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opening extract from

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EDGE OF NOWHERE

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for Zara, who never once disappointed me

EVERY SUMMER, AWAKENED BY some imperceptible signal, a shining multitude of salmon leave the churning depths of the Pacific and return to Alaska to spawn and die. And in their own annual ritual, fishing vessels launch out of safe harbours to meet the migrating schools, which swarm homeward through cold waters, using stars, the moon, and nearly forgotten scents to guide them home, as they have done unerringly since the beginning of time. Just as storms and rough seas imperil the fleets, danger lurks for the salmon at every stage of their journey. All life at sea is precarious. Nothing rests easily. The massive schools must avoid salmon sharks, pods of killer whales, and long, ensnaring nets. And when the dogged salmon reach the mouths of freshwater rivers and streams, waiting impatiently for the incoming tide to boost their one-way race upriver to die, terrible dangers still confront them. Even when the tide has launched them into the familiar flowing waters of their birth, they can only hope to escape the teeth and claws of ever-hungry bears, the talons of vigilant eagles, and the flailing lines of hopeful fishermen. Vigilance, hunger, perseverance – the driving forces in all nature, from salmon to fishermen.

* * *

All'inguq

(One)

A long time ago, in a small village nestled along the banks of a river where it emptied into the sea, three brothers hunted and killed squirrels for the fun of it. They hung the tiny furs to dry and collected the bushy tails. They had killed so many squirrels that each day they had to go farther and farther away from the village to find more.

ALL AROUND THE *ERIN ELIZABETH* the shadow-blackened sea dipped and rose in the cold rain, the canyons between waves narrowing and widening beneath dark clouds swirling on a grey, thundering horizon. Among the great swells the fishing boat looked tiny and lost. On the pitching deck, Seth Evanoff clung to the railing, trying to steady himself and to keep from falling overboard. At sixteen, he had not yet developed his father's sea legs. His feet gave out beneath him when a rogue wave swashed

across the deck, dashing a large, plastic tub against the starboard side. He watched in awe as a gust snatched the empty tub and hurled it tumbling into the tumultuous, sloshing sea.

Everywhere, fierce, wind-riven whitecaps were sliding across the bay, which was surrounded by rocky shores and steep, treeless mountains. Many still had snow on their cloud-tangled peaks, despite the warmth of an early Alaskan summer. The slashing wind carried the sound of waves breaking on the nearby shores scudding across the bay. Behind each foam-tumbling crest, endless waves piled up in the distance, mounting and rolling.

A net full of waggling salmon swung wildly above an open hold as the intrepid, forty-two-foot vessel bucked on the jostling waves and lurched sideways from the weight of the laden net. Screeching seagulls hovered above the whitecaps, slapping at the port and starboard. At the bow of the blue-and-white boat, a golden retriever, his paws finding little traction on the slippery deck, barked at the noisy birds, sea spray blasting him each time the slicing bow plunged headfirst into the swells and white-tipped waves.

At the stern of the heaving craft, a man was deftly working the control levers to the boom wench, trying to guide the hoisted net into position, while a lean, old man with iron-grey hair hunkered on the deck beside the hold, trying to steady the swaying net by himself. His gnarled fingers clutched the net strings. His feet were planted far apart, his knees bent firmly against the jostling motion.

All three fishermen wore yellow raincoats, the bright rubber made slick by rain and sea. The fronts of the slickers were stained with fish blood.

Uncertain what to do, Seth tried to regain his balance as he stood beside the wiry old man. The teenager was considerably overweight, obese even, and, unlike the old man, unsteady against the boat's roll. It had been a long time since lunch, and Seth was starving. With a free hand, he pulled a candy bar and two packets of slender meat sticks called Slim Jims from a damp raincoat pocket and was deciding which one to open first, when the man working the levers shouted at him.

'Seth!' the man yelled above the din of the torrent, the squawking seagulls, and the cranking wench motor. 'Put that away! You're always eating junk

food. You'll ruin your supper! Make yourself useful! Help Lucky with the net!'

'Yes, Dad!' yelled the teenager, quickly stuffing the snacks back into his pocket and pulling down his baseball cap, which was almost blown away by the gales whipping the surface of the sea into a fury, singing through the tight wires, ripping the foam to lace.

The bulging net, still slowly angling above the gaping square mouth of the half-filled hold, swayed with the boat's rocking.

'Grab on, Seth!' his father shouted again. 'Muscle! Use your muscles! Pull!'

When the boy was unable to help the deckhand steady the treacherously swinging net, his frustrated father ran over, took hold of it roughly, and, together with the old man, manhandled it above the hold.

