



Deployment

Sailing Vessel *High Dawn*,
Gulf of Mexico north of the
Florida Keys
02:07 EST, 10 January

Heinrich Köhler eyed the slowly approaching beach of the island through the night vision ocular. *A few hundred meters to go, then the last turn into the wind, and we anchor. Nearly done.* He confirmed his estimate using the handheld GPS unit—283 meters. It would be close enough to the beach for short boat trips, but not so near that an unexpected squall could put them on the beach. After coming so far, he would not be

undone by a rookie blunder drawing the attention of the American Coast Guard or some other helpful do-gooder. Not with a metric ton of cocaine and one hundred kilos of fentanyl on board.

The two thousand three hundred mile trip had begun a little over two weeks earlier for Köhler. His employers dispatched him and two assistants to take charge of the *High Dawn*, a beautiful sixty-five-foot cabin sloop in Greenwich, Connecticut. The yacht's owners were a Wall Street power couple who had lately made some abysmal market choices and needed quick cash. They made the fatal mistake of contacting his organization through one of their dodgier clients in hopes of a one-and-done trip to South America and back to clear their debts with no one the wiser. They were quite adept at working the system to clean up dirty cash and carefully and completely planned that aspect of the operation. Unfortunately for them, their skills in white-collar crime did not provide them with insight into the realities of the underworld of narcotics smuggling.

Köhler could not believe his luck when the two insisted on making the trip “to keep an eye on things.” He feigned a mild annoyance and then acquiescence to the demand to keep them on the hook. From his perspective, the situation could not have been better: two wealthy gay men on a Caribbean vacation on their new yacht with a

dour German captain and two crewmen provided the perfect cover for the trip down. It also obviated the need to dispose of them in Connecticut, risking discovery and failure before the journey began. The men's insistence on making the trip bought them an additional week of life. Their usefulness ended after the onload and departure from La Guaira, Venezuela, when they just became another liability. Both were quickly and efficiently disposed of at sea.

The organization took a substantial risk with this trip, concentrated in a single load rather than dispersed over several vessels. Köhler had sold them on the idea a year before—use their radar masker and decoy vessels to get a single large load through at minor risk rather than accept the almost certain loss of some portion of the product in many smaller loads. Operational security was the critical factor for success. They would not go into any port or marina. Eight terminal points for the trip were selected among the less-traveled but accessible locations in the Florida Keys. All were reconnoitered just before nightfall, and the status of clear or occupied had been broadcast by radio “in the blind.” Köhler himself would select the final destination and call it in once the *High Dawn* was anchored and secured.

With only a couple of minutes to go before anchoring, now was the time to go live and get things moving. After checking that Paolo was in position on the bow to release the anchor, Köhler turned the helm over to Jaime and ducked into the cabin to retrieve the satellite phone to make the call. He had to weave around the massive stacks of cargo in the cabin to get to the storage cabinet. He powered it on and verified he had a good signal link. It was the last act of his life.

Jaime and Paolo had a brief glimpse of a bright light approaching at over 3.5 kilometers per second, just long enough to turn their heads before the impact. Like Köhler working below in the cabin, they never knew what hit them.

Water, like all liquids, is virtually incompressible. A supersonic shock wave moving through the water is a solid wall for all practical purposes. This one broadsided the *High Dawn*, with the equivalent effect of dropping the boat onto a solid surface from sixty feet in the air. The three men were actually stationary at the outset of the event—the boat itself was “thrown” into them by the impact, killing them all instantly.

The *High Dawn* herself was laid waste. The shock wave crushed the starboard side of the hull. The mast stay on the port side snapped, and the mast itself was toppling over the starboard side, its attachment point to the deck shearing. Then the air shock wave hit, lifting the mast clear, snapping the starboard stay, running rigging, and the electric cable to the masker array. It was swept into the sea, along with Jaime and Paolo's bodies and anything else not fastened to the deck.

Köhler's command had become his tomb, rapidly filling with water from hundreds of cracks in the hull. Ironically, the priceless cargo was undamaged in the disaster, packaged in bales sealed in plastic and close-packed in any available space inside. The positive buoyancy of the bales would provide enough floatation to keep the boat from sinking for days as it sped off into the Gulf of Mexico with the residual momentum of the impact.

