



Dilemma

USCG Cutter *Kauai*, North Atlantic Ocean, eleven nautical miles southeast of Port Canaveral, Florida
11:13 EDT, 12 June

Haley

Please, God. I don't want to have to kill anyone today!

Lieutenant Haley Reardon, commanding officer of the Coast Guard Cutter *Kauai*, took another long look at the suspect boat through her binoculars and then swung her gaze back to the tactical screen. They were closing to five hundred yards range and Chief Hopkins had already given the helm order to bring them on a parallel course with the target. Within one minute, Haley would have to make the most difficult decision of her career.

Every sensor they had, from the hyperspectral imaging camera on the unmanned aircraft flying overhead, the high-resolution electro-optical camera on *Kauai's* mast, and now her own eyes screamed this boat was loaded with explosives and unmanned—essentially, a robotic improvised explosive device aimed straight at the tanker they were there to protect.

Her hands shook as she thought, *but what if I'm wrong and this turns out to be just another boat with a bunch of CARE loons hiding somewhere aboard?*

It would not be the first time she had given the order for lethal fire—the other occurred six months previously at the Haitian island of Ile Ste. Michel. They were shooting back in self-defense on that occasion, protecting *Kauai's* retreating small boat from machine gun fire from a Chinese armored car. This was different—an American boat that was not shooting at them, but giving every sign of being a deadly bomb. She wondered at how in such a short time this turned from just another ordinary patrol to a matter of life and death.

Fifteen minutes earlier...

For the third time in the last two weeks, the *Kauai* was at General Quarters Condition One with her crew in combat helmets and ballistic vests and weapons manned and loaded. It was sunny and getting quite warm already, typical June weather for Florida's Atlantic Coast. Haley was thankful to be inside the air-conditioned bridge when wearing the heavy protective equipment and felt sorry for the two crewmen standing outside at their fifty-caliber machine guns.

Haley leaned forward in her command chair on the bridge, scanning between the video screens on the Fire Control/Command and Control console, known as the FC3. The left-hand screen showed the real-time video feed from the electro-optical camera on the cutter's mast—it was trained on the tanker *Paul Morris*, following three hundred yards behind them. *Kauai's* position and any targets being tracked in the vicinity were shown superimposed on the local geography on the tactical display on the right-hand screen. The FC3 system fused information from multiple sources into the target display, both the feeds from *Kauai's* radar and the AeroVironment T-20 unmanned aerial vehicle currently loitering overhead.

The mission was close escort, this time leading a pair of response boats from Station Cape Canaveral and shepherding a medium-sized tanker of fifty-two thousand tons carrying a split load of diesel fuel and unleaded gasoline for offload ashore, conveniently in *Kauai's* homeport of Port Canaveral, Florida. This was normally a job for a single response boat or maybe the eighty-seven-foot patrol boat homeported in Cape Canaveral, not a highly equipped, special operations cutter. But these were not normal times.

The environmental extremist group CARE had become a genuine physical threat over the past month, and special intelligence suggested they were preparing for a public act of extreme violence somewhere in Florida to focus attention on their cause. Forcibly boarding and setting a sizeable tanker afire within sight of the beaches and generating a massive cleanup effort would make a significant impression, both psychologically and economically. This made industrial ports like Tampa, Jacksonville, and Port Canaveral prime targets, and internal security was beefed-up accordingly. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard, along with Brevard County Sheriff and port authority police patrol boats, covered the port approaches and internal waters to intercept and ward off any suspected attackers of transiting vessels. Haley shook her head at the thought that anyone with a functioning brain would conclude this would be a sound approach to combat climate change, but it was a sign of the pervasive and increasing insanity of the world.

Haley was typical of a Coast Guard officer in command of a patrol boat. Just shy of her thirty-first birthday, she received her commission eight years previously on graduation from the Coast Guard Academy. A tallish five-foot-eight with shoulder-length dark hair and gray eyes, she was extremely fit, with a slim, athletic build. She had taken command of *Kauai* a little over six months ago, overcoming the challenge of succeeding an extremely successful, almost beloved

predecessor, and quickly winning the respect and affection of the crew as they had won hers.

