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WITH PAUL KEMPRECOS



## POLAR SHIFT

A KURT AUSTIN ADVENTURE

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Dark Watch

by

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# Prologue

*East Prussia, 1944*

The Mercedes-Benz 770 W150 Grosser Tourenwagen weighed more than four tons and was armored like a Panzer. But the seven-passenger limousine seemed to float like a ghost over the cushion of new-fallen snow, gliding with unlit headlights past slumbering cornfields that sparkled in the blue light of the moon.

As the car neared a darkened farmhouse that lay in a gentle hollow, the driver gently touched the brakes. The car slowed to the speed of a walk and approached the low-slung, fieldstone structure with the stealth of a cat stalking a mouse.

The driver gazed thoughtfully through the frosted windshield with eyes the color of arctic ice. The building appeared to be abandoned, but he knew better than to take chances. White paint had been hastily slapped over the car's sculpted black steel body. The crude attempt at camouflage made the automobile practically invisible to the Stormovic ground attack planes that prowled the skies like angry hawks, but the Mercedes had barely escaped the Russian patrols that materialized out of the snow like wraiths. Rifle

bullets had cratered the armor in a dozen places.

So he waited.

The man stretched out on the spacious backseat of the four-door sedan had felt the car decelerate. He sat up and blinked the sleep out of his eyes.

‘What is it?’ he asked, speaking German with a Hungarian accent. His voice was fuzzy from sleep.

The driver hushed his passenger. ‘Something’s not –’

The rattle of gunfire shattered the glassy stillness of the night.

The driver mashed the brake pedal. The massive vehicle hissed to a skidding stop about fifty yards from the farmhouse. He switched off the engine and snatched the 9 mm Luger pistol from the front seat. His fingers tightened on the Luger’s grip as a burly figure dressed in the olive uniform and fur hat of the Red Army staggered out the front door of the farmhouse.

The soldier was clutching his arm and bellowing like a bee-stung bull.

‘*Damn fascist whore!*’ he bawled repeatedly. His voice was hoarse with rage and pain.

The Russian soldier had broken into the farmhouse only minutes before. The farm couple had been hiding in a closet, huddling under a blanket like children afraid of the dark. He had put a bullet in the husband and turned his attention to the woman, who had fled into the tiny kitchen.

Shouldering his weapon, he had crooked his

finger and crooned, '*Frau, komm,*' the soothing prelude to rape.

The soldier's vodka-soaked brain failed to warn him that he was in danger. The farmer's wife hadn't begged for mercy or burst into tears like the other women he had raped and murdered. She had glared at him with hot eyes, whipped a carving knife out from behind her back and slashed at his face. He had seen a flash of steel in the moonlight streaming through the windows and had thrown up his left arm to defend himself, but the sharp blade sliced through his sleeve and forearm. He punched her to the floor with his other hand. Even then she had lunged for the knife. Consumed with white-hot fury, he cut her in half with frenzied bursts of his PPS-43 machine gun.

As he stood outside the farmhouse, the soldier examined his wound. The cut was not severe, and the blood flow was down to a trickle. He pulled a pint of homemade vodka from his pocket and drained the bottle. The fiery hundred-proof liquor trickling down his throat helped numb the searing pain in his arm. He tossed the empty bottle into the snow, wiped his mouth with the back of his glove and set off to rejoin his comrades. He would brag that he'd been wounded fighting a gang of fascists.

The soldier trudged a few steps in the snow only to stop as his sharp ears picked up the *tick-tick* sound of the car's engine cooling down. He squinted at the large grayish smudge in the moon shadows.

A suspicious scowl appeared on his broad peasant face. He slipped his machine gun from his shoulder and brought it to bear on the vague object. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Four headlights blazed on. The powerful in-line eight-cylinder engine roared into life and the car sprang forward, its rear end fishtailing in the snow. The Russian tried to dodge the oncoming vehicle. The corner of the heavy bumper caught his leg, and he was thrown to the side of the road.