Two hours later, well past the expected time the *High Dawn* should have reported in, calls went out to the onboard satellite phones, then the crew's cell phones, and finally, first in code, then in the clear on marine band radio. When it became apparent that no answer was forthcoming, the alarm went out, and the organization began deploying resources for a covert search. Losing this cargo would be a significant hit to the bottom line. Both inside and outside the organization, those responsible would pay dearly if it could not be recovered.

**Coast Guard Cutter Kauai, eleven nautical miles southeast of Fort Jefferson,
Florida
09:43 EST, 13 January**

Ben

Benjamin “Ben” Wyporek, Lieutenant Junior Grade, U.S. Coast Guard, was coming up on the halfway point of his Officer of the Deck, or OOD, duty in the eight a.m. to noon Forenoon Watch. In that role, he supervised the watchstanders, kept the vessel on course and speed and clear of other vessels, and was the captain's representative. The workload stayed low when *Kauai* carried just enough speed to hold heading and position against the light winds and currents in the area. She held a position near a known drug smuggler rendezvous. These were locations where “mother ships” carrying sizeable amounts of cocaine and other illegal products off-loaded to small, fast vessels for the final run to shore in the Florida Keys.

The watch had been quiet so far and somewhat boring, an unfortunate characteristic of sentry operations. Ben was grateful, at least for the comfortable weather. The temperate and dry days of January were the best time to be in the Western Florida Keys, at least for a born-and-raised northerner like Ben. Far preferable to July and August, when the only respite from the sweltering heat and humidity came from the torrential downpours of the scattered squalls that popped up during the day.

Even the seas were kind today—no swell, and the small waves stirred by the light winds gave the patrol boat a gentle rocking motion. The downside of January patrols was that weather systems often pushed down from the north with winds that stirred up moderate wave action. They were not a problem for larger vessels, but the choppy pitching and rolling they caused made even mundane activities such as eating and sleeping a challenge on smaller boats like *Kauai*.

Kauai was a Coast Guard cutter. She was an Island Class Patrol Boat (D Class), one hundred ten feet long, weighing 168 tons, with a crew of fourteen enlisted and two officers. She was old, pushing twenty-five years of age on a design intended to last only fifteen. The Coast Guard had retired many of her older sisters, but *Kauai* was still alive and serving. Ben glanced out the rear window and saw the reason: Chief Machinery Technician James Drake walking toward the cradled rigid hull inflatable boat, called “the rib” for its acronym RHIB, with a junior petty officer in tow.

Drake got the title of “Chief,” being the only chief petty officer on *Kauai*, was the senior enlisted member and, at forty-four, the oldest man on the boat. He was the finest chief petty officer Ben had ever known, both for the mastery of his trade and his leadership among the crew. Unlike the more legendary members of the chief petty officer ranks, Drake never shouted at his juniors. Six-foot-four and physically imposing, he only needed to lean in on someone to command attention. Ben wondered whether the junior petty officer with Drake had committed a minor blunder or if he was just doing on-the-job training. Most of the skills Coast Guard technicians gained came from hands-on instruction on the job, and Drake took this responsibility seriously.

Drake looked after his officers as well. Occasionally, Ben had voiced a concern and soon found the problem had been corrected. He suspected Drake had dealt with many other issues before they even came to his attention. It went both ways. When Drake sensed Ben’s uncertainty regarding an important decision, he often asked a respectful but pointed question. Sometimes, Drake pulled him aside and said something like, “You know XO, if I were you, I’d...” Ben always took the advice and never regretted it.

Five-foot-ten with an average build, Ben was personable and much more intelligent than his mediocre grades at the Coast Guard Academy suggested. He was among the younger members of the crew, being just past his twenty-fourth birthday. Ben had aspired to join the military since grade school, and his liking of naval history led him to apply to both the Coast Guard and Naval Academies. The Coast Guard offered an appointment first, and he accepted and never looked back.

Ben was the junior of the two officers on board, the executive officer or just “XO” by title and second in command. Besides standing the occasional watch, he oversaw the administrative needs of the cutter, including the reports, supplies, and financial accounts. Also, he preserved the crew’s health, morale, and discipline, sometimes a grueling task on a surface unit as small and busy as *Kauai*. Yet, he was luckier than most officers in his position. In his year on board, there were no formal disciplinary actions, and the only chronic troublemakers had rotated off to other units.

