

# HARDSHELL

by lizzie Qnert

I been crabbin' since sun up in this god-awful heat. Sweat rolls down my back into the crack of my ass, making it itch, and black flies are eatin' me up. But, truth be told, I wouldn't change one damn thing. Like my pop used to say when Momma would bitch about us spending Sundays trotlining instead of going to church, "There's no place closer to God than Turner's Creek."

Besides that, on the water it's simple. No lies. No fights. No bullshit. No one tellin' me what to do. It's the only place I ain't gotta watch what I say.

I guzzle half a bottle of Arizona tea, and it hits me. With Momma and Pop long passed, and Eddie out of the picture, I really only got me to answer to. The marsh smell is strong and the air is thick with heat, but for the first time in a long while, it's easy to breathe.

A grouchy old heron squawks when he sails over my bateau. I putter up the creek, back to the empty gallon jug, marking the start of my line. Once I'm beside it, I lift the trotline onto the ringer arm with the boat hook. The anchor chain clanks when it rolls over the ringer and the first bait is pulled up from the bottom.

My line is hangin' low in the water, heavy with crabs. Today, every run's been like that. Must be my new bait. It's got the crabs fighting over it like druggies trying to score crack.

Dippin' my net under the crabs hangin' from the bait, I scoop'em outta the water and toss them in the bushel basket. Claws raised and snappin', the crabs skitter over each other, trying to escape. It ain't no use, they'll be in the steamer pot in no time. I kinda feel sorry for them. I know what it's like to have no way out.

At the end of my run, I lift the line off the ringer arm and it sinks to the bottom. I putter slow back to the start. Ain't no hurry. Gotta give the crabs time to latch on. After culling out the mummies and little crabs, I'm 'bout two dozen short of filling a third bushel of fat number ones. Next run oughta top it off.

The osprey screeches from her nest on top of the channel marker, when Jim-Bob passes by, headin' in for the day. Our bateaus are damn near side-by-side, but he pretends not to see me, so he don't gotta wave.

When my pop died, I got his bateau. Loudmouth Jim-Bob kicked up a stink. "It just ain't right, you working on the water."

The rest of the watermen felt the same way. Said a waterwoman was the stupidest thing they ever heard of, but I didn't give a flyin' fuck. Their bullshit wasn't gonna stop me. I'm as tough as any man and a lot more stubborn.

For one of the only times I can remember, my no-good husband Eddie took my side. Said I'd make a damn good waterwoman. Course, I soon figured out he didn't give a shit what job I did as long I as paid the mortgage and his drugged-up ass didn't have to work.

The watermen pulled all kinds of nasty stunts to make me quit. Cut my trotline, knocked over my bait barrels, put water in my gas can. Those assholes cost me a bundle, but I just kept showing up. After a while, they backed off. Now, if they don't actually respect me, they at least leave me the hell alone.

In fact, most folks leave me alone. If they steer clear of me, it's easier to ignore what's going on.

My eyes tear up. A no-see-um musta got past my sunglasses. Those little buggers burn like hell. I rub my lids.

When I look up, I spot a water cop headed my way. Blonde hair and tits—it's Rita. Her first coupla week as a water cop, the watermen hazed her hard too. But she gave as good as she got. Now they call her Dickless Tracy. She might not have a dick, but she got bigger balls than they'll ever have.

She pulls the Boston Whaler alongside me. "Hey Annie. Scorcher, isn't it?"

I wipe the sweat off my forehead with the back of my arm. "Hell ain't got nothing on this humidity."

“I hear ya.” She guzzles her water. Sweat stains the pits of her khaki uniform. “Any news about Eddie?”

My busted ribs throb under my ACE bandage.

“Nope.” I spit into the bay. “Ain’t the first time he took off.”

I know she’s trying to be nice, but I ain’t sorry Eddie’s gone. My jaw couldn’t take another wiring.

“It’s got to be hard on you. What’s it been? Two weeks?”

I shrug, “Something like that.”

“Has he ever been gone this long?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Sheriff found his truck a couple towns over. Parked in front of a crack house. Driver side door hanging wide open. Cops think maybe his dealer jumped him ‘cause he owed ‘em money.”

“Damn, Annie. I hope he’s okay.”

I bite my tongue.

A shirtless speedboater, with his hat on backwards, zooms by, rocking us in the no-wake zone. Between his oversized engines and blaring music, I can’t even hear myself think. I flip him the bird. “What an asshole! Thinks ‘cause he got money he owns the damn bay.”

Rita laughs. “I’m going to go take a little of that money right now.”

“Good. A hefty ticket’ll serve him right.”

She pulls an ice-cold water outta her cooler and tosses it over to me. “Take care of yourself, Annie.”

I nod my thanks and she chases after the speedboat.

Enough time’s gone by. I putter back to my buoy, hook my line and lay it over the ringer arm. In one run, I fill my third bushel. It’s about ten. The sun’s gettin’ higher and hotter. Time to

call it a day. I pull up my line and spool it on the bottom of my bateau, so I can rebait on my way back to shore.

I pass the duck blind where me and Eddie screwed for the first time. Our shotgun wedding came five months later. I lost my first baby to miscarriage, and the second when he beat it outta me. I had my tubes tied to make damn sure there wasn't a third.

I stamp down the anger swellin' up in my belly. I don't need it no more.

A muskrat slides into the water and a few ducks toll in. Somehow, the seagulls know they're gonna get a free lunch and hover above the bateau making a racket.

I slide the bristly trotline between my fingers. At every chewed-up piece of bait, I send up thanks, almost like I'm praying the rosary. Wiggling the old bait from the line, I toss it to the greedy gulls, and smile watchin' em swallow each piece.

When I grab for a fresh piece of bait, my fingers hit the bottom of the barrel. I only got enough to bait up this line; then it's back to the usual bull lips.

I slow down. Take my time with every salt-cured piece. I roll it between my fingers and squeeze. The flesh is springy. I sniff it. Rot and salt. I bite it and grind it between my teeth before I attach it to my line. I'm gonna burn this day into my brain, like the salt burning my cuts and scrapes.

Five long years I suffered. But I ain't like those doomed crabs. I found a way out.

Eddie mighta put me through hell, but I put him in it. Every hacked-up piece of my husband I twist into my line is sweet revenge.

He wasn't much good for nothing, but he always could catch crabs.

Dear Reader,

My character, Annie, inspired me to write a full-length novel set within the crabbing industry on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. If you enjoyed this story, be sure to check out ***Crackshell*** (domestic suspense). Due out late summer 2023!

Thanks,

lizzie Qnert