The car slid to a stop, the door opened and the driver got out. The tall man walked through the snow to the soldier, his black leather overcoat slapping softly against his thighs. The man had a long face and a lantern jaw. His close-cropped blond hair was uncovered even though the temperature was below zero.

He squatted next to the stricken man.

‘Are you hurt, *tovarich*?’ he said in Russian. His voice was deep and resonant, and he spoke with the detached sympathy of a physician.

The soldier groaned. He couldn’t believe his bad luck. First that German bitch with the knife, now this.

He cursed through spittle-covered lips. ‘Damn your mother! Of *course* I’m hurt.’

The tall man lit a cigarette and placed it between the Russian’s lips. ‘Is there anyone in the farmhouse?’

The soldier took a deep drag and exhaled through

his nostrils. He assumed that the stranger was one of the political officers who infested the army like fleas.

‘Two fascists,’ the Russian said. ‘A man and a woman.’

The stranger went inside the farmhouse and emerged minutes later.

‘What happened?’ he said, again kneeling by the soldier’s side.

‘I shot the man. The fascist witch came after me with a knife.’

‘Good work.’ He patted the Russian on the shoulder. ‘You’re here alone?’

The soldier growled like a dog with his bone. ‘I don’t share my loot or my women.’

‘What is your unit?’

‘General Galitsky’s Eleventh Guards army,’ the soldier replied with pride in his voice.

‘You attacked Nemmersdorf on the border?’

The soldier bared his bad teeth. ‘We nailed the fascists to their barns. Men, women and children. You should have heard the fascist dogs scream for mercy.’

The tall man nodded. ‘Well done. I can take you to your comrades. Where are they?’

‘Close by. Getting ready for another push west.’

The tall man gazed toward a distant line of trees. The rumble of huge T-34 battle tanks was like distant thunder. ‘Where are the Germans?’

‘The swine are running for their lives.’ The soldier puffed on the cigarette. ‘Long live Mother Russia.’

‘Yes,’ the tall man said. ‘Long live Mother Russia.’ He reached into his overcoat, pulled out the Lugar and placed the muzzle against the soldier’s temple. ‘*Auf Wiedersehen*, comrade.’

The pistol barked once. The stranger slid the smoking pistol into its holster and returned to the car. As he got behind the wheel, a hoarse cry came from the passenger in the backseat.

‘You killed that soldier in cold blood!’

The dark-haired man was in his mid-thirties, and he had the handsome chiseled face of an actor. A thin mustache adorned a sensitive mouth. But there was nothing delicate about the way his expressive gray eyes burned with anger.

‘I simply helped another Ivan sacrifice himself for the greater glory of Mother Russia,’ the driver said, speaking in German.

‘I understand this is war,’ the passenger said, his voice tight with emotion. ‘But even you must admit the Russians are human, like us.’

‘Yes, Professor Kovacs, we are *very* much alike. We have committed unspeakable atrocities against their people, and now they are taking their revenge.’ He described the horrors of the Nemmersdorf massacre.

‘I’m sorry for those people,’ Kovacs said in a subdued tone, ‘but the fact that the Russians behave like animals doesn’t mean that the rest of the world must descend into savagery.’

The driver heaved a heavy sigh. ‘The front is

beyond that ridge,' he said. 'You are welcome to discuss the goodness of mankind with your Russian friends. I won't stop you.'

The professor drew in on himself like an oyster.

The driver glanced in the rearview mirror and chuckled to himself.

'A wise decision.' He lit a cigarette, bending low to shield the light from his match. 'Let me explain the situation. The Red Army has crossed the border and blown through the German front as if it were made of fog. Nearly all the inhabitants of this lovely countryside have fled their homes and fields. Our valiant army has been fighting a rearguard action as it runs for its life. The Russians have a ten-to-one advantage in men and arms, and they are cutting off all land routes west as they race toward Berlin. Millions of people are on the move to the coast, where the only escape is by sea.'

'God help us all,' the professor said.

