

SABRINA WHYATT



The Woman I Am

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PHOTO BY SHIRLEY WHITTT

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*In loving memory of Hayward Pilgrim and John Richards:
I never knew you, yet you both inspire me every day.*

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What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters
compared to what lies within us. — Henry Stanley Haskin

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CHAPTER ONE



PHOTO BY SHELDON MUGFORD

Dad showing me the haul-up gulch, where his biological father, Hayward Pilgrim, drowned in 1942. Before he was washed out to sea, he saved the life of my maternal grandfather, Fred Richards, Sr. (Photo taken April 2013)

I AM MOST AT PEACE when I'm on the ocean. In raging seas there's a calm within me that feels almost spiritual. After a long day on deck hauling crab pots, there's a quiet contentment to sitting alone in the wheelhouse taking a turn on watch. All of life's stress gets left back at the wharf and fades to a distant thought. No room for it out here, no matter how big the ocean. On nights when there's a full moon, it's magical. Tonight though, the moon is nowhere in sight as we head for home. There's a storm coming.

The wind has picked up quite a bit since Uncle Les, who was the last person on watch, went to his bunk. After waking me to take my shift, he stayed up for a few minutes while I made a cup of coffee before heading down below to join the rest of the crew in the sleeping quarters.

Glenn, the captain of my sixty-five-foot shrimp and crab boat *Lady Kenda*, has a bunk just off the wheelhouse. People often ask me why I didn't take that sleeping area for myself, since I'm the boat's owner and the only girl on board. The way I see it, even though Glenn and I each have a Class IV Fishing Masters, I made the choice to work as a deckhand simply because I enjoy it, and I chose him to be the captain.

That, in my opinion, earns him the right to pick whichever bunk he wants. I don't want any preferential treatment, not out here.

I have a great crew, primarily made up of family. Harris, Hubert, and Lester Richards are Dad's brothers, and Captain Glenn Richards, Dad's late sister Evelyn's son, is my first cousin. Our first mate, Captain Elden Patey, who holds a Class III Fishing Masters, is the only non-relative on my boat, but he's been with us so long I consider him an uncle too. My parents, Shirley and Willis Whyatt, along with another of Dad's brothers, Hedley Richards, are also involved in my fishing enterprise. In fact, over the years they've each played an integral role in the growth and success of all my business ventures. With Mom tending to clerical duties, Dad, who's semi-retired, and Uncle Hedley both take care of the boat's needs on land. It really is a family operation. Uncle Hedley is also my eyes and ears within the fishing industry's ever-changing rules and regulations. I guess you could call him my policy adviser. All in all, I'm surrounded by a lot of people who have my back.

The boys on the boat look out for me too. They're constantly checking to see if I'm truly awake, since I started sleepwalking out here a few years back. It's not fun to wake up on the deck of a boat more than a hundred miles out on the North Atlantic Ocean and not know how you got there. It's a creepy feeling, and one that I've experienced too many times. I've often heard stories about people who have jumped overboard while sleepwalking, and they're okay unless someone tries to wake them, at which time they panic and drown. I try not to think of those tales too often, but I won't lie; they do cross my mind from time

to time. I don't know why I sleepwalk when I'm out on the boat. It's puzzling. However, on this night I'm wide awake.

A boat is showing on the radar a couple of miles to the northeast. I turn the radio up a little to make sure I can hear clearly but not loud enough to disturb the boys' rest. The whitecaps are starting to clutter up the radar screen. I have to fix that. It bugs me, and I'm always worried it will cause me to miss a piece of ice, or a radar reflector. I've done that before. One night last year when I was up on watch, I hooked a radar reflector with the chain of the stabilizer arm. God, did I ever hate to wake up the boys when I realized what I'd done. It took what seemed like forever to get it cleared. The boys would never cut someone else's gear, so they tirelessly struggled with untangling the snarl until it finally came free. They're a lot easier on me than they are on each other. I never heard one curse word through that whole ordeal. If one of them had been at the helm when it happened, well, let's just say the Big Guy would have been called upon a few times.

As I reach up to adjust the radar screen, a wave jolts the boat to port and causes me to stumble into the computer and the plug comes unhooked. Damn it! We really need to get our computer guy, Bill Murrin, to look at that loose connection. That plug should not come out so easily. The GPS autopilot is on, so I can take a second to adjust the radar before I get the computer up and running again. I always check the GPS anyway to make sure it's showing the same positioning as the computer, but the laptop is more convenient and displays more detailed chart information, so I constantly look at both. In weather like this it's common to make periodic minor adjustments to the autopilot,

a few degrees here and there, but for the most part it's pretty dead-on.

Once I regain my balance, I reach for the radar dial again. I tune it ever so slightly—just enough to reduce the clutter, but not enough to risk missing anything significant. It's such a fine balance, kind of like the entire fishing industry, I guess. And life.

Another few minutes and the new forecast will be in. We knew it was calling for gale-force winds, but I didn't think it was supposed to come on this quickly. We're head-on to the wind now, which sometimes makes the boat lurch awkwardly, but I don't mind because it always feels like being in a head punch has a safer range of motion for the boat. It used to unnerve me when the bow of the boat would dip completely under the water, but since I took a course in stability at the Marine Institute a few years back, I have a much better understanding of the boat and what she can handle. Earlier the wind was on her quarter, and I don't care for that at all. I don't like it when the boat is rolling so heavily that there's the possibility of a significant weight shift that can throw off the vessel's centre of gravity. The last thing you want in strong wind is a list. When she's rolling like that, I'm constantly looking out the doghouse window to see how far the stabilizer chain is coming up.

