

My Name Was Don

A Short Novel

by Gary Marks

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## PART I

### Chapter 1

When I'm walking Whoosh, my dog, there's no good scenery so my mind tends towards fantasies, such as seeing a beautiful girl on a beach skipping into the ocean, getting hit by a medium wave and having the strings of her bikini unravel.

She reaches out as the bottom of her two piece starts to drift away, but those strings get tricky swirling around in ocean water. The string makers should have thought of that. She watches the sea complete the kidnapping. Nothing remains but foam.

Of course, no one else is on the beach but me. After she dives beneath the next wave searching and comes out empty-handed I approach her.

"Do you have a towel?"

"No," she says breathing heavily. Her hair is salt-mangled. Her face has a sea-watery glow. "My friend dropped me off for a few hours while she teaches a class. I'm on vacation. And. . ." she starts to laugh, but then her eyes begin to tear up. "I left my towel in her car. . ."

"Look, I have an extra T-shirt in the car. It's probably long enough to cover you up." Then, ludicrously, I add, "Wait here."

As she waits the waves turn rougher. When I come back she's getting tossed around a bit. The sky has darkened. A storm is coming in.

I put my hand over my eyes while I give her the T-shirt. When she says it's okay to look I notice it's not as long as I thought it would be. But the color looks really great on her. It's light blue.

She accepts my offer to drive her home. She knows where the hide-a-key is and it's a better idea than sitting on the beach naked with a rain storm approaching.

While I'm driving she's sitting in the passenger seat constantly trying to pull the T-shirt down far enough to cover herself. But it keeps sliding up.

"Wanna stop off for some ice cream?" I was trying to make a joke.

"That's a halfway decent offer. . . but no." She emphasized the *halfway*. I thought to myself, she has a really good sense of humor. Better than mine.

When we got to her friend's condo she says, "You can come wait at the door. I'll change and then give your shirt back."

She took a while. I waited on the porch looking at all the parked cars. The wind was getting stronger. Then it began to rain so hard that the eaves of her roof created a waterfall crushing the flowers some gardener stupidly planted there.

She came to the door in dry clothes with freshly washed hair. "Sorry it took so long. I had to wash off in the shower."

"*No problem. . .*" I was shouting because the rain was so loud.

"So I guess I'm off to get some ice cream now," I yelled louder. "Wanna come?"

"No thanks. But I could invite you in for a cold drink if you want. It's the least I can do. Is ice tea okay?"

"Yes, I love ice tea!" But I kind of didn't. It doesn't really taste like anything except sour water that you need to hide with a ton of sugar.

When the front door closed behind me everything was amazingly silent. It was like a reality shift.

"My friend, Monique, she teaches French at the college."

"Okay. I'm Don."

"Katie," she smiled and shook my hand. "I'm Katie."

Her voice reminded me of star light for some weird reason.  
Bright but distant.

Her hair was sunbeam colored.

Her eyes were intense like cloudless days.

So she kind of seemed like the sky, but with soft legs. *Really* soft.

"I thought you were a mermaid when I first saw you. But then, not so much. Your legs weren't scaly enough."

She smiled, "I use lotion."

She handed me a glass of ice tea and poured one for herself. While I was dumping sugar in my glass I noticed her texting Monique to meet her home instead of at the beach. She was very responsible.

I drank the tea as slowly as possible so I wouldn't have to leave. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Katie looked like a movie actress, casually drinking ice tea while the crew ran around changing the set for her.

I heard the key turning in the door and the rain falling outside. Monique walked in. She smoothed the rainfall out of her wavy black hair and smiled. "You found someone at the beach, I see!"

"He lent me his T-shirt," Katie said. "I was naked at the time."

Monique looked at us quizzically.

"The wave un-did her bikini strings and I came along to cover her up."

"How chivalrous of you!"

"Nah, it was just a ratty old T-shirt. Besides, she gave it back."

They laughed at me. Which was totally fine. A lot of people do that. Even in my daydreams.

"Stay for lunch?" Monique asked. "We can have a gastronomic ménage à trois."

After we had some hummus and pita bread and a few glasses of wine (those were the three things) Monique said, "I have some errands to do in town. I'll be back in a few hours."

"Okay then," Katie said. "See you later."

As Monique opened the door the rain was still waterfalling off the roof. A gust of wind blew the napkins off the table and knocked over my empty wine glass.

Katie didn't seem to notice. She pulled me into the guest room and began to undress, this time on purpose.

This would have been the best moment of my life. . . . But then the rain, the rain and the wind, they both got stronger. The wind flew in from all directions. And everything began to blow apart.

## Chapter 2

I have these kinds of fantasies all the time. But they remain fantasies. I've never been to a beach where ocean water unties bikini strings. In fact, I've never been alone on a beach with anyone, not even my dog.

Reality and fantasies don't usually mix very well.

For instance, in reality my job has *figuratively* killed me. I work about sixty hours a week doing mostly nothing.

Then, I don't know if I ever told you, but I have a three-year-old daughter, and I had visitation rights. But all that changed when my ex wanted to go to college to get a degree in real estate. I guess she wanted to be a real estate agent that also has a degree in real estate because. . . *why exactly?* I didn't get it.

Anyway, she said it would really help if I took full custody of Elsa until she graduated, so we sat down with Elsa and asked who she wanted to live with. And she said, "I guess daddy." I told her later it was a good guess.

But now I'm never calm anymore, because Elsa loves to throw food at me when I'm eating. And I don't want to yell because she's only three. The dog eats all the food she throws so there's not a lot of clean-up really.

But the dog is expensive by itself. Everything costs money. And it's amazing because I think air is going to cost money eventually. Could you imagine paying some air guy a penny every time you take a breath? That's what it's getting like.

My ex is funny when she's not mean. She tried to sell me a house the other day because she's apprenticing and she wanted to show the company she could sell something besides lottery tickets. She knows I'm basically broke. But she told me I could get a "no look" loan. I said, "Didn't that become illegal in 2008?" And

she said, "Well, they still do it, they just call it something different. But they still don't look."

It's amazing because I didn't even have to graduate high school to get a job in this shitty little town because no one wants to live here, and even fewer people want to work here. So jobs are always readily available. And houses are as cheap as dirt. And even dirt here is cheaper than typical dirt because it's *here*.

Anyway, my ex asked my two real estate agent sisters for help on the big test she had to take. And they were like, well every state has different tests so we can't help, and even if we could you just left our brother for some guy that works at a gym.

## Chapter 3

I write part-time. They say I have talent and eventually when I finish this story somebody will probably publish it because I'm from a small town and people will want to know how they write.

So I need to tell you the names of the characters that I think will stick around – which ironically will include my ex, because she's gonna be Elsa's mom unless Elsa decides not to see her anymore, which she might someday but not when she's three.

