

SEATTLE, PRESENT DAY

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Allison Walker tilted her head back and sniffed the air as she stepped into the dimly lit salon. Just the usual boat smells: oiled woods, a little salt, the mildest hints of styrene and diesel. She checked her watch. It was 7:15 and, as always, she had arrived a little before the agreed time to set things up. Her prospect would be along soon.

Allison sometimes showed yachts early in the morning before typical work hours, but only when she knew enough about the potential buyer to feel safe being alone in a marina with little or no activity. This guy seemed fine, at least from his online corporate profile and the two short phone conversations they'd had. A little odd maybe, but no threat.

Allison opened the blinds along the starboard side of the salon and glanced out. Still gray and drizzly. She walked forward and up to the pilothouse to bring the vessel to life. Warmly glowing electronics always seemed to encourage buyers, she felt, and her own live-aboard experience reinforced this. Unless she was trying to sleep, Allison found a dark, quiet vessel a bit unnerving, even ominous at times. *Dead in the water.*

A shiver ran through her body as Allison leaned across the cold ship's wheel to toggle a few switches. She turned to the port side to flip on the diesel heat, and hugged herself against the damp cold. A few seconds later, the reassuring sound of the furnace's blower breathed comfort into the air.

Music or ship's radio? Allison knew that her prospect was already a yacht owner. He was also a mid-level exec in a local software company and probably a techie at heart, so she opted for the radio. That would have been her personal preference anyway, as its low chatter worked like a mental balm to mask the intensely competing trains of thought which sometimes steamed through her head. She reached up and turned on the VHF radio, tuning it to Seattle Traffic where the controller was logging in a container ship heading south through Admiralty Inlet.

Having satisfied herself that all systems were working, Allison looked forward through the pilothouse windows at the sky which was straining to take on a morning glow. She loved her own cozy little marina on Lake Union with its covered slips, but she had to admit that Elliott Bay Marina had its perks, for those who could afford them. From her vantage

point in the raised pilothouse, Allison could see southeast through several other rows of boats, over a stretch of Elliott Bay and on to the city itself. Seattle's blue-green reflections on the water rippled smoothly in response to the wake of a ferry inbound from Bainbridge Island.

Allison gazed through the window for several more minutes, savoring the January morning calm as the yacht warmed around her. The occasional creak of the boat pulling against its dock lines, and the little ticks that came from the heating ducts, gave Allison the distinct impression that the yacht was stretching its muscles, slowly joining the morning with her.

Gradually, though, Allison's mind returned to the task at hand. She let her focus change from the distant view of Seattle to the reflection of her own face as the glow of the instruments revealed it in the window. She leaned forward to check her minimal makeup, ran a finger gently under each turquoise eye, and shook her head to position a swoop of medium length chestnut hair across her forehead. She pursed her lips and allowed that crooked little smile to appear, the one that her friend Margaret called her Meg Ryan smile. "Not too bad for thirty," she whispered to herself.

"Anybody home?" came a muffled voice from behind her.

Damn, I forgot to put on the coffee! thought Allison as she hurried down through the galley to meet her early client. "Be right there!" she called back.

Allison opened the aft salon door to find a pudgy middle-aged man with dark curly hair, graying around the edges. He was wearing a yellow rain slicker and his eyes moved constantly, as if searching the vessel for something interesting or dangerous. Thick glasses seemed to magnify the effect of his shifting eyes. Allison moved slightly to place herself in the focus of his attention.

"Good morning, I'm Allison Walker," she said, smiling and extending her hand. "You must be Mr. Terpin."

"Josh Terpin, good to meet you," said the man, breathing heavily, as if he had run down the dock. His eyes met Allison's for only an instant as he shook her hand, then resumed their darting. Terpin ran a hand along the teak woodwork.

"I was just about to get some coffee going," said Allison. "Care for some?"

"Twin diesels, right?" asked Terpin, glancing around the interior.

I guess that's a no on the coffee, thought Allison. "Yes, twin Cummins 370Bs, turbocharged. 370 horsepower at 3000 RPM." Allison felt some

pride in her memory for this kind of detail. Even though her memory plagued her in other ways, it did help sell boats.

“Mmm. Thrusters?”

“Just bow thrusters. Hydraulic, though.”

“Hours on the engines?”

“About four hundred, I believe.”

“Okay, not bad.”

This kind of exchange went on for several more minutes as Allison followed her prospect through the various spaces aboard the 49-foot motor yacht. She noticed that Terpin’s breathing hadn’t slowed much as he puffed around the boat, opening storage areas, inspecting wiring, flicking lights on and off. His eyes always seemed to be a half second ahead of his hands, moving constantly.

