



# Lost Witness

A Josie Bates Thriller

Book #8

By

Rebecca Forster

*Though lovers be lost love shall not.*

- Dylan Thomas

CHAPTER 1  
Day 1 @ 2 A.M.

The man in the mid-ship cabin had sailed 6,300 miles on the *Faret Vild*, and no one onboard save for the captain knew he was there. It was the captain who brought him his meals, the captain who made sure the man's linen was clean, and the captain who had chosen the large, long unused cabin for this passenger. When the man ventured out at all it was in the dead of night when only the watch on the bridge was awake. Even then he was cautious. If he was noticed at all his presence seemed no more than a shadow on the deck, a spirit near the rails, a thing undefined but sensed by those who knew the *Faret Vild* well. Now, on the last legs of the voyage, he had cabin fever. The Port of Los Angeles was within sight, the weather was clement, the hour late, and the crew was busy preparing their cargo, so the man took a stroll.

He breathed deep of the sea air, stretched his legs a bit, turned his body, and heard the bones in his back crack. He took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and rested his arms on the deck railing. He would enjoy a moment before returning to his cabin to wait for docking and debarkation. At that time he would blend in as if he were an inspector, or a supervisor, or any number of men who worked on the ships or at the port. When his business was done he would return to the *Faret Vild* in the same manner, and he would come back richer.

But that was tomorrow and tonight was beautiful. Above him the heavens were as black as the water upon which the ship sailed. The sky sparkled with stars; the ocean illuminated by a moon that was bright enough to read by. A fresh, cool breeze caught the smoke from his cigarette and swirled it around his head before blowing it away. The man was raising the cigarette for one last drag when the back of his neck prickled. He had caught someone's attention. Being an old hand at watching and being watched, he gave no indication that he knew he was not alone. Instead, he allowed this person time to pass on or to return to where they had come from. When that didn't happen the man swiveled his head, chin tucked into his shoulder, and saw that it was a person of no consequence staring at him. He shook his head, stood up straight, took the last hit off his cigarette, and flicked the butt into the ocean. He started to walk past the watching person, who did not stand aside and who looked at him brazenly.

*The shit.*

If he were at home he would teach this one a lesson. But he wasn't at home, and the last thing he needed was to make a scene at this late date.

Yet, now that he had been seen, the man realized how ridiculous it had been to hide all these days. It was boldness that had gotten him where he was, not timidity. Then again the stakes were higher than usual, and caution had served its purpose. His business in Los Angeles would be brief and lucrative if handled correctly. Then it was on to Panama. After that the route would be firmly established, and he would never have to travel in this low manner again.

"Move," he said, annoyed by this person's impertinence.

When that didn't happen, the man showed his knife, its blade shining in the moonlight. That should have been enough, and in the next moment it was. That person, that lowly being, moved aside, but only far enough for the man to pass. He put his knife in his pocket and went on his way only to stumble, missing his footing when he thought he heard the mate speak.

*Tala.*

The sound of it was not so much whispered as choked.

*Tala.*

The man righted himself. He tugged at his shirt and raised his chin. He did not look back, positive that it was a trick of his brain that made him lose his footing. Yes, this was his imagination working overtime, brought on by the affront of being scrutinized in such a manner. Perhaps he was unnerved by the solitude of the last many days. It could have been the sound of the ocean breeze bringing up the memory of that name, whispering as it followed him through the heavy door. No matter what it was that made him think of that time so long ago, he resented being put in such a position by someone not worth spit.

The man turned to unleash his fury on the brazen snake that dared address him, but the mate was gone, disappeared into the old, creaking hulk of a vessel. The mate had gone so quickly, so silently, that the man wondered if he had imagined the meeting. Perhaps all this was nothing more than a rare itch of conscience.