In order of importance to me at the moment, my dog is named Whoosh, my ex is Windi with an "i," as in I, I, I, all the time. Then there's Z. He works at the gym. And the mayor, who you'll see is not exactly my favorite character in the book. And my brother who I talk to like once a year. Then Elsa, but she only says one thing in the whole book.

Oh yeah, I'm Gordon, but everyone calls me Don because Gordon is too long, and no one would ever call me Gor or else I'd take them out of the book right away.

Anyway, here's the story.

Whoosh and me were walking down this crappy street downtown with occasional paper blowing in the wind which I think was mostly paper they rap around To-Go burgers. I guess it keeps the heat in and stops all the goopy stuff from falling in your lap after a few bites. But no one decides to use the paper because they don't want to eat it accidentally, so they throw it in the street because nobody here cares. I mean this isn't like New York.

So Whoosh starts chasing the flying papers because it's really windy and empty and cold here, and the papers are all whirling around in the air like brown-stained helicopter propellers, and Whoosh starts to bite them 'cause of the smell of the meat I guess, because the next thing you know he's chewing

away in the middle of the sidewalk. But then someone's ankle goes by and he bites a hole in his sock and a little blood -- I mean not enough to scare me if it was my sock -- but the guy's screaming like he just got shot -- so then the police came and took Whoosh away, and I had to go to dog court to get him the hell out of there and sign stuff and bring him home.

Elsa was so happy to see him. We love Whoosh. We named him Whoosh because he's the fastest dog in town. Almost as fast as the cars here. Almost.

My ex, Windi, told me Z, the gym guy, kind of likes Whoosh, so I'm not saying I *don't* HATE him, but I'm just saying a little part of me respects that he's got good taste in dogs.

Z is a weight lifter, and I'm a fantasy person, like the bikini girl story, so that doesn't leave us with a whole lot in common. So I usually just leave Z and Windi alone. Maybe they'll get married someday but she'll have to divorce me first, which she says she's not sure of yet. I think it all has something to do with Elsa.

But my strong assumption is that right now Z and Windi want to have their fun without Elsa throwing food at them. *Whatever*. All I know is Whoosh and Elsa and me make a good team. Elsa will be fine living with me. As long as my mom takes care of her while I'm at work all day.

There's this girl that Whoosh found in the park. She's my age, and works as a modem repair operator. It's great, she knows a lot about computers. In fact, she told me her company offers her high speed for free if she wants to come in after work. Her name is Sally. She runs in the park once every few days and one day Whoosh went after her ankle and made her stop, and while I was apologizing she started petting him and then we all became friends and then we started dating.

One thing about Sally, she's really smart. Believe it or not smarter than I'll ever be. She knows a lot about dogs too, not just computers. She's a natural. She could open up a dog store if she

was fired from her job repairing modems, but she won't be. And I really like her sometimes more than I ever liked Windi. Looks-wise she kind of looked a little like Katie in my fantasy, but not quite. So now she's just a red herring. Because honestly we broke up after a few months.

My town is so stupid, I got my paycheck so I decided to eat at the diner. First there's no dogs, which Whoosh didn't like, and he had to stay outside. Second, they list the prices of food like a gas station does. Fruit salad is \$1.99 and their burger is \$2.99. They think I'm dumb enough to think it's not the same thing as a penny more? I fool them by rounding up in my head and then thinking that they owe me money back for free. But then just as I'm waiting for the change the check comes and, of course, they added tax.

Anyway, just as I was starting to take my first bite of burger Whoosh started barking at another dog that came by and they either wanted to fight or have sex, but it really started to get loud so I had to leave my food and tell Whoosh to knock it off because my hamburger was getting cold. When I got back inside the waitress had cleared my plate. With one bite gone!

And that's pretty much what my town is like. On a good day.

## Chapter 4

My dad grew up educated. It was a 2-year deal at a community college where he majored in auto mechanics. He wanted to teach me for free, but I didn't want to look up under the bellies of cars all day and get gray stuff under my nails that eventually never comes out. I wanted a job in tech, so I applied at a cable company and now I get discounted cable plus a salary of some kind.

Still, writing is my main interest. One bad thing is they say I'm slightly dyslexic, and it's really tough having a disease you can't spell, and it's even tougher if you want to be a writer.

But I'm stubborn as all crap. I told my dad that I can self-publish and work at the cable job at the same time, so I'm definitely gonna be published, no matter what.

So here's the rest of the story, finally, which I think is going to be exciting.

## Chapter 5

My city is mostly gray and black and brown, like the people there. And the cars. I don't have a car, except in my daydreams, because I can't afford it, so me and Whoosh walk everywhere.

And one bad thing Whoosh used to do was chase after cars. It wasn't just chasing them from behind, it was chasing and catching up and running with his paws right near the back tire, barking, and sometimes *woofing* really loudly, until the driver would look in his rear view mirror to see what the noise was. But Whoosh was too small to see. Though he's not a small dog.

So this one street we used to walk down was the street where the mayor's house was. We walked down that street because it had some trees. They were mostly brown because they were mostly dead, but some weren't.

Whoosh was on a leash that day but sometimes he'd get so excited from a car that he'd brake my hold and get away and start chasing, with the leash chain rattling up and down behind him like a long clanky tail, almost ready to throw sparks.

The car was fancy. In fact, it was the mayor's car, which was driving way too fast, but she would never get arrested as the mayor. So Whoosh could hardly keep up. But then. . . he could.

The mayor was married with a baby. I remember when Elsa was a baby, I think she was one at the time, and Windi was holding her and I said I wanted to hold her, and Windi said no and that pissed me off, because it was mine too. So I took her anyway and we went for a walk, and when we came back that's when Windi wanted a divorce. I mean, it wasn't just that. She had already met Z.

Anyway the mayor's baby was in her crib in the garage because it was a very clean and fancy garage with painted floors, and it was summer. Her husband was working in the front yard

wearing these long light green rubber gloves that made his hands look radioactive. The mayor's husband, who wasn't famous so I don't remember his name, was also drinking beer at the time.

And the mayor was driving too fast. That's the main point. They say she was mad because of something that happened that day at city hall -- madder than usual, because according to the papers she was being pushed not to run for re-election. So she came flying into the driveway with Whoosh struggling to keep up, and he did, but she turned too sharply and he couldn't get out of the way, so the car ran him over.

It was a mess. I remember when Windi was in the hospital over the holidays falling off a ladder hanging stuff, and there was blood everywhere, but this was kind of worse and I thought he's dead for sure. He stopped breathing but maybe it was because the mayor was screaming so loud over him she scared him. She was saying like, oh my god if the press finds out I'm screwed. And her husband says, calm down Mary, it's just a big dumb kid and a dog, and you only ran over the dog.

## Chapter 6

So I have kind of long curly blond hair, which a lot of people say is great, except I have brown eyes and that pretty much ruins everything.

