbor I see a woman on the dock I do not recognize. Mid forties. Capable hands. The look of someone who belongs on the water. She is talking to Paul with the ease of someone who has known him a long time.

I tie up. Paul comes over.

"Martha. This is Dr. Carol Reyes. She runs the maritime safety program out of Juneau."

The name lands.

"Tommy's sister," I say.

Dr. Reyes nods.

“I come every October. Paul lets me run safety briefings for the fleet.” She looks at the harbor, at the vessels, at everything Paul has built here. “He built this place into something. Tommy would have —” She stops. Looks at Paul. “He would have been proud.”

Paul says nothing. Just nods once.

A man who built something in a dead man’s name and lets that man’s sister come every October to see it.

...

The Dilemma

That evening Paul and I walk the breakwater. The harbor spread behind us. The Bering beyond. The whole maritime world visible in the last of the October light. The storm is gone. The air is clean and cold the way Aleutian air is clean and cold after a northwest blow.

I have been alone on this water for three years. I chose it. I told myself I preferred it.

Paul turned down his brother’s boat this morning. Captain Jensen told me not to let the tide go out. Tommy Reyes’s sister comes every October to see what Paul built in her brother’s name.

I can keep coming in off the northwest corner and going back to an empty bunk and telling myself the fishing is enough.

Or I can say what I have been not saying since the day he knew my vessel was in slip fourteen.

. . .

What She Has Been Not Saying

We are at the end of the breakwater. The harbor lights behind us. The Bering dark and moving beyond.

“Paul,” I say.

“Martha,” he says.

“I am thirty-four years old and I want children and a home and I have been giving everything to the ocean for eighteen years because the ocean never asks me to be anything except competent.” I look at the water. “I am tired of competent being enough.”

He is quiet for a long moment.

“It was never going to be enough,” he says. “You knew that.”

“I knew that.”

He takes my hand. His palm is warm and calloused and certain. We stand at the end of the breakwater and the harbor lights reflect on the dark water and the tide is coming in steady and strong.

“When you come in,” he says.

“When I come in,” I say.

The tide is all the way in.

CHAPTER

10

...

The Walk

Can I trust Paul to keep my secret.

We turn and walk back toward the harbor. The harbor lights are amber on the water. The fleet is in. The Bering is resting between openings the way the Bering rests — not peacefully, just quietly, gathering itself for the next round.

“Paul I want to tell you a secret.”

He looks at me. Steady. Waiting.

“All right,” he says.

...

Punta Arenas

“Seven years ago I was fishing out of Punta Arenas. Southern Chile. Patagonian toothfish. My vessel. Four crew. Good grounds.”

We walk.

“I had storm warnings. Three of them. The system was building from the southwest the way Cape Horn systems build.”

Paul says nothing.

“I stayed for one more string.”

...

The Southern Ocean

“The vessel went down in sight of the Horn. We got the raft off. All four of us.”

The harbor lights are amber on the water ahead of us.

“Three days in the Southern Ocean. The Chilean Navy found us on the third morning.”

We walk.

“Nobody died. The USCG suspended my license eighteen months. I came to Dutch Harbor when it was reinstated and bought the Nadya.”

I look at him.

“Nobody here knows.”

...

The Silence

We walk in silence.

His hand finds mine.

...

What He Says

We walk the full length of the dock before he speaks.

“I have secrets too,” Paul says. “That I don’t share.”

We keep walking.

The tide is going out.

CHAPTER

11

...

Boot Scootin'

The community center is lit up from half a block away and the Bass Brown band has the whole building vibrating before we reach the door.

Paul holds the door.

The floor is full. Every fishing family in Dutch Harbor, every processor worker, every deckhand and captain who has been hunkered down through three days of storm and needed somewhere warm and loud to be. The Bass Brown band has a steel guitar and a drummer who knows exactly what he is doing and they have launched straight into Boot Scootin' Boogie without apology.

The room notices us. Not dramatically. Just the small shift of a small community that has already decided something about two people and is satisfied to see it confirmed.

Paul looks at the floor. Looks at me.

“Can you line dance,” he says.

“Can you,” I say.

He takes my hand and walks me straight onto the floor.

...

The Grapevine

He can line dance.

Not just adequately. Completely. The grapevine and the kick and the turn all right on the beat with the particular commitment of a man who does not do anything halfway. The harbor master who runs thirty vessels and two hundred people is doing the Boot Scootin’ Boogie in his good boots in the Dutch Harbor community center and he does not care who sees it.

I start laughing.

Not politely. Actually laughing. The kind that comes up from somewhere you forgot was there.

Paul looks at me sideways without breaking his footwork. The full smile.

The whole floor moving together. The storm outside doing nothing about any of it.

...

The Seagulls

Between songs the band takes a break and the room breathes.

We step outside for air. The November dark is absolute after the community center lights. The harbor below us. The fleet in its slips straining against the storm lines. The dock lights amber on the water.

And the seagulls.

Working the dock in the dark the way they work it in the light — no difference to them, no storm, no November, no hour of the night that stops them. Their sound filling the harbor the way it always fills it. I stopped hearing them three years ago. I hear them now.

Paul stands beside me listening to the harbor.

“Ready,” he says.

“Ready,” I say.

We go back in.

...

Buck Slows It Down

The band shifts into Act Naturally and the floor reorganizes itself into something quieter.

Paul pulls me in. We move slowly. His shoulder solid under my hand. The community center warm around us. Outside the storm and the seagulls and the November dark. In here just this.

Carla is at the edge of the floor with Bree and Diane. Carla raises her drink. Bree says something to Diane. Diane is already smiling.

Captain Jensen at the bar raises his coffee without turning around.

The whole harbor watching and I do not care even a little.

...

The Dilemma

Paul's phone buzzes in his jacket pocket.

He checks it the way he checks everything — quick, professional, already reading the data.

His face changes.

“I need to step outside,” he says.

I nod.

He is gone four minutes. I stand at the edge of the floor and watch the dancers and listen to the band finish Act Naturally and start Cryin' Time and when Paul comes back in he finds me where he left me.

He looks at me. Something behind his eyes that was not there before he left.

I can ask him what his brother said. I told him everything in the dark on the breakwater.

Or I can trust his silence the way he trusted mine and let him carry it until he is ready.

I cannot have both.

...

What She Does

I take his hand.

We walk back onto the floor. The band playing Cryin' Time slow and certain. Paul pulls me close. We move together in the November dark of the community center while outside the seagulls work the dock and the storm sits on Dutch Harbor and the Bering waits for all of us to finish dancing.

He does not tell me what his brother said.

I do not ask.

The tide is going out.

CHAPTER

12

...

What She Finds

December. The harbor office at seven in the morning. Paul asked me to drop off the season's final catch report before the fleet meeting. He is already on the dock dealing with a vessel that came in overnight with a fouled prop.

I leave the report on his desk.

I am not snooping. I am leaving a report on a desk and the bank transfer confirmation is right there open on his computer screen. Not hidden. Just present the way things are present when a man lives alone and is not accustomed to anyone seeing his desk.

Sitka. His brother's name. The amount.

I look at it long enough to understand what I am looking at.

I walk out.

...

Jensen

Captain Jensen finds me at the fuel dock an hour later. Sixty years on the Bering. He says things the way old fishers say things — not to wound, just to inform.

“Paul wired money to Sitka again,” he says. Not accusatory. Just the harbor knowing what the harbor knows.

“I heard,” I say.

Jensen looks at his coffee.

“Third time this season.”

I look at the water.

“He is who he is Martha,” Jensen says. “That is not always a comfortable thing.”

He finishes his coffee and walks back toward his vessel. I stand at the fuel dock in the December dark watching the harbor breathe and thinking about Sandra Teel sitting in the tavern with her careful drink telling me things I filed away and hoped were wrong.

...

The Confrontation

I find Paul at the harbor office at noon.

He looks up from his desk. Reads my face the way he reads weather data. Already knows.

“The transfer to Sitka,” I say.

“Yes.”

“Third time this season.”

