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MASON**

SHIPWRIGHT

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Excerpt from Chapter 1:

Saturday morning dragged itself grudgingly from cold, damp, bleak darkness to cold, damp, gloomy dayness. The thermal limiter had turned off the space heater. He moved the switch to off and then back to low. He had to pee. Opening the hatch and double doors, he stepped out into Kitten's cockpit. He pulled down his zipper but then noticed how close the house seemed to be. So he zipped back up and slogged up the dock to the restroom at the end of the shop wing. There was a nasty bar of soap, but he didn't care; he washed his hands and face anyway and dried his hands on his pants. On the way back to Kitten, he heard his cellphone give "dead-battery" notice in his hip pocket. On the dock, he detected an extra set of foot prints; small ones. He chuckled to himself, "*Ah, yes, Miss Carson, the boatyard bitch - Annie Carson Lauler, curmudgeon daughter of John Philip and Evelyn Lauler, owners of Lauler Boatyard & Marine Railway.*" He recalled that she holed up in the old and neglected CAL 2-27 on the dead-and-dormant inside of the dock opposite his Kitten. "*Oh, lucky me... 'Tis true.*"

Back into Kitten, he cranked up the propane stove and made coffee. Mug in hand, he moved back up to the cockpit to wallow in the ambience of mid-winter murk on the Lower-Chesapeake. With a rag he swept the half melted snow off of a place on the cockpit seat.

Carson stepped back from the porthole.

“Damn! He spent the night here. I don’t need this right now.”

She pulled on a heavy gray wool sweater and her cold, stiff blue jeans. Slipping her saggy-socked feet into worn rubber L. L. Bean moccasins, she crammed her unmanageable and unkempt long hair into the neck of the sweater. With a slam she slid back the hatch and straddled painfully over the slats. Laboriously pulling herself up onto the dock, she sloshed over to Kitten’s side and asked, “Dr. Wythe, is there something we can do for you? We’re not open for customers on Saturday.”

“Good morning, Carson. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Dr. Wythe, this isn’t a marina.”

“I’m sorry, Carson, I guess I was out of line. Anyway, my marriage broke its back on the shoals of unmet expectations yesterday and I needed somewhere to sleep.”

“Doctor, we aren’t set up to have occupied boats here. There’s no water on the dock and I see you’ve jerry rigged electricity for yourself.”

“Carson, I’ve got nowhere else to go. When I can figure something out, I’ll let you have your privacy back.”

“Dr. Wythe, you’re not interrupting my privacy and, on second thought, you can camp out here ‘til hell freezes over.”

“It’s got a good start.”

“You’d best talk to my father if you are planning on squatting here for any length of time.”

She defiantly stood, shivering, on the slushy dock.

He went down into the cabin and brought out another mug and poured a second mug of coffee and brought it up to Carson. She began to turn away but hesitated. She turned back and took the mug in both hands. Then, without a word, she went straight back to her boat. Before she slid the hatch closed she said, “I’ll scrub the mug before I return it.”

He turned back toward the inlet and sipped from his own.

He was startled as a voice behind him asked, “Kin Ah come aboard?”

He looked around to see Carson's father, John Philip, standing over him on the dock.

"Sure, Sir, but I'll bet the coffee's cold by now."

He replied, "Well, then, come on, Evelyn's got a batch of fresh."

Lee switched off the heater, slid Kitten's hatch to the power cord, and followed John Philip up the dock. In the kitchen, his diminutive wife, Evelyn, cheerfully herded him to the table and filled a mug with a faintly vanilla blend.

John Philip began, "It's a strange time to be spendin' the night on yer boat. Are y' in th' doghouse, Son?"

"Sir, to get right to the heart of it, the doghouse is my house now."

"Ouch... Ah'm sorry, Son. Kin you live aboard Kitten? Ah mean, she's not much of a 'ouse."

"Well, it's the house I've got right now and it's got enough room for me to lick my wounds. But I don't think Carson is too happy about having a neighbor."

"We saw y' two talkin' down there. If she said more 'n two words to y', she's done talkin' for a week now."

"Well, I have her permission to stay until hell freezes over."

"She's made a name for 'erself over that kind of talkin'." Evelyn suddenly looked away and mumbled an excuse to leave the kitchen. John Philip continued, "Sorry, Evelyn doesn't like the 'b' word they've tacked onto my only child."

"I've heard she is a hell of a designer."

"Carson is my shipwright. She will design the new 'ead an' steerin' modifications we're puttin' into yer Kitten an' maybe do some of the fittin' 'erself. She got most all of the way through a degree in naval architecture an' then got 'erself derailed by some unsavory fellow. Whatever 'e did; it ruint her. Now she does what she does for me an' keeps the rest to 'erself... 'ah 'ave a said enough."