Kauai was an Island Class (Block D) patrol boat, one-hundred-ten feet long with a crew of two officers and fourteen enlisted personnel. She was an old boat, beyond twenty-five years on a design meant to last only fifteen, and was among the last of her class still in commission. She should have been decommissioned by now, but a year and a half previously, she received a stay of execution after being swept up into an extremely classified mission in the Florida Keys.

During a law enforcement patrol off Key West, *Kauai* had discovered a wrecked and derelict sailboat laden with illegal drugs. After reporting the find, they were drawn into a search for a lost Russian nuclear-tipped missile, launched by accident after a mid-air collision between a Russian bomber and U.S. fighter off-shore of Miami. Realizing the boat had been wrecked by a near-miss by the missile, *Kauai's* crew, teamed up with a Defense Intelligence Agency operative, traced its drift back to the impact point. After a vicious firefight with the wrecked boat's crime syndicate owners, *Kauai's* crew secured the live nuclear warhead, preventing a devastating explosion that would have likely ignited a nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia.

Recognizing the high caliber of her crew and *Kauai's* potential to respond quickly and discreetly to similar national crises, the Director of National Intelligence invested a considerable sum of money to extend the cutter's life, upgrade her powerplant and electronics, and cycle select members of her crew through advanced tactical training. The boat's homeport was moved from Miami to Port Canaveral, nominally to serve as the permanent range safety cutter for the Cape Canaveral rocket launch facility, but actually as the on-call platform for sensitive and covert intelligence missions in South Florida, The Bahamas, and the Caribbean. There had been two such missions since the upgrade. The first occurred about eight months before Haley's arrival and the second, the mission to the Haitian island, within days of Haley's assumption of command.

Haley glanced again at the FC3's tactical display, now showing two small targets to their north and nearly two dozen to their south. The map also showed the boundary line of the temporary security zone established for the arrival of the tanker, extending two miles on either side of the channel leading into Port Canaveral. This area was no stranger to security zones—one was always established from the shore to around twelve miles downrange during rocket launches from Cape Canaveral to provide safe clearance from falling debris in the event of a post-launch malfunction or abort. However, needing to impose one to prevent a terrorist act was unsettling enough—to do it for the third time in a fortnight was downright disturbing.

They had to regard any of those targets milling around seemingly at random just south of the security zone boundary as a potential threat, and nearly all displayed the infuriating white abbreviation "UNK" indicating that their name or registration numbers had not been determined. Haley knew most, if not all, those contacts were innocent sport fishers, recreational boats, and daysailers.

Their behavior thus far had suggested nothing else and, despite the boredom associated with this type of operation, Haley hoped it would continue to be a quiet day.

The two Station Cape Canaveral response boats were cruising in line about a mile south of *Kauai's* track, halfway to the zone boundary. These were the “pouncers” Haley would dispatch to close rapidly on any boat penetrating the zone to warn them off or, if necessary, try to stop them. *Kauai* was the last line of defense and would engage any non-compliant boats getting past the response boats. Haley's orders were clear: with the terrorism threat posed by CARE, this was a national defense mission. Any vessel breaking through the response boats would be considered as having disclosed deadly intent—Haley would use non-lethal means to stop it, if practicable. But, one way or another, that vessel would be stopped before it reached the tanker.

Haley looked up as Chief Operations Specialist Emilia Hopkins strolled across the bridge deck to check the radar display on her normal Officer-of-the-Deck sweep. Hopkins was the “old hand” on *Kauai*, the crewmember with the longest tenure, having joined some three years earlier as a petty officer first class and remaining on board after being promoted to chief petty officer. She was tall—she had two inches on Haley—and was a fit thirty-four-year-old widowed mother of thirteen- and eleven-year-old sons. Hopkins shared a house with her mother, who looked after the boys when she was at sea. She led the Operations Division and was the premier ship driver on *Kauai*—like now, she was the go-to OOD for any unusual situation. Haley smiled and nodded when Hopkins glanced her way, receiving a smile and a nod.