He puts his pen down.

“Yes.”

“You did not tell me.”

He is quiet for a moment. The harbor office around us. The fleet visible through the window. Everything Paul built in this harbor present in the silence between us.

“No,” he says. “I did not.”

. . .

The Explanation

“His boat needs an engine,” Paul says. “Without it he cannot fish. Without fishing he loses everything he has.” He looks at his desk. “He is my brother Martha. I cannot watch him lose everything and do nothing.”

“I am not asking you to do nothing,” I say. “I am asking you to tell me.”

He looks at me directly.

“I know.”

“Sandra Teel told me this is how it goes with you. Money to the brother. No telling until after.”

Something moves behind his eyes. Not anger. Something older and heavier than anger.

“Sandra was right,” he says. “About that part.”

The December light is already going at half past two. The harbor outside the window settling into its amber dark. Paul sitting across from me with the truth of him laid out between us — the man who stays on the radio all night, who builds things in dead men’s names, who cannot not help when someone needs it. All of it the same thing. All of it Paul.

...

The Dilemma

The harbor office is quiet around us.

I can accept who Paul is. All of him. The silence and the brother and the money. The man who cannot not help is the same man who stayed on the radio all night while my hydraulics failed in the dark.

Or I can decide that a man who keeps things from me is a man I cannot trust with the rest of my life.

I cannot have both. The whole man and the comfortable man are not the same man.

• • •

The Whole Man

“Paul,” I say.

“Martha,” he says.

“Tell me next time.”

He holds my eyes.

“Yes.”

“That is all I am asking.”

He nods once. The way he nods at weather data — acknowledged, accepted, already adjusting. A man receiving information and incorporating it without drama.

I pick up my jacket.

“Walk tonight,” he says. Not a question.

“Walk tonight,” I say.

I go back to my vessel. The December dark settling over Dutch Harbor. The seagulls working the dock. The fleet in its slips. The Bering somewhere beyond the breakwater doing what the Bering does regardless of what gets decided in harbor offices.

The tide is coming in.

CHAPTER

13

...

The Walk

The December dark comes down at four in the afternoon and stays until ten in the morning and in between there is nothing but the harbor lights and the cold and the sound of the Bering doing what it always does beyond the breakwater.

We walk.

No particular direction. The way we walk now — out of the harbor and along the waterfront and eventually to the breakwater because that is where our walks go. Paul's shoulder against mine. The seagulls somewhere in the dark above the dock lights. The fleet quiet in its slips.

We have not talked about this morning. The harbor office. Sandra Teel. The whole man.

We do not need to.

...

What Jensen Knows

“Jensen came to see me this afternoon,” Paul says.

We walk.

“He told me not to be a fool.”

“Jensen says things,” I say.

“He is usually right.” Paul is quiet for a moment. “He told me that watching you come in off the northwest corner three seasons in a row and go back to an empty bunk was the saddest thing he had seen in thirty years of Dutch Harbor.”

I look at the water.

“He said that about me,” I say.

“He said it to me,” Paul says. “As a warning.”

...

The Breakwater

We reach the end of the breakwater. The harbor lights behind us. The Bering dark and moving ahead. The December cold coming off the water with the particular weight of a cold that has been building since October and is not finished yet.

Paul stops.

He turns to look at me the way he looks at things he wants to be completely certain about. Completely. From the beginning. Nothing missed.

The harbor behind him. Everything he built visible in the amber light. Thirty vessels. Two hundred people. Tommy Reyes's name on the building at the end of the dock.

...

What He Says

"I watched your AIS track the whole first opening," he says. "Thirteen hours. From the harbor office window. Standing up."

"I know," I say.

"I knew then." He looks at me directly. "I have known since the first morning you came off that vessel and stood on my dock like you owned the ocean and were considering whether to keep it."

The Bering moves in the dark ahead of us.

"I am not good at saying things Martha," he says. "I am good at showing up. I will always show up. For you. For the Nadya. For whatever the Bering takes and whatever it gives back." He pauses. "That is what I have."

The December cold. The harbor lights. The seagulls somewhere above us working the dark the way they always work it.

He has been carrying this since October. Since the first morning.
Since the AIS track on the harbor office screen.

This is Paul Engel saying the true thing.

...

The Dilemma

The breakwater at the end of the world.

I can say yes to this man. To all of him. The showing up and the brother and the silence and the whole man who cannot not help when someone needs it.

Or I can say nothing and keep what I have been keeping for three years — the northwest corner and the empty bunk and the biological clock running underneath everything.

I cannot have both. The life I have been living and this man are not available at the same time.

...

The Meaningful Kiss

I take one step toward him.

That is all.

Paul meets me the rest of the way.

His hands on my face. Certain and warm the way everything about him is certain and warm. The harbor behind us and the Bering ahead of us and the December cold that stops mattering entirely.

When we step back the harbor lights are still amber on the water and the seagulls are still working the dock and the tide is all the way in and Dutch Harbor is exactly what it has always been.

Everything else is different.

CHAPTER

14

...

One More Opening

The Nadya clears the breakwater at five in the morning in the January dark and I point her north toward the northwest corner and do not look back.

The season is almost done. Two more weeks at most before the quota closes and the fleet comes in for good and Dutch Harbor settles into the particular quiet of a fishing town between seasons. This is the last good opening. The crab are still moving but slower now. The migration nearly complete. The northwest corner giving up its last the way it always gives up its last — not easily, not without cost, but giving.

I need six days on the water.

I need six days to think.

...

What She Thinks About

The wheelhouse at night. The Bering dark and moving around the Nadya. The crew sleeping below in shifts. The pots soaking on the northwest corner GPS marked and waiting.

Paul's face when he came back in from the phone call.

Not the Chapter 11 face. That was a man receiving information. This was a man who had received information and made a decision about it before he came back through the door. The decision already in his jaw. Already in the set of his shoulders.

I have seen that face on captains standing at the helm in deteriorating weather. The face of someone who has already calculated the outcome and accepted it.

I do not know what he accepted.

I fish.

...

Six Days

The northwest corner delivers.

Day one and two the pots come up full the way they always come up when you have read the migration correctly three seasons in a row. Day three slower. Day four slower still — the crabs moving now, the

migration completing itself, the structure shifting beneath the surface the way it shifts every January when the season is ending whether you are ready or not.

Dmitri's arm holds. The hydraulics run clean. Bree works the hauler with the efficiency of someone in her fourth season who knows exactly what she is doing.

Between hauls I stand at the bridge window and watch the January dark and think about Paul's face.

He will always show up. That is what he said on the breakwater.

He was at the dock with two mugs the morning after every opening.

I trust that.

I trust that.

Day five. Day six. The holds as full as January allows. Time to go home.

...

The Dock

Paul is at the dock in the January dark.

Two mugs. His breath visible in the cold. The harbor lights amber on the water behind him. The fleet in its slips. The seagulls working the dock the way they always work it regardless of the hour or the season or what gets decided on breakwaters in December.

He looks at the holds. Looks at me.

“Good opening,” he says.

“Last good one,” I say.

He hands me the coffee. We stand at the rail the way we always stand at the rail. The harbor breathing around us. His shoulder against mine.

Something is still on his face. Still decided. Still not said.

...

The Dilemma

The harbor quiet around us. The January cold. Two mugs of coffee getting warm in our hands.

Six days on the Bering and I still do not know what was decided.

I can ask him.

Or I can trust the two mugs and the showing up he promised.

...

Cryin' Time

The community center that evening. The Buck Owens impersonator one last time. The whole harbor there because the season is ending

and Dutch Harbor knows how to say goodbye to a good one.

Paul holds the door.

We dance the way we dance. His hand at the small of my back.
The floor full around us. Carla and Bree and Diane at their table.
Jensen at the bar. The harbor watching and everything exactly right
and underneath it the tide already moving.

The impersonator slows it all the way down.

Cryin' Time.

Paul pulls me close. We move slowly. The community center
warm around us and the January dark outside and the Bering beyond
that waiting for the season to end the way it always ends — not with
ceremony, just with direction.

