

SETTLING ACCOUNTS – Ricardo Santos Bell

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by

Ricardo Santos Bell

Not all tales have a hero. Some mirror reality.

1

Aforethought

So many of us are what we are brought up to be.

It was a wicked night, even by New England standards. The weather had served up a slow-drifting fog while low tide ushered the foul smell of rotting wharf timbers into the small seaside community. Tiny beads of moisture clung to every surface as the evening mist haloed the few city lights still operating at that late hour. The fog pressed on slowly, wrapping its arms around the town with a palpable hunger—a perfect night for a killing.

In a dark alleyway, a security light bathed a weathered sign attached to an equally worn warehouse-like structure. It read: Lezar Marine Hardware. The light's jaundiced glow also outlined Billy Joe Mangus's wiry, five-foot-eight frame as he leaned against the building's loading dock. Things were getting dicey. His mind screamed at him: *You've got no choice, shithead. You gotta do it and get out of town.* The ten grand would let him do just that.

A jerky movement sent the collar of his navy-blue windbreaker up around his neck. A shiver followed as the evening dew trickled off the jacket and down his spine. Billy Joe closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to make it look like a burglary gone wrong. There would be no sweat on that score. He knew how to do that! But killing the mark presented an entirely different problem. It would be his first. And he knew he would have to get close because he was no marksman, having fired a gun only a couple of times at a range. Yet, he felt confident he could pull it off, especially having partaken in a snort of powdered courage.

After running his fingers through his damp, straw-colored hair, he grabbed a key from his pants pocket and darted to the building's shipping door, doing his best to squeeze into any shadow from the security light he could find. He realized the latch might alert the mark, so he wrapped his mucus-encrusted handkerchief around the key and inserted it into the lock, hoping it would muffle the sound. His fingers started to shake; the hankie began an aerial dance. Thoughts of what he had to do tumbled through his mind. *This here's no time for getting the twitches. Do it, and let's get out of this hellhole.*

Billy Joe hesitated a moment as he forced himself to take control. Opening the door, he scurried into the building like a cautious mouse with silent, irregular movements. Ominous darkness greeted him. The odor of

oiled wood, aged rope, and centuries-old dust assaulted his overly sensitive sinuses. The place gave off an isolated quiet that reminded him of prison after lights out. A corona of dim, amber glow that emerged from somewhere in the rear of the cavernous structure made silhouettes of the rows of marine hardware piled high and out of reach.

Scampering his way down one of the unfamiliar aisles, he slowed to let his eyes adjust to the faint light as he drew a Glock 33 from his waistband. Once in his hand, a feeling of power took the place of any remaining apprehension. He'd been told the mark would be working on the company books in an office toward the back of the store. One shot at close range would do it, but just in case, he'd use two or even three.

The route he chose took him directly to the office door. He found it slightly ajar, an amber glow seeping onto the well-worn, wooden-planked floor. He peered into the office as best he could and saw the oversized desk chair turned to face a credenza on the opposite wall, the unmistakable blue glow of a computer monitor no doubt the chair's occupant's focus of attention. A small and not-very-helpful desk lamp was the only other light source. He hesitated and took a deep breath. *Kill the son-of-a-bitch and get it over with.* The thought hammered Billy Joe.

He took a breath and threw himself into the dimly lit room. His hand thrust out the weapon and fired two quick shots into the back of the chair as he shouted, "You're dead, asshole!"

Then all went black.

* * *

Three weeks earlier, a twelve-mile-an-hour breeze out of the southeast had made for clear visibility even though the sixty-eight percent humidity let the cold air cut right through a wool mackinaw. Diffused sunlight from a morning sun barely illuminated the coastline of Lubec, a

small Maine seacoast town where opportunities were difficult to find and privacy even scarcer.

Walter Lezar, owner and operator of Lezar Marine Hardware and a pillar of society in Lubec, swung his Chevrolet Suburban into the alley adjacent to the hardware store's loading dock. He arrived one hour before the facility opened for business at 8:00 a.m. His staff would open the store for business. He had other things to tend to, problems that didn't want to go away.

He thought of the legacy he had failed to maintain. Lezar Marine was a highly respected establishment that his great-great-grandfather, Emil d'Lezar, founded in the tradition of his forefathers with honesty, integrity, and the willingness to go the extra mile for his customers. Those values now seemed to wane in the ill wind that blew from the introduction of online business practices with their loss of human touch. Deals were no longer closed on a friendly handshake; there were fewer hands to shake. More and more customers were buying their supplies and spare parts over the Internet. Even fewer were repairing or building boats at his facility. It seemed prices were far less expensive if you bought directly from the manufacturer and did it yourself. The squeeze on his business reached its zenith when the city canceled its contract with him. They apologized profusely, but budget constraints in a declining economy were tough on everyone, so they passed their small harbor fleet's maintenance to their transportation department. Walter believed the cancellation ushered in the inevitable death of his family business.

Walter had grown up a roly-poly boy that caught the attention of bullies, which left him reclusive and wary of others. The death of his mother from ovarian cancer—immediately followed by the suicide of his grief-stricken father—left the small community marveling at the stoic way in which Walter accepted the demise of both his parents. Walter, only twenty-five at the time, took over the business with cold, calculating ability. The business eventually became his father, his mother, and, for a while, his wife until he married Selma Groggins. The marriage was short-lived. She had wanted more than he was capable of giving. Business, she often screamed, was more important to him. The divorce only drove him

further into the realm of commerce, leaving the scars of abandonment and rejection deep within his psyche.

Time passed, and at the age of thirty-eight, while attending the Marine Fabricators Convention at Orlando's Rosen Plaza, he somehow managed to meet and, to his great surprise, fall in love with Helen Fresnell, eighteen years his junior. The whirlwind romance had been out of a dream. This young, beautiful girl had found him interesting, even if all he had to talk about was a sleepy town in Maine and a family history steeped in marine hardware. Helen seemed to hang on his every word. She took the time to shepherd him around Orlando to all the right spots only locals knew and somehow avoided the touristy places in a town full of tourists and conventioners. He remembered her first touch as she cupped his cheek with soft, warm hands while gazing deep into his very soul. Their first night together had been the opening of doors he never knew existed.