In the quiet times on patrol, such as this watch, Ben’s mind often wandered back to his transfer to *Kauai*. His assignment resulted from good luck, although he wasn’t sure of that at the time. Eighteen months into his first assignment on the large cutter *Dependable*, the ship’s XO told him of the offer of an early rotation for the position on *Kauai*. She explained this opportunity was the perfect bird in the hand—with the number of one-tens dwindling, his chances for an XO job in his next assignment were fading fast. Needing no further encouragement, he took the job.

Lieutenant Samuel Powell greeted Ben on his arrival, having taken command two weeks earlier. The sector commander had fired their predecessors following a serious mishap, and Ben worried he was walking into a fiery mess of poor discipline and morale. Much to Ben’s relief, Sam did not expect him to “whip” the crew into shape; they just needed to offer clear direction, stability, and encouragement. They set out to build *Kauai* into a successful team and shake loose the specter of failure that had brought them there. Within a few months, they had done just that.

Ben liked and appreciated Sam from the outset. An inch taller than Ben with a slim, athletic build, Sam was a Mustang—a former chief petty officer in the Operations Specialist rating who had completed Officer Candidate School and received an officer's commission. At thirty-five, he was second only to Drake in age among *Kauai's* crew. Ben thought Sam was the most open and approachable officer he had ever met, possessing a ready, but not mean, sense of humor. He was not a pushover, and he insisted on decorum on the Bridge and in official situations. Still, Sam ensured the crew understood he stood by them if they worked hard and played by the rules.

It surprised Ben to learn later that Sam was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's prestigious Wharton School and came from a wealthy family. Children from that world rarely opted for the rigors of military life, particularly as enlisted personnel. He worked up the nerve to ask Sam about his choice one quiet evening when they were both on the Bridge.

Sam dropped his head for a second, then he looked up and said, "My family asked that question in shocked disbelief." After a brief pause, he said, "Let's just say I had to make a choice between two teams. One had people who'd let someone they know die just to make more money, and the other had people who risk their lives to save people they'd never met." He smiled. "The Coast Guard was the best call I ever made."

"Me too, sir," Ben had replied with complete sincerity.

Ben completed another round of scanning for targets by radar and binoculars when the alert sounded on the satellite channel used for communication with the operations center in Miami.

The message read, in plain language: "To *Kauai* from District Seven Operations Center: detach at once from the current mission and proceed to latitude 25 degrees 6 minutes north, longitude 81 degrees 8 minutes west for search and rescue on a disabled sailing vessel. The target is suspicious—a possible drug smuggler—and *Kauai* is to contact the Coast Guard maritime patrol aircraft 2303, the on-scene commander. Acknowledge."

This is more like it. Ben thought as he typed the latitude and longitude into the navigation system. *Drugs and search and rescue—buy one, get one free!* He picked up the phone to call Sam and report the development.

"Captain speaking."

"Sir, OOD here. They have detached us for SAR, disabled sailing vessel, potential drug target spotted by an HC-144. I read zero-six-seven true at one hundred-two miles. We should have comms from here if he is high enough."

"Very well. Make the turn and bring up full speed. I'm coming up now."

"Very good, sir." Ben hung up the phone and gave the orders to the helmsman. Sam entered the space a few moments later, and Ben announced, "Captain on the Bridge."

"Carry on, please." Sam returned Ben's salute. "Let's see if we can talk to them."

"Yes, sir." Ben dialed up the plane's frequency on the control console, then returned to his usual position, monitoring *Kauai's* progress while listening to the radio conversation. "We're up now, Captain."

“Thank you.” Sam picked up the handset. “Two-three-zero-three, one-three-five-one on uniform in the green, over.”

After a brief pause, the Coast Guard plane responded, “One-three-five-one, zero three, roger, read you lima-charlie in the green, over.”

“Zero-three, five-one, we are on the way, ETA three and a half hours. What do you have for us?”

“Roger, it’s weird. We have a large cabin sloop that’s a total mess. The main deck is awash with heavy damage to the deck structures, and the mast is gone—nowhere in sight. No persons on board or bodies are visible.”

“Copy main deck awash—is the vessel sinking?”

“Negative, vessel is upright and stable. The hull’s trashed, but something’s keeping it afloat. Could be sealed contraband.”

Sam paused as he pondered the plane’s report. A full load of drugs in sealed plastic packages could keep a small sailing vessel afloat, even with extensive damage. But that much product was worth a fortune—the owner’s abandonment of it made little sense. “Roger, can you find the cause of the damage?”

“We got as close as possible, and we have good camera footage. No apparent weapons damage, no sign of vessel collision. It could be storm damage, but I’ve never seen it like this. It is just—weird. When you get closer, we will send the camera video to you.”