Anyway, I ran up to the mayor and I said my dog needs a ride to the hospital. But she didn't want to get her hot silver car with white leather seats all bloody, so she called a vet who told her she had to drive Whoosh over. Then she did.

After Whoosh was with the vet, I was sitting in the waiting room and some guy from the local paper showed up and asked me if I owned the dog, and I said yes. And then it was like, is the dog going to die, and was it the mayor's car, and was it her fault for being a mad person a lot of the time? And I said, "No, yes, I don't know."

But before I could say more the mayor comes in, sees the reporter and says, "Oh my God, not only is this dog a hero, but he saved my baby."

She said, "I didn't know my baby was in the crib in the garage, and it was starting to rain (I don't remember that but it was cloudy, I remember that much) and she said, "I pulled in a little too fast, honestly, like people do sometimes, but the dog jumped in front of my car to save my baby's life. This dog is a hero!"

This is called distraction. Not a lot of people wanted to talk about her driving too fast anymore, or running over Whoosh, all they all wanted to know was what kind of dog was it, and who owned the dog, and what was the name and age and date of birth of the dog, and the baby too - and did we know the baby personally before Whoosh saved it? I mean, were they friends?

So I said. "A mutt, me, Whoosh, 5, or 35 in dog years, and January something, and no we didn't know the baby personally.

And we weren't friends, in fact we never saw the baby in our lives until it was smiling and waving in the papers the next day.

"So it was your dog Whoosh who saw the baby?" they said, and before I could answer they wrote that down. Then they asked if I had a photo of Whoosh. I had a ton on my phone, so I emailed them some, and Whoosh made the local headlines the next morning:

Dog Turns Hero That Saves the Mayor's Baby.

This was a local paper, mind you. So they didn't exactly have to be literate to work there.

## Chapter 7

Except one of the Mayor's enemies changed the headline in an editorial he wrote the following day, to:

Dog Turns Hero That Saves the Mayor's Baby. . . *From the Mayor!*

So then, all hell broke loose in my shitty little town because the elections were coming up. And now Whoosh was right in the middle of it.

Meanwhile, Whoosh was in bandages, limping slowly around the apartment like an old WWII vet, and the newspapers made sure to get lot of pictures of that. Whoosh was a hero because he was selling lots of papers, and circulation for The Town Cryer was increasing for the first time since like 1969, when it came out supporting the Vietnam War, with pictures of naked hippies on the front page to prove their point. Whoosh was *that* big now!

But when the camera lights were turned off and it was just me and my dog again, like the old days, Whoosh was hurting for sure. I had to give him special food with medicine and vitamins poked into it so he wouldn't see, but you know, he guessed they were in there when he chewed because it was like this weird look he would give me, like something's different.

But he couldn't tell if he liked it more or less until the taste got onto his tongue, and then he knew he hated it and would try to spit it out but it was already too far down his throat so he'd swallow and then start to walk away.

But then you could tell he forgets what happened because he turns back and takes a another huge bite and the whole thing starts all over again.

## Chapter 8

Sometimes I get stoned a lot. When I do I usually try to do something useful like watch movies and eat. It's nutritious and relieves stress. Everything else is just too real.

What I think about while walking with Whoosh are bikini girls. I really like bikinis. So another fantasy I have is with this same girl, Katie, in it.

She was walking in her bikini and sandals, shopping for jewelry on the beach strip, when suddenly this weight lifter type (not Z if that's what you're thinking) comes up and starts harassing her.

I'm the only other person around and I'm pretty skinny, but I go up to him and tell him to leave her alone. He says, "Who the hell are you, dog-face?" And I say, "I'm her husband."

"Bullshit you are," he says, but Katie doesn't disagree. So I say, "I'll prove it. She's a singer, and I'm a . . . I'm a lawyer."

"A lawyer, eh?"

"That's right, I prosecute people who try to take advantage of singers and then lie like cowards trying to keep themselves out of jail."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, asshole, that *is* right. So if you want to keep harassing my wife the only way to get away with it is to kill me. Do the math -- if you get caught you'll end up in jail for the rest of your life.  $2-1=0$ . Know what I mean?"

"No," he says. And I believe him.

So I make it clearer. "You only have one logical option. That's to walk away."

"Fuck you."

But then, after an uncomfortable silence where no one moves, he slowly starts to cross this small bridge we're on

overlooking the ocean. But then he stops dead still, puts his hands on the railing, and whirls back towards us, "What the fuck, I'm a gamblin' man," he yells, laughing.

He grabs me by the shoulder to get me out of the way so he can get to her, but I stumble over my own feet and he falls over me towards the bridge railing. Just as he's getting up I put my shoulder under his rump and with all the strength I can muster I push upwards until he falls over the railing and splashes into the ocean.

Katie looks at me stunned. She says, "Oh my God, I owe you big-time. I don't know how to thank you. I'll never forget you for this." Her voice is as beautiful as starlight.

I say, "Do you like dogs?"

"Dogs?" She laughs. "That's so weird you said that, because that's what I do for work. I wash dogs."

"I *love* dogs!"

"Me too!"

Then I say the weirdest thing. "I have to tell you something, but you might think I'm crazy."

"Go ahead, I can handle it," she smiles.

"Um, I think I had a fantasy about you once. You were wearing this same bikini, and you were swimming in the shallow part of the ocean."

"What happens after that?"

"Your bikini fell off and then the wind picked up and the rains came. And you had this roommate."

"Roommate?"

"Monique."

"Who *are* you?"

"Don," I shrug.

"I have a roommate named Monique!"

"Wait, what?"

"Yes! How did you know that?"

"I just know. I know something else too."

"What's that?"

"When we kiss it always starts to rain."

"You're so weird. . . . Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure!"

"What's your dog's name?"

"Whoosh."

"Whoa, I like that. I *really* like that."

She takes my hand and we go down to the end of the beach where the rocks and seaweed are, where hardly no one ever goes. She kisses me. We feel rain fall on our cheeks. She doesn't stop, and then, the best thing in my life happened.

## PART II

### Chapter 9

The mayor gave Whoosh a key to city hall in front of a bunch of her supporters, reporters, sons and daughters of the reporters, and two city council members that had the mayor in their hip pocket. They needed each other to keep piling the shit higher and higher upon this little town of ours. Bad roads, collapsing buildings, debt through the roof, scandals, bribes, it was all here, happening in miniature, just like in a real city.

I was shoved off to the side while poor bandaged limpy Whoosh and the mayor, wearing a diamond necklace and a blue thing that looked like a baggy man's suit were photographed. It was quite disgusting really. They had to put Whoosh up on a table they improvisationally dragged out of city hall to get the mayor's face and Whoosh's face on the same level. But Whoosh kept looking around for me, and it looked for all the world like he was snubbing the mayor. "Maybe he's looking for my baby," she laughed nervously, as Whoosh tried to jump off the table.

