

Widow Walk

By Les Pendleton

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CHAPTER ONE

The large, gentle creature had been following them for the past two days. Appearing a dirty white, the bird rode on the rising wind, which had been fueled by an intense summer sun. It seemed to want nothing more than someone to point the way. How was it that this bird had encouraged legions of tales, most all of them ending with sailor's misfortunes? Even the "Ancient Mariner" accused it of being a curse on his vessel? What was it that inspired Samuel Taylor Coleridge to brand this magnificent bird an instrument of evil, an omen to fear? The weather was beautiful, the seas were friendly, and the sky was clear. Alan studied the albatross as it tailed the ship, hour after hour, mile after mile. Surely, this solitary traveler, so far away from any perch just wanted to know there was another voyager close by. After all, an albatross was just a bird, no different in the broad spectrum, than a robin or a bluebird. Perhaps, if a sparrow had been seen on the rail of the Titanic, it too would instill fear in latter day sailors. "Superstition," he thought, "What an odd invention of man."

Wind Trader moved swiftly with a graceful rise and fall. Silently she moved across the face of gentle Atlantic swells responding to a freshening, fifteen knot breeze. Out of Boston, she was a vintage Alden schooner built for an affluent New England banker back in the thirties. Time had treated the old boat kindly. Each successive owner had appreciated her lines and abilities enough to maintain her with the respect due her pedigree.

Irving Monroe was last in this proud line. Twenty years in the insurance business had taken most of his hair and filled his brow with wrinkles. He was short and stocky, laden with the gilded markings of a self-made man. His tight fitting polo shirt, white

shorts and Rolex watch spoke volumes about his values. He had plenty and was damn proud of it. He left his family and divorced his first wife, leaving her well set in a mansion in West Orange, N.J. He had sold his business, finally setting sail to fulfill many years of wishing.

His associates all told him he was suffering from middle-aged madness and that it would pass. His response to that statement was always the same --"I'm not going to let it pass; I'm going with it." Along with "it," he had picked up a younger wife...much younger and an unquenchable urge to sail the tropics.

On this day he was taking his dreams south. They were two hundred miles off the east coast of North Carolina. This put them beyond the swift waters of the Gulf Stream, a powerful, mid-ocean current that moves tirelessly northward at two to four knots--an insurmountable counter force for even the swiftest, south bound vessel. Thus, Wind Trader and her crew could see only the dark blue Atlantic and a clear horizon on this beautiful August evening. She was making seven knots easily as she headed for ports along the eastern seaboard, eventually to make for the Caribbean and spend the winter. She was built entirely of the best and most exotic woods available. Her decks were Burmese teak and her trim was African mahogany. She had twelve hand-rubbed coats of spar varnish on her bright work and a glistening, bright white polyurethane finish on her hull. A quick glance and one would swear she was new. Any knowledgeable sailor could take one look at her lines, her proud bow, the narrow hull and recognize her for what she was--the best of her generation.

The crew handled Wind Trader's nine hundred square feet of sail with skill and the sixty foot vessel graced her majestic surroundings. She possessed an ephemeral aura that only those who love the feel of wind in the sail can ever truly know and appreciate.

Irving's wife Sherrie, sat on the companionway hatch. She watched her husband work the old mahogany wheel, directing the ship on a broad reach. Sherrie was about thirty, probably fifteen years the junior of her husband. Her dark hair lay down the middle of her back and her olive skin needed no coaxing from the sun to shine. Careful attention to her make-up and clothing, along with a seductive smile and personality, made her a very sexy woman... especially to a man with Irving's tastes. Sherrie had set her sights on Irving the first time she met him. It was a tumultuous time for Irving as he was breaking up with his wife. Sherrie could send his heart racing with one well-placed touch. She was what every middle aged wife hoped her husband wouldn't find--a woman bold enough to do all the things they were not willing to do to keep their men. She knew well what Irving's friends thought of her and couldn't care less. The poverty and strain of her youth had made her a survivor. She had worked her way into this position and would remain there, no matter what anyone thought.