That's what really makes me nervous. If it seemed like the fish, the steel fin at the bottom of the chain that hangs from the stabilizer arm, might come up out of the water, I'd call Glenn in a hurry. The boys would all be up before it got that bad anyway. It's hard to stay in your bunk when you're getting

tossed around. For now she's nodding her head, and that's fine by me.

As I study the screens to make sure everything is as it should be, I can't help but wonder how they did it before all these electronic devices came along. It amazes me to think of the pure instinctive genius fishermen years ago must have had to be able to navigate their vessels anywhere on the ocean with nothing but a compass. It's certainly a different world now, and with respect to the advances in navigational instruments, it's a world I'm grateful for, especially on a night like this one is shaping up to be.

My stomach drops with the head of the boat and the sea raises us again as if to give the next round of waves time to garner enough strength to make a fierce comeback. As I take a sip of hot coffee, I watch the dark swells rolling toward me from what seems like nothingness. When I see waves like that, I can't help but think of that tragic day in my hometown nearly seventy-two years ago, long before I was born.

*

FEBRUARY 26, 1942, BEGAN LIKE any other day in St. Carol's. The snow glistened on the hilltops surrounding the picturesque fishing community nestled away in a little valley on the Great Northern Peninsula. Smoke towered from the chimneys of every house as the wood stoves were lit, one by one, by men who were starting their morning routine. The fishermen of St. Carol's worked their sealing nets out on the back of the land and kept their boats in a place they called the haul-up gulch.

A big sea was raging that day, so the men made a collective

decision to walk over to the haul-up gulch and move their boats to higher ground, away from the increasing swell. The wooden vessels would not stand a chance on a day like this, especially with all the ice and slob tucked in the gulch. Some of the ice pans were half the size of their sixteen-foot open boats, and with the powerful force of the waves, that kind of ice would carry a punch like concrete. It would show no mercy to anything in its reach.

Hayward Pilgrim was just twenty-two and a man in love. He was head over heels for Elizabeth Whyatt, with whom he shared a five-month-old son they named Willis. He couldn't wait to wed his bride-to-be. He had already bought a wedding ring, and he would soon put it on Elizabeth's finger. He couldn't be happier.

Hayward fished with two other men, Fred Richards, Sr., and Billy Johnson. In addition to sharing the same boat, they also shared the same lighthearted sense of humour. They were great friends, and while they worked together tirelessly from daylight to dark, they enjoyed each other's company. They shared many stories out on the water, some true and some surely fictional. On this day Fred and Billy were teasing Hayward about soon becoming an old, married man.

Almost all of the men in St. Carol's, with the exception of a couple who were finishing up morning chores, made the trek over the hills and down to the haul-up gulch. There were nine of them in total. In addition to Hayward, Fred, and Billy, there was Fred Richards, Jr., Albert Pilgrim, Ray Simms, Uncle Cyril Richards, George Kinsella, and Alf Mugford.

The gulch was covered with snow and ice, and the sea was crashing against the rugged shoreline and invading the "balli-

catters,” the band of ice that formed close to shore by the winter spray. The roar was deafening as the men reached the top of the hill and headed down the path to the water’s edge. This was one hell of a sea.

All nine men grabbed hold of the first boat and slid it close to the base of the hill as the ocean raged under the snow-covered outcrop beneath their feet. The frozen surface was uneven but plenty thick and wouldn’t break. They stood a safe distance from the waves that came in over the rocky shoreline, and they knew the boats would be okay here.

Fred took one last look at the swelling sea and gave an affirmative nod indicating their job with the first boat was done. As he turned to the snow-covered cliff, he saw it. Only for a split second, but he saw it. A monstrous wave had washed up over the land east of where they were standing, had come around the top of the gulch, and was now heading back down at full force, directly toward them. Since the wave had hijacked the path they needed to get out of there, they had nowhere to go. It happened so fast there wasn’t time for fear to set in. Maybe that was a blessing,

Before there was time to think, all nine men were swallowed up and were swept out toward the open sea. If they passed the rocky point, it would be too late. There would be no hope for any of them.

As Hayward was tossed in the ice-packed wave, he reached up and somehow managed to grab the jagged edge of a rock. In that moment Fred swept past his friend, but close enough to reach out and grab on to Hayward’s leg, while Hayward held on to their lifeline—the sharp, icy rock. When Fred realized he was

holding on to Hayward, he felt an odd warmth wash over him, knowing he wasn't alone in this freezing hell. Maybe now he had a chance. He only hoped the other seven men were okay too.

Fred clung to his friend with all the strength he could muster. He tried not to think about the physical shock of the cold or the pain that was beginning to set in from the initial impact of the wave. It felt like someone had swung a baseball bat and hit him full-force in the chest.

Hayward held fast to the jagged edge, now the only thing keeping them alive. As the wave finally retreated to the sea, Hayward struggled to climb onto the rock and Fred clambered up behind him. They each felt like they were carrying a thousand pounds, weighed down by clothes drenched with heavy, icy salt water. On top of the rock, they both collapsed with exhaustion, grateful to have made it out alive.

Seconds later, as Fred was trying to catch his breath to say thank you to his friend for saving his life, they heard Uncle Cyril yelling at them to run. Another wave was coming and it was headed straight for the two young men. But the weight of the ice and slob made it impossible to run, so they held fast on top of the rock that had saved them once, hoping it would keep them safe one more time.

As that dark, rolling mountain of sea came toward them, Hayward and Fred exchanged a glance as if to say everything would be okay. That was the last time Fred would ever see his friend.

As the wave slammed over their exhausted bodies, they braced themselves by lowering their heads, closing their eyes, and holding on as tight as they could. But as hard as they tried,

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