“Roger that. Any other traffic nearby?”

“Negative. Radar is clear, and nothing visual to the horizon.”

“Roger. Can you hang in until we arrive?”

“Affirmative. Orders are to hold here until you’re on scene.”

“Zero-three, five-one, roger, see you in three and a half, out.” Sam replaced the handset and stepped over to Ben. “This is a helluva thing. It must be dope keeping her afloat, but it doesn’t figure them abandoning it.”

The problem intrigued Ben. “A storm could have washed them overboard, but there haven’t been any big storms around here since last October, Captain. Maybe a waterspout or rogue wave?”

Sam stared out across the bow, rubbing his chin. “Maybe. It’s strange the mast is nowhere around. The stays and running lines should’ve kept it nearby. Like the man said, weird. Let’s go in heavy on this one, XO, full law enforcement load-out. I want Chief to go along too and give that boat a check up close before anybody sets foot on it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get Hoppy to relieve you in a couple of hours. I need your eyes on that boat with no distractions when we approach.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Besides, I want my best driver with the conn when we head into weirdness.” Sam winked.

Operations Specialist First Class Emilia “Hoppy” Hopkins was a fast-tracker in her rating. Although that rating covered a wide range of skills, her primary responsibilities aboard *Kauai* included navigation, communications, and operational

systems. She was an outstanding ship handler and the go-to OOD for any dicey situation. A thirteen-year veteran of the Coast Guard and above the cut for chief petty officer, she would pin on the coveted promotion this summer on rotation from her E6 billet aboard *Kauai* to an E7 billet elsewhere.

Like Ben, Hopkins was tall—five-foot-ten, and a fit, thirty-three-year-old, widowed mother of eleven- and nine-year-old sons. She shared a house with her mother, who cared for the boys when she was at sea. Sam liked and felt a kindred spirit with the warmhearted and professional petty officer, but, as captain, he had to take care not to let it show. His wife Joana followed no such restraint—she and Hopkins were the closest of friends. Ben shared Sam’s admiration for Hopkins and often leaned on her for help with operational issues or advice for dealing with the crew.

“Boss, I’m crushed!” Ben faked a distressed expression at the implied slight on his competence. He knew it was the right call—Sam needed him to have his full attention on the problem instead of focusing on keeping *Kauai* from running into anything. Also, he had to admit Hoppy *was* a better driver than he—hell, she could give the skipper a run for his money.

As Sam went back below, Ben returned to his OOD duties, the watch less quiet than a few minutes ago. The engines were roaring at full power, with a brisk twenty-eight knots of wind produced by the full speed run and intermittent loud thumps as *Kauai*’s hull cut through the occasional wave.

Coast Guard Cutter Kauai, Gulf of Mexico, fifty-six nautical miles northeast of Key West, Florida
12:03 EST, 13 January

Ben

Right before her approach to the target vessel, *Kauai*’s crew went to Law Enforcement Stations. All topside personnel donned body armor and helmets. The gunners uncovered and loaded the fifty-caliber machine guns, and a carbine-equipped sharpshooter took position on the Flying Bridge above the main Bridge. The video downloaded from the plane did not yield any insights, just a full-round view of a wrecked boat. There was no hiding place topside, and both officers were sure the interior was uninhabitable to anyone not using scuba gear. Still, Sam did not take chances with his crew and his ship. After a slow approach from the south with all eyes on the target, Hopkins brought *Kauai* into the light westerly wind about fifty yards up sun and “parked” using throttle and rudder.

The RHIB was hoisted in position at the edge of the port main deck. Besides the coxswain driving the boat, it held the three-person boarding party led by Boatswains Mate First Class John Bondurant and Chief Drake. Bondurant was the senior boatswain’s mate, leading the deck department aboard *Kauai* and supervising the other two boatswain’s mates, the gunner’s mate, and the three junior seamen. He was typical for a mid-grade boatswain: an expert coxswain, competent OOD, and smart law enforcement boarding officer. In his early thirties, Bondurant was an inch shorter

than Drake, but even more broad-shouldered. His duties with *Kauai* were demanding, but at least he was home with his family a lot more than on other tours on larger cutters. He was relatively new, arriving at the unit shortly after Sam and Ben took over, but he fit in nicely and liked the crew.