“Captain, I have three contacts moving into the buffer zone from the south,” Electronics Technician First Class Joe Williams said from his seat at the center position of the FC3 console. As the commanding officer, Haley was addressed as “Captain” aboard *Kauai*.

“Let's move one down. Whose turn is it, Williams?”

“Four-Two-Three, ma'am,” Williams replied, referring to the boat's hull number.

“Very well. Send him down to the line.”

“Aye, aye, ma'am.” Williams keyed the transmit button for his headset and said, “Four-Two-Three, Orchid, head two-one-five for the intercept of targets bearing one-eight-three, two-zero-seven, and two-four-one from you. Hold at the security zone boundary. Over.” They had set up an area stretching a mile beyond the security zone boundary to the south as a buffer zone to allow Haley time to position the station boats to intercept a contact before it entered the security zone proper. The protocol was for the boat to activate its flashing blue law enforcement light and begin audio warnings for a target approaching within a quarter mile of the security zone boundary. If the target did not stop, the boat would execute a non-compliant stop-and-board.

After three seconds, the reply came from the speaker. “Orchid, Four-Two-Three, WILCO, heading two-one-five. I have three rec boats in sight on those bearings. Over.”

“Four-Two-Three, Orchid, roger, those are your bogies,” Williams replied. Williams was also an old hand on *Kauai*—only Hopkins and Chief Machinery Technician James Drake had been aboard longer. He was a solid performer who loved his work maintaining electronics and, especially, being the fire control master operating the cutter’s automated weapon systems—the non-lethal entangling weapon colloquially known as “the Squid” and the twenty-five-millimeter auto-cannon mounted on the cutter’s forward deck. Both were loaded and “hot” right now, ready to be directed against a potential target by Williams with a few keystrokes and slight movements of his joystick.

To Williams’s right sat Operations Specialist Third Class Natalya Zuccaro, performing quartermaster duties of navigation and keeping the electronic logbook. Zuccaro was among the newer members of the crew and one of the youngest at twenty-one. She was not a top performer in Haley’s estimation—good enough to remain on board, but not much more. Haley knew Hopkins shared this opinion and when they occasionally discussed the young petty officer, she would usually roll her eyes or shake her head, and simply say, “It’s Gen Z, Captain. They’re hit or miss!” The thought that Haley had, like Hopkins, become a member of the “older generation” at the ripe old age of thirty never failed to amuse her.

Chief Avionics Electrical Technician Erich “Fritz” Deffler occupied the third and last seat at the FC3 console to Williams’s left. He was the Air Mission Commander for the UAV, controlling its movements and sensors as it orbited lazily over the security zone’s southern boundary line. Deffler was not part of *Kauai*’s standing crew, but was assigned to the Coast Guard’s aviation deployment center in Jacksonville. When *Kauai* needed UAV support, he usually led the aviation team, allowing him to be together with Hopkins. They had met in his first deployment on *Kauai* eighteen months ago and had built a romantic relationship since. Haley was not keen on romance between members aboard the same boat, but, technically, Deffler was not one of her guys. As with Hopkins, Haley liked Deffler personally and deeply respected and appreciated his skills. So, as long as he and Hopkins remained consummate professionals when aboard the boat, she could live with it—when they were off duty ashore, they could do as they pleased as far as she was concerned.

Haley’s second-in-command, Lieutenant Ben Wyporek, stood silently on her right, where he could see the tactical display. He was a supernumerary on the bridge during the operation, there to maintain “situational awareness” in case he had to fill in for Haley or Hopkins or lead a boarding crew in a non-compliant vessel situation. Ben’s official title was Executive Officer, but he was generally referred to by the position’s abbreviation “XO.” He was of average size, about five-foot-ten, clean-shaven with his sandy brown hair cut to regulation length and startlingly blue eyes.