The song is about leaving.

Neither of us says a word.

The tide is going out.

CHAPTER

15

...

May

May comes to Dutch Harbor the way May always comes — not gently, not with ceremony, just with light. More of it every day. The darkness that has been sitting on this harbor since October lifting by degrees until the evenings are gold and long and the Bering looks almost forgiving.

The terns are back.

I hear them before I see them. That sharp particular cry above the harbor, above the fleet, above everything. Three of them working the breakwater in the May light. Back from wherever they go. Back to the same rocks they left in August.

I stand on the dock and watch them and think about Bristol Bay.

...

What Paul Tells Her

He finds me at the Nadya at seven in the morning. Two mugs. The May light already gold behind him.

He looks at the harbor for a long moment. At everything he built here. Thirty vessels. Two hundred people. The building at the end of the dock with Tommy Reyes's name on it.

Then he looks at me.

"My brother needs me in Sitka," he says. "Not the boat. Him. He is not well Martha. He has not been well since January and I have been —" He stops. "I should have told you in January."

"Yes," I say.

"I am leaving May fifteenth."

The May light on the water. The terns crying above the breakwater. The Nadya in her slip exactly as she has always been.

. . .

Bristol Bay

"I am going to Bristol Bay," I say.

He looks at me.

"Bree is already signed on. Salmon season opens June tenth. I have been going to Bristol Bay since I was nineteen years old." I look at my vessel. "It is the next thing. It has always been the next thing."

We stand at the rail with our coffee in the May light. Two people who chose each other in October standing in the same harbor pointing in different directions.

“Martha,” he says.

“Paul,” I say.

...

What She Knows

I know what I am going to say before I say it. I have known since January when I saw his face come back through the community center door with something decided in it. I have known since the six days on the Bering when I told myself I trusted the two mugs and the showing up.

I trusted them. I do trust them.

That is not the problem.

The problem is I am thirty-four years old and I want children and a home and a man who comes back through the breakwater and is still there in the morning. Not a man who is good at showing up when he is here. A man who stays.

Paul Engel cannot not go to Sitka. That is who he is. The man who cannot not help when someone needs it.

I love that about him.

I cannot build a life on it.

...

The Dilemma

The May light on the harbor. The terns above the breakwater. The Bering beyond it doing what it always does.

I can wait. Bristol Bay is three months. Sitka is — I do not know how long Sitka is. We can come back to this in September. See where we are. Two people who are always leaving can figure out how to stop leaving.

Or I can say the true thing now. The thing I have known since January. The thing the biological clock has been saying underneath everything since October.

I cannot have both. The hope that September fixes this and the truth I already know are not available at the same time.

...

May 15th

“I cannot do this Paul,” I say.

He is very still.

“I cannot be the harbor you come back to between the things that need you. I cannot wait and see and hope that September looks

different.” I look at him directly. “I want a husband. I want children. I want someone who is here.” My voice is steady. “You are the best man I have known. You are not that man.”

The May light. The terns. The Bering.

Paul looks at me for a long time. The way he looks at things he wants to be completely certain about.

“I know,” he says.

Two words. The truest thing he has said since the breakwater in December.

He sets his mug on the dock box. Looks at the Nadya one last time the way harbor masters look at vessels — making sure, being certain, not missing anything.

He walks back toward the harbor office.

I watch him go.

Above me the terns are crying over the breakwater in the May light, back from wherever they go, back to the same rocks, back to begin again.

The tide is all the way out.

CHAPTER

16

...

Loading Out

Dutch Harbor. June first. The Nadya loaded for Bristol Bay — gear stowed, holds cleaned, fuel topped, everything in its place the way everything is always in its place on my vessel.

Carla is on the dock.

Not going. Just there. Arms crossed. The expression she uses when she has things to say and has decided to say only some of them.

“You could stay,” she says.

“I go to Bristol Bay every June,” I say.

“You go to Bristol Bay every June alone,” she says. “This June is different.”

I hand her a dock line. She coils it the way she has coiled dock lines on this vessel for three seasons. Her hands knowing the work

without thinking about it.

“Come back in one piece,” she says.

“I always come back in one piece.”

She looks at me the way Carla looks at things she does not entirely believe. Then she hugs me once — direct, brief, completely Carla — and walks back up the dock without looking back.

Dmitri is already aboard. Bree coming down the dock with her gear. Behind her a man I do not recognize carrying a duffel and moving with the particular ease of someone who has loaded onto vessels he did not own for most of his life.

...

Austin

Bree stops at the gangway.

“This is Austin,” she says. The tone of a woman presenting information without editorial comment. “He needs passage to Bristol Bay. I told him you might have room.”

Mid thirties. The look of someone who has been outside in every weather condition the North Pacific offers and has made his peace with all of them. He looks at the *Nadya* the way experienced fishers look at vessels they are about to trust their lives to — checking the lines, the trim, the general condition of a boat that tells you everything about the captain before you meet her.

He looks up.

“Austin Reeves,” he says. “I can work the passage.”

I look at Bree. Bree looks at the horizon.

“Stow your gear forward,” I say. “We leave in an hour.”

...

The Passage

Three days from Dutch Harbor to Bristol Bay.

Austin works. Not because I asked him to — because that is who he is. He is on deck before Dmitri in the mornings. He knows every system on the *Nadya* within six hours of boarding without being shown. He coils line the way someone coils line when they have been doing it since they were old enough to hold rope.

The first evening I watch him from the wheelhouse. He and Dmitri working together in the particular silence of two people who do not need words for physical work. Bree at the rail watching the water. The Gulf of Alaska gray and cold around the *Nadya*.

I think about Paul.

I think about Paul and I watch Austin Reeves work my deck and I think about Paul.

...

What Bree Says

The second night. The Gulf dark around us. Dmitri below. Austin on watch at the bow, his back to the wheelhouse, the spray off the hull catching the running lights.

Bree comes up with two mugs. Sets one beside me without being asked.

We watch the water for a long time.

“He is not Paul,” Bree says.

“I know that.”

“I am not saying that is bad.” She drinks her coffee. “Paul was the right man at the wrong time. Or the wrong man at the right time. I have not decided which.” She looks at Austin’s back at the bow. “Austin Reeves follows the catch the way you follow the catch. He understands what you are.”

“Bree.”

“I am not saying anything.” She finishes her coffee. “I am just saying he understands what you are.”

She goes back below.

I watch Austin at the bow and think about Paul and drink my coffee and watch the Gulf of Alaska take us northeast toward Bristol Bay and the salmon and whatever comes next.

...

The Dilemma

The wheelhouse at midnight. The Nadya running steady. Austin still at the bow.

I ended it with the best man I have known three weeks ago. I am thirty-four years old and the biological clock does not take bereavement leave.

I can keep the wall up. Austin Reeves is crew for a three day passage and nothing more. Bristol Bay is work. That is all.

Or I can let Bree be right. Just once. Let someone who understands what I am be worth looking at.

I cannot have both. The grief I am still carrying and whatever this is are not available at the same time.

...

Bristol Bay

Bristol Bay comes up on the third morning in the June light.

The light here is different from Dutch Harbor. Longer. Softer at the edges. The midnight sun not quite arrived but building — the evenings going gold and refusing to end, the darkness never quite coming, the whole sky in a permanent state of almost.

Austin comes off the bow as we enter the bay. Walks back to the wheelhouse. Looks at the water ahead of us.

“First time in Bristol Bay,” he says.

“You have never fished Bristol Bay,” I say.

“Never needed to.” He looks at me. “I go where the catch is.”

He says it simply. A man being accurate about his own conditions.

The way people tell you who they are before you are ready to hear it.

I bring the Nadya into Bristol Bay in the June light with the midnight sun arriving and Austin Reeves standing beside me and somewhere behind us Dutch Harbor and Paul Engel and the tide all the way out.

The tide is coming in.

CHAPTER

17

...

The Boat

Austin knows a man selling.