Although Bondurant was the senior coxswain, his tasking to lead the boarding party meant his subordinate, Boatswain's Mate Second Class Shelley Lee, had charge of the boat. Lee was also a skilled boat driver and OOD and, being the only other female aboard *Kauai*, berthing mate with Hopkins. Lee was twenty-five years old and small for a boatswain's mate, barely five-foot-three, but a superb athlete.

Once the boat crew and the boarding party had boarded the RHIB and were secure, Lee reported by radio, "*Kauai, Kauai-One*, boat ready for launch."

"Launch the boat," Sam replied. After the RHIB had lowered the remaining six feet into the water, Lee detached the hook from the lift frame and guided it clear. Firing the engine, she moved the boat smoothly away from the cutter's side.

As the RHIB arced to the left to clear *Kauai's* stern, Sam walked back to the starboard side of the Bridge. Ben had kept his eyes on the wreck during the launch. "Nothing to report, Captain," he said, sweeping the target with his binoculars.

"Right," Sam said, then radioed, "*Kauai-One, Kauai*, circle the vessel at least once at twenty yards. If satisfied, approach and board from the south."

"*Kauai, Kauai-One*, WILCO, out," Lee replied. Although Drake and Bondurant were both senior, Lee commanded the boat and reported to the captain as coxswain. The RHIB completed a slow turn around the wreck, with no one aboard seeing anything of concern. "*Kauai, Kauai-One*, nothing seen, closing for boarding now, over."

"*Kauai-One, Kauai*, roger, out," Sam answered, not taking his eyes off the scene.

The RHIB moved alongside the wrecked sailboat, allowing the three boarding team members to jump on and spread out. After Drake boarded, Lee pulled the RHIB back to a safe observation position.

"*Kauai, LE-One*, nothing in sight, but I believe there's a dead body somewhere," Bondurant stated via his voice-activated headset. "I'm pulling the hatch now." While the team's junior member moved to a cover position with his shotgun, Bondurant lifted the hatch. "Oh, Goddammit!" he said, recoiling from the opening.

"LE-One, *Kauai*, report status, over," Sam ordered.

"Uh, *Kauai, LE-One*, sorry about that, sir. We've got a floater, pretty ripe. Standby."

Ben grimaced as he watched Bondurant don a surgical mask from his kit and add a stroke of VapoRub. "Floater" was Coast Guard slang for a human corpse made buoyant by trapped gasses generated during decomposition. This was a drawback of the operational Coast Guard: sometimes, the "R" in SAR meant recovery instead of rescue. It wasn't just the terrible smell of a decaying human corpse—it was knowing what that smell *was* that got to you. At least you can mask the odor with a pungent ointment.

Bondurant nodded when he finished, and the other team members took similar action. Drake stood back with his hand covering his mouth and nose until handed a

mask and ointment container. “OK, proceeding,” said Bondurant, moving back to the hatch. He stepped down through the opening and disappeared. After two minutes, he returned to the main deck.

“*Kauai*, LE-One, I have a report.”

“Go ahead, One,” Sam said.

“Roger. Just the one body. Lots of product down there—looks like it’s the only thing keeping her afloat. The cabin’s full of water. I couldn’t see shit, er, excuse me, sir. I would say she took a hell of a whack. The starboard side’s smashed in. I’m goin’ to let Chief look around if you’ve no objection.”

Sam paused before replying. “OK, tell Chief he can have a look if he’s sure it’s stable. But call the RHIB over first. If things turn bad, you guys bail immediately. Clear?”

“Roger, sir. Also, I cleared the junk hanging over the transom. The boat is the *High Dawn* out of Greenwich, Connecticut.”

“Copy one, continue.”

Ben called the infirmary. “Doc? XO here. There’s a dead body on the boat. Please break out a body bag and stand by. Thanks. Bye.”

Sam stepped inside and picked up the handset to radio the circling plane. “Zero-three, five-one, we’ve got it. Thanks for hanging around for us. For your records, the target’s name is the *High Dawn*, and the home port is Greenwich, Connecticut. No registration numbers are visible, and documents are inaccessible at this time. Over.”

“Five-one, zero-three, roger that, *laka maika’i, hoa aloha!*” The technician in the plane knew Sam from earlier encounters and that his last assignment was a patrol boat in Hawaii.

“*Mahalo hoa*, out,” Sam replied with a slight smile.

After about fifteen minutes, Bondurant called again. “*Kauai*, LE-One, Chief is done. He says we might as well get off this tub. It’s not safe to leave a prize crew on board.”

