

LIONS
in the
WATER

JACK J. WYATT

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For *Smarjee*—

Your unending encouragement,
laughing, and listening.

For the food you left by my study door,
and the empty plates you picked up later.

*The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and
the storm terrible, but they have never found these
dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.*

— VINCENT VAN GOGH

1



THE TUCKERS READIED to kill each other. Again.

Jed's anxious eyes turned from the wheelhouse to the large man holding the knife.

"You fucker!"

The dagger's blade split the counter, tacking wrinkled bills under its razor-sharp nose. This was how the challenge began—not always like this, but near enough.

Bobby glanced at the standing shank, then back at his brother Dennis.

"Count em!"

Dennis winced. "What?"

"Count the cards, stupid! The deck. The holes. Community, river, the flop." Bobby tilted his head. "Should be fifty-two, just like your dummy IQ!"

Jed slid to the end of the galley table. Part of his duties aboard included maintaining order with the crew. Especially between these jumbo-idiots. But the scrapping brothers had at least thirty pounds on him, each. They'd swung bait and catch most of their adult lives, when they weren't boxing or wrestling one another.

"I'm not counting no cards! It doesn't prove anything! You dealt me shit from the bottom!" His large hand pounded the bulkhead.

Bobby, six-foot-two and square-jawed, rose from the galley's bench. He executed a slow stretch and cracked each knuckle, his stare roaming from Dennis to the paper money and scattered change in the pot.

"Bobby don't do it..." Jed's eyes darted to the closed wheelhouse door, then back to brother versus brother.

"That is my cash, and I will be taking it." Bobby's biceps and forearms flexed under his filthy, tight t-shirt. "Come get some!"

Dennis charged with a cocked right fist, but larger Bobby pitched left, missing the buzzing haymaker. He lunged across the table, clamping four calloused fingers and a thumb around Dennis's throat.

The gagging man barked out a cough.

He spun Dennis around, wrenching his left arm. Humid breath filled his younger brother's ear canal. "How we going to end this? Am I going to have to beat your ass again?"

Squirming and kicking, Dennis clawed at Bobby's sweaty forearms, but the powerful holds didn't budge.

"Bobby, stop that shit," Jed called.

"Oh, I'm not hurtin' him. Just a lesson in sportsmanship." His fingers tightened around Dennis's neck.

Working on a hot, muggy boat, three crewmen rubbed each other wrong sooner or later. But these two brothers far more than others. Sometimes \$6.37 in a downtime card game sparked a punch, other times the last sandwich or energy drink.

"Bobby, I'm not kidding."

Dennis wheezed and gasped, his face approaching a tomato red.

Jed needed something heavy. He bounced from the galley bench and seized a fire extinguisher off the starboard wall. Clutching the metal cylinder with both hands, he aimed its butt-end toward Bobby's chin. "Last warning."

Bobby's eyebrows shot up. He torqued his younger brother's left wrist and shoved him forward, sending all two hundred and ten pounds

of Dennis smashing against the port's paneled bulkhead. Victorious Bobby scooped up his prize money from the table. Still champion.

Dennis massaged his sore arm in silence.

Jed shook his head. *The Tucker brothers*. They punched and pummeled each other from time to time, but he was sure one of these days they'd grow out of it. He hoped that damn day would be soon.

"Hanger!" A voice boomed behind the wheelhouse door, and the three men rushed through the galley's portal to the deck.

The sea should have swallowed the *Gypsea Moon* years ago. A white-opal trawler with faded scarlet trim cresting her thirtieth birthday at sea, she sat seventy-nine-foot from bow to stern and beamed at twenty-four feet. Two precarious diesel engines powered her massive hull.

The boat's owner, though, refused to fix her overworked motors or fund repairs for anything north of meeting basic safety standards. Missing cleats, warped planks, and decrepit nets strung together by a colorful array of checkered mends.

Despite her aging innards, she sported an indestructible steel body. One that preserved the livelihoods of her captain, first mate, and both deckhands—even if the latter two did beat the piss out of one another on occasion.

Outside, with the afternoon breeze at a moderate three to four knots, the *Gypsea Moon* sashayed on the waters, her aluminum outriggers holding steady. Winged hitchhikers squawked on the outstretched booms, eyeing the waters beneath for a leisurely lunch.