Putting a hand to his eyes, he pressed his fingers against the sockets to quell the pounding behind his lids. Undone by what had happened, the man considered that this encounter might be a bad omen. Then he laughed. Such thoughts were folly. He had a diamond in his ring after all. Everyone knew that diamonds kept evil spirits away. Yet here he was worrying like an auntie; acting like an amateur. That person was nothing but an ant in a hill, moving things about without knowing why, doing what was expected and unsure of how to handle the unexpected. He on the other hand made things happen with a snap of his fingers: big things, frightening things, deadly things.

Stepping through the heavy metal door, he turned left and not right toward his cabin. He would inspect his cargo once more, count the boxes, and check the lashings. He would visit each container, even the one down in the very bowels of the ship because tomorrow was important; tomorrow some of that cargo would be delivered, tested and accepted and he would arrange for the next shipments. All would be well. What just happened was nothing. He would move forward as he always had. He would come out on top as he always had.

\* \* \*

The *Faret Vild* was a very large container ship built in 1990. In 2002 it was sold to Libier Knox, and then it was acquired by North Jutland, Boldsen Enterprises in 2004. The vessel sailed, as it had since 1990, under a Liberian flag, but it was no longer the pride of the fleet.

The massive ship's captain, Adeano Bianchi, was Italian; the first mate, Nanda, was Indonesian. The engineer was a man of mixed heritage whose papers indicated that he came from New Zealand. The crew was sparse - as crews tend to be on such vessels - and numbered seventeen seafaring souls. Of the crew there were four Chinese, one African, nine hailing from the Balkans (two Serbs, three Albanians and four Croats), two citizens of the Philippines and one - well one who was a mystery of sorts.

The Italian captain, needing another hand at the last minute, merely shrugged at this young man's poorly forged U.S. passport. He ignored his reticent, wary manner, and the distrustful darkness in his blue eyes. The young man was possessed of a quiet that made his fellow mates steer clear and the captain feel as if he were somehow lacking. Still there were worse types on board. Not to mention there was another mate who would not sign on without this strange young man. To get the refrigeration engineer Adeano Bianchi had to take the second mate who was not an engineer. That was fine because they both came cheap.

The young man - this boy - was not angry or cruel or even a little insane, he simply made it clear that if people kept their distance it would be for the best. Men like him were ocean swells, apparent and unsettling but of little consequence once they moved on. The first mate assigned the quiet man to the lower hold to monitor the temperature on the refrigerated units, and the captain thought no more about him.

Now it was zero two hundred hours and the *Faret Vild* lay off the coast of Southern California. Having been advised by the port that a berth would not be available until zero eight hundred at the earliest, the crew made the ship ready to anchor. They did their work quickly in anticipation of the 'love boat' the captain had promised. It would bring ladies who would help them pass the time in a happy way while the ship remained in the queue.

On the bridge, the first mate was on the radio walking through the anchor checks: brakes on and clear of the voyage securing devices, hydraulic power of the windlasses was checked, and the anchor crew was appropriately dressed for safety. The latter was a matter of faith since the first mate did not think it necessary to check on the crew's dress, nor had the Indonesian thought it necessary to send more than one crew to discharge the task. This was a violation of the company's safety regulations, but it had been done before and it would be done again. Finally the first mate confirmed there was no craft or obstacle under the bow.

Simultaneously the captain ensured that the vessel's GPS speed was near zero before he specifically identified the ship as the *Faret Vild* to those on shore. He did this to avoid misinterpretation should any outside person pick up the transmission. The ship, after all, was old and the communications were by radio, so the identification was necessary to avoid possible confusion with another vessel. This procedure was also necessary because Captain Bianchi wanted no curious eyes on the *Faret Vild* for any reason. By the book. No mistakes. For a captain who was more than willing to cut corners this was telling to Nanda, but the first mate asked no questions. That was how he stayed employed and healthy. Finally the Italian gave Nanda a nod and he, in turn, gave the order to drop anchor.

