

Prologue

The *Amelia Celeste* was born a lobster boat. An elegant lady, she ran a proud thirty-eight feet of mahogany and oak, from the graceful upward sweep of her bow, down her foredeck to the wheelhouse, and, on a straight and simple plane, back to her stern. True to the axiom that Maine lobstermen treat their boats with the same care as their wives, the *Amelia Celeste* had been doted on by Matthew Crane in much the way he had pampered the flesh-and-blood Amelia Celeste, to whom he had been married for forty years and on whose grave every Friday he continued to lay a dozen long-stem roses, even twelve long years after her death.

Matthew had the means. His grandfather had made a fortune logging, not only the vast forests of northern Maine but the islands in its gulf that bore trees rather than granite. He had built the family home on one of those evergreen islands, aptly named Big Sawyer. Two generations later, Crane descendants were equally represented among the fishermen and the artists who comprised the core of the island's year-round residents.

Matthew was a fisherman, and for all his family money, remained a simple man at heart. His true delight, from the age of sixteen on, had been heading out at dawn to haul lobster traps from the fertile waters of Penobscot Bay. A purist, he continued to use wooden traps even when the rest of the local fleet had switched to ones made of wire mesh. Likewise, he would have died before trading in his wood-hulled boat for a newer fiberglass one, which would have been lighter and faster. Matthew didn't need speed. He lived by the belief that life was about the 'doing,' not the 'done.' As for gaining a few miles to the gallon with a lighter boat, he felt that in a business where no two days were alike, where the seas could change in a matter of minutes and abruptly unbalance two men hauling loaded traps up over the starboard rail, the stability of the *Amelia Celeste* was worth gold. And then there was the noise. Wood was a natural insulator. Cruising in the *Amelia Celeste* was quiet as no fiberglass craft could be, and quiet meant you could hear the gulls, the cormorants, the wind, and the waves. Those things brought him calm.

Reliability, stability, and calm — good reasons why, when Matthew turned sixty-five and his arthritis worsened enough to make his hands useless in the trade, he fitted the vessel with a new engine and tanks, rebuilt the pilothouse with permanent sides to keep out the wind, polished the mahogany to an even higher sheen, installed a defogger on the center window and seating for passengers in the stern, and relaunched the *Amelia Celeste* as a ferry.

During the first few years of this incarnation, Matthew skippered her himself. He made three daily runs to the mainland — once early each morning, once around noon, and once at the end of the day. He didn't carry cars; the ferry run by the State of Maine did that. Nor did he publish a schedule, because if an islander had a special need, Matthew would adjust his schedule to meet it. He charged a nominal fee, and was lax about collecting it. This wasn't a job; it was a hobby. He simply wanted to be on the boat he loved, in the bay he loved, and if he made life easier for the local folk, particularly when the winter months imposed a craze-inducing isolation, so much the better.

On that Tuesday evening in early June, however, when the idyll went tragically awry, Matthew — to his deep regret — was not at the helm of the *Amelia Celeste*. She was being piloted by

Greg Hornsby, a far younger cousin of his who had spent all of his own forty years on the water and was as skilled a fisherman as Matthew. No, there was no shortage of experience or skill. Nor was there a shortage of electronics. As a lobster boat, the *Amelia Celeste* had been equipped with multiband radios, fish finders, and radar. As a passenger-toting vessel, she had the latest in GPS navigational systems along with the rest, but none of it would help that day.

Riding low in the water as lobster boats did, the *Amelia Celeste* left Big Sawyer at six in the evening carrying the photographer, art director, models, and gear from a photo shoot done earlier on the town docks. The sun had come out for the shoot, along with a crowd of locals wanting to watch, but the water remained cold, as Atlantic waters did in June, and by late afternoon, the approach of a warm front brought in fog.

This was no problem. Fog was a frequent visitor to the region. The lobsterman who let fog keep him ashore was the lobsterman who couldn't pay his bills.

Between the instruments at hand and Greg Hornsby's familiarity with the route, the *Amelia Celeste* deftly skirted lobster buoys clustered in the shallows leading to inlets at nearby Little Sawyer, West Rock, and Hull Island. After taking on a single passenger at each pier, she settled into the channel at an easy twenty-two knots, aimed at the mainland some six miles away.

Fifteen minutes later, the *Amelia Celeste* docked at Rockland and her passengers disembarked with their gear. Eight others were waiting to board, dressed not in the black of that city crew, but in the flannel shirts and hooded sweatshirts, jeans, and work boots that any sane islander knew to wear until summer truly arrived. These eight all lived on Big Sawyer, which meant that Greg would have a nonstop trip home, and that pleased him immensely. Tuesday was ribs night at the Grill, and Greg loved ribs. On ribs night, the wife and kids were on their own. His buddies were saving a booth; he'd be joining them there as soon as he put the *Amelia Celeste* to bed.