Sherrie admired her husband's knowledge of sailing and his enthusiasm for adventure. She had a desire to know what lay beyond the horizon, something a small town upbringing had fostered in her. With Irving, she would find out and in style.

Irving was comfortable this far at sea, even though he was fully aware of the precarious nature of ocean voyaging. This was not his first offshore adventure. He had participated in numerous ocean races over the years. Earlier, he had crewed on a friend's boat in the Newport-Bermuda race. That event put him in virtually the same area they

had covered on this trip during the first three days. His experiences had taught him to carefully put together a proficient crew. He had the utmost confidence in his second in command. Should he take sick, or, God forbid, suffer an injury, his first mate, Jason Aldrige was a particularly fine sailor. He glanced toward him, standing by the starboard rail, studying the horizon.

“It doesn’t get much better than this, eh Jason...”

Still staring at the horizon, he replied.

“I ain’t so sure Capn’. There’s some thunderheads back there and the way the winds’ blowin’ one of em’ might wind up staring down our bowsprit”.

Jason was salty looking by anyone's standards. Irving thought him the perfect choice. When engaging a crew for a long ocean voyage, a man needs to fit the proper, mental image in order to instill confidence in the crew. Should the voyage become perilous, there were those on board who were up to the task. That being the prerequisite, Jason would be your man. Fiftyish and bearded, his was a mostly hidden face; weathered enough to speak of many years under an ocean sun. Strongly muscled, his very presence was a tribute to Wind Trader--a master seaman for a stately ship.

Irving trusted him, though he knew Jason liked to throw a little scare into the rest of the crew by drawing from some past adventure they had not shared in and would certainly be terrified of remembering if they had been there.

There are not a lot of sailors today who could identify all the rigging and lines on a vintage schooner. The trend on modern yachts had been for many years to simplify them, to make them as user friendly as possible. Wind Trader had almost a mile of rope and cable that made up her standing and running rigging. To the untrained eye, it would be a

huge task to make sense of it all, even though every inch of line had a specific purpose. Jason knew each of these almost like second nature. He needed no book on seamanship to understand what was happening on board every minute. He knew boats and he knew the sea. This summer afternoon found him preparing to administer a knot-tying lesson to the youngest member of the crew, Stephen Woods. He left his post by the rail apparently secure that the distant clouds posed no threat. Jason would effortlessly tie an appropriate seafarer's knot and ask if his pupil could duplicate it. If he answered affirmatively, Jason would take the dull edge of his razor sharp knife and untie it with one or two well placed insertions and tugs on the line. More than not, his apprentice would end up with something quite different than what he had been shown. And so it continued for over an hour, with a lot of interesting sea tales punctuating the lesson.

Stephen, also from New England, was tall and lean with boundless energy, a pleasant demeanor and a good hand on the harmonica. This added a desirable touch to the movement of the boat... a sea tune with a rhythm to match the steady rolling of the swells. This was like being rocked to sleep for a true voyager. With the boat under a steady trim, Stephen gave up on mastering the double bowline and began going through most of his repertoire to the enjoyment of all. Other crewmembers teased him about how he could find his mouth. This was in reference to his new, three-day growth of facial hair. He had always wanted to see what his face would look like with a beard. This six month trip would afford him the perfect opportunity. Prior to this, the restraints and requirements of his profession had demanded a clean-cut appearance. The old warriors of the financial establishment still had their stereotypical picture of what a player should

look like. He had fulfilled this requirement to a “T” for the past eight years. Alan Kelly had been kidding him about his attempt at bearding all afternoon.

"This is only a six month cruise, Stephen. Why don't you just try for sideburns this time? Go for a beard when you're looking at a year off."