In the beginning, their life together had been a surge of euphoric feelings bursting through the walls of his stunted emotional being. The feel of her skin felt like a fine piece of smooth, silk satin. Her energy in bed surpassed anything he had ever encountered. Her mouth both titillated and brought him to sexual heights he had never imagined possible. He could not get enough of her. For at least a short while, his being did not begin and end with the business.

The first couple of years were heaven for Walter as Helen tended to his every wish, including wishes that he had not thought he had. More than once, he commented on how well she had been brought up. Helen only smiled when those moments arrived and never mentioned her life before their meeting. They discussed having children early on, but he could never quite pin her down to a decision. She was not ready yet but left open the suggestion that the opportunity would come, that she wanted to provide him with this gift. At the time, Walter had thoughts of a son or daughter to inherit his business and continue the family legacy into a seventh generation. The years passed, and Walter realized he had no real feelings on the matter one way or the other, having been without a family for so long. He mused that he probably wanted to be part of the rite of passage to the next generation, mostly because he had not had that luxury. Eventually, the subject drifted into a tightly shut closet. But now, six years had trickled

by, and the marriage began to wear thin, although, as his New England upbringing demanded, it remained civil. Looking back, he realized that his love-at-first-sight miracle had been a passion that could not outlast their fundamental differences.

Making his way through the stock room to his office, he shed his jacket and moved to the window overlooking the harbor, a harbor that would soon be without the presence of Lezar Marine. He knew—he hoped—that there was a way out. He only had to find it before things got worse. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a sloop making its way to the town's only public dock. It was late in the season for boating tourists. They could only be here for supplies or fuel. It was a guess. Had he known what it brought, he would have planned differently.

* * *

The town's harbormaster's office sat perched atop the Seafood Grotto, a tourists' fish market owned by the town's long-time mayor, now closed for the winter season. Dressed in shiplap, its peeling, mist-green paint, its large windows overlooking the harbor, and its various antennae and weather instruments on the roof gave it the look of a stubby airport control tower badly in need of tender loving care. The harbor consisted of aging platforms strung together from piling to piling along the Lubec shoreline on the south side of the Quoddy Narrows that separated the State of Maine from Campobello Island in New Brunswick. The few trawlers and sailboats, moored at their buoys, thrust their masts and outriggers skyward as if praying for an extended season.

Assistant Harbor Master Johnny Semple stood at one of the harbormaster facility's large windows and watched a Beneteau sloop swing its hull smartly into the fueling dock. *Boat's got a good crew*, he commented to himself.

Johnny placed last on the roster's ladder with less than six months of tenure. That position on the pecking order relegated him to the midnight-

to-eight shift, a position he held dear regardless of the occasional complaint expected from someone thirty-two years of age.

Johnny's handsome good looks and well-developed physique made him the star catch in the small community, often drawing longing looks from locals and tourists alike. Always quick with a smile, a handshake, or helping out wherever needed, his outgoing and likable personality plowed rapid inroads among the town's inhabitants whose nature, true to their New England roots, usually rendered them suspicious of outsiders. During the tourist season, he gave sailing lessons to Lubec's up-and-coming sailors as well as to enthusiastic tourists. Lubec society, one whose youth gravitated away from the tiny community toward the better life that gushed from their television sets 24/7, welcomed him into their bosom.

An avid angler, Johnny would cross over into New Brunswick on his day off and head for the Atlantic side of Campobello Island to do some serious fishing. On his return, he would sell his catch to the town's only fish market, another enterprising practice the area's residents did not miss.

After a month at the harbormaster's job, the U.S. Immigration and Customs officers recognized the friendly face as Johnny went back and forth across the bridge once a week. Johnny always made sure to check in on the officers and thank them for their service. He was not just another passing motorist. And he frequently pointed toward his catch with a smile and eyebrows raised. At first, the customs officers had refused. Still, with time, they began accepting a fresh, twenty to twenty-five-pound Atlantic salmon from the gracious fisherman, unaware the rest of the catch carried a kilo of cocaine neatly stashed in their gutted bellies. Ten keys, or twenty-two pounds, were smuggled in each week. Uncut, its value reached \$900,000. Cut and processed, its price on the street soared three-fold. Getting it across became a matter of routine. As Lubec's well-liked assistant harbormaster, his smuggling never raised suspicion.

Upon returning home, Johnny would wrap each key of cocaine in aluminum foil and dip it into melted beeswax. Boxed in a non-descript cardboard container labeled as candle wax, he would ship it by United Parcel to a small factory in Trenton, New Jersey, that sold candles to churches across the country. In Trenton, his Russian connection paid him \$500 per key for shipping and handling. They never missed the six ounces

of blow he replaced with an equal amount of cornstarch that Johnny skimmed off each shipment—mixed correctly, who would notice the blend in a combined twenty-two-pound delivery? After all, Johnny had to satisfy his local customers and an ever-hungry piggybank that held his future away from Lubec. He was careful, however, not to draw suspicion with spending unbecoming his position in the town. The money was for his next gig, where he would be in charge.

As well manicured as his image and connections became, risk menaced his tranquility. If caught by the DEA, Johnny knew he'd spend some time in prison, but only if he kept his mouth shut. Otherwise, it would be a short and final stay. However, if he stayed loyal, he knew his employers would continue their working relationship. He was very competent in his assignment, and regardless of their tendency toward violence, his Russian connections always had their eyes glued to the cash register. As to being caught by the Russians for lightening the delivery, he could always blame his Campobello contact. Those possibilities existed only in the murky future. In the meantime, he strove to appear an ordinary, law-abiding citizen.

The Beneteau sloop had barely caressed the dock when one of its crew, carrying a leather duffle, jumped from the deck onto the pier and near-stumbled toward the small restaurant at the entrance to the marine facility. Johnny recognized the gait. Here was a soul in need of a fix—a potential customer. *Nice of him to drop in while I'm still on duty.* The thought brought a self-satisfied grin to his face.