The warm sun struck Captain Bill's gray-stubble beard. He idled the rumbling engines and massaged his left knee. Taking a measured breath of sea air, he turned in the helm's chair and placed his feet gently on the floor. He stretched his sore back as best he could, then headed down the gangway to the galley.

Dennis and Bobby manned port and starboard, while a watchful Jed throttled the winch. As the lines raised, the captain arose on deck and steadied himself on the ship's tubular rail.

“Something snagged the tickler.”

Jed nodded. With nets sunk around eighty feet, surfacing could take a few minutes. The tickler chain held taut in front of the submerged nets. Its links dragged the ocean bottom, causing shrimp to bounce off the seafloor. As the *Gypsea Moon's* mesh traps drove forward, they captured everything in their wake...including wandering rays, stray scorpionfish, and the odd eel. But in rough terrain, any sizable fixed underwater object could hook the mechanism and hang it.

An experienced captain could react fast enough and stop the boat. Cease her drift before the winch's cable drums ran wild. Captain Bill held that sea-sense. When he called hanger, *Gypsea Moon* spun less than fifty feet of cable from her drums before he healed the engines. The ship came to a dead halt.

Jed knew of other unlucky vessels that had spooled out. Ran their tow cable rigid after the nets snagged the seabed on a reef or hooked a massive underwater boulder, anchoring the moving ship. The result meant a violent jolt for the boat and her crew. One that could launch a sailor or two overboard. More still, other ships, usually trawling too fast, had snapped entire outriggers. Nothing energized an exhausted fisherman quite like a sixty-foot metal baseball bat swinging across the deck.

Dennis and Bobby took turns peering over the rails to check the lines. They were careful not to get in each other's way, lest round two erupt in front of the commander.

Captain Bill enforced only a few rules on his boat. The top two being *no drinking* and *no fighting*. If he caught Dennis and Bobby raising fists on board, he'd lose his shit. The skipper would hook-line both men and drag them in *Gypsea Moon's* backwash all the way to shore.

Once the doors breached, Jed hit the lift-stick on the winch. Both booms started their slow rotation to vertical above the deck. The elevated outriggers exposed their mesh bags and catch, saltwater dripping from the nets. The bags drew inward over the ship's wooden deck planks.

Dennis and Bobby manned port and starboard, reaching for their respective lines. Jed halted the winch after each hefty round pouch hung over the ship's belly. At once, the brothers pulled the bag-lines and let the seafloor's catch spill onto the boat. A familiar smell of fish and seaweed assaulted the air.

As the last of it fell, an odd thump sounded near Bobby's feet.

He squinted and scanned the area, then knelt and sank his large hands into the catch.

Jed secured the winch, swigged the last of his coffee from his tin-mug, and walked toward Bobby's crouching figure.

As Jed stood over him, Bobby's hand jetted up from the pile of hapless crustaceans.

"Check this out!" In his dirty fingers, a weathered piece of oblong metal about the size of a half-dollar. He used a thumbnail to scrape sea chum from the object's face. A forged metal. Silver. As he rubbed, designs appeared—a flower or bushel arose. Bobby rubbed it again. A raised cross encircled with dots and unfamiliar writing on its circular outer edge. Four tiny figurines under each bisection. A winged creature of some type, then an unusual hat or crown. Still another design, this one unclear. A raised blur of silver etching washed away by years, if not centuries, of seabed waters.

Captain Bill's curious face emerged between the two men.

"Spanish," he bellowed.

Jed and Bobby looked up at him.

"Those markings. Spanish. See the cross here and the lion? That's genuine silver."

Jed and Bobby glanced at one another; eyes wide. Both men dropped to the deck and shoved their hands into the mound of wiggling shrimp and unlucky bottom fish, slime and seaweed slipping between their fingers. The fishermen rummaged through the sludge for more treasure.

Bobby grunted and sent another silver coin clanking into Jed's empty coffee cup.

Then Jed found one in his side of the pile. Clank.

Bobby uncovered two more. Clank. Clank.

After another minute and many more clanks, the smiling men rose to their feet. Bobby grabbed the tin coffee cup and brought it alongside Jed and the captain.