Finally some aide smartened up and dragged me up there to calm Whoosh down. They tried pulling me out of the picture but the minute they moved me to the side Whoosh tried to jump off the table again. Finally they snapped the pictures with me in it. I wasn't smiling. I was pretty pissed at what they were doing to Whoosh. Even though his tail looked pretty happy.

## Chapter 10

So Katie and I get married. I don't know which fantasy preceded it. The one where I lend her my T-shirt, or the one where I push the guy off the bridge. But we are so happy.

First of all, she hates muscle men and phony mayors.

Second of all, she loves dogs. So we have more. With each child we add a dog on their first birthday. And of course, Elsa is there too. And she doesn't throw food anymore.

I know you'll say this fantasy isn't that good. Well, fine, but it's better than what happened.

## PART III

### Chapter 11

My picture got in the local papers along with the mayor and Whoosh, who in every photo was shown licking my face. Everything was going fairly well for the mayor, she seemed to have steered her way out of a big jam. Until editorials started pouring in (at least three) asking if dogs could run for mayor. And if not the dog, how about *him*?

*Who?*

*The guy who the dog is licking.*

Now I had never thought about running for mayor before but I had been stoned a lot. And that meant that I had seen a lot of movies, and even remembered some of them. One movie was about blackmail. It was kind of amazing how far you can get with blackmail. So when I asked to see the mayor and was eagerly invited to her office, of course, I was pretty nervous. First of all, I had to take time off from my job because this mayor, our mayor, didn't work on weekends, ever. I mean a bomb would have to go off for her to work on a weekend.

After we shook hands and she offered me some ice water (they only offer alcohol in big mayor's offices) she asked me what she could do for me. And I said, I don't know. But what I did know was that I was an eye witness to what happened and she was speeding, and Whoosh didn't jump in front of the car to save her baby. She ran him over for no reason. (I was kind of glad to get that off my chest.)

She looked at me quizzically, coldly. "And?"

"And so if I tell the truth to the papers and they investigate the accident carefully enough they'll see I'm right. I mean, the

police already took photos at the scene. I saw them. So the dog-blood was *where* in relation to the driveway, the car, and the baby?"

"Are you trying to *blackmail me*?"

"I think so."

She was a bit stunned by my lack of subtlety. This was actually a mistake on my part. I remembered if this was a movie the character would have said something like, "What do you think?" Or, "Call it what you want. But whatever it is, Mayor, you have a problem. And I'm it."

But I was nervous. So I just said, "I think so."

And she said, "You *think* so?"

So I said, having a moment to gain my composure, "Call it what you want. But whatever it is, Mayor, you have a problem. And I'm it."

She slammed her hand on her desk, which kind of shocked me. "I have about five people a day come in here and try to blackmail me. It's part of the job. You think I'm going to cave in to you, you little. . ?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And why is that?"

"Because if it's proven that you ran over my dog and lied about what happened you could lose the election and have a perjury charge on your record. At the very least you could be charged with filing a false police report."

"Oh, I'm so fucking scared now!" She started laughing with this really mean laugh.

So I took out a piece of paper I brought along with me just for a moment like this and read it to her: "Lying to an officer in an official statement, such as a police report, can incur a fine or jail sentence. For example, in Massachusetts, a falsified report is punishable by a fine of up to \$500, a one-year jail sentence or both, according to the General Court of Massachusetts."

"*This isn't Massachusetts!*" she screamed.

"Yes I know that, Mayor. Our state is a lot crappier than Massachusetts, even though it's easier to spell. But the fine and jail time are the same."

She was silent for a long moment. "What exactly do you want?" Her voice sounded defeated. It was just like the movie predicted. That kind of quiet defeated voice and her face turning pale.

"I don't know."

"*You don't know?* How can you blackmail me and not even know what you want? That's. . .*that's*. . . *just stupid.*"

"Oh, well now that you mentioned it."

"Okay, I knew it. *Say it!*"

"I want to be Mayor."

"*What?* Get out of here, you little shithead."

"Really?"

"Mayor is an elected office. I can't just anoint you like a little King."

"Maybe you could be my campaign manager."

She rolled her eyes. "You are beyond nuts. I'm not going to be. . . . *Jim!*" she called out.

In came Jim, a weak looking guy in a white dress shirt and rolled up sleeves, like he was going to have to stick his hands in a toilet. He looked weaker and scrawnier than me. If he was trying to walk Whoosh on a leash Whoosh would have yanked his arm right off. Or at least scraped up his knees pretty bad.

"Get him out of here."

He looked at me with a face that I guess tried to look menacing. I can read faces pretty well.

He took me by the arm. I looked at the Mayor and said. "It's over."

What I meant was, I give up. This was a stupid idea. You win."

But she took it as a threat, and said, "Jim, wait. Let him stay."  
Jim disappeared as quickly as he appeared, except looking even weaker.

"Look," said the mayor, even though I was already looking right at her. I don't get why people ever say look unless you have your back turned and a car is coming. "Let's work something out. What is it you're looking for? Money? Power?"

I played lots of video games, so it's not like I had never been asked this question before. "Both."

She shook her head. "Fuck."

I didn't know what to say so I just sat there. She had a nice clock in the corner of her office. It was a grandfather clock, and the name made sense because it looked really old. The hands didn't work. She set it to always say 5 o'clock, which is when her work day ended, unless there was a bomb.

"How about if I create a position for you?"

"What kind of position?"

"Well, if you campaign for me and help me win the election it could be something like, Head of the Animal Protection Agency."

"I don't really like animals. Just dogs."

"Well, it's not like we have a lot of Rhinos running around town, Gordon."

"Yeah, no, I mean I actually hate cats. And rats. And raccoons. And skunks. And moles. And pretty much everything except dogs."

"Okay, *fine*. You can be Head of the Dog Protection Agency."

"I don't like really small dogs either."

"Okay, head of the Medium to Large Dog Protection Agency. How's that?"

"*That's great!*"

"And how about \$50,000 a year?"

I almost started dancing around the office when I heard the dollar amount, but I remembered what happens in movies when the blackmailer starts dancing around. He usually gets shot.

"I can't ride my bike from my apartment to work. I live too far. I'd have to take a bus, or Uber. And what about traveling from dog to dog? Wouldn't that be part of my job? I'd need a car."

"Yes, yes, a car plus travel expenses."

"And what about fliers? I might need to print out and hang fliers all over town if dogs get lost."

"We'll pay for that."

"\$55,000."

"\$50,000 is as much as the budget allows before the council members begin to squawk and redline it out. They have people on staff that don't do anything either. But the unwritten rule is nothing above \$50,000."

"Plus expenses."

"Yes, okay, plus expenses."

"I don't want to have to work nights. So no calls about a dog in the middle of the night, right?" I was trying to think of everything. For some reason I didn't trust her.

"Right. Deal?"