At the marine facility's fuel dock, three men began to moor the Beneteau sloop as Johnny heard his replacement's footsteps trudge up the wooden stairs on the exterior of the harbor master's building. He turned away from the scene playing out at the pier and reached for his jacket and lunch box. He knew the townspeople liked the fact he packed his mid-shift meal. It proved his frugality. It made him one of them.

The door swung open, accompanied by a gust of wind that caused Johnny to turn and catch sight of Martin Nosek as he shuffled in. The forty-seven-year-old, panda-size second-in-command at the town's docking facility puffed for a while to catch his breath. Johnny eyed the man and mused, *The guy should exercise more.*

Martin finally caught his breath. "Mawnin', Johnny. I see we won in Iraq."

"Yeah. Caught it last night on the evening news," Johnny replied as he turned his attention back to the docked sloop.

"Bush done got 'em by the short hairs. You see him on that carrier?" Martin said, removing his parka and joining Johnny at the large windows overlooking the marina.

"That I did. Looked mighty presidential."

"Ay-yah. See we've got a sloop down at the pier."

"That we do."

Both men stood and watched as the boat's crew finished securing the mooring lines to the dock. Johnny slipped on his jacket and made for the door. "You go check out the sloop while I go see who the guy is that got off in such a hurry."

"What guy would that be?"

"The one that went into the Pelican. He's probably trying to talk Margaret into a hot breakfast."

Martin guffawed. "Hope for his sake she's in a good humor."

"One can always hope," Johnny said with a wink and a smile as he headed out the door.

2—Billy Joe

Opportunity is where you find it.

The Hungry Pelican—the pier's only eating spot—sat at the entrance to the public dock. It had shiplap siding painted the same flaking misty green as the port facility, while a rusty iron cutout of a pelican loomed over the doorway in greeting. A favorite of tourists during the season, it now suffered from the arrival of autumn with only an occasional visit from townsfolk and the crack-of-dawn business from commercial, deep-sea anglers on their way to a day's fishing.

Johnny came through the entrance and caused the spring that shut the door to twang its caustic complaint. The smell of burning grease tweaked his nose as he spied Margaret, the owner, busily cooking in the kitchen. She looked up, her white hair stringing down around her head like a badly thatched hut. "Hey there, Johnny. What's it to be? Coffee or something to eat?"

"Just coffee, Maggie." Johnny was sure that if women were cars, Margaret would be a Hummer.

"You know where it is." That said, she went back to her grill.

Johnny made his way behind the counter to the coffee brewer, poured himself a cup of the oily black liquid, and scanned the room for the newcomer. He caught sight of the tortured soul scrunched up against the corner of the back booth like a forlorn puppy. *The poor bastard needs more than food.* Johnny quickly scanned the restaurant. Other than the three of them, the place appeared empty.

Sidling up to where the young man sat, Johnny noticed the slight twitching of his wiry frame. "Hi there," he said, trying his best to sound solicitous. "Mind if I sit?"

In return, Johnny received a lifeless stare from pale-blue eyes set in a stubbled face. The look spoke unequivocally about the man's habits.

Johnny slipped into the booth's opposite seat, put down his cup of coffee, and anchored his best smile of sympathy.

"Name's John Semple. People 'round here call me Johnny."

Johnny noticed no change in the young man's catatonic stare. Johnny looked back to Margaret, who remained engrossed in cleaning the restaurant grill. He turned back to the struggling visitor.

"I'm the assistant harbormaster. Just thought I'd check to see if there's anything I can do for you." Johnny put out his right hand, a small, clear plastic packet of white powder neatly placed in his palm. "Looks like you need some aspirin, friend."

The young man's eyes lit up like headlights on high beam and stared at the contents in the outstretched hand. Salvation dangled but inches away. Warily, as if the offering was a trap or might be withdrawn, he grasped Johnny's hand to retrieve the packet. Once in his possession, he sat up a little straighter.

"Gotta take a dump. Back in a minute." With that, the newcomer reached for his duffle and started to stand.

Johnny stared at the soft, rich leather of a Royce duffle bag. "I'll watch the bag for you if you want."

"Nah, I'll keep it with me," the young man said over his shoulder as he headed toward the restroom on unsteady legs.

Johnny's mouth curled up in a knowing smile. *So, that's where he keeps his cash. This guy has bucks and a habit.* He wondered just how much he would get out of this new customer.

Minutes passed before the young man returned, his eyes glassy but clear, his straw-colored hair slicked back, and his manner confident. The transformation caught Johnny by surprise.

"Hey. You look like a new man," Johnny said.

"Feel like it, too. Thanks... for the aspirin, I mean. What do I owe ya?"

"Gonna stay long?"

"Might."

"Then consider it an investment in our future business," Johnny said, a smile beginning to form on his lips.

"Thanks again. How do I get hold of ya?"

"I'm here every morning after eight. Sometimes you can catch me at the Drop Inn in the evening. It's a bar on the edge of town."

"Cool," the newcomer said.

"By the way, what should I call you?"

"Billy Joe. Billy Joe Mangus, but most folks call me BJ."

"What brings you to Lubec, BJ?"

Billy Joe's mind went into look-back mode.

The island of Manhattan contains over eight million people stacked neatly—and sometimes not so neatly—in various high-rise buildings. It was the perfect setting for easy, door-to-door salesmanship for Billy Joe. When not peddling non-existent products to support his prison-acquired cocaine habit, Billy Joe frequented the west side of Manhattan, specifically Riverside Park's Boat Basin Café in the Atlantic Yachting Marina. Its large, plate glass wall overlooking the Hudson River served as the current home of New York's aging yuppie elite, who frequented the lounge to talk sailing, discuss business, and meet the evening's occasional liaison. Just the society Billy Joe wanted so badly to emulate.