Ben's primary job as XO was to handle the load of administration for the unit to free up the commanding officer to keep "the big picture." But Ben was far more than an administrative manager to Haley. He was the tactical lead for the unit, combat trained for expeditionary missions ashore during *Kauai's* "black bag" operations. Although subordinate in position and several years her junior, he was the person she leaned on for advice, to bounce ideas off, and to handle problems before they turned into crises. He had wisdom and common sense well beyond what one could normally expect of a twenty-five-year-old junior officer and the crew deeply respected and admired him. He and Haley were not friends in the conventional sense—it was difficult to maintain a friendship within the hierarchy of a military command cadre—but they were partners in leadership on *Kauai*, and Haley had grown to trust him more than any other person she had ever known.

Haley glanced over and, noting Ben's grim expression, whispered, "What's on your mind, XO?"

Ben returned her gaze briefly before turning back to the display and replied, "It's probably nothing, Captain, but I don't like how those three just decided to make a run north." He pointed to one contact on the screen. "And this one in the middle, it was keeping pace with the others before, but now it's dropping back. Why is that?" He turned to Haley again and, noting her slight smile, grinned back and added, "Sorry. I guess I'm getting a little jumpy."

"No, no. Let's pull the thread. Not like we have anything else going on. What are you thinking here?"

Ben's frown returned. "We're getting close to the jetties—maybe twenty minutes at this pace, so the window is closing. It's now or never. They've had two chances before today to watch our tactics. We've had a couple of intercepts on those, so if they were around, they know how we roll: we go to the closest threat. So, if this is the real deal, I would expect one or both boats in front to be decoys, with the third carrying the threat."

Haley's smile disappeared. "So, what would you suggest?"

"Let's move down half the distance. If it is nothing, then no harm done. If one of those guys is just screwing with us for setting up another security zone, a show of force might make them think twice."

"And if this is the real deal?"

Ben turned with a grim expression. "Then we have twice the distance to engage and...defeat them."

That's a carefully chosen word, "defeat," Haley thought. *He knows if this is the real thing, it will probably end up in a gunfight.* "What about those two to the north? It would be an excellent tactic to decoy us away in one direction while they come in from one-eighty out."

"Yes, ma'am." Ben nodded. "We should pull the second response boat up to backfill us here and tell him to focus north. If anything looks hinky, we can hustle back here to deal with it."

This was becoming one of those conversations with Ben that Haley dreaded, one of those calling for a decision on a life-or-death situation, the likes of which she could not even have imagined before she arrived on *Kauai*. As always, Ben had presented a straightforward case and logical solution, but Haley hesitated, willing for it to just go away.

“Captain?” Ben asked, quietly pressing the issue.

Well, girl, you wanted to be the boss. Time to do some of that captain shit. “OK. As usual, you’ve sold me, XO.” She turned to Hopkins across the bridge and said, “Chief, let’s move south smartly. Make it half the distance to the boundary line.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Hopkins replied as she advanced the thrust levers. “Helm, left ten degrees rudder, steer two-four-five.”

“Chief, my rudder is left ten, coming to two four five,” Seaman Mitchell Pickins, the helmsman, replied.

“Very well. Zuccaro, give me a heads up when we come onto the new trackline.”

“Yes, Chief,” the young petty officer responded.

Haley switched her communications panel setting to “Radio 1” and pressed the transmit button for her headset. “Five-zero-six, Orchid Actual, close on the tanker and take the lead,” Haley said, directing the second response boat into *Kauai*’s former position leading the tanker.

“Orchid, five-zero-six, WILCO, out,” replied the coxswain on the second response boat.

As *Kauai* heeled to the right in her turn toward the new course, Haley smiled ruefully at Ben, getting a sympathetic smile in return. “Hey, it breaks up the monotony, Captain.”