"No, and no sick dogs. I don't want to have to start picking up sick dogs. My neighbor almost died of rabies.

"Fine! No sick fucking dogs! Deal?"

"Deal"

We shook hands.

"What about a contract? I need a contract."

"We can't do that until after the election. Until then, what I need you to do is to go out there and talk to the press and local radio stations about how you and I have become friends. And that Whooten. . . "

"Who?"

"Your dog."

"Whoosh!"

"Right. Tell them that Whoosh loves me and we've all become friends and you're grateful the mayor is just a regular person. One of us. A good citizen and a friend. And that you're going to vote for me and you want everyone to know that."

"*And* that if you win I'm going to be Head of the Medium to Large Dog. . . ."

"No, no, *no!* Gordon, Jesus. Don't mention that or they'll know there's a quid pro quo."

I always wanted to use that word in a sentence.

"Do you understand? Just do what I say, and only what I say, and everything will work out fine."

"I thought I was blackmailing *you*. It feels like you're blackmailing me!"

"Well that's what good mayors do. They try to find compromises so that everyone wins."

"Except the tax payers and small dogs, I guess."

"Well, good guess. . . . Now go out and sell this story! There's only one month left until Election Day. I need a boost in the polls to get me over the top. And you're just the catalyst I've been looking for."

"Remember though. No cats."

## Chapter 12

Now this was the kind of fantasy that really made sense. A *real* fantasy! \$50,000 a year for what? I didn't even know what my job was about. The town already had George. He was the dog catcher. Whoosh hated him. But we weren't going to take his job. Maybe I'd end up being his boss somehow? Then I could get Whoosh special treatment if he ever got in trouble.

Needless to say, I was very happy with my blackmail strategy. I didn't tell you this, but I thought about it *a lot* before sauntering into the mayor's office. I researched things online, just like I did to find the word, "saunter" instead of walk. So I'm not surprised it worked out so well. Good things happen when you're well-prepared.

Next thing I know this guy Jim, the mayor's weak assistant, is calling me on the phone telling me he's setting up meetings and interviews for me to tell everyone how great the mayor is as a person. And how much she loves babies and animals, although I specifically said, "except rats. She would work hard to cure the plague." I didn't want to leave anything for the opponent to try to counter-attack. The plague would have been one of those things.

I even went on a local TV show with Whoosh and explained how nice the mayor was and, you know, got carried away with like, "Yeah she comes over our house all the time just to pet Whoosh. She gets right down on the floor and plays with him. Because, I mean, if a dog saves your baby's life, are not you going to play with that dog?"

Then came the election. I drove some old ladies to vote and said, yes, I'm Whoosh's proud owner, and yes the mayor's baby is fine, while thinking, the baby never even knew what happened. Why wouldn't it be fine? Whoosh got run over by the damn

mayor because she was driving like an idiot. Whoosh was *not* fine.

"Don't forget how great the mayor is with babies and dogs," I'd call out as they got out of their car and hobbled over to the election booth. They almost all had bad hips.

Late that night I got the great news that the mayor had won re-election. The vote was close. I figured maybe I put her over the top, so why not ask for more than \$50,000 a few months after I start. I mean, she wouldn't even be mayor without me.

Next morning I called my boss and quit my crappy job. He said it was fine because I wasn't showing up enough lately anyway, and he could fill it in like three minutes.

I took Whoosh for a nice long walk in the cool autumn air. I breathed in all the tree colors, metaphorically. I called Sally to say hi for the first time in a long time. I asked a lot of questions about how her dog was doing because I figured it might be part of my job to ask good dog questions.

Then I saw the mayor drive by, so I waved. I know she saw me, but she didn't wave back. She kind of looked away. That got me concerned. So I decided to go right away to city hall.

## Chapter 13

Jim was in the outer office on the phone when I sauntered in. When he saw me he jumped, and told the person on the line that he'd call right back. That made me feel important. Maybe this job was bigger than I thought.

"What's up Don?"

"I want to talk to the mayor about starting my job."

"You already have a job."

"Yes, I *know*. And I want to start now."

He looked at me quizzically.

Just then the mayor came out to ask Jim something. When she saw me she turned away.

"I'm ready to start my job!" I called out.

"Come back tomorrow."

"But I need to start getting paid today. I quit my old job and I need to make sure I have a smooth transition."

"Gordon, I haven't even had time to talk to the council about this. They are going to have to approve your job in the new budget. That's going to take some time."

"How much time?"

"A few months. I just got re-elected, these things. . ."

"A *few months*?"

"That's the way the process works."

"Well, I, you know, the way my process works is if I don't get paid starting today I'm going to tell the press the truth."

"Well then the job offer is off the table. Go tell them the truth. Tell them you tried to blackmail me and I ended up having you help me get re-elected with nothing received in return. And they'll say 'Welcome to politics.' Or tell them that because I refuse to be blackmailed you're willing to bring me down -- me -- your best friend, the one who rolls around on the floor with your

smelly dog, because I won't offer you a \$50,000 job to sit on your ass and do nothing but think about dogs all day."

"That's not true! I'm willing to work extremely hard for medium and big dogs!"

"Well, tell *that* to the press too!" she cackled. "I'm sure their hearts will bleed for you and large dog breeds everywhere."

"This isn't fair."

"Blackmail isn't fair either, is it? Life is tough, Gordon. And the fact is, you suck at it. You're just a scrawny kid who barely graduated from high school whose best friend is a dog that drools too much and chases cars. . . . Good luck with that."

## Chapter 14

I had this fantasy one night about a girl who was walking in the forest. She was only half dressed, looking up at the moonlight. She didn't seem to be in distress. I was on a moonlight hike, I thought maybe she was hiking too.

"Hi there," she called out casually.

"Hello. I'm Gordon."

Before she could tell me her name a storm blew in. Her clothes got soaked and she began to shiver. "Hold me, I'm cold Gordon."

So I reached out. She felt warm. I felt myself melting into her like sun butter, like warm moonlight into a mirror, like gravity onto a planet. She was preventing me from falling away.

I was lost in her. Part of her. Love! The first time I ever really felt it was with her, there. It was indescribable. It was filled with some kind of eternal life. Love never dies. One molecule of love floating around will outlast a thousand days of work and sleep.

She began to shiver. So I held her more tightly. We were suddenly in a warm room, the sun was shining in through a large window overlooking the sea. Our clothes disappeared. Seeing her naked was the most beautiful vision my eyes had ever encountered. More amazing than the most beautiful painting ever created. Until.

She began to fade. She kept saying yes, please, Gordon, your blue eyes are so bright and clear -- my eyes were blue that day -- keep holding onto me Gordon. But the fading continued. Suddenly she stopped breathing.

She was almost invisible now.

I saw the number 23 as she was disappearing. She was smiling.

"What's your name?" I cried. "Tell me your name so I can find you again someday. . . ."