A counterfeit Social Security card supplying the means, he applied for and received a public library card. For weeks, he immersed himself in sailing and boating publications until he could name every make of boat, including their rigging, layouts, advantages, and shortfalls. In time, he held knowledgeable conversations concerning every aspect of sailing with the best of them. It wasn't long before he required more than acceptance from his newfound friends. A four-to-six-week delivery schedule of the items he sold had allowed him enough time to garner more than four thousand dollars. But now, the lack of delivery of those articles had given way to some complaints. Soon after, the police became involved. So far, it was just an investigation but enough to concern Billy Joe. It forced him to consider a way out of New York, preferably one that left no trail.

One night while occupying his customary bar seat at the Boat Basin Cafe, Billy Joe overheard a conversation by the fireplace.

"Wouldn't you know it? The day before we're ready to cast off, and the dumb shit comes down with shingles." Malcolm Foster, a short, powerfully built man in his sixties and head of distribution for NuroCon Industries, shook his graying mane in frustration and downed a tumbler of Lagavulin scotch neat.

Jack Baisley of Baisley Shipping leaned in from one of the overstuffed chairs. "We can do it without him." Baisley's tall, slender body, dark brown short hair, and horned-rimmed glasses painted the picture of an upscale accountant.

In the chair next to Baisley sat plump, middle-aged Lee Bingham, looking as if the monstrous behemoth of disappointment loomed on the horizon. He gazed at Foster and asked, "Is it possible?"

"No, it isn't," Malcolm said. "We're skinny as it is, and I don't plan on heading for New Brunswick standing extra-long watches 'cause we're short a crew member." He again shook his head back and forth, his grey hair never once losing its perfect coiffure.

Billy Joe sat and pretended to nurse his drink at the bar. He recognized an opportunity when he saw it. Only in this case, he had overheard it. He turned in their direction and called out, "How many crew ya got?"

"Oh. Hi, Billy. Three. We're short one." Malcolm raised his glass and signaled the cocktail server for a refill.

Billy Joe slid off his barstool and sauntered over to where the three men were gathered. "Where y'all headed?"

"We *were* headed to Saint John for the regatta," Jack said, his funk growing.

"What boat?"

"The Celeste."

"Oh, yeah, the forty-three-foot Beneteau sloop. Carries 934 square feet of sail and no autopilot. Makes her a lot to handle when you consider

eight-hour watches for each guy, especially if you're headed all the way to New Brunswick. Ya just might hit weather this time of year. Have to reef sail in mid-watch."

"See! What did I tell you?" Malcolm stuck his finger out and dared Jack to contradict.

"How about your wives?" Billy Joe asked.

"Left this afternoon for Palm Beach. Two weeks of fun in the sun." Jack slumped back in his chair, his mouth turned down, his body sagging. A cold silent moment passed, and he said, "Okay, so we cancel the trip. You think we can get our deposit back?"

Lee, a member of the New York Bar, rested his head back and stared at the ceiling. "The contract reads no refund of deposits within five days of the charter."

"Shit," Jack let slip from clenched teeth.

"Make that double shit," Malcolm added.

Billy Joe posted a grave look accompanied by a shake of his head and started to reel them in. His eyebrows slowly rose toward the ceiling while his stern look gave way to the shining face of optimism.

"Ya know...." He paused to look as if the thought had just developed and not sparked by desperation. "I was gonna start my vacation tomorrow. Drive up to Seneca Lake and do a little fishin'. Great trout up there. Whadda ya say to me filling the fourth spot on your crew? I bet they got fish up there."

Lee bolted upright in his chair.

"We wouldn't want to impose our problems on you, Billy," Jack said, leaning forward once more, his eyes bright and expectant.

"Shut up, Jack." Malcolm grabbed his drink from the approaching server and wrapped his free arm around Billy Joe's shoulders. "Billy here sees a good thing. He gets to vacation with three of New York's finest, all expenses paid. What's to impose?"

All three men shared a laugh as Malcolm ordered fresh drinks all around.

Billy Joe smiled and joined the fun as his mind leaped back to the problem at hand. It might be best if he spent the night away from his apartment just in case the police decided to visit him before his departure.

They were less than a day out when the three men, good sailors all, realized Billy Joe could name every sail, line, and fitting on the boat. The problem was he didn't know what to do with them. That led to a discussion on whether to drop him off at the nearest port. They could leave him with enough money to get back to New York while picking up a for-hire, seasoned seaman, or they could let him stay aboard and make the best of a bad situation.

"So, the guy's a schmuck. He doesn't have a franchise on that. I say we let him stay. He takes the day watch where we can keep an eye on him."

Malcolm's logic sounded good until the evening of the following day when Billy Joe, feeling himself an ostracized member of the crew, rose from the dinner table and made his way forward to where sails are usually stored. Curious, Lee and Jack followed and caught the younger man inhaling three lines of white courage.

"You dumb ass," Jack shouted at the once more defiant and self-assured Billy Joe.

"Fuck *you*, Jack!" Billy Joe hollered. He brushed by the men and darted for the companionway.

On deck, Billy Joe stumbled to the bow, sat down, and let the evening wind whip his face with North Atlantic spray.

Jack and Lee came topside and joined Malcolm at the wheel. They quickly filled him in on Billy Joe's misguided recreation.

"If Canadian customs find drugs onboard, they'll arrest us all, him for possession and us for trafficking. We might be able to beat the charge in court, but it'll take us two to three years. Meanwhile, we'll be branded as drug smugglers."

Lee's assessment sounded the resonant bell of doom in the other two men.

After a continued conference lasting less than a minute, Malcolm shouted to Billy Joe, "We're dumping you in Saint John. But before we

do, we're going through your stuff and getting rid of any drugs you're carrying. We'll search the entire boat if we have to."

Billy Joe contemplated the move. He'd been in such a hurry to leave New York that he had failed to consider all the factors involved.

"I don't have a passport." He threw out the statement and let the wind carry it aft to the three men sitting in the cockpit. Without the document, there would be the necessity to confirm his identity. When questioned, his shipmates would undoubtedly state their port of origin as New York. It wouldn't take long before the Canadians found out he was being investigated for fraud in that city.

The men sat for a moment. Then Malcolm turned to Lee. "What does that mean?"

