

Chapter One

“Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.”

-Publilius Syrus

The ship shuddered to silence two-hundred miles off the Moroccan coast. Homebound from Israel, the sixty-year-old engine was failing. Ten days before, anchored off Malta, the engineers had labored for forty-eight hours, trying to find and fix the problem. This time we were dead in the water, no land or help in sight.

The racket could not be ignored. We shut down the engines after lunch on Thursday. The comforting throb of power drained away exposing sharp feelings of vulnerability. No longer choosing our course across the ocean, the low swells determined our heading, and the current decided our speed and direction. *Who's in charge now? Who had ever been in charge?* The engine's noise had drowned these thoughts, now rising on the lapping waves.

The engineers worked into the night as we drifted south. They zeroed in on cylinder four. They changed the fuel injector six times, torqued the head, and checked the timing. I joined them from midnight until 0200 to help clean the scavenging air valves. We suspected dirty fuel and switched to a different tank.

The engine's reassuring clatter resumed at 0440 on Friday morning. I set our course across the Southern Atlantic for the Bahamas, but the crew's confidence was shaken. My chief mate and second mate came to my stateroom Friday after lunch. I was sitting at my desk, and stood to meet them.

“This ship is unseaworthy,” said my second mate, his face reddening. “I demand to get off at the nearest port.” An Alaskan crab boat captain, early fifties, Jim was almost twice as old as me—his captain. He no longer seemed as impressed with me as he had when he joined the ship in Israel.

“Unseaworthy?” I repeated. “Do you agree?” I asked Terry, my chief mate. Terry, mid-sixties, was a licensed hundred-ton master who sailed on Great Lakes passenger vessels. I envied his bright white beard.

“Yes,” he muttered, eyes darting to Jim for reassurance.

I looked from one to the other, perplexed. Were they still crying about not being home for Christmas, or were they actually concerned about safety?

“I’ll look at the chart,” I said.

The watchstanders on the bridge were tense. Four months ago, they had all been landlubbers, volunteers for a cause. In the long days since, they’d seen more challenges than commonly fill a hundred voyages. How many more hardships could they endure? Silent they stared at me, waiting.

I looked at the chart, picked off the distance, ran the numbers—a day’s voyage to the Canary Islands.

“Rob,” I said to my third mate, “we’ll try to fix the engine in the Canaries. Come left to course two-two-zero.”

“Two-two-zero! Yes, sir!” Turning, he said, “On the helm, come left to two-two-zero.”

I’d been a Pacific Ocean sailor. I didn’t even know where the Canary Islands were until I needed them for refuge. I walked back to look at the chart again—worthless. My only paper chart was an

overview of all the islands. My electronic chart showed blank brown polygons on a blue background. Nowhere near enough detail to be safe. How deep was the water? Where were the hazards? Traffic separation schemes? Areas to anchor? Which island should we call?

I walked down the steel ladder to my stateroom. The ship smelled like almost fresh paint and a hint of oil. Built in 1942, it was still a good ship. It felt authentic to me, honest—round portholes that opened, steel bulkheads without veneer, exposed ribs and electrical conduit. I focused on the feeling of the handrail, sixty years of paint gripped and chipped and reapplied.

Back to business. I pulled out two books, the *Sailing Directions*, and the *Guide to Port Entry*. They showed I had two options—closer, deeper Santa Cruz de Tenerife, or farther, safer Las Palmas. The water off Tenerife was too deep to anchor, and mooring our old ship pier side was begging for harassment from the port authorities. I wished I could ask someone for advice, but those I might ask already thought I was too young and inexperienced. Better not reinforce it.

Lord, what should I do? Listening. Straining. Silence.

Las Palmas? Better anchorage, but a little further. Hungry, I headed to the mess hall for a snack. Rob, our third mate, had baked some Basque Shepherd's bread. Hot from the toaster, crispy and buttered, Rob's bread soothed my soul.

"Captain Jake, come to sick bay." The nurse blurted over the PA.

Again, urgent, "Captain Jake, come to sick bay."

Man, what now? I took a crunchy, buttery bite, tossed my toast on a plate, and turned back for the passageway.