“I suppose. Hopefully, we have reached peak paranoia for today.”

“Captain, the bogie furthest east has turned and is heading southeast,” Williams interrupted. “The other two are continuing on an intercept track for the tanker, and the one furthest west is accelerating.”

“Right. Are any of the other contacts moving this way?”

“Negative, ma’am,” Williams replied.

The news troubled Haley. *This is bad. That target must see the response boat by now, and he’s behaving more aggressively. That can’t be a coincidence.* “Williams, give me an intercept course for the target lagging behind.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Haley activated her radio again. “Four-two-three, Orchid Actual, close on, stop, and board the vessel on your port bow,” she said, referring to the now-speeding boat. “We’ll take the other northbound target.”

“Orchid, four-two-three, WILCO, out,” came the disembodied voice from the radio receiver.

Haley watched on the tactical screen as the course vectors associated with *Kauai* and her two companions grew and rotated. She turned to Deffler and said,

“Chief Deffler, I need closeups on those two northbounds ASAP. Start with the one running further west.”

“On it, Captain,” Deffler replied. “Going to max continuous power, ETA one minute, fifteen seconds.”

“Good. Make it one pass, then proceed to the second target. Pass data directly to the boat as it comes in on Radio One.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Deffler replied, keeping his eyes on the split screen showing the UAV’s flight telemetry and its on-board camera view. After slewing the camera to the target’s azimuth and down-angle, he selected the lock function as soon as the boat entered the field of view. It was a white recreational boat with green trim, about thirty-five feet long. Deffler keyed the transmit button and said, “Four-Two-Three, Orchid Air. How do you read?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Roger. I’m coming up on your target now. I see three people on board, all adults. From the clothing, it looks like two males and one female. No weapons in sight. I’m running hyperspectral. Give me a sec while it processes.”

“Roger, copy all.”

Less than three seconds later, the results of the hyperspectral imaging popped onto the screen: “Explosives: Negative; Chemical Agents: Negative; Radiological Agents: Negative; Confidence: High.”

“Four-Two-Three, Orchid Air, negative for explosives, chem, and radiologicals, confidence high,” Deffler radioed.

“Roger. Thanks for the assist!”

“Good luck, Four-Two-Three,” Deffler said, directing the UAV toward the second target. Turning to Haley, he added, “One minute to the next target, Captain.”

“Very well. Same as before, please.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Deffler replied and turned back to the screen.

Haley glanced at the tactical display. The response boat had reached the target vessel, and both were slowing down, she was relieved to see. She did not want to have to break off from the second target to support the smaller boat. She glanced at the icon for their target again—still motoring steadily on a collision course with the tanker at eighteen knots. The UAV was approaching from the west. *We should have something on them by now.* “What’s happening, Chief?” she asked impatiently.

“Um, I’m not reading any POBs, ma’am. Nothing showing on either visual or infrared.”

This was a very ominous development—they should at least be seeing the heat signature from any people on board at this point. Haley stood and stepped over to the aviation station. “Can you put the camera on the second screen, please?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Deffler replied, pressing a button to bring up the electro-optical camera feed onto the righthand screen. A fast-cruising recreational boat appeared also white, but with blue trim, trailing a thick, white wake with regular

splashes of waves under the bows. The deck area and mezzanine behind the enclosed helm were covered by a dark blue canopy.

OK. Maybe they're inside or under the canopy, Haley thought hopefully. At the same time, an icy ball was forming in her stomach at the thought the boat might be uninhabited. "How soon on the hyperspectral, Chief?"

"Just completing the initial scan now, Captain. It will take about five more seconds to process." After that length of time passed, the readout popped onto the left-hand screen. "Holy shit!"

In flashing red letters, the top line read: "Explosives: POSITIVE [AN]."

Deffler turned a wide-eyed look to Haley and said, "Positive for explosives, Ammonium Nitrate, confidence high, Captain!"