'Can't you do anything right? Hold it like this,' his father snarled before returning to the controls to release the catch.

When the bottom of the net was finally opened, spilling its contents into the hold, some salmon missed the opening and flapped wildly about the deck. It was Seth's job to catch them one at a time and toss them in with the rest of the fish.

Jack Evanoff, Seth's father, had been a commercial fisherman all his life. His own father had been a fisherman. He had worked hard for years to save enough money to buy the boat, and he saw his hold full of fish as a means to pay his bills, including the mortgage and heating oil, the loan for the boat, diesel for the engine, and the salary of his old deckhand who earned a small percentage of the catch. In addition he had to save for the future because winters were long, and some seasons were leaner than others. Not only were salmon returns unpredictable from year to year, but the market price fluctuated from summer to summer, from species to species. King salmon, also called Chinook, always demanded a good price.

Sometimes, so many pink salmon swarmed into the bays that the price would bottom out, glutting the market – nature's perfect example of the law of supply and demand. In those years, beaches near the outlets of rivers and streams were littered for miles in both directions with decaying salmon, the stench insufferable. Even the bears and eagles lost interest after a certain point. Only crabs would eat the dead salmon once high tides had washed the rot-soft corpses back into the sea. At some point during such

years of terrible abundance, you couldn't even give the fish away.

While Seth struggled to collect the slimy salmon, Lucky, the old deckhand, worked with the assured skill that comes from a lifetime of doing something until it becomes second nature. The biting wind blew his long, thin hair across his grey-whiskered face. No one spoke. Each knew exactly what had to be done and how to do it, putting away the heavy, empty net with the attentiveness of an artist or surgeon, being careful that the net should not tangle, knowing that a tangled net would mean loss of time and money. The old deckhand's fingers were strong and sunburned. One hand was missing part of a finger from an accident long ago, and his broken nose was a constant reminder of another accident.

Life at sea was dangerous.

People had always called the old man Lucky, which wasn't his real name. No one knew the name his parents gave him.

No one had ever asked.

After tossing the last flapping fish into the near-full hold, Seth watched as his father and Lucky struggled to close the hatch.

'The wind is getting too strong!' Jack shouted to Lucky as they leaned face-to-face, bearing down with all their weight to latch the square lid. 'It's getting too dangerous out here!'

Lucky nodded in agreement.

'Let's go home, Jack!' he replied, rain blowing off at an angle from his crooked nose. The howling wind swept his words over the side of the boat, drowning them in the sea.

After everything was secured, the three-man crew met in the pilot house, their yellow slickers dripping puddles on the floor. The fur-soaked dog curled up on the floor beside them, put his head between his paws and sighed heavily.

'The weather is pretty rough,' said Captain Jack, placing his baseball cap on a wall-hook. 'But I'm worried it's going to get worse. We need to make for port now, while we still can. We've got to get these fish to the cannery.'

Leaning so close to the window that his nose almost touched the glass, Lucky squinted, trying to see through the rolling sheets of water that tirelessly pounded against the glass, trying to smash into the dry cabin. He had been on seas like this many times

in his life, and he knew how bad it could get if the wind were to grow much stronger.

'You're right, Jack,' offered Lucky, scratching his scraggly beard. 'Let's stay on the leeward side of the islands. It'll be safer there. The islands will offer some protection.'

Everyone on board was aware of the danger of storms on open water.

Alaska is surrounded on three sides by water: the Gulf of Alaska, part of the vast Pacific to the south; the dangerous Bering and Chukchi Seas, which separate Alaska from Siberia; and the frigid Arctic Ocean to the north, the frozen home of polar bears and seals. Alaska has more coastline than the rest of America combined. Thousands of islands – some big, some small – line its southern coast. The Aleutian Islands, with their fifty-seven volcanoes, span over twelve hundred miles westward toward Asia. The Inside Passage bordering British Columbia is lined with over a thousand islands. Prince William Sound, over a hundred miles across, is speckled with hundreds of islands. In the summer, deer and bear swim from island to island foraging for food. It was in these pristine waters that the *Exxon Valdez* tanker

ran aground on Bligh Reef, spilling almost eleven million gallons of crude oil and killing an estimated quarter million seabirds and some three thousand sea otters and harbour seals – the world's worst environmental disaster.

From years of experience, Jack knew that even the most ferocious winds during the day sometimes die down in the evening. There's some truth to the nautical expression, 'Red sky at night, sailor's delight.' He knew that if they waited awhile, the sea might calm a little. Sometimes a little is enough. Besides, he was hungry. He and his crew had been working hard since lunch, almost nine hours earlier, and he chose to face a drive home through the stormy night on a full stomach.