"Other than the fact he'll have problems when we try to clear Canadian immigration, I really don't know. But something tells me there's more to this than that little shit not having a passport. The question is: Do we want to find out if there's more to this coke head, or do we dump him at the next U.S. port?"

Jack leaned forward. "I say we dump him... *now*."

Lee nodded his assent.

Malcolm thought for only a moment. "It may be tough to hire a fourth, but as much as we could use another hand getting across to New Brunswick, I agree. Jack, can you go below and get me the chart for this area?"

The sun barely peeked over the horizon seven hours later as the *Celeste* motored her way up the Quoddy Narrows and put into the municipal pier in Lubec. It was time for breakfast. By then, Billy Joe needed more than a meal, having had his favorite white powder unceremoniously dumped overboard.

Johnny watched Billy Joe's eyes lose their faraway look, so he ventured, "None of my business, but you look like a guy who knows his way around. How'd you end up here? And who are those guys that dropped you off?"

Margaret ambled up to the two men and brought Billy Joe fully present. She placed a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and French toast in front of the new arrival. He smiled up at her and gave her a wink. "Thank ya, mam. Looks mighty invitin'."

Margaret's response constituted a blank stare. She nodded once and returned to her kitchen.

Billy Joe at once realized this was not a New York meal, but then again, why should he bitch. He was out of danger, and the guys aboard the sailboat had served their purpose. He was out of New York, where no one could find him. Only three men knew where he was, and they were unlikely to have their integrity questioned by telling tales about sailing with a cokehead.

Billy Joe reached for the maple syrup and looked up at Johnny. "Those three assholes on the boat that dropped me off promised me an expense-free vacation to Canada if I crewed for them. After we were under way, they hit me up for some money to pay for the fuel and groceries. So, I told them to drop me off at the closest port, and they could shove their vacation up their ass."

"So, they tried to screw you," Johnny said.

"Ya got that right. But nobody screws me. I'm connected. I got friends in New York, ya know. The kind who can make it painful if someone really pisses me off." Billy Joe started to devour a mouthful of French toast. "Where's a good place to stay? Just until I can find a way back to the Big Apple," his full mouth mumbled.

"The Sea View. A motel up the highway a bit."

"Is it the best?"

"You could say that. It's the only place open this time of year, but it's okay."

"Jesus. How many people y'all got in this burg?"

"About forty-five hundred. Lots more in the summer, though."

Johnny could see the wheels turning in his newest customer. Not for one minute did he believe the little shit about being connected, but as a

potential customer, he'd go along. *This guy's running from something and looking for a place to lie low. God knows I've been there myself.*

But while he was here, Johnny would supply this needy soul with a steady supply of what he needed most. In fact, he might prove useful in handling certain "chores" while Johnny continued to build his reputation among the town's folks. However, Johnny had another pressing matter on his mind at that moment. Helen Lezar had scheduled a sailing lesson for 9 a.m. It would be her first, and Johnny didn't want to miss rubbing elbows with the wife of Walter Lezar, one of the town's elite.

3—Spice

Keep life's tiller firmly in hand.

In a tight-fitting white cotton blouse—and an even tighter pair of red lycra shorts that accentuated her perfectly formed backside—Helen Lezar struggled with the main sheet as the tiny catboat changed direction and dashed to windward. Securing the line to the starboard cleat, she turned and gave her instructor the most seductive smile she could manage. As he plied the tiny vessel through the waters just outside the Lubec Marina, Johnny Semple returned the smile in kind.

"You catch on quick, missy."

The smile never left Helen's face. "It's Helen. Not missy."

"Helen it is. How'd you ever come to end up in this northern paradise? You're a little too much together for this budding metropolis."

Helen gave Johnny a long, hard look with emerald-green eyes that accentuated her honey-blond hair. As a strapping young man with short brown hair, Johnny struck her as athletic and available. The fact that he was good-looking made it all the better. Sex with her husband, Walter, had become a New England dinner—bland, banal, and obligatory. No doubt this young stud could be trained to excel in bed. In reply to her instructor's question, she said, "Now, you wouldn't want to know everything about me, would you? All the mystery would go up in smoke."

Born in Statesborough to a mother presumably from Atlanta, Helen Fresnell, like her mother, Lila, possessed a classic beauty, emphasized by her seductive eyes and a smile that could charm a snake into submission. Helen didn't remember her father. Lila only mentioned him as a generous man with whom she had three years of blissful conjugality. He had been Lila's first. At the age of thirteen, Helen started numbering her stepfathers. That winter, Lila launched her fifth nuptial adventure.

Academic learning was never enforced. Helen came and went as she pleased, knowing, soon enough, that Lila would meet someone else

much more interesting than her present partner. When she did, Lila would say it was time to move to greener pastures, and Helen knew well that her mother never referred to the color of grass. That kind of green put her and her mother in the latest fashions, the best jewelry, and the newest model of expensive automobile. Her mother's manipulating style bordered on genius. She never asked for a redraft of her present husband's will. That would have been presumptuous. After all, she would only be with the man for a short time. A healthy divorce settlement sufficed, a strategy that augured well for the distant future. However, fate, that intrusive entity into well-planned futures, had other plans.

With her seventh husband, Lila's discerning eye failed. When she told him she was leaving him, the man went to his dresser, pulled out the .38 caliber Smith and Wesson of which he was so proud, and put three neat shots in the middle of her ample bosom. Supposedly out of remorse, he swallowed the next bullet and followed his wife into the hereafter. Their neighbors in the suburban community of Meadow Woods outside Orlando were shocked but not surprised. Lila's self-confidence never hid her extramarital affairs.

At nineteen, with golden hair and a full sumptuous figure that could entice a priest into a carnal relationship, Helen suddenly discovered poverty—her stepfather's estate going to the children by his first marriage. His family had no use for her, and she had no idea if she had relatives on her mother's side, a subject Lila had assiduously avoided. Without means of support, she started waiting tables at the coffee shop in Orlando's Renaissance Hotel, a plebian existence after so many years of extravagant living. Her mother, however, had taught her well. Helen could appraise a man in less time than it took him to introduce himself. Most wanted one thing from her, but she never seemed to be in a generous mood. Soon enough, she would cull the field, find the right man, and ensnare him as her mother had taught her.