It was more than a minute before the first mate realized that he had not received confirmation from the anchor crew. He palmed the radio once again, but before he could speak the bridge vibrated with the telltale shimmy of the hydraulics engaging and the giant anchor being lowered by the enormous chain. Satisfied, the first mate turned away. The captain looked up, pen at the ready, in anticipation of verbal confirmation of the lowering of the anchor for the log. Before the Indonesian could speak, the shimmy stopped and all went quiet. In the next second a warning light blinked green on the bridge.

"Nanda."

When the captain had the first mate's attention, he moved a finger to indicate the walkie-talkie. Nanda picked it up and muttered '*omong kosong apa*' before depressing the talk button. The captain laughed.

"*Si*, but she is our piece of crap."

As Nanda tried to raise the anchor crew, the captain left his log and went out to the bridge wing. He called to Lito, one of the Croats working below, and ordered him to see what was what. The man dropped the heavy hose he had been using to wash the deck, and leaned over the railing. When he stood upright again, he waved his hands at the bridge and signed that the anchor was stuck, dangling against the side of the ship.

"*Che Casino*. Such a mess." The captain muttered as he went back to the bridge. "Nanda, send someone to check."

The Italian went back to his log, making meticulous notes, taking little notice as the first mate called to the lounge where the crew smoked and ate as they waited for the ship to be secured and the love boat women to arrive.

"Bojan will go," Nanda said when all was arranged.

The first mate went back to work. There had been a change in position that needed to be reflected in the log since the anchor was not yet in place. This he relayed to the captain.

While the men on the bridge monitored the drift, Bojan, one of the Serbs, rose from his dinner, stubbed out his cigarette thoroughly, downed the rest of his coffee, and made a joke at the expense of the Albanians. Only then did he go on his way, down into the bowels of the ship, keeping a more leisurely pace than he should have.

He navigated the narrow passageways and ladders with a light step, ignoring the cold that became frostier the deeper he went. He whistled a song from his youth and chuckled as it pinged a merry echo in his wake. He drummed a beat or two on the massive containers stacked high on either side of him.

As he approached his destination, the whistling stopped and his steps slowed. Despite the groans of the ship, despite the grinding of the hydraulics, the *Faret Vild* seemed suddenly, eerily silent. The only light came from poorly spaced industrial fixtures attached to the walls. These were encased in metal cages and cast ghostly shadows in the hold. Bojan inched forward unable to imagine what was wrong since he was a man of limited imagination. Not that it mattered. No one could have imagined what he found in the anchor room.

First he saw the dead man caught between the hydraulics of the windlasses and skin of the vessel. One of his arms was woven through the massive links of the anchor chain. It had been cracked in so many places the thing didn't look like an arm any longer. Part of his shoulder was crushed, too, and his neck was tilted at a ninety-degree angle. The man's body was being dragged back and forth on the floor, and his face was crushed flat where it rhythmically hit the hull as the chain strained against the obstruction. The Serb knew the man was dead without touching the body. He had seen enough dead men to know this. He also knew that men didn't wind themselves through chains to commit suicide, and that meant whoever had done this must still be about.

Knees bent, fists held at the ready, eyes narrowed as he peered through the shadows, Bojan pivoted slowly. The anchor room was not a large space, so it wasn't long before he saw the other one propped up against the wall, bloodied, glassy-eyed, and unmoving. Carefully Bojan righted himself and went over to take a closer look. This one had been beaten badly, cut in places; perhaps a

bone or two was broken. Unsure of what to do next, knowing there was no help for the dead man, Bojan backed away. Keeping his eyes on the person against the wall, he called the bridge, and told the first mate what he had found. The first mate told the captain who said:

"Shit. Shit." Bianchi often swore in English when he was angered or upset so as not to soil his own language. "Who is it?"

When Nanda shrugged the captain ordered him to get two more men to the anchor room. The Chinaman, Guang, and the African responded, leaving the rest to wonder why the ship was not at anchor and what could be the cause of such urgency. The captain himself roused the engineer and then left the bridge to Nanda. The sound of men running could be heard from different quarters of the ship before it funneled into the bowels and converged in the hold. The captain was first to arrive. The engineer was next, but the Chinaman and African were hot on their heels.