"I . . ."

"*Tell me.*"

She reached her hand out to me, "Quickly, take my hand."

But I couldn't quite reach.

It was like the Michelangelo thing.

I cried out, "Please, before you go. I promise I'll find you if you just. . . ."

"I'm Katie."

## Chapter 15

Jobless, loveless, counter-blackmailed, and living in fantasies that could never last, I sank down, drowning, into a dark space. Whoosh was reading my mind, he stayed quietly by me all the time, unless another dog caught his attention. Then he couldn't help himself. He'd bark for like an hour. I couldn't get him to stop. What exactly was he trying to say? That's one of the great dog mysteries.

The mayor was now beloved. Her baby was getting older and in the papers all the time. I offered to babysit for her because they wouldn't give me my old job back downtown, and I figured the mayor still owed me. But she wouldn't return my calls.

Sally called me once in a while to see if I wanted to walk our dogs together in the park and then maybe go back to her place. But something stopped me. I couldn't get the thought out of my mind that Katie was dead. Just at the peak of our relationship she died and now she would never come back.

I tried to purposely fantasize about her being alive again, maybe at the beach. or in a cafe, or at a dog training class. But it was no use. Fantasies are spontaneous. You can't force them.

Then it hit me. I've been forcing things my whole life. Forcing my way into jobs all the time. Forcing Whoosh to stay on a leash all the time. And my marriage to Windi, I was extra nice before we got married, but once she married me I just turned into who I am. I was a scam. Even as a dad, I wasn't being real with Elsa. I was forcing her to act her age. Forcing her to grow up. I was just going through the motions of being a dad, forcing *her* to go through the motions.

Katie was teaching me not to do that anymore. If I did I was just going to kill what's real, kill joy, kill love, kill *her* again. Over and over again. Until I learned the lesson.

## PART IV

### Chapter 16

Whoosh and I had had it. We took Elsa and moved to a town miles away. With a new mayor. And new companies that didn't know I had quit on my old company. And new girls in cafes that didn't know what a screw up I was, or that I'd killed every fantasy I'd ever had and turned it into. . . all this.

The town was called "Freeport." I liked the sentiment -- I wanted to feel free in a new port. A new place, a new me. No one who knew me would believe this new me was even possible. That's how *new* I would be.

I got a job in a hotel. They actually had a hotel in Freeport. It was big and right near an airport, which was very exciting. I got to meet people from all over the world. I especially liked the ones that spoke English.

Whoosh seemed happy in his new apartment. Elsa was in school now. My hours at the hotel allowed me to pick her up at 3pm and give her some serious quality time. Whoosh and Elsa and I would go to a park and run around and play.

One day while I was emptying the hotel garbage the maids bagged and left in the basement for me, Z, Windi's gym rat, came in from out of nowhere.

"Listen bud, I don't give a crap personally, but Windi wants Elsa living in the same town we're in. You didn't get her permission to move this far away and she's not happy about it."

"Does she even have time to spend with Elsa? I mean, she can have her on the weekends. I can even drive her there and back. But during the week she'd definitely be better off with me."

"I don't think she'd be better off with you if you happened to be in a *wheelchair* with two broken legs. Know what I'm sayin'?"

"Okay, have Windi call me and we'll work something out. But I'm not moving."

"Do I look like her fucking social secretary?"

"*No!* I mean, do you even know how to write or spell? You're just a muscle with a far off stare as far as I can see."

"Listen, you little jerk. You were no good when you were with her, and you're even more of a screw-up now. She doesn't want Elsa sitting around your crappy little apartment with that stupid ugly dog of yours drooling over everything. She hates the dog even more than she hates you."

"I always knew she was a bad judge of dogs. And people apparently."

He pinned me against the wall. "You won't be a 'people' much longer if you keep this up. Just remember what we talked about. *Got it?*" He let me down gently. I appreciated that. I really did.

After that day, when my work day was over and Whoosh was rolling around after dinner trying to kill the itching that his fleas caused, and Elsa was fast asleep dreaming about the time we'd spend together tomorrow, and I was done working at the hotel, and I was sitting in front of the TV watching re-runs of *The Jetsons*, it was like the pot dealer laced some joint I was smoking with loneliness. That's what it felt like honestly.

I started to feel like everything I was doing was just a huge massive enormous cavernous waste of time. The walls would trap me in, my breathing would quicken, the TV would go dark, the lights would become too bright, and I'd put my hands over my eyes and try to fall asleep on the couch, telling myself over and over not to forget to buy Whoosh some flea ointment in the morning. I hated seeing him itch and itch like that.

## Chapter 17

Freeport was a harbor town. On the eastern edge of town were the boats. A thousand boats. People would work on them day and night because boats never got totally fixed. They'd bring lunch buckets and dinner picnics. Some tried to be romantic about it by letting their girlfriend non-boat-owner drink beer and watch the boyfriend boat owner curse at wires and change the sandpaper of the sanders and tinker with motors and order parts. Sometimes it would rain and the girl would go below deck and sleep off the beer while the owner boyfriend stayed in the rain trying to figure out *how* what happened happened, and how not to let it happen again, but secretly knew it would.

The reason I know so much technical stuff about boats is that my dad had a boat. He thought being an auto mechanic meant he could fix boats too. We would go out on summer weekends and go under the bridge and watch the towns float by in slow motion. Colors were cleaner and brighter when you saw a town from the water. My brother and two sisters would be playing cards in the cabin while my dad would teach me about the stern drive and the wiring for the emergency radio.

So now on summer days when work was over I'd go down with Elsa to the docks and show her all the different kinds of boats. We'd laugh at some of the names written on the stern like, "Sun-Day-Driver," or "Vitamin Sea." My favorite one, named by a brave or insane owner without a superstitious bone in his body was, "Titanic II."

Things were going pretty well at my new job. I got a big raise along with a lot more responsibilities. I was overseeing the entire hotel housekeeping division now. So with the extra money I bought a beat-up sailboat with a huge amount of water damage

for almost nothing, and on weekends Elsa and Whoosh and I would go down and work on the boat.

Now I too was one of the crazies spending every free waking hour trying to keep their money-pit afloat. *And it felt great!* Things were looking up.

I did call Windi after Z visited, and she said she wanted Elsa to be with her every weekend. So I agreed. But then she never called again. It's almost as if once I said okay she didn't care anymore.

On Elsa's seventh birthday we launched the ship. A long time had passed since the beginning of the book. I skipped a lot of stuff.

Anyway, I considered naming the boat, "Just After Don." But it sounded too foreboding. Even though the word play was about the sunrise.

Another name I came up with was "Wonder Whoosh." But Elsa didn't like it. She said Whoosh was a dog, not a boat. Just let him be a dog.

So I came up with another name, it came in a dream I had one night.

We christened the boat, "Katie's Dream." We had dock space 23. And we all stayed there on warm nights. It was like a second home.