And so it went for almost a year until she found herself waiting on a large man with soft hazel eyes, smooth, ruddy skin that reminded one of a newborn child, and the only one wearing a suit in the Florida heat. She had noticed him over the past two days and observed that he possessed that particular hint of shyness that met her well-taught expectations. Her predatory skills rose to the occasion. A bit of research at the hotel's front desk gleaned the information she required. This one

had money, not just a suitable bank account. The man owned the oldest and most respected marine hardware business in the Northeast, one with prestige and a seat at the table with the movers and shakers of his community.

Her mother's words rang in her ears when meeting a prospective mark for the first time. "A man with money has to feel proud of who he's with, so look your best at all times. Men have big egos. Pamper that ego so you can hold onto them until it's time to move on. There's a hell of a lot more to getting the right man than being good in bed."

Lila had done well most of her life. Helen was going to do even better.

Making her way through the conventioners having breakfast, she approached the table where Walter Lezar sat perusing a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. She immediately spied the lack of a ring on the third finger of his left hand. It was time to begin. Placing a glass of water in front of him, she turned on her most vivacious smile, her pen at the ready over her order book.

"Good morning, Mr. Lezar. May I suggest the Swedish crepes this morning? They're downright exceptional."

Walter instantly looked up, a confused look on his face. "I'm sorry. Do I know you?" he said in a rich basso voice.

She leaned forward and tapped the clear plastic nametag pinned to his lapel with her pen, followed by a wink. "No, sir. I caught your name off your convention badge."

That's all it took. Helen had snared her first fly. But she, as yet, didn't fully appreciate the full intricacies of web building. Although her blond hair and voluptuous young figure lacked novelty in Florida, she soon discovered such attributes were a rarity in Walter's hometown, attributes that, when flaunted, would raise eyebrows in the small New England community.

Life in a town of 4,500 souls—even one with a heavy tourist season—eventually became boring, especially for someone possessing youth and beauty. The advent of Fall triggered a depressing mood in Helen. Every year it worsened, so with a desire to seek an avenue for her energies, she enrolled in the sailing class given by the easy-on-the-eyes assistant harbormaster. She had plied the Atlantic shore off the

Florida coast as a passenger. The time to learn the art had arrived. It would have been better had she learned to knit or crochet as most of the town ladies did during the off-season.

The small sailboat heeled over as it darted up the Narrows. Johnny adjusted the sail to accommodate the increasing breeze and looked over at his new pupil, who seemed to be in deep thought.

"You still with us, Helen?" he asked.

Helen peeked out from over her sunglasses. "What did you say?"

"You said knowing about you would send the mystery up in smoke."

"Send it higher than a Georgia pine," she said, her smile becoming broader.

"Hah! You're something, Helen. How about you take the tiller for a while? Get the feel of it."

Helen moved to the stern and brushed by Johnny, who caught the distinct odor of camellias as she passed. The sensation of a bare thigh against his bare forearm lingered for just a moment. It lasted long enough for both to take pleasure.

Finally, Johnny pointed to a buoy in the distance. "Head for that buoy. Keep the sail from luffing."

"What's that?"

"Luffing? Letting the sail lose the wind and losing headway."

Helen's eyes sparkled. "Like slowing down life and losing all the fun."

The smile on Johnny's face said it all. Helen could see he had plans for his new student. But, like most men, he didn't realize it was she who had a firm hold of the future's tiller.

* * *

Walter Lezar lit an Ashton cigar with an antiquated Zippo lighter, the only memento of his father's that he had kept after his death. He watched the tiny catboat dancing on the water from his boat repair shop overlooking the narrows. He didn't know this new addition to the harbormaster's crew, a newcomer to their city. He had passed muster by the inquiry made following his application for the position. Most residents liked him, and Helen seemed determined to learn sailing, so Walter had agreed. He knew the small town tended to suffocate her. He worried he might lose her if she couldn't find a way to breathe.

"Gus is going to be laid up for about a week." The comment came from Janice Simmons, Walter's store manager. Young, bright, and a bit plump with long brown hair and a congenial smile, she was one of his most trusted sales staff.

Walter turned to her from watching the catboat. "He's always taken the extra step for us. I'd hate to think where we'd be without him. It's only right that we should foot the bill for his accident, even if he caused it. We all make mistakes."

"You're an old softy, boss, but he'll be glad to hear it." Janice exited the small office with a grin on her face.

A thump to Walter's right leg caused him to look down at his office companion, a mixed Alsatian/St. Bernard with a large, fluffy, constantly wagging tail. Graying whiskers around the snout spoke of his many years as Walter's faithful friend. He'd kept the dog—all one-hundred and twenty pounds of him—at the office since marrying Helen. She didn't like dogs, complaining they mussed up the house and left hair on the furniture and her clothes.

Walter reached into his pocket. "Okay, Rufus, I get the message." He slipped the dog a treat and patted it on the head. It went directly to its plaid-covered bed and lay down, something it did more often these days.

Walter turned once more to the scene being played out in the channel, Helen's blond hair the beacon attracting his attention. Over the last couple of years, they had drifted much like flotsam on an unpredictable ocean, each setting a different course without conscious awareness. Walter couldn't pinpoint the exact moment he felt uncomfortable around his wife. Nothing specific. She still said all the right things, but her feelings toward him seemed no longer sincere.

He knew it must be his fault for the shifting direction of their marriage, blaming the difference in their ages—he at forty-four and she at twenty-six. The fact that he spent a great deal of time at the store didn't help. But no matter how much time he spent at the office, there never seemed to be any solution to his business problems. The business's extensive debt far outreached its solvency.

But life has a way of surprising even the most skeptical, so it came as a surprise when an offer came from a Montreal investment group to buy the hardware business and the marine repair facility, including the real estate on which it sat. Supposedly, the buyers wanted to expand their marine business into the United States. He had turned over the offer, which he received by registered mail, to his lawyer, Jonathan Sutton, two days earlier. It was time to hear what Jonathan had to say about the offer.