Alan stood out from the group in both appearance and presence. Alan Christopher Kelly was true to his name, a third generation Irish American. Nothing about him spoke of a sailor. Small framed, thin and introspective, he would have appeared more at home in the library of a college or pounding numbers in the back of a bank or accounting firm. His hair was sandy and thick, though neatly trimmed and didn't alter the image projected by his round, wire rimmed glasses and unobtrusive manner. His hazel eyes, however, betrayed his calm exterior. One glance uncovered a mind that examined and evaluated all which occurred around him. His intellect and upbringing showed in virtually everything he did. He was always polite and thoughtful, but tended to avoid idle chatter. His teasing, such as with Stephen, was good-natured. If anything stood out in his manner of speech, it was his decidedly northern accent and the total absence of profanity under any circumstance.

He watched the other crew members go about their tasks as if he would be asked questions regarding their duties upon arrival at port. On more than one occasion, this characteristic got under the skin of Jason. However, each time just before Jason would say something, Alan would instinctively go about a needed task. It was as if he knew an explosion was coming and he would defuse it. On this particular afternoon he sat perched on the bowsprit that protruded just over fifteen feet from the boat's proud hull. Only a webbing of rope and line under this precipice would prevent an unsecured

passenger from taking an unwanted ocean swim. Alan realized this and kept one hand securely anchored to a support line. He watched the waves run tirelessly under the bow and studied the horizon as a new infusion of scarlet indicated the approaching sundown. "Always more beautiful at sea than on shore," he thought.

The captain and crew kept Wind Trader southerly bound on a true course and trimmed her for the maximum speed the wind would allow. She was far too stable to reflect small variances in the wind or waves. It took better than twenty-five knots of wind to get her to maximum hull speed. Another ten knots would be needed to bury her rail. This afternoon she heeled gently to port as a westerly wind slowly increased in velocity. The crew was enjoying the stronger conditions. Since leaving Boston, they had encountered only light winds and flat seas. She had been sailing upright and rather slowly until this welcome change occurred. She was now rising and falling, heeling moderately as she raced over the building swells. This was what they all had been waiting for. If the wind held, in three days they would reach the northern-most islands of the Caribbean.

This symphony of nature was quickly halted by a weather alert on the VHF marine radio. It was mounted just inside the companionway, directly in front of Irving's position at the wheel. The stoic voice brought a frown to Irving's tanned face.

"Pan Pan, Pan Pan, Pan Pan...Hello all stations, this is Coast Guard Station Fort Macon. The National Weather Service has issued a severe weather alert to mariners for offshore waters east of Cape Hatteras. Severe thunderstorms have formed along a line parallel to the Gulf Stream and there have been two reports of possible waterspouts. The possibility of severe weather exists for the Atlantic coast until eleven PM. Strong

lightning, severe winds and possible waterspouts. Seek shelter if possible, boats in offshore waters should prepare for dangerous seas and gale force conditions."

Irving looked at his wife. "Damn, wouldn't you know it. Two days out and we've already got bad weather headed our way. So much for the five day forecast. We're probably going to get hammered out here." There was growing concern in his voice.

"Jason, damn it, looks like you guessed right. Bad weather on the way. Force eight or stronger. Shorten sail and secure the deck for heavy seas."

His commands seemed almost paradoxical with the moderate seas Wind Trader was riding at the moment.

Irving turned back to his wife. He could see the worry in her eyes.

"Sherrie, babe, you better go below and make certain everything's secure there. When you're done, come back up and see to it that everybody's got a life vest on. We've got a while to get prepared. Let's take advantage of it. Thanks, sweetie. Look...don't worry, this old boat's seen many a storm out here and she's definitely up to whatever is thrown at her."

Irving then directed his commands to the remaining crewmembers. "Stephen, you and Alan give Jason a hand and then space yourselves out where you can work the lines. You guys better put on a harness and a tether before it gets too rough."

Already, distant flashes of light were beginning to punctuate the brilliant sunset. Jason said out loud to the group, "Red sky at dawn, should'a seen it coming."