I realized later, it was *my* dream, not Katie's, so the name really didn't make any sense. But I had already paid the guy at the marina a lot of money to paint *Katie's Dream*, in big black scripted letters on the stern. So it was kind of too late to care. Besides, maybe I *was* Katie's dream and not the dreamer. I read about something like that happening in a Marvel comic book once, so that made me feel better.

## Chapter 18

Then, surprise, Z and Windi got married. First they had a huge wedding, inviting everyone they'd ever met -- they even invited me, plus my brother and *his* wife, my two sisters, and Whoosh! Whoosh and Elsa and I went. They gave him a special place near Elsa, with a doggy bowl full of four of his favorite meats. They were all just piled on top of each other though, so it wasn't a very nice presentation.

Then, they expected this great send-off, with Windi asking me to be happy for them right before they got into their car with the string of cans hanging from the back. People were throwing rice too, which Whoosh went nuts over. He ate small piles of it from the ground because he knew somehow it was food, but then, knew somehow it wasn't.

So I said, yes, I'm happy Windi, which I wasn't, unless feeling nothing is happy, which some people think it is, but not me. When I'm happy I know it.

Then, right after their honeymoon, which consisted of a trip to the Virgin Islands, which for Windi was kind of ironic because she hadn't been a virgin since she was like fifteen, they bought a house in our old crappy town for maybe forty thousand dollars. You could buy a mansion there for forty thousand dollars. On ten acres. Because nothing grew there, so the acres were just piles of dirt.

And then, right after their Virgin honeymoon and first mortgage payment they started talking to lawyers about how to take Elsa away from me.

This was what Windi wanted as her wedding gift from Z, because he personally didn't give a crap about Elsa. But a promise is a promise.

Windi took him at his word to be faithful, and to honor and obey the heck out of her for the rest of his muscle-bound brainless days. So he put up the money, now *their* money, of which he had plenty from the untimely death of his rich parents, and paid lawyers whatever they asked to make sure Windi got Elsa back.

## Chapter 19

I had spent all my money on the boat, and on Elsa, and Whoosh too, so by the time the papers were served I was pretty much living paycheck to paycheck.

I searched far and wide, as they say, for the cheapest lawyer in town. And I found him. His name was Egbert G. Hazelton. The son, and grandson, and great grandson of the famous Hazelton family of Freeport. Although I never did find out why they were famous, unless they discovered hazelnuts. And even if they did, who eats hazelnuts these days?

He worked for peanuts (oh no, that was funny by mistake, but I'll leave it). Because he was already so rich it's like he worked as a lawyer just for fun. But the problem was he didn't know the law very well because he didn't read much. Nor did he feel like hiring assistants to read for him, or just give him the Cliff notes. So by the time we replied to the demand letter from Z and Windi's attorneys it was basically like David and Goliath, except David loses. Which is a lot more realistic.

The way they got what they wanted was that they didn't just ask for Elsa. They wanted Whoosh too. They said since Windi and I bought Whoosh together as a young puppy he was joint property. Of course, what they failed to mention was that Windi didn't walk Whoosh ever. Never fed Whoosh unless she was throwing him a piece of pizza crust while we watched the ballgame, or give him a taste of her beer just to watch him shake his head and shiver. She thought that was a world class joke.

Hazelton was a buffoon. Not that I'm not. I understand that. But I'm just saying it's easy for one buffoon to recognize another. The problem was, being a buffoon as the head of a hotel maid service is not the same thing as being a buffoon lawyer. It's really not.

By the time it was over the trade-off was just as they planned it -- they got Elsa, I saw her one day a week. And I got to keep Whoosh, but they could never *ever* see him, touch him, or feed him, *ever*. Not that they gave a shit.

Hazelton thought that was a fair deal. I thought he was nuts. But I had to agree.

So I saw Elsa once a week from then on, until the big event happened that changed everything.

## PART V

### Chapter 20

So in a lot of books there's a big event that happens that changes everything. But I don't have to make one up because something like that really happened right at this point.

It all started with a phone call from my brother, who I hardly ever heard from. He called me to wish me a happy birthday, and then proceeded to tell me that Z was an asshole.

"And why is that? You think he should have written me a birthday card? Because really. . . ."

"Not quite, dumbhead. He tried to pick up my wife at a cafe last week. And I don't mean trying to pick her up over his head."

I said, "How did she even know who Z was?"

He said, "She was at the wedding, moron, along with half the world, including the bride's little daughter and a mangy dog that ended up being the star of the divorce settlement.

Remember?"

"Oh yeah."

"Well he didn't recognize Maggie, but she recognized him, because his muscles are bigger than his brain."

"True."

"But that's not all."

"She slept with him?"

"*Nooo*, you numbskull. She didn't. . . Jesus, why the hell would she have told me the story if she'd slept with him? I wouldn't know shit about it, and we'd be talking about what you're going to do for your birthday besides yawn and watch TV."

I yawned and pressed the power button on my remote. This really wasn't very interesting.

"Anyway, remember Madison?"

"Madison, your friend from college?"

"Yeah, well she's a professor now."

"Wow. Was she from Wisconsin?"

"Why?"

"I think I remember that for some reason."

"Well, I don't fucking remember. Anyway my wife and Madison became good friends, and she started telling her about this affair she was having with a stud who works at the gym in town."

"Wait."

"Connect the dots, Sherlock."

"So Madison and Z are. . ."

"Doin' it. Sharing the beefsteak."

"That's disgusting."

"Drinking outta the same keg."

"Would you shut the fuck up already? I get it."

"Well, what are you going to do about it? You going to tell the ol' lady and piss her off?"

"I don't know. I have to think. I mean, there may be a way to have this work out better than just making Windi so mad she bites his arm off and then has a nervous breakdown. Something better. But I need to think."

"Since when did you become so devious, little brother?"

"I tried to blackmail the mayor once."

"Oh yeah? How did that work out for you?"

"Well, that's why I need to think. Because if I have the same success with Windi as when I blackmailed the mayor I could end up with nothing more than having my picture on the front page of the local newspaper with a dog licking my face. It couldn't have been much worse."

"Sounds like whitemail to me. You got ghosted."

"Yeah, well, fuck you."

That's how phone calls with my brother almost always ended. It was my family's way of saying goodbye.

## Chapter 21

When I called Windi she was surprised to hear from me.

"Hey, listen, you know how I didn't give you a wedding present?"

"How could I forget?"

"Well, I thought of a cool admittedly delayed wedding present for you and Zack."

"And what's that? Dropping us out of a plane without a parachute?"

"No! I'm serious. Bygones. We need to be a family, for Elsa's sake."

"Okay, so?"

"So what if this weekend you and Z -- do you mind if I still call Zack -- Z?"

"He hates you for it. But I don't care."

"Well then, how about if you and Zack go sailing on my boat with me this weekend? Just the three of us?"

