

Bella Bella

written by Jonathan London - illustrated by Jon Van Zyle

Chapter One: Down to the Sea in Kayaks

a breakfast serials story

If I'd known beforehand what was to unfold, the dangers we'd face, I would've been even more doubtful about this trip than I already was.

The stars above the bulkhead swayed as the ferry rolled through the deep swells, north toward Alaska.

But we weren't going to Alaska; we'd be lowered in our kayaks at midnight, off the old island village of Bella Bella, part of British Columbia, the westernmost province of Canada.

1 "You look green, Aaron," Roger the Rogue said. "Keep your eyes on the horizon. That'll help settle your stomach." He'd once been a river rat on the Rogue River, though I think most of his "roguish" days were behind him. What he did retain was a swashbuckling air, a twinkle in his eye, and a wealth of advice.

I was sitting on the hardwood deck. Lisa, Roger's teenaged daughter, stood beside me. Cold salt spray hit my face. The horizon was just an invisible line where the bright stars faded into the blackness of the Pacific Ocean, but I tried to hold my gaze on it.

It didn't help. Seasickness churned in my belly along with the butterflies of anxiety. I'd never sea kayaked before, but more importantly, I dreaded the

thought of taking another trip with Cassidy.

"If you're gonna spew, dude," Cassidy said, "do it downwind." He was fifteen but seemed much older, having been to sea many times. In fact, he'd worked with his dad, Wild Man Willie, on a fishing boat off the coast of Alaska the summer before.

With a stomach like steel and a tongue like a razor, he was someone you'd never forget.

For one thing, he couldn't be trusted. On our whitewater rafting trip through Desolation Canyon, over spring break the year before, he'd thrown rocks dangerously close to Lisa and me, practically drowned me, and almost caused a rattlesnake to bite her.

In an emergency, he had saved Dad's life. And because of that, Dad trusted him.

But that wasn't enough for me. I was still wary.

"Ah, yee'll find ye sea legs in no time, matey," Roger said,

putting on his old-timey sea jargony voice.

He and my dad went way back, as did Willie—to the war in Vietnam. But both men couldn't be more different than Dad. For one thing, like me, Dad was a landlubber next to them and their kids. Lisa had gone sea kayaking many times. And at thirteen—the same age as me—she was probably the prettiest tomboy to ever sail the seas.

I tried to stand up, held onto the rail for a second,



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and slowly lowered myself back down on the deck.

Lisa squatted behind me and gripped me around my chest. Her touch sent a thrill through my body.

“Upsy-daisy,” she said. With her help I stood up, lurched with the roll of the ship, and grasped the deck rail.

“Listen up, you scallywags!” bawled Willie. A powerfully built man, he’d been a squad leader in Vietnam and could belt out orders that made your hair stand at attention. “We’ve got forty-five minutes to get belowdecks, gather our gear, and rig up our kayaks for off-loading,” he called out as he took off his Indiana Jones-style hat and gave my backside a whack.

“You okay?” Dad asked. He had big hands and a body like a broken crate—all bones and awkward angles. These were the first two words he’d spoken to me all evening.

“I’m good,” I lied. And I led the way, swaying and staggering, down to our pile of gear, which would be our tools of survival for the next ten days.

As on our river trip through Desolation Canyon, most of our gear was stuffed into watertight rubber dry bags. I slipped my arm through the strap of one and hoisted it onto my back. I sighed, realizing we’d have to each make two or three trips lugging our loads to the staging area on the second deck.

Our three long, sleek, double sea kayaks were stacked on deck like stiff, polished crocodiles in the glow of the yellow storm light. Four grizzled deckhands peered at our growing pile of stuff with growing alarm.

Having been up since three A.M., we were well beyond tired. We’d driven up from our rendezvous in Bellingham, Washington, crossed the border into Canada, rolled through the city of Vancouver, and arrived in Horseshoe Bay just in time to catch the ferry to Nanaimo.

Then we’d driven up the length of Vancouver Island to Port Hardy, where we’d embarked amid the screeching of gulls and eagles. Dolphins danced off the prow of the ferry as it cut through Queen Charlotte Sound. As we sailed, we watched the mountains of the mainland slide by, then searched for killer whales till the sun sank like a blazing ship in the ocean.

Now it was almost midnight, and the sound of the sea slapping the hull reverberated in my bones as if I were in a submarine awaiting a depth charge from above.

Since it was impossible in Bella Bella to off-load kayaks from the ferry directly to the wharf, we had to be lowered into the sea by lines and a winch.

“Don’t fall, punk,” Cassidy said as he and Wild Man Willie squeezed into their fully loaded eighteen-foot kayak. The deckhands slipped two slings beneath them—one fore and one aft of their cockpits. The winch engine revved, the boom creaked, and Willie and Cassidy were lifted over the deck rail and slowly lowered into the sea. Soon they were followed by Lisa and her dad.

Now it was our turn. Once again, the winch engine revved, the boom creaked, and up we went. The deckhands carefully swung us outboard—about twenty-five feet in the air—and we swung there, holding our breath. I was thinking about how much I really didn’t want to be there, when the line attached to the forward sling suddenly snapped—and my stomach flew into my mouth.

to be continued...

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