Jack glanced at his watch and then at his son who was standing beside him, only a couple of inches shorter.

'Looks like it's supper time,' he said. 'What do you say we make for a cove and have something to eat?'

Seth nodded enthusiastically.

Like most teenage boys, he was always hungry.

Before long, the boat had anchored in a small bay, sheltered somewhat from the tempest, though it still

rocked a good deal. Generally, boats would anchor in such safe harbours to outlast bad weather. But storms in the Sound can sometimes last for days, putting at risk a catch like the one brimming in the hold of the boat. The fish can spoil if not delivered in time, a total waste of effort and fuel – a risk most captains are not willing to take. Commercial fishermen are gamblers, sometimes betting lives in how they play their stake.

While Jack cooked supper in the galley, Seth and Lucky sat waiting at the rectangular kitchen table, which, like most things on the boat, was bolted down for safety. Everything on board was rigged for rough seas. The cupboards and drawers were latched to keep them from opening and spilling their contents when the boat tossed and heaved on waves and swells. The stove top had special fixtures rigged to hold pots or pans in place. Even the few pictures on the walls were fastened tightly with screws.

A framed photograph of Seth with his mother and father was fixed on the wall above the table. His mother's fairness was highlighted by his father's darker skin and black hair. Everyone in the picture looked happy. His parents had their arms around each other,

with Seth standing between them smiling and holding Tucker, who was then a squirming puppy. That was two years ago. His mother had died in a car accident about a year after the picture was taken.

It was winter.

Seth's parents were coming home from a Fisherman's Association banquet in town when two deer leaped onto the road. His father slammed on the brakes and turned sharply to miss them. So sure-footed at sea, his father lost control on the icy land, and the truck spun wildly, jumped a steep bank, and crashed into a tree. His mother was thrown through the windscreen and died instantly. His father suffered only a mild concussion, a couple of minor cuts, and a bruised rib.

Seth blamed his father for the accident, which soon became a wedge between them, sharp as a splitting maul.

Truth be told, Jack blamed himself. He thought of his wife all the time, even while working the levers to pull in the long, heavy net full of shiny, waggling salmon.

While the galley filled with the smells of cooking, Lucky played solitaire, flipping over each card and

laying it thoughtfully on one of several face-up rows, absently keeping them from sliding off the table with his flannel shirt sleeve. His cup of coffee kept scooting towards the edge of the table, its contents sloshing with the motion of the boat. Tucker lay on the floor on an oval carpet, occasionally raising his head to look around, sniffing, wondering when the food would be ready. He was always given a little something extra in his stainless steel bowl. Seth played with his hand-held video game, leaning back in his chair, wearing earphones, listening to music on his iPod, his eyebrows knit tightly as he stared at the small screen, his thumbs moving frantically. Sometimes his tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth. He was still wearing his dark-blue baseball cap with the words 'Erin Elizabeth' embroidered in gold thread across the front. It was his mother's name and the name of his father's boat.

That wasn't the original name.

For a long time the boat had been called the *Natsalané*, the name of the mythic man who created the first killer whale. But Seth's father changed the boat's name after his wife died. He even painted two bright yellow flowers on the stern, one on each side

of her name, the long, green, leafy stems framing the two words. She had always loved flowers, happily spending her summer days tending her flowerbeds.

'Isn't there something else you can do?' his father asked, standing at the sink and draining water from a steaming pot of boiled red potatoes. His sarcastic tone matched his look of disappointment.

Seth understood the look.

In the year since his mother had died, he had withdrawn from the world, spending most of his time at home in his bedroom playing video games, listening to music, surfing the internet, and ignoring his homework. Consequently, his grades at school had slipped dramatically. His mother had always been proud of Seth's good grades. He had also stopped spending time with his friends and going for long walks with Tucker like he used to. As a result, he had gained a lot of weight.

His father called him 'soft' and 'lazy'.

He was right. Nonetheless, it hurt Seth to hear it. His father used to be proud of him. They used to be a happy family.

Seth didn't respond, remaining intent on his game. Besides, his father had complained about his

games a thousand times before, saying things like, 'Why don't you play baseball or something? Go ride your skateboard or your bike. You need to get out and exercise. Why don't you play with the other boys your age?' And his father's favourite, 'When I was your age, my parents made me play outside all day until it was time for supper.'

Seth had learned to tune out his father's voice, although he wasn't intentionally disrespectful. He had simply learned to act as if he had not heard him, to avoid an argument.