"Yeah? really?"

"Really."

"That might actually be cool."

"Saturday?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You can leave Elsa with my mom, and I'll leave Whoosh at home, he stays home on workdays anyway. So he'll be fine."

"Well, thank God for that. We wouldn't want Whoosh to miss daddy and start peeing all over your floor, now would we?"

"Hey, that's funny. Yeah, I never thought of that. Good one!"

I was ready to punch her right through the phone, but I was sticking to the plan.

## Chapter 22

Friday night got me concerned. The weather report said it would be overcast with a chance of heavy rain. Might even be a small boat advisory. But I figured if Windi and Z didn't cancel I sure wasn't going to.

I was missing Elsa more and more by the day. Life was getting very lonely again. I had no boat to work on and keep my mind occupied.

And Whoosh was getting old. His limp from the car accident had never gone away. And now he had trouble getting up because of his hips. When I came through the door from work he would struggle to get up before running over to me like he hadn't seen me in ten years. But his time, I knew, was coming to an end.

Me, unfortunately, I was still young. I'd have to go through decades more of this before I could have bad hips and not look like some kind of freak.

But if this plan worked, the three of us could be one big happy family again.

## Chapter 23

My final fantasy *ever* began when the boat sailed under the bridge, the same bridge my father used to sail me through.

It was a two-lane bridge with a bicycle path. It had crisscrossed steel beams that made it look like a cat's cradle.

Windi was not super happy about the weather. The boat was being thrown around pretty good by the time we were past the bridge headed out to open sea. So she consumed an unhealthy amount of beer to relax (I had seen this act far too many times before). But the more beer she drank the windier the weather got.

After she couldn't drink another sip, with her stomach in knots from the boat rolling, she stumbled down to the cabin, dove headfirst onto the little couch near the mini-fridge, and fell asleep. This was perfect timing.

I decided to leave the helm and have my talk with Z. He was at the bow, wave spray ricocheting up into his face. He was licking up all the swirly salty life in front of him. His shirt was off. He was flexing his muscles and laughing every time the boat rolled to one side. We were crashing forward. He was holding onto the rail laughing like a madman.

I reefed the main sail. Then I noticed the main sail maker's name, *Z-Spars*, at the bottom of the sail. I'd never really thought about it before. Z! I took it as a sign. I went to the front of the bow to join him.

"So," I said, as the waves hissed against the hull, "Windi is sleeping off the six pack she just chugged down. I don't think she likes the weather very much."

"I *love* it!" Z screamed into the wind-swirl. "It smells like life, and love, and sex. It's like *salt*-screams, it tastes like. . ."

"I *get* it. I really do. It's exciting, isn't it? It's almost like having an affair, kind of."

He cocked his head and stared at me. One of his eyelids began to close. I couldn't tell if he was staring me down or if sea spray hit his face before he had a chance to blink.

"Windi would hate it if she ever found out you had an affair," I mentioned as casually as possible. "Not saying. But I mean, also, I think the courts would re-think Elsa living full-time with a step-dad that's fucking a friend of my brother's wife. If that were to ever happen."

"You're brother's wife?"

"Madison's best friend, as fate would have it."

"You *mother*. . ."

"No, no, I'm not saying I'm going to tell Windi. I just want a little hush money, so to speak, to keep things even keeled as they say in the boating world. . . but not actual money. Let's say it would be in the form of you helping me get my daughter back."

"Really? Is that all you want?"

"Yes, well I mean, maybe *some* money thrown in for good measure, but. . ."

Suddenly he picked me up by the shirt, I knew I shouldn't have worn a shirt, and tilted me backwards until I was half overboard."

"You know what this is, don't you? It's *blackmail*! And I don't like being blackmailed, especially not by creepy little wimps like you."

I was starting to choke.

"And in a storm like this who would know whether you got thrown off the boat from a wave, or if you got murdered trying to *blackmail* someone?" He started shaking me like a bartender shaking a cocktail.

At that moment a big wave hit the boat and he almost lost his grip on me.

If it wasn't for him reeling me back in using all of his strength, like he'd just caught a marlin, I would have fallen in.

"Oh," I said, huffing, trying to catch my breath as the rain began to ping against us like cold pins. I pointed at him, "You know what I just thought of? Neither of you know how to sail! So if I go, you go. You need me alive," I coughed.

Another wave hit and I began falling over the rail, this time without his help. He caught me with one hand and said, "Yeah, you got me there, mate. Except my team won sailing races when I lived in Australia, so, on second thought, your theory sucks. *Gor.*"

I hated when anyone called me *Gor*, but at this moment I found it in my heart to forgive.

I saw a glint of sunlight hit the water. It looked like. . . someone.

The wind was pinning our hair back. I was hyperventilating. "I know how to swim miles and miles," I yelled. The noise all around us was deafening. "I could make it to shore for sure. Windi knows that! She'd never believe you if you told her I fell overboard and drowned."

Just then a wave as hard as a brick slammed into the boat and I tumbled down under the sea. One reality suddenly switched into another. *Z* no longer existed. Only bubbles. I saw bubbles all around me.

I tried to find my way up to the light. But then the hull of the boat slammed against the top of my head and I blacked out.

When I became conscious I tried to orient myself. I somehow made it to the surface and gasped for oxygen. My head was aching, bleeding, pulsing to my heartbeat. I looked around in every direction. And then I saw her, it was Katie. She was swimming towards me. "*Katie!*"

She was shimmery like a sunbeam. I watched her vaporize into sea mist.

I started swimming towards the boat. It was listing. I didn't see *Z* aboard. Waves were pushing against me as I tried to get closer.

After swimming for what felt like an hour I had arrived too late. The boat had keeled over. I tried to see if I could find Windi or Z in the surrounding water, but there was no sign of them. I tried to grab onto the hull but it was too slimy. My hands reached frantically for something to hold onto. I could feel my nails digging like dog paws into algae and slipping away.

I thought of Whoosh waiting for me at home, hips aching. I thought of Elsa waiting at grandma's. Waiting for me to come to her, eyes hypnotized by the blue and yellow TV light flashing in waves, bright, then dark, then bright again.

A wave hit me from behind and I came up gulping for air. But I breathed in sea water instead. My chest was burning.

Katie reached out to me, "The boat is gone. Z is dead."

The deck and hull were fully submerged now. Piercing rain pummeled what was left of the main sail. I saw the *Z-Spars* label had ripped right between the Z and the - .

I looked at her face. "*Katie!*" I cried.

The sky darkened. I couldn't see anything anymore, but I sensed something trying to reach back towards my outstretched arms. I swam towards the feeling. "*Katie! Katie!*"

Then I heard in a voice as clear as starlight, "Yes. It's me, Don. Quickly, take my hand. I can save you. . . I can save you now."

And our hands met.

*The End*

~ Don