Austin Reeves has been following the catch globally for fifteen years and knows someone in every port who is selling something useful at the right time. The man's name is Cobb. Sixty years old. Been fishing Bristol Bay since before Martha was born. His knees are done and he knows it and he wants to sell before the season starts not after.

Boat and permit together. A 1994 Jumbo Wegley. 32 feet. Fiberglass. Everything works. The permit clean and transferable.

Martha walks the boat stem to stern the way she walks every vessel she is about to trust her life to. Hull sound. Engine rebuilt two seasons ago. The net drum on the stern well maintained. The fish holds clean and cold.

She looks at Cobb.

“I am buying to fish one season and sell,” she says.

Cobb looks at her. Looks at Austin. Back at her.

“I know,” he says. “Austin told me. I want her to go to someone who will fish her right for one more season before she sits in a yard somewhere.”

Martha makes him an offer.

Cobb takes it.

...

The Radio

The radio is everything in Bristol Bay.

Not the VHF. The public radio station out of Dillingham — KDLG — broadcasting the Fish and Game openings and closings every few hours like a heartbeat. Martha learns to sleep with it on. Learns to wake up at the specific frequency change that means an announcement is coming. Learns the particular silence before the opener is called that the whole fleet hears at the same time.

When the opener comes everyone moves at once. Hundreds of vessels all hitting the water in the same window chasing the same fish in the same piece of water. Combat fishing. The most chaotic and alive thing Martha has ever seen on the water and she has been on the water her whole life.

Austin on the stern working the net with the same complete efficiency he showed on the Nadya's deck. No wasted motion. No instruction needed. He has never done this specific fishery and he fishes it like he invented it.

"You have done this before," she says.

"No," he says. He is already resetting the net. "But I have done everything else."

...

The Salmon

The sockeye come in like a tide.

Not one fish at a time. Millions of them moving together through the bay toward the rivers where they were born, the water green and thick with them, the nets filling in minutes when the run peaks in July. Martha has fished Bristol Bay before but not like this — not as the captain, not with her own permit, not with Austin Reeves on the stern reading the water the way she reads the northwest corner.

He sees them before the net tells him they are there. Something in the way the surface moves. The birds working a particular piece of water. He points. She turns the boat. The net goes out.

Full on the first drift.

"How did you know," she says.

He looks at the water the way Eli Marsh looks at the tundra. Completely. Nothing missed.

“The birds,” he says. “And the way the current bends around them.”

A man who reads water the way she reads water. She files that and does not take it out again for three days.

...

The Beach

The opener closes at midnight. The sun still up. The bay golden and quiet after six hours of combat fishing. Martha ties off to the tender, offloads, collects her fish ticket, points the bow toward the beach where Bree has a fire going.

Fresh sockeye on a grill made from a section of old crab pot. Bree with a beer she brought from Dutch Harbor because Bristol Bay is dry and Bree planned ahead. Dmitri eating in the particular focused silence of a man who has been working since four in the morning and has earned every bite.

Austin sits beside Martha on a piece of driftwood and eats his salmon and watches the midnight sun on the water and says nothing.

She watches him not say anything.

This is the thing. He is the man who follows the catch globally, who has been on every water there is, who knows someone selling in every port — and he can sit on a beach in the Bristol Bay midnight sun

and be completely still and not need to fill the silence with anything.

...

The Dilemma

The midnight sun on the water. The fire low. Bree and Dmitri gone to their bunks. Martha and Austin on the driftwood with the bay spread out in front of them gold and quiet.

I can let Austin Reeves be a friend. A good one. The kind you make on the water and keep for life.

Or I can let this be a romance.

...

What She Does

The fire burns down.

Austin looks at me. Not the way men look at women when they have decided something. The way he looks at the water — completely, reading what is there, not rushing the information.

“Tell me about Bristol Bay,” he says. “When you were nineteen.”

Nobody has ever asked her that.

“Perhaps another time.”

The midnight sun moves in its slow circle. The bay breathes. The salmon are still running somewhere out there in the dark that is not dark, moving toward the rivers where they were born, doing what they were made to do regardless of what gets decided on beaches.

CHAPTER

18

...

The Laptop

The opener closes at eleven at night. The sun still up. The bay gold and quiet. I tie off to the tender, collect my fish ticket, point the bow toward the beach.

Bree is already there with the laptop open on a piece of driftwood.

“Danny is on,” she says.

Austin looks at me. I look at the screen.

Danny Rosenberg is standing on a dock somewhere in Alaska with the midnight sun blazing behind him at what the clock says is two in the morning. He is wearing a Brooklyn Nets cap and holding a coffee mug and looking at the sun over his shoulder with the expression of a man who has been personally betrayed by astronomy.

. . .

Danny In The Midnight Sun

“I came here because of the terns,” Danny says to the camera. “Someone in a love story told me about them. Birds that follow the sun from the top of the world to the bottom and back. Two summers every year. No darkness. No winter. Just — light.” He looks at the sun again. “I thought that sounded nice.”

He pauses.

“It is two seventeen in the morning.”

He points at the sun.

“That is still happening.”

Polly’s voice from somewhere off screen.

“The midnight sun occurs at latitudes above sixty six point five degrees north during the summer solstice period Danny.”

“Thank you Polly.”

“You are welcome.”

“Did I know that before I came here.”

“You did Danny.”

“And I came anyway.”

“You did Danny.”

Austin is already smiling. Not performing a smile. Actually smiling the way people smile when something is genuinely funny and they are not trying to manage their reaction.

...

The Sunrise Card

Danny holds up the Expander card. Card number three. Sunrise and grounding. Barefoot in the dirt. Thirty minutes of morning light.

“This card changed my life,” he says. “I stand barefoot in the dirt every morning and I watch the sunrise and something in my nervous system says — okay. We made it through the night. The sun came back. We are going to be fine.”

He looks at the midnight sun.

“I have been standing barefoot in the dirt for four days.” He looks at his feet. “The sun has not moved.”

Polly.

“The sun rises at approximately two forty four AM at this latitude in July Danny.”

“So I missed it.”

“By fourteen minutes.”

“Every day.”

“Every day Danny.”

“The terns do not need this card. The terns ARE this card. They just follow the light without anyone telling them to.” He points at the midnight sun. “I flew four thousand miles to stand in what they swim through every year like it is nothing.”

Martha looks at Austin.

Austin is watching Danny with the complete attention of a man hearing something that is landing somewhere real.

. . .

Live Or Not

Danny stops mid-sentence. Looks at the camera. Looks at Polly.

“Wait,” he says. “Am I live right now?”

Polly checks her clipboard.

“You are not live Danny.”

“Then who am I talking to.”

“You are talking to yourself from three weeks ago.”

Danny looks at the camera. Looks at the midnight sun behind him.

“Three weeks ago I was in Brooklyn. There is no midnight sun in Brooklyn.”

“Correct Danny.”

“So my avatar traveled here without me.”

“It would appear so Danny.”

Danny looks at the sun. Looks at the camera. Looks at the sun again.

“Life is meant to have fun,” he says.

He says it the way he always says it. Not as a punchline. Not as a lesson. Just as a man stating the most accurate thing he knows about being alive.

Austin laughs until he cannot stop.

Martha watches Austin laugh and something that has been closed since May opens just enough to let the light in.

...

After

The laptop closes. The bay gold around them. Bree and Dmitri gone to their bunks. The fire low.

Austin looks at Martha.

“He is right,” he says.

“Danny is always right,” I say. “He just usually does not know it either.”

Austin picks up a piece of driftwood and turns it in his hands. The particular stillness of a man who is not done thinking.

“The terns,” he says. “They go back to the same colony every year. Same nest site. Same birds.”

“Yes.”

“They follow the sun all the way around the world and they still come back to the same place.”

I look at the water.

I still have the same choice to make. Friendship or romance.

...

The Choice

It feels like romance to me. Life is meant to have fun.

The midnight sun on the water. The salmon still running somewhere out in the bay.

Danny Rosenberg. Tonight was fun.

CHAPTER

19

...

The Opener

Radio at four in the morning. The opener called.