Quickly the sails were lowered. Only a small storm trysail was left up to help the boat maintain steerage. That way, she could be kept with her bow properly into the seas if they built up to a dangerous level. No one spoke of it but they could all feel a growing

anxiety beginning to permeate their minds. They were experienced sailors in a strong ship but there were a lot more desirable places to be in a storm than Cape Hatteras, the "Graveyard of the Atlantic."

The seas began to build quickly; paralleling the increasing darkness and reflecting the sharp flashes of lightning that filled the sky. The old ship began to rise and fall more rapidly as the space between swells shrank and their crests turned a frothy white. With the noise of an approaching freight train, rain began to move across the sea all around Wind Trader. So strong were the pelting drops that they stung the crew as they struck their faces. Every couple of minutes a large cresting swell would break over the bow and wash over the teak decks. The wind had increased dramatically. As predicted, the weather was quickly becoming severe.

Irving shouted above the roar of wind and rain,

"Make sure your lifelines and harnesses are secure! I don't want to lose anyone overboard. These storms don't last long but they can get pretty damn nasty till they pass."

All were prepared. They were in the thick of the storm in moments, the bow of the boat punching holes in black twenty-foot waves. Each joust brought the boat nearly to a stop as the sleek hull drove itself into tons of water. It seemed as if she might completely bury herself but then, she would suddenly rise from beneath the white mountain and burst forward, propelled by a forty-knot wind in her shortened sail. Irving knew she would probably move just as fast with bare poles in these conditions. If it worsened, a sea anchor would have to be dropped from the stern to slow her down so she wouldn't dive under a wave and be unable to rebound to the surface. Green water was sweeping across

the deck now with each giant swell that smashed onto the bow. The port and starboard running lights cast red and green reflections on opposite sides of the deck. The water rolling across the teak planking picked up the color and added a surreal effect to the eerie sight.

Stephen had never experienced a storm at sea. He could already see this was no time for a missed step or lost grip. A storm at night brings imagination into reality as the crew envisions huge, unseen, cresting waves barreling down on them. A strong flash of lightning illuminated the horizon and Stephen could clearly see that his fantasy had not over-estimated the situation. Perhaps, he thought, total darkness might be better.

A burst of light fell on the deck in front of Irving as the companionway suddenly opened. Sherrie appeared, with a death grip on the handrails. There was unmistakable anguish spreading across her face as she shouted,

"There's water coming in below. I don't know if she's bursting her seams or what's happening, Irving--you've gotta' come see."

Irving looked to see who could take the wheel. He realized that in these conditions, no one should try to disconnect their lifelines to traverse the treacherous walk to the wheel. Seeing no other alternative, he directed his wife.

"Sherrie, just hold the wheel where it is for one minute and I'll see what's happening down below." He moved towards her. "Here, connect to my lifeline and I'll be back in a moment." With that, he disconnected his harness and connected Sherrie's to the lifeline. As he moved forward, the bow raised up as if pointing to the sky while a monstrous wave went under it. Free from his only security, Irving slid backwards, falling, grabbing at everything he passed. Several loose ropes gave way freely as he grabbed for them. Just

that quick, he was gone, swept overboard into the boiling, dark sea. Sherrie screamed at the horrible sight unfolding before her, knowing he was certainly lost. Wind Trader was moving away from him at ten knots and who could even get a line to him? What could be done?

As terror filled her every pore, Alan appeared at her side...with Jason close behind. Disregarding their own safety, they had disconnected from their lifelines the moment Irving was swept overboard. Jason screamed to her, "Go below and secure yourself in the main cabin! Forget the water down there for now. We're coming about!"

With that, he spun the wheel hard to starboard in what all aboard knew was a dangerous attempt to slow the ship's movement away from it's fallen captain. As the bow turned into the wind, she lay powerless at a ninety-degree angle to the huge seas. This was a dangerous undertaking and they all knew the possible consequences. The boat could broach and be rolled over so far that she would take on water from her leeward side, a potentially fatal event. However, Jason knew this was the only chance to try and save Irving.