Once there, they fanned out into a semi-circle. Stunned by what they saw, they fell mute. The engineer was the first to act when he came to his senses. He lunged for the windlass and shut off the hydraulics, silencing the groaning of the chain, the churning of the motor, and the banging of a bone against metal. When that was done he stood back with his mates. All were more angry than distressed. The love boat would be cancelled for sure. Instead of the big bosomed American prostitutes it would be the U.S. law swarming the *Faret Vild*, and he did not like that at all.

Guang, the Chinaman, and the African were not happy either, but they weren't worried about the women; they were worried that they would be called upon to bear witness to the authorities. On this vessel, as all others, none of them were without fault and many were on the wrong side of the law. They preferred to come and go unnoticed. To make much of the dead at the expense of their living and their freedom was viewed as a ridiculous exercise. Besides, the dead man was unknown to them. If he were a stowaway, then he had taken his chances and lost. If he were not, then he was bad business that belonged to someone on board. In that case, the only law that mattered would be the captain's. The other one - the not quite dead one - they knew. It was not unexpected that this had happened. That one had simmered with anger from the beginning of the voyage, and that sort of thing always came to a bad end.

It seemed a long while that they waited for orders. Perhaps the captain was waiting for the one in the shadows to die. Perhaps he did not know what to do. The crew was aware that the Indonesian often helped the captain to make decisions, but this time Adeano Bianchi surprised them. He took command, snapping his fingers at Guang.

*"Infermeria. Pubblicare una guardia."*



There was no doctor aboard, but Guang was certified in first aid and there were supplies in the infirmary. The man was trustworthy which made him the best one to put on guard, but he was also slow moving. The captain waved him on.

*"Rapidamente. Rapidamente."*

Forgetting English was the universal language of the ship, the captain fell back into Italian. Not that it mattered what language he spoke. Everyone understood that speed was necessary if for no other reason than to allow the anchor to lower. The swells from the north could change the ship's position for the worse if they were not secured soon. Repositioning would waste precious fuel and raise questions from the Port Authority; questions Adeano Bianchi did not want to answer.

"Now!"

The captain's roar finally set them to work. Guang took the bloodied one and the African and the Serb were left to the man caught in the chain. They jockeyed for position, arguing quietly about how best to extricate him before beginning their grisly task. The Serb slipped on the bloody floor once. When he righted himself, they found their rhythm.

The captain watched, tight lipped and solemn. He tilted his head when it seemed the dead man's own would fall off as he was pulled away from the anchor chain. When it remained attached to the torso, Adeano Bianchi seemed relieved. Seeing that the crew was better than he had given them credit for, he offered some encouragement and praise while he considered what else must be done before anyone from the outside stepped aboard the *Faret Vild*. Checking his watch, Adeano noted that time was short so decisions must be made quickly. When the dead man was finally freed, the engineer stepped in and reset the windlasses. As the anchor chain unfurled, Adeano Bianchi directed the two men carrying the body.

*"Contentitore quarantasette."*

Container number forty-seven was nearly empty, and the temperature change needed to preserve the body would make no difference to the cargo it carried as far as the captain knew. Not to mention it seemed fitting to put the man in one of the containers he had watched over so carefully. Forty-seven was due for Panama, so that would give the captain time to think what to do.

The men heard Adeano Bianchi but remained where they were. Their eyes still on the chain, they held their breaths and waited for the massive anchor to hit bottom. Only then did they re-adjust their load and go on their way with the body slung between them. When they came to the narrow ladder, the Serb passed the body up to the African and then joined him to carry the dead man toward the stern where they found the container.

Left alone, the captain looked at the mess on the floor and the walls and contemplated the problems that might lie ahead. It was possible that the Port Authority would question why it took so long to anchor, but that was a simple fix. He could adjust the log or point to the slack of the chain and the natural drift it would cause. He would tell them that the ship was old and the hydraulics needed work. The company would pay a fine and there would be no more to it. The authorities were all about business, and a fast turn around was all they really wanted. No, the discrepancy of anchoring was not a problem, but the dead man was another matter.