I am already dressed. Austin is already on deck. Bree behind him pulling on her gloves. Dmitri at the stern checking the net drum.

We look at each other.

We go.

...

Combat

Two hundred boats hitting the water at the same time. The bay churning white. Everyone running for position. I know this bay. I have been running these grounds since I was nineteen years old and I

know where the fish will be before the net tells me.

I turn us north.

Austin on the stern. No instruction needed. The net goes out clean on the first set and he is already watching the water for the next drift before the first one soaks.

Full in six minutes.

We reset. Full again. Reset. Full again. The sockeye stacked the way they only stack when the run peaks — millions of them moving through the bay toward the rivers where they were born, red and certain and unstoppable.

The tender finds us at noon. We offload without stopping. The fish ticket. Back to the grounds.

Austin on the stern in the noon sun that looks exactly like the four in the morning sun because it is all the same sun. Picking fish. Resetting. Watching the water. Pointing. I turn the boat. The net goes out.

Full.

...

What She Files

He does not ask how long we are going.

He does not check the clock. He does not look at the beach. He does not do the thing people do when they are getting tired — the

small adjustments, the slowing down, the looking toward shore.

He just works.

Hour after hour in the Bristol Bay midnight sun that is also the Bristol Bay noon sun and the Bristol Bay four in the morning sun because it is all the same light and time has stopped meaning what it usually means.

I file that. Put it somewhere I will look at later.

We offload again at what the clock says is midnight. The tender crew looking at our numbers.

“Good day,” the tender man says.

“We are not done,” I say.

...

Day Two

Day two the opener is still running.

Fish and Game counting the escapement upriver. The numbers good. The run still coming. The radio silent on closures.

We fish.

Bree and Dmitri sleeping in shifts below. Austin and I running the deck together in the two in the morning sun that is also the ten in the morning sun. The net going out and coming in. The fish silver and red in the holds. The tender finding us again.

More fish tickets.

Austin picks a sockeye out of the net and holds it up. Big. Deep red. Perfect.

He looks at me.

“Beautiful,” he says.

He is not talking about the fish.

I take it from him and put it in the hold.

...

The Dilemma

End of day two. Forty hours running. The holds nearly full. The opener still going.

The tender man tells us the run is peaking. Two more days if Fish and Game keeps it open. The best numbers in five years.

I can call it now. Go in. Rest. Bank what we have. It is already a good season.

Or I can keep going. Two more days. More fish. More this.

...

Keep Going

I look at Austin.

He is looking at the water. Already reading the next drift. Already working the next set in his head.

“Two more days,” I say.

He looks at me. The full smile of a man who was not going to suggest it but was hoping to be asked.

“Two more days,” he says.

The tide is all the way in.

CHAPTER

20

...

Day Three

Day three the opener is still running and Dutch Harbor feels like another life.

The bay in full frenzy around us. The fleet running hard. The fish still coming. The midnight sun doing its endless circle while time dissolves into net sets and fish tickets and the particular exhaustion of people who have stopped counting hours because the hours stopped meaning anything two days ago.

Austin on the stern. I am on the wheel. Bree and Dmitri sleeping below in shifts. Just the two of us and the bay and the nets going in and out.

He points.

I turn.

Full.

...

What Exhaustion Does

Exhaustion strips everything away.

Not the bad kind of exhaustion. The kind that comes from four days of meaningful work in a place that is giving you everything it has. The kind that leaves you with nothing but what is actually there.

No performance. No management. No deciding what to show and what to keep back.

Just Austin Reeves on my stern in the Bristol Bay midnight sun picking fish out of a net for the fourth day running and not being anything other than exactly who he is.

A man who reads water. Who works without being asked. Who followed the catch globally for fifteen years and showed up on my dock in Dutch Harbor with a duffel and offered to work the passage.

I know why he came to Bristol Bay.

I know it the way I knew the northwest corner was delivering before the first pot came up.

...

The Radio

Four in the afternoon on day three. The radio.

Not an opener announcement. Fish and Game calling a twelve hour closure. Escapement numbers. Let the fish rest. Let the fleet rest.

The bay goes quiet all at once. Two hundred boats standing down at the same moment. The particular silence of a fishery that has been running at full speed for three days suddenly stopping.

Austin looks up from the stern.

Bree comes up from below. Dmitri behind her. Both of them blinking in the sun that has not moved.

“Twelve hours,” Bree says.

“Twelve hours,” I say.

...

The Deck

Bree and Dmitri go back below.

Austin and I stand on the deck in the twelve hour silence. The bay golden around us. The fleet at rest. The fish still running somewhere beneath the surface going where they are going regardless of what Fish and Game decides.

We are covered in four days of Bristol Bay. Fish slime and salt and the particular smell of sockeye that gets into everything. My hands are raw from the net drum. Austin has a cut on his forearm from a line that ran wrong on day two that he did not mention and I noticed and

said nothing about because he did not want it mentioned.

We stand on the deck and look at the bay.

...

The Kiss

He turns to look at me.

Four days of Bristol Bay on both of us. The midnight sun on the water. The fleet at rest around us. The radio quiet.

He takes my face in both hands.

Not rushed. Not uncertain. The way he does everything — completely, from the beginning, nothing missed.

I put my hands over his.

...

Day Five

Twelve hours later the radio calls the opener.

I am already dressed. Austin is already on deck.

He looks at me differently than he looked at me yesterday.

I look at him the same way.

We go.

The tide is coming in and it does not stop.

CHAPTER

21

...

Day Five

The run is thinning.

I can feel it before the tender man tells me. The nets coming up lighter. The drifts taking longer. The fleet spreading out across the bay looking for fish that were everywhere three days ago and are somewhere specific now.

Austin is on the stern looking at the water.

He points northeast.

Nobody is fishing northeast. The whole fleet is working the river mouths the way they always work them when the run peaks. Northeast is open water. Northeast is where you go when you do not know where else to go.

I turn us northeast.

...

Where The Fish Are

Full in four minutes.

I look at Austin. He is already watching the water for the next drift. Not surprised. Not satisfied. Just reading.

We reset northeast. Full again. The sockeye stacked in open water where nobody thought to look because the run has always peaked at the river mouths and Austin Reeves does not fish where the run has always peaked. He fishes where the fish are right now.

The tender finds us at noon. Looks at our numbers. Looks at the fleet spread across the bay pulling light nets.

“How,” he says.

I look at Austin.

Austin looks at the water.

“He reads it,” I say.

The tender man shakes his head and takes our fish and goes.

...

The Fleet

By mid afternoon three boats are following us.

Not close. Respectful distance. Watching where we set and setting nearby after we move. I have been the followed boat before — on the northwest corner in Dutch Harbor when Morrison watched from two miles out. This is different. These are not Morrison. These are fishermen reading the same data the tender man read and making a logical decision.

Austin notices them.

“We have company,” he says.

“We always have company when the fish are running,” I say.

He almost smiles. Goes back to watching the water.

Points west.

I turn west. The three boats turn west behind us at respectful distance.

Full in five minutes.

...

Day Six

Day six the run is nearly done.

The tender man tells us at the morning offload. Escapement numbers strong. Fish and Game will close it tomorrow. Last day.

The fleet knows. Everyone fishing hard. The particular urgency of a last day — not panic, just intention. Everyone wringing what is

left out of the season before the radio goes quiet for good.

Austin on the stern in the last day sun. Same as day one. Same boots. Same jacket. Same complete attention to the water.

I watch him from the wheelhouse.

Six days. Six days of Bristol Bay and this man on my stern and the midnight sun and the radio and the fish tickets stacking up and something that started on a driftwood log in the firelight and became something else entirely somewhere in the middle of four days of continuous opener.

He points.

I turn.

Full.

...

The Last Offload

The tender man comes to us at what the clock says is ten at night for the last offload of the season.

He looks at our final numbers. Looks at me. Looks at Austin.

“Best boat in the bay this week,” he says.

Austin picks the last sockeye out of the hold. Holds it up. Big. Deep red. Perfect. The last fish of the season.

He looks at me.