His father placed three blue plastic plates on the table. On each was a thick serving of salmon, which had been fried in a black cast-iron skillet and had honey drizzled over the flaking orange meat. Beside the salmon fillet was a pile of small red potatoes and a heaped serving of green beans.

'You know the rules,' his father said, pointing to the top of his son's head. 'Take off your hat when we eat. And turn off that damn music. It's so loud I can hear it from over here. You'll bust your eardrums.'

Begrudgingly, Seth turned off his iPod and stuffed it into a pocket on his slicker.

While Lucky and his father ate, Seth stared at his

plate, rolled a potato back and forth with his fork. He didn't like green beans or boiled potatoes, and he was tired of salmon. He only liked hamburgers or hot dogs or pizza. He rarely ate vegetables. After a few minutes, Seth pushed away his plate, walked over to the cupboards and made himself a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich on white bread, first cutting away the thin, brown crust with his pocketknife, a sixteenth birthday present from his father a couple of months earlier. The single-bladed knife had originally been his grandfather's, who eventually passed it down to his son. Now it had been Seth's father's turn to give it to *his* son.

When he was finished, Seth wiped the flat sides of the blade against his blue jeans before he carefully closed the folding knife and slipped it back into his pocket.

'You never eat anything I make,' his father said sharply, trying not to yell. 'You always ate whatever your mother cooked. Now all you ever want are peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and microwave pizzas. No wonder you don't have any muscles. No wonder you've gained so much weight. You're so finicky. You wouldn't last a day in the wilderness.'

That was another of his father's favourite sayings.

They had had the same argument a hundred times before, and Seth's response was always the same.

'It's the only thing I like,' he mumbled, sitting down to eat his sandwich.

His father and Lucky shared what Seth had left on his plate, giving the salmon skin to Tucker, who gobbled it happily. Dogs love salmon skin.

After supper, Jack made a pot of coffee and filled a tall, green thermos with a stainless steel cap. He would need the caffeine to keep him awake during the long night's journey home. He was used to the routine, having done it countless times. He was a strong man who believed in the value of hard work, the kind of man who measured his honour by keeping his word, by following through on plans. Besides, there would be plenty of time to rest after the fish were delivered.

After weighing anchor, the captain climbed up to the pilot house and guided the boat out of the sheltering cove, into the blasting headwind, into the deep troughs, the bow busting through waves, the wind hurling itself at the craft, which suddenly

seemed smaller, tiny and uncertain on the frenzied sea. Jack's gamble hadn't paid off: the wind hadn't died down. Even with the throttle nearly wide open and assuming no unforeseen problems, it would take all night to reach home.

Once underway, with nothing left to do but wait, Seth and Lucky climbed into their narrow beds. Lucky read while Seth played his video game. Eventually, both fell asleep. Lucky, used to rough seas, slept soundly. With much less experience, Seth slept only fitfully, tossing and turning in his narrow bed like the restless sea, feeling the threat of nausea.

* * *

Seth awoke with a start.

He lay in his upper-bunk bed, at first listening to the relentless rain and the intolerable sound of Lucky snoring. It was so loud it could be heard even above the thunderous din of the storm and the wind as it screamed through the wires of the boom. Something kept rolling back and forth across the floor – one of the marbles Seth used to play with, perhaps. But then he began to wonder whether he

had brought Tucker into the cabin when he came in for the night. He couldn't remember. He had seen him in the galley during supper, but afterwards Tucker had followed him and Lucky out on deck to make sure everything was secure for the journey home.

Seth hung his head over the edge of the high bunk, looking for Tucker. He called for him softly, so as not to wake Lucky, who was asleep on the narrow bed across from the bunk, one of the old man's skinny legs exposed from under the blanket.

Seth didn't see the dog anywhere on the open floor or beneath him on the empty lower bunk, where his father slept unless pressed by duties on deck, as on this night. He swung his legs over the side and carefully climbed down the sturdy ladder, gripping the rungs tightly as the boat swayed and heaved. When he was safely down, he knelt to look beneath the bottom bunk. That was where the dog sometimes hid during thunder, which always made him tremble and whimper. He didn't like gunshots either.

He wasn't much of a hunting dog.

Tucker wasn't there, only a pair of tennis shoes, two black rubber boots, and a single white sock with a red stripe.

Worried that his dog was on the deck outside, exposed to the storm, soaking wet and shivering and miserable, Seth quickly put on his clothing and boots, as quietly as possible so as not to awaken Lucky, who never stirred. When he was dressed, he grabbed his baseball cap and his yellow slicker from a hook on the wall beside the door.