Eighteen coins. Eighteen silver coins. The three men laughed, and Bobby patted Jed on the shoulder.

“Wow!” a voice behind the captain shouted. Dennis Tucker outstretched his sizable wet fists and opened them slowly. “Mine are gold!”

2



REMNANTS FROM THE crew's catch rotted on the planks, wafting through the early morning air like death. The boys throttled the winch and raised the outriggers to full vertical before making port. Bill turned the wheel and pointed the Gypsea Moon downriver toward the docks.

He rubbed his tired eyes and flexed his stiff legs. Everything ached. As yesterday and the day before. He recalled a line from some lousy poem he'd once read: "Better sore at sea than land for me!" Complete bullshit. That soft-handed jagoff poet didn't know from *sore at sea*.

Pulling the boat's throttle back to an easy jog, Bill recalled his rough courtship, from deckhand to captain, while he stared toward the calm Florida shores.

In younger times, he performed every duty from scrubbing down the sorters to prepping gear. He fought season after season through blistered hands and assorted injuries to keep his spot at the rail—it paid far better than bait and fetch-it work. He learned never to disobey any of his seasoned captains, a habit he'd picked up in the Navy. He gave his hard-working deck mates respect. In his free time, he studied charts and weather maps. He got promoted to first mate. His reputation grew, and other crews wanted him. Finally, one spring, a

regular boat captain fell ill. Early-to-work Bill entered the wheelhouse and never left.

He'd managed a few boats during his tenure at the controls. Traveling where the fishing took him, along the gulf coast and now the east. He once did a full season's turnaround in the Pacific Northwest. Slingshotting bait, netting salmon, trolling longfin, and railing crab. But a year of ice and rain had returned him to the warmer climate of the southeast.

Two decades at the helm now, scooping up catch. His philosophy, though born of a more able-bodied man, still held true. An adventurous life tests wit and worth, a meek life exerts neither. For many years, laboring on the seas had provided him with everything he wanted. He could never imagine a day without waves and wonder.

Though, a few seasons ago, while fishing the waters in a sleepy Louisiana seaside town, he met a lovely sun-kissed woman with large curls and a plump smile. Dropping by her bakery for coffee and a pastry became a morning routine. Over several weeks his shy grins and nods elevated to small talk, and finally an invitation to dinner. He didn't eat but three bites. Instead, he fell into the mesmerizing, soft, radiant eyes of the smiling shopkeeper. There was a calm in Olivia's gentle laugh, a refuge, something he'd never experienced before. The following year, they bought a canary-colored house with a green front door. For the first time in his life, a black mailbox in the front yard tethered him to the rest of the world. He mowed the lawn on Sundays and drank iced tea alongside his loving bride. His other days a cycle of pushing from the docks at dawn, back in time for dinner.

But money grew tight. He stopped running charters for tourists and began fishing deeper waters with a crew. Two, three days or more at sea. The money got better. But nights casting under the stars became too many. After three seasons, that black mailbox told him not to bother cutting the front lawn any longer.

He remembered her delicate smile and sweet touch. Something fell from his eye, and he wiped it away. Why had the sea he loved taken so much from him?

He swore many times since if he ever got another chance at passion like that, he'd chase it around the earth until he caught it.

A twinge in his shoulder strained him back into reality. He gazed out the wheelhouse window at his three-man crew.

As Jed tossed over the last of the bumpers at the bow, Dennis and Bobby opened the ship's refrigerated hold, then sprung from the deck to the dock. The boat nudged closer as they pulled and tied off the braids. A soft bounce and a few squeaks, and the *Gypsea Moon* rested in her berth.

Bobby and Dennis trotted ashore, searching for cell signals and cold suds.

Jed, his first mate, would remain aboard the *Gypsea Moon* until he excused him. Damn good man. Reminded him of his younger days. Loyal, smart, and driven by a peculiar tenacity Bill could never teach. When Jed had a goal, he kept tunneled focus and saw it through to the end. He'd often talked about getting his own boat and crew, one day—Bill knew that time wasn't too far off now.

A dock worker in licorice waders stepped aboard. He'd lead the cannery's shoreside crew through the process of collecting the crew's catch.