I look at him.

He puts it in the brailer.

The season is over tomorrow. The boat sells next week. Bristol Bay ends and Dutch Harbor begins again and somewhere in between those two things is the question neither of us has asked out loud.

I can let it stay unasked. Get through tomorrow. Sell the boat. Go back to the Nadya. Let Bristol Bay be what Bristol Bay was.

Or I can be the kind of woman who asks.

...

Not Yet

I do not ask.

Not tonight. The last day is still running and there is still fish to catch and Austin is already back on the stern reading the water in the last light of the Bristol Bay season.

Tomorrow.

The tide is all the way in.

CHAPTER

22

...

The Last Fish

The tender man takes our numbers and goes.

Austin picks the last sockeye out of the hold. Big. Deep red. Perfect. He holds it up the way he held up the first one six days ago.

He looks at me.

He puts it in the brailer.

The image plays over and over in my mind.

I take a deep breath.

...

The Declaration

“I love you Martha.”

The deck goes quiet. Bree does not move. Dmitri does not move.
Bristol Bay does not move.

“I love you Austin.”

...

The Kiss

I have never kissed for so long.

...

Bree

We hold on to each other until Bree bumps us.

...

Austin's Sacrifice

He does not let go of my hands.

“I am not following the catch anymore,” he says. “I am done moving.” He looks at me the way he looks at water he has already read completely. “I found what I was looking for.”

The midnight sun on the bay. The fleet around us. The radio quiet for the first time in six days.

...

Time For Shore

Dmitri steers us back to shore. Everyone is dog tired.

The boat moves slowly, so do we.

Exhausted and exhilarated at the same time.

Finally we reach the dock.

We disembark in silence.

Austin goes back to the cabin.

CHAPTER

23

“Paul.”

“Martha.”

My heart is pounding.

I’m jumping into his arms.

He catches me.

We kiss.

My head is swimming. I’m floating.

I open my eyes. There’s Austin.

Torn between two lovers. Grappling for what to say.

“Paul, I love you.”

“Austin, I love you.”

“Paul, I love you.”

“Austin, I love you.”

“Paul, I love you.”

“Austin, I love you.”

Bree shouts,

“Choose.”

I place my hand in Paul’s.

He calmly says,

“Will you marry me, Martha.”

“Yes Paul, yes.”

— — —

CHAPTER

24

The Zoom Show How To Be Funny When You're Not Special
Episode: The Catch — A Love Story Fifteen Years Later*

...

Opening

Polly: Good evening. I am Polly Cebos. I am twenty six years old. I have been the Master of Ceremonies of this program since I was eleven. According to my data tonight's episode involves one harbor master, one fishing captain, one global catch follower, one veteran deckhand, one processing dock sorter, one sixty year veteran of the Bering Sea, one old flame, one support vessel mechanic, five children, an undetermined number of grandchildren, and one ranchette of unspecified acreage in an undisclosed location. We will also be hearing from Danny Rosenberg who is our host and who may or may not be live at this time.

Danny: Thank you Polly. I am Danny Rosenberg. I am a

fictional therapeutic comedian from the book Expander Reaction. I have been in several love stories. They seem to always find me. Tonight we are inside one of them. Fifteen years after the last chapter. I have questions.

He looks at the camera.

“Before we begin I need to ask something important. Martha. You’re a fictional character like I am, right.”

Martha says nothing.

“Polly. Is Martha a fictional character like I am.”

“According to available data Danny, Martha Volkov is a fictional character created by the author Martha Volkov. As are you. As am I.”

Danny looks at his coffee mug.

“Well. That explains a lot.”

“Shall we proceed Danny.”

“Yes Polly. Let’s proceed.”

...

Interview One — Martha Volkov

Age 49. Ranchette. Undisclosed location, Alaska. Occupation: Former captain, F/V Nadya. Current occupation: Mother.

Grandmother. Retired.

“Danny:” Martha. Thank you for being here.

“Martha:” You asked me seventeen times.

“Danny:” I did. You said no sixteen times.

“Martha:” Paul said say yes.

“Danny:” Paul is a wise man. We will get to Paul. First — fifteen years ago you were standing on a Bristol Bay dock and you jumped into a man’s arms. Take me back to that moment.

“Martha:” No.

“Danny:” No.

“Martha:” You were there Danny. You told me life is meant to have fun. You were not even live.

“Danny:” I am frequently not live. It is a condition of my existence. But I need you to take me back to the dock.

Martha is quiet for a moment.

“Martha:” My heart was pounding. My head was swimming. I was floating.

“Danny:” You were floating.

“Martha:” I was standing on a dock and I was floating.

“Danny:” And then.

“Martha:” And then Bree shouted Choose.

“Danny:” Bree shouted Choose.

“Martha:” Bree has always been direct.

“Danny:” We will get to Bree. You placed your hand in Paul’s.

“Martha:” Yes.

“Danny:” Why Paul.

Martha looks at the camera the way she looks at the northwest corner — completely, from the beginning, nothing missed.

“Martha:” He was already there when I arrived. He knew my vessel was in slip fourteen before I did. He watched my AIS track for thirteen hours standing up. He stayed on the radio all night in the dark when my hydraulics failed fifty miles out on the Bering. He built a harbor in a dead man’s name and let that man’s sister come every October to see it.

She pauses.

“Martha:” He caught me.

“Danny:” He caught me. That is the name of the story.

“Martha:” It is the name of the story.

“Polly:” The title The Catch has a double meaning Danny. It refers to both commercial fishing operations and to the act of catching a falling or jumping person. It also refers colloquially to a desirable romantic partner as in he is quite a catch.

“Danny:” Martha. The proposal. Will you marry me Martha. On a Bristol Bay dock. Fifteen years ago. What did you say.

“Martha:” Yes Paul. Yes.

“Danny:” And then what happened.

“Martha:” We got married.

“Danny:” Just like that.

“Martha:” Just like that.

“Danny:” Where.

“Martha:” Las Vegas.

“Danny:” Of course.

“Polly:” Las Vegas Nevada is the most common destination for spontaneous marriages in the United States Danny with approximately one hundred and twenty thousand weddings performed annually.

“Danny:” Were you wearing fishing gear.

“Martha:” I was wearing the dress I brought to Dutch Harbor.

“Danny:” You brought a dress to Dutch Harbor.

“Martha:” I always brought a dress to Dutch Harbor.

“Danny:” Martha. The children. Tell me about the children.

Martha's rectangle changes. Not her expression exactly.

Something behind her eyes that has nothing to do with harbor masters or AIS tracks or the northwest corner.

“Martha:” Five. Three girls. Two boys. The oldest is fourteen. The youngest is four.

“Danny:” And they know the water.

“Martha:” They know the water.

“Danny:” The Nadya.

“Martha:” Paul sold the harbor master position two years after we married. We fished together for three seasons. Then the ranchette. Then the children. The Nadya is in Kodiak. My eldest daughter is learning her.

A silence in the rectangle.

“Danny:” Martha. Was it worth it. The shore. The ranchette. The fishing life given up.

Martha does not answer immediately. The audience rectangles are very still.

“Martha:” Yes.

“Danny:” One word.

“Martha:” One word.

“Danny:” Do you miss it.

Martha looks at something outside the frame of her rectangle. The ranchette perhaps. The undisclosed location. The five children somewhere nearby.

“Martha:” I miss the northwest corner sometimes. Early October. The first opening. The way the first pot comes up.

“Danny:” But.

“Martha:” But Paul is here when I come home.

The audience rectangles are quiet.

“Danny:” He catches you.

“Martha:” He catches me.

...

Interview Two — Paul Engel

*Age 52. Ranchette. Undisclosed location, Alaska. Occupation:
Former harbor master, Dutch Harbor. Current occupation:
Father. Rancher. Occasional fisherman.*

“Danny:” Paul. Thank you for being here.

“Paul:” Martha said say yes.

“Danny:” She said you said say yes.

“Paul:” We say yes to each other now. It is a system.