Seth stepped out of the dry cabin, leaning against the door hard to close it, catching himself as he almost slipped on the deck, made all the more slippery by the salmon that spilled while loading them into the hold. Their slime never quite washed away, no matter how many times the surface was hosed and scrubbed.

Although it never turns truly dark during summer in Alaska, the sky churned like the sea, grey-black and seething. The stinging rain fell so hard that it hurt Seth's eyes when he looked up, squinting and covering his face with one hand. He had trouble telling where the swirling sky ended and the swelling, white-tipped sea began. Lightning

flashed. From where he stood, Seth could make out his father's back in the pilot house. He wished he were back inside where it was warm and dry. And safe. When a large wave slapped the side of the boat, Seth grabbed a deck rail to steady himself. A blasting gust blew his cap from his head, sailing it upward and far from the boat on the shifting winds, before it dived like a hungry seagull into the roiling chaos of the sea.

Suddenly, almost imperceptibly above the din of the storm, Seth heard a high-pitched whimper, almost but not quite a bark. He followed the sound across the deck, calling the dog's name.

'Tucker!' he yelled, trying to steady himself as the boat dived into a rising swell and crashed through the other side, sea spray exploding from each side of the bow. The jolt almost bowled him over.

'Here, boy!'

The howling wind swept Seth's words off the boat like his cap, out across the roiling sea, where they floundered in the swallowing waves.

Seth followed the muffled sound of whining. He only heard it intermittently. He had to listen carefully, turning his head toward the direction of

the sound. Following a clap of thunder that split the air, he again heard the sorrowful whining. He moved slowly in the direction of the noise, hanging onto whatever steadfast support he could find. At the very back of the boat was a stainless steel table bolted to the deck where the crew worked on the nets. Seth bent down and looked beneath it.

There was Tucker, curled up and trembling, his drooping face soaking wet and pitiful.

'Come on, boy,' said Seth, grabbing the dog's collar and tugging. 'Let's go inside where it's warm and dry.'

He dragged Tucker out from beneath the table, but when they had walked only a couple of steps towards the cabin, a large wave suddenly struck the side of the boat, and a wall of seawater swept boy and dog across the deck and over the starboard side. At first Seth was turned helplessly in the dark foam, rigid with panic, unable to determine up or down. He hadn't taken a deep breath before the wave snatched him, and he felt his lungs trying to gasp, to suck in air. He struggled to swim to the surface. When his head finally popped out of the sea, he screamed in reverse, taking in a chestful of water.

Shaking the hair from his eyes, he looked around for Tucker.

'Tucker!' he yelled as white-caps crashed over his head, making it hard for him to breathe or shout. 'Tucker!'

He couldn't see very far. His body rose and plunged on the crests and valleys of each wave.

The boat was still close enough for Seth to see the two yellow flowers framing the name on the stern, *Erin Elizabeth*. He called out, desperately waving one arm, frantically trying to keep himself afloat with the other.

'Hel . . .! Help!' he tried to scream, but briny water choked his words.

The boat kept going, crashing into the waves, its propeller churning the darkened sea, the distance growing between them, grey and rain-drenched.

Seth turned to look again for his dog, treading the water as he spun about. When lightning flashed, he saw Tucker's head, not too far away, but only for an instant at the peak of a swell before he disappeared. Seth swam for it, struggling against the twisting currents, the pelting torrent, and the surging waves. He could feel his muscles stiffening from the icy water.

Seth knew how dangerous Alaskan waters can be. He had heard stories how even the strongest swimmers can't last long in the frigid northern seas, even during this, the warmest season of the year. When he was close, Seth grabbed the dog's collar, careful not to pull his head below the surface and, at the same time, spoke to him, calming him and encouraging him.

'Are you okay, boy?' he asked, swallowing and coughing up a small portion of the sea, trying to reassure the frantic dog, whose wide eyes sparked with fear.

For a long time they bobbed on the surface, the thrashing sea heaving and scudding around them, tossing them about like lost buoys. At times, the waves seemed to rise up, sharp and angular, like fins or jagged teeth. Seth had to use both arms to tread, trying to stay close to his struggling dog. He had learned long ago to keep his fingers close together, paddle-like. Spread fingers were useless when swimming or treading water.

He could no longer see or hear his father's boat.

It could be miles away by now, he thought, noticing for the first time his bone-deep trembling and that

he could no longer feel his toes. His arms were getting tired. He felt dizzy and exhausted.

Seth began to wonder how much longer he could stay afloat.