Allison tried to make some sales headway. “So, is this boat something like you had in mind?”

“Yeah, it’s in the ballpark.”

“What kind of boat do you have now, if I could ask?”

“It’s a Bayliner, a 3988.”

“So this would be a nice step up for you,” Allison smiled.

“Hey, don’t give me that bullshit about Bayliners,” Terpin shot back. “They make a good boat.”

“No, no! I just meant the size. Ten feet is a nice jump up, and with the extra beam, you’d have so much more interior space. And the pilothouse is a real plus here in the Northwest, don’t you think?”

“I guess. So what’s up top?” asked Terpin with a glance up the steep wooden stairs leading to the flybridge hatch.

“There’s a nice upper helm, tons of space for a dinghy and seating for at least six. Here, let’s go take a look,” Allison smiled as she gestured upward toward the hatch.

Terpin grabbed the handrail and took a step up. “Ooh,” he muttered, reaching back to massage a leg.

“You okay?” Allison asked.

“Yeah, happens every now and then. It’s nothing.” Terpin took another slow step up and winced.

“Why don’t I just send you some photos of the bridge,” offered Allison. “Besides, it’s still raining out there. Here, let me give you a hand,” she said, reaching up.

Terpin brushed her hand aside.

“Is it a cramping kind of pain, even burning sometimes?” Allison asked.

“Yeah...” Terpin looked at her sideways.

“Could be intermittent claudication,” said Allison. “Restricted blood flow in the arteries of your leg, basically. It manifests as a temporary symptom, but often reflects a more permanent underlying condition. Can be a serious indicator...”

Terpin, having reached the bottom again, turned and stared at Allison. She noted that this was the first time the man had actually looked directly at her for more than a fraction of a second. *Flushed appearance, a light sweat. Hypertension too?*

“When was the last time you had your blood pressure checked, Mr. Terpin?”

“What are you, a yacht broker or an MD?” said Terpin as he backed away. “I’ve gotta get to a meeting.”

Terpin stepped onto the dock, and with an irritated glance back, was gone.

Allison sat down heavily and pounded the seat of the couch with her hand. *What is wrong with me?!*

This wasn’t the first time Allison had let one of the Teachers get in her way. They were usually helpful, almost always interesting. But sometimes, like now... *Just because she’s a doctor doesn’t mean I should let her jump in when I see someone in trouble! I mean, shit, it’s my life!*

My life? Right, more like our life, or their life. Just in the last year or so, she had to admit that things had gotten more intense. And the headaches were more of a bother, too.

As far back as she could remember, Allison seemed to know things that she shouldn’t know, to learn things much faster than her peers. Not everything, just things that the Teachers knew about: dry, skill-related things, nothing personal. Like that crazy journal reference that had been stuck in her head like an annoying song since childhood, long before she had any clue about its meaning. Just a string of words and numbers: *American Journal of Surgery, Vol. 134, August 1977, No. 2, p. 136.* Over the last few years, she’d read the paper several times, had no trouble understanding it, but failed to see how it could possibly be relevant to her life. Her life? What was that, anyway?

Allison slumped forward and put her head in her hands. Had it finally gotten bad enough to talk to someone about? No one could possibly

understand. They would just send her away. No. She shook her head slowly from side to side, as if to reinforce the decision she had made and re-made hundreds of times before.

She hadn't breathed a word to anyone about the Teachers since she'd made that mistake when she was a little girl. On her fifth birthday, just a few days after Allison left her last foster home and was finally adopted, she had tried to make some inroads with her new big sister, Beth. The adoption hadn't been easy for either girl. Allison never knew her birth parents and had no experience with a real sibling; and Beth, for her part, saw little Allison as a foreign invader. So when Allison tried to share something about her Teachers in an attempt at intimacy, Beth shut her down. She said that Allison was broken and told her that only broken babies had imaginary friends. Imaginary teacher-friends were even worse. Not only that, she said, but if Allison ever did anything Beth didn't like, Beth would tell Mom and Dad all about the Teachers, and they would send Allison back where she came from. *Send you back. Broken.*

Allison still felt the pain of that moment. She knew it was juvenile, this crazy thought of abandonment. Why even allow it mental space? No one was going to send her anywhere. She was a grown woman, for God's sake! She'd made it this far in one piece, more or less.

Maybe her friend Margaret would get it. Maybe it would be safe to tell her. It would be an enormous relief, and there really wasn't anyone else. But Allison couldn't bear the thought of losing her only real friend; and that could happen, couldn't it? *Send you back. Back where you came from. Broken.*