

The Following Sea

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Black Lawrence Press

For my mother and father

The previous spring Joseph Merickel tracked a dead moose for almost two days. Seven months later people still debated how the animal met her end. Some said a state ferry hit her when she was swimming, while others speculated she was poached on shore from a passing fishing boat but fell in somewhere unrecoverable. Whatever her origin, the waterlogged cow rode the tides to Skagway's harbor where she surprised an underwater welder down for his first dive of the day working on the new railroad dock. After the shock wore off, the welder and his partner dragged the moose out with a come-along and deposited her in a friend's driveway before breakfast. In the flat grey of that March morning this appeared a great practical joke, and the friend no sooner discovered the moose than perpetuated the prank on a neighbor.

Word eventually reached Chief of Police Merickel, who recognized the caper to be if not illegal at least in bad taste. The citizenry's thawing sense of humor kept the moose agile, but Merickel cornered her the next afternoon on the school superintendent's lawn, where deceased animals and juvenile antics alike ground to a halt. No charges were filed and several participants volunteered to haul the carcass to the dump. Everyone shared a good chuckle and the *Anchorage Daily News* awarded the tale top billing in their *Life* section.

Now Linda Walker lay dead in her rented cabin off the Dyea Road with bruises suggesting struggle and blunt force trauma. Her

boyfriend Scott Sounder was nowhere around. Officer Lambar could be heard retching out back. This first Thursday of October 1994 was barely seven hours old, but promised to be the town's fourth day of heavy rain. There was no good day for this, but it being a Thursday somehow made Merickel feel worse.

He stood on the porch while drops rang the surrounding canopy of trees like the old ball diamond's flattop dugouts. Merickel had seen people lose much more blood and still live, but checking for a pulse and dialing the fire department had taken everything in him. Already he heard the ambulance's wail down in town. Were he to walk back past Lambar, the cabin's hillside perch would allow an unhampered view of Skagway's small grid of streets and the rig northbound for the bridge. But the siren meant movement, which in turn meant no more than ten minutes.

"Yeah, I just peered in and... shit, you see."

Karl Deem's voice made Merickel start as the man emerged onto the porch. As much of a slumlord as a population of seven hundred allowed, Deem had come by earlier that morning for the overdue rent, likely hoping to catch Linda in the shower. Between Linda and his vomiting junior officer, Merickel had lost track of the old man.

"Probably best not to poke around in there, Karl. Being a crime scene and all."

"It's my damn place." Deem snorted but knew his error. "You should string up your yellow tape if that's the case."

Merickel recalled last seeing his own roll in the bottom desk drawer with a day planner still wrapped in cellophane.

"Just stick by me for now, okay?"

The EMTs left their siren on until the ambulance stopped, the hood steaming as the engine ticked down. The full-time guy was

accompanied by a volunteer of about twenty-two who wore his work coveralls under one of the heavy orange jackets bought with profits from the department's 4th of July barbeque. Deem followed them in but Merickel waited on the porch until he heard the young part-timer radioing the clinic. The kid stood over Linda, struggling with syntax as if any error would worsen her fate.

"...got a female with signs of strangulation and hits," he said. "Or contusions, I mean. Looks to be in her late thirties..."

"Thirty-six," Merickel said.

Both EMTs looked up.

"Linda was thirty-six. Would have been thirty-seven next January," he said. "I only know because her name falls on the same month as mine on the community calendar."

One such calendar, put out by the Emblem Club and bearing the birthday of anyone willing to pay the five-dollar fee, hung on the fridge. Merickel pointed but the EMTs only stared. A crackling female voice over the radio asked if they were still there.

"So, yeah, she was thirty-six."

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During the five minutes needed to confirm Linda was dead Merickel busied himself with the department Polaroid normally used to catalog dogs at large, closing his eyes before each shot. Lambar had recovered but stayed outside. He kept his own police tape in the glove box but was unfamiliar with the process, and Merickel emerged to a yellow web screaming against the dirt driveway.

"I guess that about does it for now." Merickel pocketed the Polaroids without waiting for them to develop. The EMTs retrieved a black bag and stretcher while he stepped up beside Lambar. The

kid lost two of his twenty-three years to the snug uniform and one more to a soft farm-boy face.

"I'm sorry, Joe. That wasn't professional at all."

Merickel started to put a hand on his shoulder but stopped just short of contact. "Don't worry. She was my friend, too."

Lambar had been sweet on Linda in a futile way that five years earlier could have legally been termed a schoolboy crush. He had come north last December from Colorado, where a decade before Linda had attended flight school. The two often spoke of life down south and played volleyball Thursday nights at the gym, though Merickel knew Lambar was a bigger fan of Linda than of volleyball.

A clanking on the step got their attention. The EMTs had misjudged the doorway's drop, and after a sheepish look focused all energies on getting Linda to the ambulance with no more trouble. Merickel offered a solemn wave when they drove off with no siren but bulbs popping.

"Why don't you run me to city hall for my cruiser," Merickel said. "Then I'll come back for another look around. You can start tracking down kin and making calls." He could see only a few hundred feet up the mountain, where low clouds waited to settle into the trees. No planes again today. "See who Canadian customs has had come up the highway lately. I'll check the ferry."

Merickel retrieved Deem, who looked to be in search of a rent check thoughtfully filled out beforehand. After locking the door, the landlord surrendered his key with a smirk.

"I bet you're going to say I'm not allowed back in my own cabin, eh?"

Merickel said he was afraid so and watched Deem disappear down the snaking road without a blink of taillights or passing nod

at the posted limit. Moments later the lawmen followed in Lambar's Isuzu Trooper cruiser. Rain overflowed the ditches and pulsed across the pavement in thick veins.