The dead man was Adeano's special guest. They had done business once before, a test run to see if the captain was a proper partner. Adeano had passed with flying colors and been awarded this job. He had been told what he needed to know about the cargo and no more. It was illegal, it was worth a great deal of money, and there was a ready market among Americans. Adeano understood. He did not need the man to draw him a picture. He also knew that the people waiting for this cargo had a strict time schedule and would not simply be disappointed with this turn of events, they would be vindictive against those who disrupted their business. It was possible that he, Adeano Bianchi, would be held accountable even though he only had control over the transport. Then again, was the dead man really of such consequence? It was the cargo that mattered, not the one who delivered it. Yes, the Italian decided, this was an inconvenience and nothing more. He would search the man's quarters. Certainly he had records, contact numbers, and an inventory list. Surely there would be something that would help Adeano show his good faith to whoever was working with this man. With that information, the captain would fulfill the order in Los Angeles as well as the one in Panama and all would be well.

Satisfied that everything that could be done was being done, he ordered the engineer to 'clean this up', and started down the length of the ship meaning to go to the man's cabin first thing. He didn't get far. There was a niggling worry in his head like an earworm; a tune playing endlessly, the lyrics of which he could not make out. The captain swung himself up onto the first rung of the ladder and as he began to climb he thought that, perhaps, the unpleasantness of a body on board his ship was bothering him. Yet that didn't seem right. He would simply dispose of the body once they were out to sea. If asked at the next port, he would say the man left the ship of his own accord. Let anyone prove that he had not.

No, the body did not seem to be a bothersome thing to Adeano Bianchi. What niggled at him, he realized, was the one who was still alive. It would be best if that one was dead too. He might have to encourage such an outcome. As sad as that would be, Adeano consoled himself with the thought that a quick

confession to the monsignor and a heartfelt penance would take care of his soul while the deed itself would secure his job. The captain was, after all, a practical man.

By the time he thought all this, Adeano was on the upper deck, looking at the blinking lights of the port on one side and the grey/black darkness of the early morning on the other. It was then that he understood what was amiss.

The problem was not the dead man, nor the near dead.

The problem was not the crew who he trusted to keep their counsel.

The problem was not the state of Adeano Bianchi's eternal soul.

The problem was the one who had not been in the anchor room, or on the deck, or anywhere else that Adeano knew of. If he had come upon the bloodbath in the anchor room, he would never have left his mate's side. If he didn't know of the incident, then Adeano wanted to be the one to tell him what had happened to his friend.

Changing course, the captain went to the crew lounge instead of the bridge. The men sitting around the narrow table looked up. Each was somber. The news of what had happened traveled fast. Adeano Bianchi counted heads. Five mates were missing. Four could be accounted for. The one who was not there was Adeano's earworm.

"*Trova il ragazzo*," he said. And then in English, 'find the boy'.

## CHAPTER 2

Day 1 @2:30 A.M.

He lay back against the wall, arms close to his body, feet tight together, burrowed into a corner under a ladder, beside a blue container. Once again his name crackled over the intercom, but he didn't respond to the captain's command to report. Throughout the ship his mates called out for him in their many accents, but he stayed quiet. While he could identify each of their voices, it was impossible to be sure of their positions because the *Faret Vild* was like any other container ship: a massive steel shell crisscrossed with wires, mazed with pipes, connected by a labyrinth of catwalks, and cavernous spaces that were packed with giant metal boxes above deck and below.

It was cold in places, hot in others and oven-like near the engines, but mostly the interior of the *Faret Vild* was cold. There were crawl spaces where voices were nearly lost and vast expanses where they became distorted. He had misjudged only a moment ago. Thinking one of his mates was aft, he instead found the man almost on top of him, cutting off his escape via the gangway, ruining his first plan.