Blood. Not hungry anymore. Big blops on the deck. Bright red, a Hansel and Gretel trail leading forward. Woozy.

Norma slouched, face white, left hand bundled in gauze. The infirmary was painted light green, and lined with glass-door cabinets. A cluttered metal bunk bed crowded the center. Elizabeth, the ship's nurse, stood back, pressed against the countertop, wide-eyed, silent.

I reached for Norma's hand and gingerly opened the gauze wad. The tip of her thumb was snapped backward at the base of her nail. It rested in a clot of blood. I might have seen bone if I'd looked harder.

"Clear that bunk," I barked, pointing. "Help me with her. Get some ibuprofen. And water. Ice pack. Call Daniel on the PA." Elizabeth jumped with each command. Daniel was a sharp young member of the engine department, he'd be valuable help.

Norma was our laundry lady. She was sixty-eight years old, yet not our oldest crew member. Dark hair to her shoulders and bright eyes, only the smile lines hinted at her age. She bustled about her chores cheerfully and doted on her husband Lloyd, an engineer on board. The seas were low, but the ship had rolled, and Norma grasped a door jamb for balance. The door had closed on her thumb.

On her back, color returned slowly. I propped her arm on pillows and rigged a sling of gauze to elevate her hand. I couldn't look at her thumb to adjust her bandage, too squeamish. Ice pack on her forehead, Daniel prayed for her, and her spirits brightened ever so slightly.

My toast was soggy and cool back in the mess hall, but I was hungry again, so I chewed on it anyway. *So much for Las Palmas. Eight extra hours to medical help?* I plodded back to the

bridge, my footsteps sounding tong, tong, tong on the metal steps. *I better tell the office we're pulling into Tenerife.*

I called from the flying bridge, the top of the ship, open air, no steel overhead to block the satellite signal. The weather was pleasant, sixties, overcast, the only breeze from our sedate advance at five knots. The fresh air almost helped.

“Don,” I said into the satellite phone, “Norma’s broken her thumb badly. We have to change plans.”

Don and Sondra Tipton, founders and administrators of Friend Ships, the organization for which we were all volunteering, had been scrambling to find a ship’s agent since we changed course for the Canaries the day before.

“We need to pull into Tenerife,” I said, talking quickly. “I can’t anchor.”

“Are you sure?” Don pleaded. “It’s never good to pull into port like this. We get trapped. It’s expensive. They could impound the ship.”

Friend Ships was a volunteer ministry funded by donations. Practically speaking, they didn’t have deep pockets. They couldn’t lose a ship or have it bound up in red tape halfway around the world.

“Sand bottom, Don. Over two-hundred feet deep,” I said, not seeing his side, and frustrated, feeling he didn’t see mine. “It’s forecast to blow thirty-five knots tonight. We need eleven shots of chain, but only have eight. Norma’s hurt bad, and Las Palmas is eight hours more sailing.”

“If there’s really no other way...” Don said, trailing off.

“There isn’t. We have to pull in.”

“Okay,” he sighed. “We’ll look for an agent on Tenerife.”

I dropped back down to the bridge, and quickly performed the scan that had become second nature. I checked the radar, looked out the windows, watched the compass and rudder indicator for a few beats, and checked the GPS for speed and course.

“Anything amiss, mate?” I asked.

He shook his head “no.” I paused at the chart, traced my finger along our trackline, noted the fixes, and read the latest log book entries. *Sure would be nice to have a single hour without drama.*

“I’ll be in my stateroom,” I called out as I descended.

Five minutes later the ship’s general alarm rang loud for two seconds and stopped. Normally used to signal emergencies like fire or abandon ship, my officers wanted a backup if they couldn’t reach me by sound-powered phone, so I’d suggested a half-second jingle of the general alarm—after they tried the sound-powered phone. My phone was at arm’s length. It never rang.

“Captain,” Terry said as I entered the bridge, “I have a large contact on the starboard bow that I can’t find on the radar.”

I looked in the direction he was pointing, then peered through a pair of binoculars.

“Do you mean the large rectangular shape close to the island?” I asked.