"That bastard." Lambar accompanied his outburst with an open palm against the steering wheel. Merickel just studied the water.

"So you think it was Scott?"

Lambar winced at having thrown himself into a test.

"I don't *know* that, but if I had to guess..."

"I'm pretty sure you're right," Merickel said, mostly to relax the young officer. "Still, we need to move carefully. News will run through town like a good flu. I don't recall seeing one of Westwind's planes at the airport but let's swing by anyway. And I need you to call Johnny Lester in Juneau. Tell him I'll be in touch later today, tonight at the latest."

Linda and Sounder were—or had been—pilots for Johnny's Westwind Airways. Although based in Juneau eighty miles to the south, Linda maintained her cabin here and Johnny often let her make the last Skagway run of the day and keep a plane overnight. Merickel had known Johnny for eighteen years and though news of a deceased employee should probably come from a friend, he hoped this might go down easier via an official stranger. He had watched the Army do things that way for twelve years and they had far more experience with dead people.

Crossing the bridge Lambar turned onto the lone remaining gravel street that hugged the river down to the airstrip. Sure enough, no Westwind aircraft, just a stable of Skagway Air Service Cherokees and a few private airplanes slick with rain. Merickel returned a few morning waves as Lambar rolled them toward city hall, offering each a tight smile. They would know soon enough. This was the

town's first killing in a long haul, and when things didn't hit often they hit hard. Lambar stared forward out of what his chief assumed some misguided sense of respect. His eyes were red from more than a good puke and Merickel couldn't begrudge him. Crushes made guys cry even when the girl was alive.

Even through a water-streaked windshield Merickel noticed his own Isuzu Trooper listing to port as they approached city hall. Both left tires slouched flat, a quick inspection revealing them deflated via the valve stem.

"Calhoun?" Lambar said.

"Most likely."

The review committee for the chief of police position did not meet for another six weeks, but campaigning appeared to be underway. Merickel would not be surprised to find honest slashes by Halloween.

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Ever prepared, Lambar kept two cans of Fix-A-Flat in his Isuzu, supplying Merickel enough pressure for a wobbly trip to Petro-Marine's air pump. He drove next down to the ferry terminal, an indignant middle finger in the hand of piers reaching south after cruise ships now a month gone. A handwritten sign in the window confirmed the terminal was closed and would remain so until the Friday afternoon boat. The lot was empty and Merickel could not imagine a criminal stupid enough to rely on the state ferry for escape, but he made a note to call the terminal manager and see if Scott Sounder had been on any recent sailings. The Burro Creek fish hatchery lay visible across the bay but beyond that the clouds and inlet melted into bruised greys and blues. A nearby viaduct

pumped a thick vein of brown runoff, and the river and streams ran bloated to a point that demanded notice. All of this was standard for fall, but even a boxer fully aware of having been beaten up the night before still startled at the first reflection of his swollen face.

The dash clock read just after eight a.m. Jan would still be readying the kids for school. She had to have realized something was not right when Lambar came by early to pick him up this morning, but she would want to know more than he knew right now. So Merickel drove back to the cabin.

The lot was prime real estate, especially with all of the valley's usable land below bought up by longtime locals or summer tour outfits. The cabin's heavy log walls and low ceiling wrapped around anyone who entered like a homemade quilt. The living room, kitchen and bedroom blended together, delineated only by strategic plants and a bookcase. A lone additional door led to the cramped afterthought bathroom. The bed's overflowing comforter, save for a few browning stains, invited a soul to dive in.

Many of the books might have belonged to either Sounder or Linda—flying regulations and aerodynamics and standard fiction bricks by Clancy, King and Grisham. A cluster at the end could only be hers—*Chop Wood, Carry Water: A Guide to Finding Spiritual Fulfillment in Everyday Life*, Gibran's *The Prophet*, *The Three Pillars of Zen*. Linda hadn't used all of her years wisely but had been trying to pull things together. Merickel slipped her logbook from atop the bookcase and thumbed the pages. He knew enough pilots to understand how the numbers and sums within would have let Linda fly bigger airplanes to farther away places, but she had wanted to stay here. The bottom shelf held a shiny uncracked bible, some photo albums and her Hoonah High yearbooks. He did not need to open them to know what

their portraits looked like each year and where his and her random photos lay—*Friendliest* and *Best Smile* for Linda, *Most Shy* for Merickel.

Despite three decades of history between them, Merickel could not recall ever having been in this cabin Linda had been renting from Deem since the summer before last. The Linda he knew had existed everywhere but here. He hoped this might somehow help him get through his required duties today, but had anyone been there to ask he would have readily admitted to possessing no idea what he was searching for. Merickel supposed he should look for big clues, as any crime committed with bare hands was not one of subtlety and evidence should be equally clumsy. But he saw only the tracks of a couple who cohabitated sporadically until one died and the other disappeared.

Not disappeared, Merickel corrected himself, but simply was not readily available. Sounder could be walking into work right now down in Juneau or, with today's weather, having an oblivious breakfast over at Donna's Restaurant across from the airport. Sounder was thirty, five years the police chief's junior, and in his two years of flying for Westwind maybe twenty words had been exchanged between them. All Merickel knew of him came filtered through Linda. The style of quiet he ran had always struck Merickel less as still waters than that of someone who long ago learned the basic wisdom of not speaking.

A fresh shower streaked the windows, suggesting the methodical coolness this entire process would require. Merickel recalled reading somewhere how composure when no one was looking was a true sign of character. So he sat there drumming a slow beat with his thumb on Linda's kitchen table, knowing full well no one was watching.