He took two bags and a large box from Jeannie Walsh and stowed them under a bench while she stepped over the gunwale. Her husband, Evan, handed over several more bags and their one-year-old daughter before climbing aboard himself. Jeannie and Evan were sculptors; their bags held clay, glazes, and tools, and the box a new wheel, all purchased in Portland that day.

Grady Bartz and Dar Hutter, both in their late twenties, boarded with the ease of men bred on the water. Grady worked as dockman for Foss Fish and Lobster, the island's buyer and dealer, and was returning from a day off, looking only slightly cleaner than usual. Dar clerked at the tackle and gear store; once in the boat, he reached back to haul in a crate filled with stock, set it by the wheelhouse wall, and moved down to the stern for a seat.

It was a wise move, because Todd Slokum was the next to board. Thin and pale, Todd was the antithesis of a seafaring man. Even after three years on the island, he still turned green on the ferry to and from. Local gossip had never quite gotten a handle on why he had come to Big Sawyer in the first place. The best anyone could say was that Zoe Ballard was a saint to employ him.

Now he stumbled over the gunwale, hit the deck on rubbery legs, and tripped toward the nearest bench as he darted awkward glances at the others already there.

Hutchinson Prine was only a tad more steady. A lifelong lobsterman, his aversion to talk hid a wealth of knowledge. Nearing seventy, he still fished every day, though as sternman now, with his son at the helm. Hutch wasn't well. He had been in Portland seeing doctors. The scowl on his face said he didn't like what they had told him.

'How's it goin'?' Greg asked and got no answer. He reached for Hutch's elbow, but the older man batted his hand away and boarded the *Amelia Celeste* on his own. His son Noah followed him aboard. Though Noah was taller, and even smarter and better-looking than his father, he was just as silent. His face, at that moment, was equally stony. But he did reach to untie the lines.

The *Amelia Celeste* was seconds shy of pulling away from the dock when a pleading cry came from the shore. 'Wait! Please, wait!' A slender woman ran down the dock, struggling under the bulk of heavy bags that bounced against her body. 'Don't leave!' she cried beseechingly. 'I'm coming! Please wait!'

She wasn't a local. Her jeans were very dark, her blouse very white, her blazer stylishly quilted. The sandals she wore wedged her higher than any islander in her right mind would be wedged, and as if that weren't odd enough for the setting, fingernails and toenails were painted pale pink. Her hair was a dozen shades of blonde, fine and straight, blowing gently as she ran. She was simply made up, strikingly attractive, and married, to judge from the ring on her left hand. The large leather pouch that hung from her shoulder was of an ilk far softer than that worked by local artisans; same with a bulging backpack.

Big Sawyer often saw women like her, but not in early June, and rarely were they alone.

'I have to get out to Big Sawyer,' she begged, breathing hard, addressing Noah first, before realizing her error and turning to Greg. 'I had my car reserved on the five o'clock ferry, but obviously I missed that. They said I could park back there at the end of the pier for a day or two. Can you take me to the island?'

'That depends on whether you have a place to stay,' Greg said, because he knew it was what everyone on board was wondering. 'We don't have resorts. Don't even have a B and B.'

'Zoe Ballard's my aunt. She's expecting me.'

The words were magical. Noah took her bags and tossed them into the pilothouse. She passed him the backpack, then climbed aboard on her own, but when Evan Walsh rose to give her a seat, she shook her head, and, holding the rail that Matthew had installed when he had turned the *Amelia Celest* into a ferry, worked her way along the narrow path to the bow.

Noah released the stern line and pushed against the piling of the pier. He said something short to his father, but if there was an answer, Greg didn't catch it. As he edged up the throttle, Noah

stalked past the wheelhouse. Stationing himself on the far side of the bow from Zoe Ballard's niece, he folded his arms and stared into the fog.

Quiet and graceful for a boat that was broad in the stern, the *Amelia Celeste* slipped through the harbor at headway speed. Although two hours remained yet of daylight, the thick fog had drained the world of color. Only the occasional shadow of a boat at its mooring altered the pale gray, as did the clink of a hook the silence, but these were quickly absorbed by the mist. Once past the granite breakwater, the waves picked up and the radar came on, little green dots marking the spot where a boat, rock, or channel marker would be. Painted buoys bobbed under the fog, signaling traps on the ocean floor. The *Amelia Celeste* gave these as wide a berth as possible, throttling up to speed only when she was safely in the channel.