He shouted orders to the crew, "Hold on to anything if you're not using a lifeline! Stephen, can you get a spotlight on the water and see if you can find him? Watch the crests and pan the spot on them."

Stephen plugged in the high-powered searchlight they normally used for spotting channel markers. It could put out a concentrated beam of light for a hundred yards. In this driving rain and with the vicious tossing of the deck, it's usefulness was less than half that. They would have to get very close to Irving to spot him. There was also the risk of a wave smashing him into the hull of the boat if they got too close. The chances of

saving him in these conditions were very small. Three successive waves crashed into the now-depowered ship, hitting her broadside as she floundered with her side into the wind and sea.

"He's there!" Stephen yelled, pointing the beam of light at the struggling form twenty yards away. As each wave passed, he disappeared from sight. "No way we'll ever get a line to him in these seas."

Seemingly, with no discussion or thought, Alan grabbed a length of line and handed one end to Stephen.

"Secure it!" he yelled over the howling winds. "I'll get it to him." With that he leaped over the stern and into the raging ocean.

"You idiot!" screamed Jason, "Now there's two were gonna' lose. Follow him with the spot. Try and keep him headed right."

Stephen replied, "How do I know which way is right? I can't see a damn thing."

As the seconds ground by like an eternity, nothing appeared on the water other than the glow from the tiny spot and the flashes of lightning still ripping the skies all around the ship. With each passing moment, they both knew all hope, whatever there had been in such a desperate attempt, was fading. The ship could not remain in this precarious position much longer. Now lifeless and at the mercy of the sea, she would have to be turned before the wind and repowered in order to save the vessel and her remaining crew.

"One more minute," Jason said, as much to himself as to Stephen. "Then we've got to come about or we're all going to the bottom."

The seconds dragged by ever more slowly. When he could wait no longer, Jason spun the wheel. Then he and Stephen saw it at the same instant.

"The line!" Jason said. "He's pulling on the line! Stephen, take the wheel."

Jason inched over to the rail. With the certainty of an experienced hand, he knew what must be done. He strained at the secure end of the line reaching to Alan and got enough slack in it to wrap a length around a winch on the rail. Immediately, he cranked at the winch, hauling in the line as fast as his powerful frame could work. Slowly, surely, the angle of the rope increased until it was straight down off the side rail.

"Hit them with the spot!" he screamed at Stephen. He quickly shone the light on the water at the end of the rope. There they were, Alan holding tightly to his captain. Amidst the fury of the storm he had retrieved him from a certain, watery grave.

With great effort on all parts, the pair of men was plucked from the boiling ocean. Jason helped them to the companionway.

Inside the main cabin, Sherrie sat in a semi-coma awaiting the news confirming her worst fears. She not only foresaw the end of the only decent life she had ever known, but a lonely path back to her pathetic past. She would rather drown with Irving, she thought.

The companionway doors in front of her swung open with a rush of water and then she saw the drenched presence of her husband. She ran to him. "Oh My God!" she screamed as she embraced him. "You're alive! You made it!"

Too exhausted to even respond, he collapsed on the water-soaked floor in a pile as Alan did the same. They were spent, but they were alive.

"She's still sound," Jason said. "Rain just overloaded the bilge pump. I'm going topside."

They could all feel the motion of the boat settle as she came about now running before the wind. Wind Trader could let the storm pass without a victim this night. Such an

unbelievable event would stay with them the remainder of their lives--the fury of the storm, the terror of a man overboard in a black sea. The storm passed as quickly as it had arrived. Most of all, they would remember a show of unequalled courage in the face of overwhelming danger. A courage so fierce it allowed one man to decide to risk his life to save that of another, a man he barely knew. They all realized they had witnessed a rare and special act.