That first plan had been the best. When the ship docked he had intended to make his way off the *Faret Vild*, losing himself in the crush of men who would be tending to the cargo. Once away, he could tell the authorities what he knew of the matter in the anchor room and make sure his injured mate was taken away and cared for. But the ship was not hurtling toward port with the body of the dead man; no one was calling for medical attention for his mate. That meant he would not have a chance to slip off the *Faret Vild* unnoticed. The lowering of the anchor only confirmed his injured mate's warning that no one aboard this ship could be trusted.

Knowing a life hung in the balance, the second escape plan was to lower the gangway while at anchor, slip into the water and swim for it. That could be easily done without assistance, and he could maneuver the gangway into position a few feet from the water's surface. That would make his escape safe and, if luck held, unnoticeable for a good long while.

Then he would. . .

Then he could. . .

He would. . .

He could. . .

It didn't matter what he could have done because now he was trapped below deck with the African blocking his way, taking a smoke, cutting off the route to the gangway. It would have been easy to take him down, but the young man had seen enough blood in his life to last for eternity. And, truth be told, he liked the African, so he eased away unseen and hurried down to another deck.

The captain's voice came over the intercom, ever more strident, ordering him to report to the bridge. Instead he went on his own way: mirroring the movements of those who searched for him, dodging them when they turned away, becoming a shadow when they looked toward his hiding places. They went right; he went left. They shined a light fore; he slipped behind a container aft. He climbed down the metal ladders with the care of a thief, waiting for the sighs and groans of the ship to cover his movements.

He went down another, shorter ladder, jumped the last two rungs and hit the ground running. He ducked under pipes big enough for a man to stand up in, touched the smaller ones, and avoided the steaming ones. He stayed close to the containers that were filled with things people needed and things they didn't need but would buy anyway.

Skirting around the last container, he crouched with his fingertips on the cold floor, pulled his lips tight, and tried to breathe evenly. When he saw no one and heard nothing he gave one last look around, whispered a prayer of sorts, and went for plan three: the hydraulic door. It was as wide as ten men standing finger-tip-to-finger-tip and as tall as three standing atop one another's shoulders.

The engines were quiet as they lay at anchor, but that didn't mean they were silent. He heard the sounds of the ship and felt the strain of every piece of metal that held the old vessel together. Above it all he heard the thud of his heart.

Suddenly dizzy, he put his back against the wall, doubled over, and spit out blood. He had run into a pipe in the dark and could feel that one of his teeth was loose. There was a knot on his head. These were minor things compared to what he had seen in the anchor room. The memory of that made him ill, and for a moment he considered going to the captain or enlisting the African's help. He would ask to simply stay by his mate's side and accept what consequences came, but the moment passed. He had been warned. His head snapped toward a sound, his hand instinctively went to the zippered pocket of his pants where he safeguarded the thing his mate had thrust upon him.

*Take it to an important person.*

His ears pricked. One man, maybe two were coming though it sounded as if they were still far away.

*Tell them my name.*

He remembered the look of desperation in his mate's eyes.

*Take it. Tell them.*

The words had been spoken like a dying wish. He shook his head, refusing to accept that this was the end. Not his mate's, not his. That was why he had to go.

Twirling to face the wall, he flipped the cover on the panel that controlled the hydraulic door, but stopped short of moving the switch. In a split second doubt paralyzed him. He argued with himself, pleaded with himself, railed at himself. Either he had the guts or he didn't; either he had the will or he didn't. He was not a coward, but he was frightened as any human being would be. Once he flipped the switch the door would open and set off warning lights on the bridge. It might escape notice for a few minutes, but the captain's inattention wouldn't last long. The one thing he was charged to do would remain undone because he hesitated; the one life he cared about would be lost.