"Good morning. Sutton, Merlich, and Jameson. How may I help you?" the voice said on the phone.

"It's me, Bev. Is he in yet?" Walter asked.

"Getting his morning jolt of coffee, Mr. Lezar. Let me connect you."

Seconds passed, and Sutton came on the line. "Morning, Walt. I take it this is about the Montreal offer."

"What do you think?" Walter asked.

"I gave it to Emery to look over. It's more his field than mine, and he says it's a good starting offer."

"You research them?"

"A solid Canadian company more into real estate than commercial boat business."

"Then it's the land they want," Walter said.

"An offer like that isn't for a failing business. And then, who wants to get into marine hardware nowadays?" Sutton had a sad note in his voice as he uttered the words.

Walter had guessed the real reason when he first received the Montreal offer. He had to admit his business property would best serve the community and the buyers as a tourist resort. Like horse-drawn

buggies, boat yards in a small community were outdated. “What’s next?” he asked.

“A counter. Does twelve and a half sound reasonable? You liquidate the inventory.”

“We can let them have the inventory if they counter. What do you say?”

“Sounds good. I’ll draft a response and get it to you as soon as possible.” The line went dead and left Walt to wonder how Helen would take the sale. He’d soon find out.

His face turned sour as he returned his focus to the catboat plying the waters of the narrows. *Damn the Internet and all those websites. They’ll be the death of mom-and-pop stores all over the country.*

* * *

The Drop Inn bulged with local Lubec twenty-and-thirty-somethings that night. Being Saturday, it gave the younger crowd of the city a chance to burn off some repressed week-long angst. Sunday was put aside for a chance to recover. Johnny entered the local drinking hole, followed by Billy Joe, the latter’s eyes canvassing the bar like a ferret searching for possible danger. Many of the bar’s regulars waved or hollered their greetings to Johnny, who returned them with a broad smile and a wave of his hand. Darla, one of two barmaids, rushed to his side and gave him a peck on the cheek, her black pony tail whipping back and forth.

“Why so late?” Darla asked with a frown on her face, her blue eyes aglow. “Your customers have been chomping at the bit, waiting for you.”

“Had some things to take care of. Business, you know,” Johnny replied. “This here’s BJ. He’s visiting for a while.”

Darla turned to Billy, a warm smile on her face. “Hey there, BJ. Kinda late in the season for a visit, ain’t it?”

“Business,” Billy Joe muttered.

“Yeah, he’s from the Big Apple,” Johnny added. “Get him whatever he wants, and I’ll have the usual. Gotta take care of some business.” With that, Johnny made into the crowd and began slipping palm-sized packets to his many customers as the music started a deafening beat that left conversation in its wake.

“What’ll ya have, BJ?” Darla shouted over the music.

“Bourbon. Woodford Reserve, neat, if y’all got it,” Billy Joe replied.

It only took a couple of minutes for Darla to get Billy Joe’s drink from a bartender whose prominent upper teeth protruded from his mouth. When she returned to Billy Joe with his drink on a tray, she asked, “One bourbon, straight up. Caught the southern lingo, BJ. Where ya from, originally, that is?”

Billy Joe hesitated for a moment. Why was she interested? It was none of her business. It caused him to reflect for a moment. The only ones that knew he was here were the three assholes who had dropped him off in this Mayberry parody. No way were they going to let the cops know he was in Lubec. He knew enough about the law to know that might be interpreted as aiding and abetting.

“Just makin’ conversation. I don’t mean to pry,” Darla went on. “It’s just that ya come from the big city. You must know your way around.”

He did. Knowing his way around had taken him through his short life with some good along with an abundance of bad. Born Freddy Hamershault, life had never been kind to Billy Joe. He struggled through early life as the youngest of eleven children born to parents who thought condoms were a form of party balloon. His father ignored him except when he was on a binge. Those moments had left him with more than one wound.

His mother also shunted him out of mind. Not that she didn’t love him—if indeed she even understood the concept of maternal love—but because her children got in the way of her all-consuming pursuit of clear, smooth, domestic vodka. Hand-me-downs, hunger, neglect, and abuse finally spurred him out of the neighborhood, out of high school,

and into the world of sex, drugs, and self-pity—a cocktail of dissatisfaction and defiance.

By the time he reached his twenty-third birthday, he'd served three years on a five-to-twelve-year sentence for robbery. Violent confrontation didn't suit him, so he learned to distinguish individuals who, out of naïve trust or simple ignorance, could be manipulated into giving him what he wanted, a trait that served him well at his parole hearing. It also prepared him for his arrival in New York as the newly invented Billy Joe Mangus, where he began selling rejuvenation massagers and elixirs he had no intention of delivering to little old ladies craving attention. Suckers were to be taken advantage of, and he was the ring master to do just that.

Billy Joe looked up as Johnny returned from his business dealings and took his drink off Darla's tray. "You guys get acquainted?"

Darla put her free arm around Johnny. "BJ was just about to tell me his life story, honey," she said as she gave Johnny another peck on the cheek.

"Georgia, if it's anybody's business," Billy Joe blurted, putting and end to the interrogation.

The way Billy Joe stated his origin hit Darla like a hammer. "Gotta get back to work," she said to Johnny. With a frown, she turned and headed back to the bar.

"What's going on?" Johnny asked.

"Nothin'," Billy Joe replied.

Johnny was about to delve deeper into the beginnings of a rift between the two when he thought better of it. No sense in starting something that might fizzle out. After all, the customer is always right, so he changed the subject. "What do you think of our bartender?"

"That's some set of teeth," Billy Joe replied.

"Name's Bucky Beaver. No kidding, his last name's Beaver. So, the locals nicknamed him Bucky."

"Wouldn't be because of his buck teeth, would it?" Billy Joe asked.

"Naw, what makes you think that," Johnny said with a grin. "Drink up. I gotta be at work by midnight."