“LE-One, *Kauai*, roger, board the RHIB and return to ship. Tell Chief to come to the Bridge as soon as he’s on board.”

“*Kauai*, LE-One, roger, out.”

Sam turned to Ben. “Send Doc with Smitty and Lopez to recover that body. Make sure they get a thorough safety talk before they leave and have masks ready.”

Ben saluted. “Very good, sir.” He went below to arrange things. The recovery team swapped with the boarding team in the RHIB. The boat set off again, and Ben and Drake headed to the Bridge.

After exchanging salutes, Drake started his report. “Captain, I’m not sure what we can do. No point trying to dewater. The starboard side is crushed inward. You can also forget about towing her—I’m sure she’ll break up if you try it.”

“Crushed? The deck’s intact. What do you think hit her, Chief?” Sam frowned.

“That’s just it, Captain. It couldn’t have been a collision. There’s no dent of any kind. It’s like, well, it’s like the hull slammed flat against a wide stone wall, except that it didn’t leave a mark.”

“What?”

“I checked over the side; no scratches or mars on the paint, just cracks from the impact. It’s like somebody set off a big bomb right beside her, but there’s none of the scorching or residue you’d expect to see. The only time I’ve ever seen hull damage like this was when they tried that AirDrop of the new oil skimmer, and the chutes separated—smacked down from a thousand feet. And it gets weirder, sir.” Drake paused.

“Do tell.”

“The mast was yanked right off. Bolts sheared up, and the stays snapped right above the deck. That’s why it’s not dragging alongside. It’s just gone, blown away.” Drake wiped his forehead. “That body we found? I figure he was inside when it hit, or he’d been blown off too. It’s too bloated to be sure, but it wouldn’t surprise me if he just got smashed around inside the cabin.”

Sam leaned back against the rail with a furrowed brow. “So, you’re telling me you think this boat was dropped from a great height?”

“No, sir. I’m sayin’ the damage looks like that other boat. I don’t see how it could have happened, but that’s what it looked like.”

“Great.” Sam shook his head. “Can’t tow it. Can’t just sink it because of the dope. I guess it’s time to call the boss. Thanks, Chief.”

“Yes, sir.” Drake saluted and then turned to leave.

Sam started a “chat” on the command net with the District Operations Center in Miami to report their findings and seek further orders. By the time Health Services Technician Second Class Michael “Doc” Bryant and the two junior enlisted crew members returned with the body, he had the answer he expected:

“Standby in the vicinity of the subject vessel and await orders.”

“XO, surprise, surprise. Our orders are to await orders. OOD, stay within five hundred yards of the wreck. Call me right away if anything changes. Resume the at sea watch, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Hopkins replied, turning to check the radar while Sam and Ben left for the afterdeck.

“Doc, you got anything for me?” Sam asked Bryant when he reached the afterdeck. Bryant provided routine medical services and was the EMT aboard *Kauai*. A slight build and bookish manner with steel-rimmed glasses hid a quiet intensity gained as an Army medic in Afghanistan before he transferred to the Coast Guard. He had good-naturedly shrugged off the “Army grunt” jokes in his first days on board. The jokes stopped when the crew saw Bryant in a tropical blue uniform with his Army Combat Medic Badge on his pocket and the Silver Star and Purple Heart topping his rows of ribbons.

Bryant replied, “Sorry, Captain, we almost needed a strainer to pull him out of the cabin. I figure he went down at least three days ago, based on decomp, but you’ll need a lab to get anything definite. We ought to get him on ice, or we will have to vent the bag. Any chance we’ll be heading in soon?”

Sam frowned. There was no cold storage aboard beyond two large kitchen refrigerators. “Sorry, Doc, we’re to standby until further orders, and yes, I told them about the body.”

“So be it, sir.” He turned to Ben as Sam returned to the Bridge. “XO, I still need to do the workups for your annual. I can clean up and be ready for you in half an hour.”

“Um, yeah, I’ll be a bit busy for a while. Let me get back to you.” Ben waved his hand dismissively, turned, and started walking forward to catch up with Sam.

“You have to let him take your measure eventually,” Sam whispered.

“Sir, the best you can hope for from any physical exam is not getting fired. I’m in no hurry to take that chance.”

Sam turned. “Something I should know about?”

“No, sir. Just a personal tic. I’ll take care of this in the next dockside, Scout’s honor.” Ben grinned.

Sam returned a sad smile. “Mmmm, yeah.”