“Danny:” That is a good system. Paul. October. Fifteen years ago plus fifteen. You saw Martha Volkov standing on the wharf when the Northern Pursuit came in. What did you think.

“Paul:” I thought her vessel was in slip fourteen and she needed to know that.

“Danny:” That is what you thought.

“Paul:” That is what I said. What I thought is different.

“Danny:” What did you think.

Paul looks at something outside the frame of his rectangle. The ranchette. The undisclosed location. Fifteen years of something.

“Paul:” I thought I was in trouble.

The audience rectangles laugh.

“Danny:” You watched her AIS track the whole first opening. Thirteen hours. Standing up.

“Paul:” I watch all the vessels.

“Danny:” Standing up. For thirteen hours.

“Paul:” I have good posture.

More laughter in the rectangles.

“Polly:” Paul. Question four of seventeen. You turned down your brother’s boat offer in November of that year. You cited the harbor as your reason. Was the harbor your reason.

“Paul:” No.

“Polly:” What was your reason.

“Paul:” Martha was in slip fourteen.

“Polly:” Question seven of seventeen. You stayed on the radio all night when Martha’s hydraulics failed on the northwest corner. Standard harbor master protocol or something else.

“Paul:” Something else.

“Polly:” Can you be more specific.

“Paul:” No.

“Danny:” Paul. The declaration. The breakwater. December. You told her you were good at showing up. You said you would always show up. Did you know then that you were going to marry her.

“Paul:” I knew in October.

“Danny:” October.

“Paul:” The first morning. She came off the vessel and stood on the dock like she owned the ocean and was considering whether to keep it.

A rectangle in the back row of the audience is crying. Several others.

“Danny:” You left for Sitka. She ended it.

“Paul:” Yes.

“Danny:” Was she right to end it.

Paul does not answer immediately.

“Paul:” Yes. She was right. I was still the man who went silent when his brother needed something. She needed a man who stayed. I was not that man yet.

“Danny:” Yet.

“Paul:” Yet.

“Danny:” What changed.

“Paul:” I spent four months in Sitka watching my brother get better and thinking about a woman standing on a dock in the Bristol Bay midnight sun. I understood what I had done. What I had not done.

“Danny:” You gave up the harbor.

“Paul:” I gave up the harbor I built in Tommy Reyes’s name. That was the hardest thing I have ever done.

“Danny:” Why did you do it.

“Paul:” Because Martha Volkov was worth more than anything I had built without her.

The audience rectangles are very still.

“Polly:” Question twelve of seventeen. You arrived in Bristol Bay without warning. How did you know where she was.

“Paul:” Jensen.

“Danny:” Jensen told you.

“Paul:” Jensen said don’t let the tide go out Paul. He said it every time I called. For four months. Don’t let the tide go out.

“Danny:” And you flew to Bristol Bay.

“Paul:” I drove to the airport. Jensen called me a fool for driving.

The audience rectangles laugh through their tears.

“Danny:” You saw her come off the boat.

“Paul:” I saw her come off the boat.

“Danny:” And.

“Paul:” And she ran.

“Danny:” She jumped.

“Paul:” She jumped.

“Danny:” You caught her.

Paul looks at the camera. The full smile Martha saw for the first time on a Dutch Harbor dance floor fifteen years ago.

“Paul:” I caught her.

• • •

How Did That Work Out For You — Paul and Martha Together

Five Year Segments

“Danny:” Paul. Martha. Years one through five. Take me there.

“Martha:” We got married in Las Vegas. I was wearing the dress I brought to Dutch Harbor.

“Paul:” I sold the harbor master position eight months after the wedding.

“Danny:” How did that work out.

Paul is quiet for a moment.

“Paul:” There were mornings in year one and year two when I stood at the window looking at nothing.

“Danny:” The harbor.

“Paul:” The harbor. Tommy Reyes’s name on the building. Thirty vessels. Two hundred people. I built that from nothing and I walked away from it and there were mornings it felt like amputation.

“Danny:” Martha. Did you know.

“Martha:” I always knew. I brought him coffee.

“Danny:” You never said anything.

“Martha:” He knew I knew. That was enough.

“Paul:” That was enough.

Polly: During years one through five Paul and Martha Engel produced three children. A girl in year one. A boy in year two. A girl in year four. The harbor master position in Dutch Harbor was filled by a man named Garrett who according to

available data keeps a photograph of Tommy Reyes on the office wall.

“Danny:” Paul. When did the window mornings stop.

“Paul:” When our son was born. Year two. I was holding him and I looked at Martha and I understood what I had traded the harbor for.

“Danny:” Was it a good trade.

Paul does not answer immediately.

“Paul:” Yes.

“Danny:” Martha. The fishing. Years one through five you were still on the water.

“Martha:” Three seasons. Paul crewed for me on the Nadya. He was good.

“Danny:” Paul Engel was good on a crab boat.

“Martha:” He was good at everything he decided to be good at.

“Paul:” I was seasick the first week.

The audience rectangles laugh.

“Martha:” He was seasick the first week.

“Danny:” How did that work out.

“Martha:” He never complained. He just worked.

A pause.

“Martha:” That was when I knew I had chosen correctly.

“Danny:” Paul. Martha. Years six through ten. The ranchette. Martha stops fishing. Take me there.

“Martha:” Year six I sold the Jumbo Wegley. I had been leasing it back to Cobb’s nephew. Year six I sold it outright. That was manageable.

“Danny:” And the Nadya.

Martha looks at something outside the rectangle.

“Martha:” Year seven I brought the Nadya into Kodiak and tied her up and came home.

“Danny:” How did that work out.

Martha is quiet for a long time.

“Martha:” There were mornings in year seven and year eight when I stood outside before the children woke up and faced the direction of the Bering.

“Danny:” Paul. Did you know.

“Paul:” I always knew. I brought her coffee.

The audience rectangles are very still.

“Danny:” Martha. Did you regret it.

“Martha:” Regret is the wrong word.

“Danny:” What is the right word.

“Martha:” Grief. I grieved the fishing life the way you grieve something that was real and good and had to end. Grief is not regret. I chose the shore. I would choose it again. But I grieved it.

Polly: During years six through ten Paul and Martha Engel produced two additional children. A boy in year six. A girl in year nine. The ranchette was expanded in year eight to accommodate what Martha described in a local newspaper interview as a completely unreasonable number of people.

“Danny:” A completely unreasonable number of people.

“Martha:” Five children and Paul’s brother moved to the ranchette in year seven.

“Danny:” Paul’s brother.

“Paul:” He got better. He needed somewhere to be.

“Danny:” The brother who cost you the harbor.

“Paul:” The brother who is teaching my children to fish.

The audience rectangles are quiet.

“Danny:” How did that work out.

“Paul:” Better than I deserved.

“Danny:” Paul. Martha. Years eleven through fifteen. Where are you now. Take me there.

“Martha:” Our eldest daughter asked for the Nadya in year eleven. She was sixteen.

“Danny:” What did you say.

“Martha:” I said learn her first. She spent year eleven learning the Nadya in Kodiak. Year twelve I signed the vessel over.

“Danny:” How did that work out.

Martha looks at Paul. Paul looks at Martha.

“Martha:” I stood on the dock and watched her clear the breakwater and I thought about October fifteen years ago when I stood on a different dock watching a different vessel come in and a harbor master appeared beside me with a clipboard.

“Danny:” And.

“Martha:” And I went home and Paul had coffee ready.

“Paul:” I always have coffee ready.

“Danny:” Paul. Fifteen years. The harbor you gave up. The window mornings. The brother on the ranchette. The five children. How did that work out for you.

Paul looks at Martha for a long moment.

“Paul:” I gave up a harbor I built in a dead man’s name. I got a life I built in my own name. With this woman.

He pauses.

“Paul:” Tommy would have approved.

Several audience rectangles are crying.

“Danny:” Paul. Martha. Last question. How did that work out for you. All of it. The whole fifteen years.

Paul takes Martha’s hand in the rectangle.

“Paul:” She still jumps.

“Martha:” He still catches me.

The audience rectangles are completely silent. Then they erupt.