The chop was fair to middlin', not overly taxing to the boat, even riding low as she was. In turn, she elicited little noise beyond the soft thrum of her engine, the steady rush of water as the point of the bow cut through the waves, and an occasional exchange of words in the stern. Nothing echoed. The fog had a muting effect, swallowing resonance with an open throat.

Far to starboard, a hum simmered in the thick soup before growing into the growl of a motor. In no time, it had grown louder and more commanding, belying the soundproofing of the fog, just as its owner meant it to do. That owner was Artie Jones, and he called his boat *The Beast*. Infamous in an area dominated by the boats of working fishermen, it was a long, sleek racer of the alpha-male type, whose aerodynamic purple body shot over the surface of the water driven by twin engines putting out a whopping 1,100 horses. It was capable of going seventy-five without effort, and from the rising thunder of those twin Mercs, it was approaching that now.

Noah shot Greg a *What the hell?* look.

Bewildered, Greg shrugged. The fog yielded no sign of another boat in the area, but his radar screen painted a different picture. It showed *The Beast* tracing a large arc, having sped from starboard to a point astern of them now, crossing through the last of the wake left by the *Amelia Celeste* and heading off to the north. The rumble of the racer's engines faded into the fog.

One hand on a bronze spoke of the wheel and one on the throttle, Greg kept the *Amelia Celeste* aimed at the island. Dreaming of ribs, he forgot about Artie Jones until the sound of *The Beast* rose again. No mistaking the deep chain-saw growl that came from the monster engines in the tail. The racer was headed back their way. Radar confirmed it.

He picked up the handset of the VHF, which was preset to the channel the local boaters used. 'What the hell are you doing, Artie?' he called, more in annoyance than anything else, because he didn't care how macho it was, no man in his right mind would be playing chicken this way in the fog.

Artie didn't answer. The roar of those twin engines increased.

Greg sounded his horn, though he knew it didn't have a chance of being heard above the noise. His eyes went back and forth from the radar screen, which pinpointed the racer, to the GPS

screen, which pinpointed the *Amelia Celeste*. It occurred to him that if he didn't do something, the two boats would collide. For the life of him, though, he didn't know what to do. Artie wasn't behaving rationally. The radar screen showed him cutting through prime fishing grounds, plowing past buoys at a speed that was sure to be destroying the pot warp tied to hundreds of traps. If he was aiming at the *Amelia Celeste*, playing some kind of perverted game, he had the speed to follow wherever she turned.

'Artie, what the *hell* — throttle down and get out of the way!' he shouted, uncaring that he might alarm his passengers, because what with the way they were all staring wide-eyed into the fog in the direction of the oncoming howl, they were already highly alarmed.

He sounded the horn again and again, to no avail.

What to do, with the island barely a mile away, the responsibility of nine people in his hands, and Artie Jones a loose canon in his muscle boat, capable of calling on all those horses, shooting off like a bullet with his bow in the air, propelled who knew where in the fog at a speed faster than the *Amelia Celeste* could ever hope to move?

Studying the radar screen for a final few seconds, Greg tried to guess where *The Beast* would go based on where it had been and what it could do. Then he made a judgment call. Unable to outrun the powerful boat, he yanked back on his own throttle to let *The Beast* pass.

It would have worked, had *The Beast* continued along its established arc. What Greg couldn't possibly have known, though, much less plugged into the equation, was that Artie had been hugging the wheel of his beloved machine at the moment his heart stopped and was slumped, frozen against it, unconscious at the end — but that at the same moment the *Amelia Celeste* made her defensive move, his lifeless body began to slide sideways, pulling the wheel along with it.

Matthew Crane knew what had happened the instant he heard the explosion. He had been in his usual spot on the deck of the Harbor Grill, nursing a whiskey while he waited for the *Amelia Celeste* to emerge from the fog and glide to the pier. His ear was trained to catch the drone of her engine, distant as it was at the mile point, and he hadn't been able to miss *The Beast*. He had plotted its course in his mind's eye, had foreseen bisecting paths and felt the same sense of dread he had known when his flesh-and-blood Amelia Celeste had been admitted to the hospital that final time. The horrific boom had barely died when he was hurrying down the steps and across the beach. Scrambling onto the dock, he ran waving and shouting toward the handful of men who had just returned from hauling traps, and who were themselves staring into the fog in alarm.

Those men set off within minutes, reaching the scene quickly enough to fish the first two survivors from the water before they were overcome by smoke from the fire or cold from the sea. The third survivor was picked up by another boat. None of the three suffered more than minor bruises, a true miracle given the fate of the rest.

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