

BETH ANN MATHEWS

---

RISE TO THE OCCASION

My boyfriend and I lived in Glacier Bay, Alaska where we worked as biologists. Our home was a forty-two-foot sailboat, *Resilience*. Late in October, prepping for a deer-hunting expedition, we discovered the boat's gearshift was not engaging. I fetched tools and made lunch while Jim diagnosed the problem and made the repair.

A day late, beneath building clouds, we motored toward the Inian Islands, a hunting and fishing hotspot. Twice a day, the Inians experience powerful currents as tides drain and re-flood Icy Strait's narrow channels. Oceanic swells also lumber in from the Gulf of Alaska, pummeling the islands. Locals call the islands' south passage "The Washing Machine."

As we set anchor in South Inian Cove, I stood at the helm. From the bow, Jim released the anchor with a hundred feet of rumbling chain and secured it. "Reverse," he called over a shoulder.

I shifted into gear, inhaling the spruce-scented breeze.

One boot on the chain, he felt for tension transmitted up from the sea floor. "A little more juice," he said.



This man and I had lived together three years—the first in a rented, classic Alaskan log cabin, the last two on our much warmer sailboat. He was the one with boating experience. A good mentor, he liked showing me how things worked, helping me understand the why behind the what.

Family roots in the Midwest, I'd grown up in Indiana, climbing trees, roller skating across bumpy asphalt, and scheming with my best friend to buy a pony. During a family vacation in Florida, my parents booked us for a day trip on a deep-sea fishing vessel. My siblings and I were told we might see dolphins. My mother and oldest sister spent the entire time holed up down below, in and out of cramped, peculiar-smelling restrooms, flat-out seasick. I spent most of the day on the top deck, scanning turquoise water, chin at the railing. I did not see dolphins.

My youthful dream had been to live on a farm, raise horses, a garden, and children.

Jim and I had moved to Alaska when he took a job at Glacier Bay National Park. We'd explored building a house in the small community, and I'd fallen in love with a five-acre lot next to a burbling river. Instead of buying land, we'd each drained our saving's accounts for a down payment and co-signed on a hundred-thousand-dollar loan to buy *Resilience*, a solid Dutch-built ocean cruiser. His rationale—that we could either own five acres or have a million-acre ocean as our backyard—won me over. Though reluctant to abandon the homestead alternative, my love for this man and southeast Alaska's marine wilderness convinced me to turn the corner. I wanted to be all-in, but my Midwestern core taunted: *You're an imposter*. My confidence in running our sailboat tottered on a narrow ledge.



As I nudged the throttle, we inched backward. Two ravens exchanged deep-throated, "Claa-whok!" calls. With a forecast for twenty-knot

northerlies, we tucked in close to the lee shore. Boulders rimmed the cove beneath an alder-tufted forest edge.

Once anchored, we embraced in the breezy dusk, savoring the wilderness and our solitude.

The rain began as pinpricks.

"J.D. sent us off with two moose steaks," Jim said. "I'll get those started."

In the warmth below, we shed fleece pants and jackets. The boat yanked against the anchor line. Jim stopped chopping garlic to listen. After another "thud-clank!" he frowned. "I'm going to add a snubber to the chain."

While he attached the shock-absorbing line, I started rice and made a salad in the small galley.

"We're holding," he said, climbing down the companionway, "but the wind's already up to twenty-five. These steep hills are funneling it through the gap. And there's a back eddy from the current."

"Should we turn on the radar?" I asked.

"Good idea."

We ate in silence beneath the *tat-tat-tatter* of rain as the boat swayed and shuddered. We took turns checking our radar position and climbing the steps to look outside.

Two hours later, I was brushing my teeth when Jim hollered, "Get suited up!"

"What's happening?" Toothpaste foam splattered the sink.

"Wind's shifted. We're dragging toward shore."

I shoved bare legs into thermal pants, pulled on boots.

Up top, rain sliced through the fleece.

The diesel's low-throated "Thu-roommm!" was a reassuring addition to the storm's loud quarrel.

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "Keep her nose into the wind, while I take off the snubber and crank in the chain. As soon as the anchor's off bottom, you gotta power up so she doesn't blow onto the rocks."

I flashed an *Ob Jesus* look.

The look he bounced back said, "We can do this."

At the helm, eyes on Jim, I wrestled into my windbreaker. The rigging whistled and hummed. I scanned the dark cove. *Where were we? How could that rock wall be only two boat-lengths behind our stern?* As my brain remapped our position, I realized we'd swung 180 degrees. Another blast sent the depth sounder from fifteen to thirteen then ten feet. *Shit!* I pictured our sailboat's keel only four feet above the sea floor.

Jim knelt to remove the snubber. With every plunge, seawater shot up around him.

*What am I doing here?* I should have held out for buying land.

He yelled something but the request hurtled past my ears.

"What?" I shouted.

"Drive into the wind. Up the chain!" He sliced a straight-arm forward.

I shoved her into gear. *What if the shift repair doesn't hold?* Helm to starboard, I pressed the throttle. The bow fell *off* course—more throttle. *Don't overshoot.*

A shadowy image of our sailboat aground darted into my mind, hull at an ungainly tilt, like a beached whale.

Again, Jim hollered, "Into the wind!"

"I am!" I shouted, instantly realizing I could do more. *Focus.*

I eased the helm to port, and then quickly turned to starboard, fending off blows of wind like punches from one side then the next. *More throttle. Cut back. Ease the chain's tension.*

Jim flashed a thumbs-up, anchor's-off-bottom signal, and then leaned out to dislodge wads of kelp. A gust shoved the now-untethered boat toward the rocks. Helm hard to starboard, I revved to full throttle. *Resilience's* bow rose and, like a Clydesdale, she plowed ahead, consuming ground we'd lost. Jim's gear repair held. The depth sounder flashed from nine to ten. *Hold this heading.*

Eleven. Twelve.

*Keep her in the middle.* My body shook with cold, pulsed with alarm, but I was in the zone. *We*—the three of us—were in the zone, as if *Resilience* had become an extension of us.

Jim hand-held his way to the cockpit, storm slapping his back. In a wordless exchange he nodded, then took my place. Gripping the rail, shoulder to shoulder with this adventurous, capable man, I scanned through shrouded night vision. The rocky shoreline ghosted closer, and then receded. No, I thought. This is where I want to be.

Beneath the howling sky, we powered out of South Inian Cove into the safety of deep water.