OK, there it is! Haley took a deep breath to steady herself and replied quietly, "Very well. Get as close as you can. If you see anything that could be alive on that boat, shout it out."

"Will do, ma'am," Deffler said, turning back to his control panel.

Haley turned to Ben and swallowed hard. "XO, you handle comms with the command center. Tell them there is a rec boat, positive for explosives and apparently unmanned heading for a collision with the *Paul Morris* at eighteen knots, distance four thousand five hundred yards. Unless it changes course, I intend to engage with the twenty-five before it gets within fifteen hundred yards."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Ben replied grimly, then leaned over to dictate the message to a pale and wide-eyed Zuccaro.

"Chief Hopkins, close to five hundred yards from the target and assume a parallel course at eighteen knots."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Hopkins replied. She stepped over to Ben's right to watch the tactical and radar displays as *Kauai* approached the target.

Haley returned to her seat and took another deep breath to calm her thundering heart. Finally, she looked at Williams with as neutral an expression as she could muster and said, "Williams, surface action port. Weapon select mount twenty-five. Load high explosive incendiary. Target is the rec boat at two-five-six and nine hundred yards. Weapons tight."

"Yes, ma'am," Williams replied coolly. "Loading high explosive." He entered a command into his keyboard and the twenty-five-millimeter auto-cannon on the foredeck emitted a series of "clanks" as the autoloader put a shell into the breech. As soon as the green "Ready" status appeared on the auto-cannon's status board, he selected the recreational boat from the tracking list and clicked on the "target select" button on his screen. The auto-cannon came alive and pivoted onto the bearing of the target, after which "selected" and "tracking" appeared next to the boat's listing. "Target identified, target selected, on target and tracking, Captain."

"Very well. We can't have any overs in this environment, Williams," Haley warned. The odds against a stray shot reaching far enough to cause collateral damage or injury among the other boats in the area were enormous, but she was taking no chances.

“Yes, ma’am,” Williams replied, as he selected another option on the screen. “I’m going to manual now. I’ll pitch the first shot fifty yards short and walk them up into the hull.”

“Good. Hold for now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Haley raised her binoculars and took a last intense scan of the target boat. She could see no movement whatsoever or anything bearing a resemblance to a human being. After lowering the binoculars, she turned back to the tactical screen. They were closing to five hundred yards range and Chief Hopkins had already given the helm order to bring them on a parallel course with the target. Two thousand one hundred yards to the tanker. Maybe a minute to decide. Keeping her eyes on the screen, she asked, “Chief Deffler, are you still reading no people on that boat?”

“Affirmative, Captain,” Deffler replied. “I’ve still got nothing on visual or infrared.”

“Any chance they are there, and we are just not seeing them?”

“There’s a chance, ma’am, but they would have to be hiding using pretty sophisticated gear.” He turned toward her. “I’ll go on record that there’s no one aboard.”

Haley smiled grimly. “Thanks, Chief. Zuccaro, anything from the command center?”

“Just an acknowledgement of our last message, ma’am.”

Figures. You’re on your own, as usual. Stopping that boat will not be a problem. One command from me and the high explosive shells from the twenty-five-millimeter will start punching holes in the hull—just a few hits will slow her immediately and then sink her.

And probably kill anyone on board.

Haley watched the range to the tanker tick down with each passing second. *Everything we have says this is an unmanned bomb and the only correct action is to sink it before it hits that tanker. But what if we’re wrong?* She paused a few more seconds, wishing the boat would just turn around. “Right. Zuccaro, log that I have determined this vessel is an unmanned improvised explosive device targeting the tanker *Paul Morris* and I am engaging with twenty-five-millimeter gunfire.”

Zuccaro furiously typed on her keyboard and then said, “Log entry complete, Captain.”

Haley swallowed hard, her heart pounding in her ears. “Very well. Williams, batteries release, commence fire!”