Both men took a sip of their drinks and gave the appearance of two young bucks out on the town for a bit of recreation. Billy Joe, however, felt caught in a vice. He needed a big city to lose himself in, and Lubec was hardly that. He was smart enough to realize that selling crap to the locals wouldn't do. Yet, there was a benefit to hiding out in Lubec, even for a short time. The New York Police would hardly look for him in a small New England town. However, he failed to consider that trouble has a way of looking for you wherever you hide.

* * *

"Why so late?" Helen asked as Walter entered through the back door of a Colonial-style kitchen, its fireplace emitting warmth from the burning logs.

"I got caught up at the store doing some paperwork for the sale," Walter replied, hanging his mackinaw on a clothes hook by the door.

"What sale?"

"We got an offer from a Montreal company to buy the business and the real estate it sits on," Walter said as he turned back toward his wife. "What's for dinner?"

Helen moved to the counter and picked up a casserole. "Tuna and noodles." She had learned that Walter liked comfort foods best. She delivered the casserole to the oven and placed the casserole on the center rack. "Are we thinking of selling?"

"If the price is right. Do-it-yourself and the internet have put a dent in our gross for some time now. It's hit our profit margin something fierce."

Helen's mind went into overdrive. She had almost no knowledge of where the money she spent came from. What little she had acquired came from her work as a waitress in Florida. It hardly qualified her to judge what a sale might do to her way of life. She searched her mother's background in such matters and found nothing.

On the other hand, Walter found her lack of comment on the sale disturbing. Perhaps it was her lack of experience that muted an opinion. And maybe it was something else.

* * *

A week passed, and Helen continued to take sailing lessons. Walter took note that her pleasure grew with every lesson. He had allowed himself to play with the thought that perhaps with a hobby like sailing she would come to appreciate his part of the world. It might even reduce the distance that had grown between them. In the meantime, he tried hard to accept the sale of his business and property. It left him with a gnawing sense of loss and the shame of failure that the company would not survive the last of the Lezar line.

Customer relations and pride of ownership had stood as the defining foundation of the family for over two centuries. Now, it was being replaced by the bottom line, the very thing to which he had dedicated his life. To Walter, it appeared as if the stony heart of big industry was consuming businesses like his all over the country. He had trouble looking at the portrait of Emil d'Lezar hanging in the store.

On that particular morning, Janice Simmons entered Walter's office while he was engaged in a telephone conversation with the Montreal buyers. He nodded to Janice and continued the conversation. "Oui... Remersie... Adieu."

Turning to Janice, he let a sad smile etch his face as he hung up the phone. "Our last counter has been accepted. All the staff will receive six weeks' severance. You'll be kept on while I dispose of the inventory. They're going to need people, Janice, so make yourself indispensable. All of you."

Janice looked on, a hint of melancholy creeping into her voice. "I'm sorry, boss."

"Nothing lasts forever. We've had a pretty good run. Only the doughnuts at the Pelican are older."

Janice chuckled and wiped the moisture from her eyes. Walter, however, stood stoic, pushing the hurt he was suffering deep down within him, just as he had learned to do growing up.

"The world's rolling on, Janice. Some of us get squeezed out in the process."

Their conversation halted as Helen popped into the office in a pink, tight-fitting jump suit. The matching scarf around her neck accentuated the flush in her cheeks.

The smile disappeared from Janice's face. She nodded at Helen and turned to leave. "Good day, Mrs. Lezar."

As soon as Janice was out the door, Helen's face screwed up in a pout. "Mrs. Lezar.... Mrs. Lezar.... Mrs. Lezar. You'd think after six years she could call me Helen."

"We've been through this a dozen times. It's the way New Englanders show respect. After all, you *are* the boss's wife. And after all this time, Janice still calls me 'boss,' never Walter."

"She doesn't like me. Nobody likes me. A lot of polite smiles, but not even an invite for coffee."

"That's not true. How about the Brehms?" Walter offered.

"Oh yeah. Sure. They lasted three years and then went back to California."

"The winters were just too much for them."

"Or the cold shoulder," Helen said with a sneer.

Walter realized he wasn't going to win the argument. In an effort to guide the conversation in a different direction, he said, "I've some news on the sale. They've accepted our counter."

"Twelve and a half million? Man, that's awesome!" A radiant smile bathed her face, her body tingling, her feet sending her into a slight skip and bounce.

"It's much less than the value of the two properties combined, but—"

"Took them long enough," she said, the pout appearing once more.

"A few days is hardly long. The good thing is, they're in a hurry. They're FedExing the papers to Jonathan overnight. He'll have his

partner give it the final perusal, and, assuming the papers are good, they'll wire the money to our account when escrow closes."

"Oh! Money," Helen said, this time with a look that begged forgiveness. "I need a fifty for today's lesson." She let her right leg cross over her left—the stance a little girl takes when asking for an ice cream cone on a hot summer's day.

"Why don't you write Johnny a check?"

"I left the checkbook at home. I know it's dumb, but I don't want to go all the way back to get it."

He stood from behind his desk and moved to the doorway. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a ten and two twenties and placed them in her hand.

She reached up and planted a kiss on his cheek. "I'm so proud of you, honey, but I gotta run.... I'll be late for class."

Walter watched her lithe young body sprint toward the door and out of his office. He would once again be solvent. His outstanding business debts would be paid out of escrow, a mere one hundred and thirty-four thousand. The rest would go towards his personal debts, which were sizable. Even so, he'd have enough to semi-retire at the age of forty-four. Not rich by any means in the present state of the economy, but with enough to give them a comfortable living if they sold off the family residence, put all the antique furnishings on the market, and moved into a smaller place, one with less prominence in their small community. He wondered if Helen could adjust to their new lifestyle, a lifestyle without the freedom to spend indiscriminately. He knew his wife. She thrived on spending money.

Not too long ago, he had hoped things would work out. That hope had now developed a chink. When Helen had started taking sailing lessons, Walter noted that it seemed to give her a great deal of pleasure. For the first few lessons, she talked of nothing but sailing and her brilliant instructor, Johnny Semple. She piled accolade after accolade on him and the freedom she felt on the sea. Then one day all mention of her new mentor ceased. Walter questioned her about the man, but she always changed the subject. Thereafter, his suspicion parted soil and started to grow.