Gathering his courage, he activated the massive door. It pulled back slowly, opening laboriously, revealing the world outside the ship in inches, feet and finally miles. The port lights blinked, twinkled, and flared. Tethered ships seemed to undulate with the movement of their night crews. Monstrous cranes plucked up containers as if they were children's toys. A red one swung in the air, the name *Maersk* was painted in letters three stories high. Another was blue and yet another yellow. The port looked magical, safe, and so far away.

Below him the sea was indistinguishable from the sky: both were blacker than black. While the ship was at capacity the containers were not all full, so the *Faret Vild* rode high in the water. It was impossible to know exactly how long the

fall would be, but the smell of the ocean and the sound of the water lapping against the hull told him it was a longer distance than it was safe to fall. He judged that the ship was nearly three miles off shore. That could be a good thing. If the fall didn't kill him he could swim a few hundred yards out and disappear into the dark. Then again, distance could be a bad thing. If no one could see him swim out, they also wouldn't see him drown if the fall stunned him.

*Six of one half a dozen of the other.*

All this was a crapshoot. All his life had been one. He had never beaten the odds, but neither had he laid a bet that broke him.

The air was cold; the water would be colder. He knew that he was strong, but sometimes strength was not enough. Stamina, tolerance for the cold, and courage to face what might lie beneath the water's surface were needed to survive in the ocean. One wrong move and he would be gone just when he had found a reason to live again.

Lips tipped up in a sad little smile, the young man realized he was wasting time. Speculation was a ridiculous exercise. Loss was a part of his life. So many he loved were already gone and the one he was leaving on board the *Faret Vild*, the one he hoped to save, would probably be gone soon too. Still, he would try to help. It was all he could do; it was what he had always done.

With the giant door locked in place he raised his head and took a deep, bracing breath. He heard his name called as if in a dream. Knowing they were closing in on him, he raised a foot, stepped into the air, and fell through the cold dark.

Arms crossed over his chest, legs together, he broke the water's surface like an arrow. His body didn't immediately register the shock of the frigid water or the impact of the fall. The taste of blood washed off his lips and was replaced with that of salt, which was then replaced with no feeling at all as the ocean-cold took its toll and the dark engulfed him. He felt peaceful as he descended. Slowing and twirling, his hair floated above him, and his feet tugged below him. He didn't know how long he sank, but somewhere in the back of his mind he understood that he was going too deep.

Fighting the languor he released his hands, spread his arms wide, and stroked upward with all his might. He kicked hard, scissoring his legs, propelling his body against the heavy sea. Three strokes; three kicks. Three more of each. Unsure of whether he was up or down, knowing he was still too deep, he released his breath in short bursts and chased after the bubbles. At first they fizzed around him making it impossible to tell up from down. Struggling to control his panic, he breathed out again, parsing the precious air in order to more easily track the bubbles.

*There.*

Yes.

These bubbles drifted up, and he followed them praying that the surface was only a few strokes away.

His lungs were on fire. He couldn't feel his hands. He pulled harder, pushing through the water, kicking fiercely. He twisted and turned, and finally wiggled out of his jacket. It drifted away. He jack-knifed and managed to untie one boot. Heavier than the jacket, it sank beneath him. The other couldn't be undone, but still he was lighter and that was something. Out of practice in the water, out of breath, he swam for his life.

Just when he thought he would die, he broke the surface, throwing his body high into the air like some great, breaching fish. He fell back and sank again, but not so far and not so fast. Twice he went under; twice he rose. Finally he began to swim in earnest. The salt water stung his eyes and blurred his vision. The current tested the strength of his strokes. With his head up, he could hear the commotion on the ship behind him. Turning on his back, he tread water and looked at the *Faret Vild*. The captain had turned on the kliegs. The ice-white light strafed across the water making it glitter. He dove deep when it came close and propelled himself forward with a breaststroke so that no one above could see the surface ripple. When he came back up he was out of range of the light. Rolling on to his back, he flung out his arms and legs and floated, resting for as long as he dare. A few minutes later, when the *Faret Vild* turned the lights out, he began to swim again.

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