Bill studied the tin cup atop the dash. Silver and gold, with Spanish markings. They'd trawled a large area—several hundred square miles in a sweeping pattern. He pressed a few keys on the ship's GPS console, then took a pencil and a new piece of chart paper and drew rough marks corresponding to the screen's coordinates. He reached for a straight edge and connected a few points.

Although the snag had occurred at the upper part of his grid, the capture of Spanish coins might've happened anywhere they'd dragged the net. Moreover, the metal hadn't floated out the bycatch. So, they

must've had a good deal of shrimp in the bags before netting the coins. He lopped off a section near the grid's starting point.

He placed little arrows at each end of the plotted dots, then he shaded in the area with the side of the pencil. "Anywhere in this 140-square-mile area thar be treasure..." he mumbled with a smile.

He laughed, then folded up the ludicrous treasure map and rested it over the coffee cup. What was he thinking? Finding any more of the treasure, if any existed, would take a miracle. He'd need more crew, and far more supplies and equipment. A worn-out shrimping vessel, an aging captain, and three fishermen didn't have a chance.

The pilothouse door swung open.

"Fill the boat?" David Brack stood in the passageway, leaning half his weight against the helm's door frame. As usual, a collared shirt with the first three buttonholes undone showed a patch of scruff on his spray-tan chest.

Bill turned slowly in his chair. It was far too early in the day to deal with this man's bullshit...

The boat's owner, a lanky man of thirty-eight. A former financial advisor from Miami. Brack drove a fire red Lincoln convertible. Sometimes a blonde sat inside, sometimes a brunette.

Always in slacks, a matching jacket, and a collared shirt. The outfit rotated between black, gray, and brown. But ever the same pseudo-suit ensemble with no tie, signifying Brack's rise from the corporate butthole which had spawned him.

Brack waved away all suggestions for new equipment. Only interested in the catch and the cash. Fuel and supplies came off the top. Then fifty percent to Brack, the rest split between Bill and his crew. Even so, the cheapskate always tried to finagle more for himself.

Brack rubbed his smooth chin. "Don't see much packing." He pointed to the two men in overalls hoisting out the crew's catch.

“Prospects scurried off.” Bill motioned toward the wheelhouse window. “Working a new grid. Day after next, we’re fixin’ to chase up near...”

Brack shook his head. “Doesn’t make sense to me why you docked then.” He placed both hands on his hips.

Bill tensed his jaw muscles.

“Supplies, we’d been out for three days.”

Brack scowled and pointed his finger at Bill. “I got the education. I earned the capital. I own the boat!” Another shake of his head. “Your job is to fill it! I can’t open another contract until we fulfill this one. I’m not made of money, you know!”

Bill said nothing.

Brack lifted his beige loafer from the floor to check its bottom.

“Damn seagulls...” He scraped the sole against the ladder’s step.

Bill snickered.

“I don’t care if you and your men are starving out there. Fuel costs money, Captain. Remember that. Next time I shave shares!” He knocked his knuckles against the wheelhouse door, made a quick turn, and left.

Bill shook his head before returning his attention to his penciled treasure grid.

Jed bounced up the ladder with the weigh sheet.

“Hey Skip, all set. I’m going to head in for a shower and hit the rack. Anything else you need?”

Bill gave a grunt without looking up from his chart paper. “Never work for an asshole.”

“Aye Captain!” Jed gave a firm chuckle.

“Good sailor. Next outing is the day after tomorrow. Rest up. Get the boys to clean the quarters and restock, if you please? We’re taking her southward for another overnigher. Catch up to schedule.”

Jed nodded. “Absolutely.”

Bill turned toward his chart again.

“Hey Cap’n, mind if I take one of those pieces? Like to give it a quick study while we have internet. Try and find some history.”

He lifted the tin mug and handed it to his first mate. Jed fingered through a few pieces until he found a suitable coin, then passed the cup back.

“Got my cell if you need me.”

Bill nodded.

Jed retreated through the helm’s door and closed it behind him.

Bill moved from the chair with caution. He returned the cup full of Spanish coins to the *Gypsea Moon’s* dash and gazed out the pilothouse window at the early morning sea, recalling, for some reason, the smell of freshly cut grass.