We were ten miles north of Tenerife. The point was rocky, mottled in angular shadows like a stealth plane, and the shoreline was still beyond the horizon. Daylight had just begun to fade.

“Yes, it’s dark gray,” he said. “I think it’s a ship.”

“It's not a ship,” I sighed, “It's a building. Did you use binoculars?”

Terry looked down.

“Don't ring the general alarm anymore. I'm getting chow, I'll be right back. There's nothing out there within ten miles and we're making eight knots.”

I descended to the mess hall and hustled back to the starboard bridge wing with a divided plastic tray. I sat in the captain's chair, upholstered in gray vinyl hardened with age, painted metal frame chipping. I ate slowly, food tasteless, tray resting on my thighs. I sat staring, my thumb exploring a hole in the armrest, soft center and sharp edges. The engine beat slow, speed reduced since the repair—the ship gave no sense of motion through flat calm seas. Whiffs of dirt and vegetation arrived like messengers. The sky darkened and the horizon faded. The inky black island only seemed closer if I'd been looking away for a while.

About 1830, Tenerife Vessel Traffic Control called us on our VHF radio.

“*Spirit of Grace, Spirit of Grace*, this is Tenerife Vessel Traffic Control, over.”

I bolted from my bridge wing perch, and strode into the wheelhouse. Terry held out the mic.

“Tenerife Vessel Traffic Control,” I replied, “this is *Spirit of Grace*, go ahead, over.”

“*Spirit of Grace*, you are not in the traffic separation scheme. Alter your course to comply with the traffic separation scheme.”

I looked forward, then to port and starboard. Not a ship in sight. Three hours before we'd seen a distant tug and tow, but it never came closer than six miles. What do they need a Traffic Separation Scheme for?

“Traffic Control, we’ve never been to this area and don’t have any charts. Please direct us to the traffic lanes, over.”

“*Spirit of Grace*, the traffic separation scheme went into effect yesterday. Look at your charts and alter course to comply with the traffic separation scheme.”

“Traffic Control, I repeat, we do not have any charts. We do not know where the traffic separation scheme is. We’ll get charts when we pull in to Santa Cruz and then we’ll be sure to comply with the traffic separation scheme, over.”

There was no reply, so I changed the subject.

“Traffic Control, we’re having engineering difficulties and a medical emergency. We need to pull in to Santa Cruz.”

“*Spirit of Grace*, please call Port Control on channel twelve.”

I spoke with Port Control, and they said just one agent is assigned to vessels calling port in an emergency. I recorded his contact information to email the home office.

Terry asked, “Captain, should we alter course for the traffic separation scheme?”

“No. To where? For what?” I gestured to the nothing. It was the first time I’d ever called a port with no other traffic. Spooky, like I-5 empty through Seattle.

Ninety minutes later, no additional drama, we’d limped into position to enter the breakwater.

Emails had passed between the Louisiana home office, the Tenerife agent, and the ship. No deal had been sealed.

“Stand by engines,” I said. This would probably take a while, but not knowing for sure, I needed the engineers to be ready to maneuver at a moment’s notice.

We drifted again, now off Tenerife. Black island, orange lights, black seas, white caps, not an uncommon view for me, yet it filled me with dread. *Should we have pressed on to Las Palmas? But Norma's thumb. Can they fix the engine? How much is this going to cost?* I felt threatened, taunted, about to be trapped. *What else can I do?*

I prayed from the bridge wing, "Dear Lord, please surround and protect us with legions of angels."

The home office and the agent reached an agreement at 2200. Five hours since Norma broke off her thumb. The engine clattered to life, the propeller twisted us forward through the jaws of the breakwater. We boarded the pilot like we'd done it before, and tied up the same way. What progress we'd made in four months! Landlubbers no more. Norma cleared customs and boarded the waiting ambulance ashore.

Wide awake I lay in my rack, worrying about tomorrows and wondering about yesterdays. What am I even doing here? *No one has experiences like this, they read about them in books.* I stared at the overhead, eyes wide, black shadows on white paint. *How did I come to be a sailor? How can I stop?*