. . .

Interview Three — Austin Reeves

Age 49. Dillingham, Alaska. Occupation: Commercial fisher.

Permit holder. Five boats. Bristol Bay.

“Danny:” Austin. The dock. Fifteen years ago. You stepped off the boat. You saw Martha in Paul’s arms. You tipped your hat. Then what.

“Austin:” I walked to the end of the dock and sat down.

“Danny:” You sat down.

“Austin:” I sat on a piling at the end of the dock and watched the midnight sun on the water for about an hour.

“Danny:” What were you thinking.

“Austin:” I was thinking she made the right choice.

“Danny:” That is what you were thinking.

“Austin:” That and — I need somewhere to sleep tonight.

The audience rectangles laugh.

“Danny:” Where did you sleep.

“Austin:” Above a bait shop in Dillingham. Paid a month’s rent in cash. First time in my life I paid a month’s rent anywhere.

“Danny:” How did that feel.

“Austin:” Strange. Then right.

“Danny:” Then what.

“Austin:” I called Cobb. His nephew had the Jumbo Wegley. I made him an offer. He took it.

“Danny:” You bought the boat.

“Austin:” I bought the boat Martha and I fished for six days. I figured it knew where the fish were.

The audience rectangles laugh.

“Danny:” Did it.

“Austin:” It did. Best season in Bristol Bay that year.

“Danny:” Austin. Clara.

Something shifts in Austin's rectangle.

"Austin:" Year three. Five words. You are still here. She runs the fuel dock. Has been there twelve years when I meet her. I say three words back. I am still here. We have coffee. Then dinner. Then another dinner. Then the kind of winter that makes a man understand why people stay in cold dark places.

"Danny:" Because the right person is there.

"Austin:" Because the right person is there.

"Danny:" The wedding.

"Austin:" Year four. June. Midnight sun. The harbormaster who has known Clara since she was seven performed the ceremony. Cobb came. Bree came. Dmitri sent a card.

"Danny:" You cooked.

"Austin:" Halibut chowder. My best work.

The audience rectangles laugh.

"Danny:" Year five.

Austin looks at something outside the frame.

"Austin:" November. Our daughter arrives.

"Danny:" You named her Martha.

Austin looks at the camera.

“Austin:” After the best captain I ever crewed for.

The audience rectangles are very still.

“Danny:” Does she know.

“Austin:” Martha Volkov Engel knows. She sent a message through Bree. She said tell him she is honored. And tell him the northwest corner is still delivering.

“Danny:” What did you do with the message.

“Austin:” I put it in my jacket pocket. Next to Card Six.

“Danny:” Card Six.

“Austin:” Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. I have carried it since Portland. Eighteen years.

“Danny:” Little Martha. Tell me about her.

Austin looks at something outside the frame. The dock. The bay. The eleven year old somewhere on one of his boats.

“Austin:” In the wheelhouse at three. Handling gear at six. Last Tuesday she pointed northeast when the whole fleet was working the river mouths. I turned us northeast. Full in four minutes.

“Danny:” She reads water.

“Austin:” She was born reading water.

“Danny:” Like her father.

“Austin:” Like her mother.

A pause.

“Austin:” Clara reads water better than I do. She just does it from a fuel dock.

The audience rectangles laugh.

“Danny:” Austin. Last question. Fifteen years ago you tipped your hat and walked to the end of the dock and sat on a piling and watched the midnight sun. How did that work out for you.

*Austin reaches into his jacket pocket. He holds up Card Six.
Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration.*

“Austin:” I tipped my hat and walked away from the best woman I ever knew. And I walked straight into the life I was supposed to have.

He looks at the card.

“Austin:” The catch was never the fish.

The audience rectangles are completely silent.

“Polly:” Card Six. Love Gratitude Joy Inspiration. It functions as a force field. It worked.

“Danny:” Austin. Thank you for being here.

“Austin:” Life is meant to have fun Danny.

“Danny:” It is Austin. It really is.

Austin's rectangle goes dark. Card Six goes with him.

• • •

Interview Four — Bree

Age 38. Bristol Bay. Current occupation: Deckhand. Permit holder. Still following the catch.

“Danny:” Bree. Thank you for being here.

“Bree:” Martha said say yes.

“Danny:” Everyone says Martha said say yes.

“Bree:” Martha is persuasive.

“Danny:” Bree. The word. Choose. On the Bristol Bay dock fifteen years ago. Where did that come from.

“Bree:” Someone had to say it.

“Danny:” Why you.

“Bree:” Because Dmitri was looking at the water and someone had to say it.

The audience rectangles laugh.

“Danny:” You watched Martha and Paul from the beginning. October. Dutch Harbor.

“Bree:” I watched Paul watch her AIS track from the harbor office window. Standing up. The whole opening. I told her at the tavern.

“Danny:” What did she say.

“Bree:” She drank her water and said nothing. Which meant everything.

“Polly:” Bree. Question three of eleven. You introduced Austin Reeves to Martha in June of that year. You told him Martha might have room on the passage to Bristol Bay. Was that an accident.

Bree looks at Polly's rectangle.

“Bree:” No.

“Polly:” Can you be more specific.

“Bree:” Martha needed to know what she was choosing. You cannot choose Paul without knowing what you are giving up. Austin was what she was giving up.

“Danny:” You engineered it.

“Bree:” I introduced two people who needed to meet. That is different.

“Danny:” Is it.

“Bree:” Ask Martha.

“Danny:” Martha is not in this rectangle.

“Bree:” Then you will have to take my word for it.

The audience rectangles laugh.

“Polly:” Bree. Question seven of eleven. On the deck of the Jumbo Wegley when Austin declared his love and Martha declared hers. You were present. What did you think.

Bree is quiet for a moment. The first time in the interview.

“Bree:” I thought she meant it.

“Danny:” She did mean it.

“Bree:” I know. That is what made the dock so hard.

“Danny:” Bree. Austin. How is he.

Bree looks at the camera.

“Bree:” Austin Reeves stopped following the catch globally the day he walked away from that dock. He fished Bristol Bay for three more seasons. Then he bought a permit. Then a boat. Then a small house in Dillingham.

“Danny:” He stayed.

“Bree:” He stayed. He has a daughter now. Seven years old. He named her Martha.

The audience rectangles go completely silent.

“Danny:” He named his daughter Martha.

“Bree:” He said it was the name of the best captain he ever crewed for.

Several rectangles are crying.

“Danny:” Does Martha know.

“Bree:” Martha knows.

“Danny:” What did she say.

“Bree:” She said tell him she is honored. And tell him the northwest corner is still delivering.

The audience rectangles are very still.

“Danny:” How did that work out Bree. All of it.

“Bree:” Ask the little girl in Dillingham named Martha.

Danny looks at his coffee mug for a long moment.

“Danny:” Life is meant to have fun.

“Bree:” It is Danny. It really is.

The audience rectangles are quiet and full and completely themselves.

...

Closing

“Polly:” Danny. Before we close. Are there any love stories you would like to be in.

“Danny:” Funny you should ask Polly.

“Polly:” I am asking Danny.

“Danny:” I heard about a story. Deep outer space. A living spaceship made of spaceweed. Two androids who have fallen in love.

“Polly:” The story is called Spaceweed Danny.

“Danny:” Spaceweed.

“Polly:” The most important person on the ship is not the captain Danny.

“Danny:” Who is it.

“Polly:” Whoever ate the most fiber.

The audience rectangles erupt.

“Danny:” I need to be in that story Polly.

“Polly:” According to my data you are already in it Danny.

“Danny:” I am already in it.

“Polly:” You are Danny. They found your comedy special. The humanoids are attempting humor. They are not very good at it yet.

“Danny:” Nobody is good at it yet. That is the whole point.

He looks at the camera.

“Danny:” Life is meant to have fun.

The audience rectangles go dark one by one.

The last one to go dark is Martha's.

She is looking at something outside the frame.

The ranchette perhaps.

The undisclosed location.

Paul's coffee on the counter.

The tide coming in.