'*He* seems to have evacuated East Prussia as well. Consider yourself a fortunate man,' the driver said cheerfully. He backed the car up, threw the shift into low gear and drove around the Russian's body. 'You are seeing history.'

The car headed west, entering the no-man's-land between the advancing Russian juggernaut and the retreating Germans. The Mercedes flew along the roads, skirting deserted villages and farms. The frozen countryside was surreal, as if it had been

tilted on its side and emptied of all human life. The travelers stopped only to refuel from the spare gas tanks the car carried in its trunk and to relieve themselves.

Tracks began to appear in the snow. A short while later, the car caught up with the tail end of the retreat. The strategic withdrawal had become a full-fledged rout of army trucks and tanks that lumbered along through the falling snow in a slow-moving river of soldiers and refugees.

The luckier refugees rode on tractors or horse-drawn carts. Others walked, pushing wheelbarrows piled with personal possessions through the snow. Many had escaped with only the clothes on their backs.

The Mercedes rode up on the edge of the road, and its deep tire treads dug into the snow. The car kept moving until it passed the head of the retreat. Around dawn, the mud-splattered car limped into Gdynia like a wounded rhino seeking shelter in a thicket.

The Germans had occupied Gdynia in 1939, expelled fifty thousand Poles and renamed the bustling seaport *Gotenhafen*, after the Goths. The harbor was transformed into a navy base, primarily for submarines. A branch of the Kiel shipyard was established to turn out new U-boats that were matched with crews trained in nearby waters and sent to sink Allied ships in the Atlantic.

Under orders from Gross Admiral Karl Doenitz,

an eclectic flotilla had been assembled at Gdynia in preparation for the evacuation. The fleet included some of the finest passenger liners in Germany, cargo ships, fishing boats and private vessels. Doenitz wanted his submarine and other naval personnel rescued so they could continue to fight. Eventually, more than two million civilians and military personnel would be transported west.

The Mercedes made its way through the city. A bitterly cold wind was blowing in from the Baltic Sea, whipping snowflakes into clouds of icy, stinging nettles. Despite the frostbite conditions, the city's streets were as crowded as on a summer's day. Refugees and prisoners of war slogged through deep drifts in futile search of shelter. Relief stations were overwhelmed with long lines of hungry refugees waiting for a crust of bread or a cup of hot soup.

Wagons piled high with passengers and goods clogged the narrow streets. Refugees streamed from the train station to join the throngs who had arrived on foot. Muffled under layers of clothing, they resembled strange snow creatures. Children were pulled along on makeshift sleds.

The car was capable of speeds reaching 170 kilometers per hour, but it soon became bogged down in traffic. The driver cursed and leaned on the horn. The heavy steel bumper failed to nudge the refugees out of the way. Frustrated at the glacial pace, the driver brought the car to a complete halt. He got out and opened the rear door.

‘Come, Professor,’ he said, rousting his passenger. ‘Time for a stroll.’

Abandoning the Mercedes in the middle of the street, the driver bulled his way through the crowd. He kept a firm hand on the professor’s arm, yelled at people to make way and shouldered them aside when they didn’t move fast enough.

Eventually, they made their way to the waterfront where more than sixty thousand refugees had gathered, hoping to get aboard one of the vessels lined up at the piers or anchored in the harbor.

‘Take a good look,’ the driver said, surveying the sight with a grim smile. ‘The religious scholars have been all wrong. You can plainly see that it is *cold*, not hot, in Hell.’

The professor was convinced he was in the hands of a madman. Before Kovacs could reply, the driver had him in tow once more. They wove their way through a snow-covered settlement of tents fashioned from blankets and dodged scores of starving horses and dogs abandoned by their owners. Wagons cluttered the docks. Lines of stretchers carried wounded soldiers brought in from the east aboard ambulance trains. Armed guards stood at each gangway and turned away unauthorized passengers.

The driver cut in front of a passenger line. The steel-helmeted sentry manning the checkpoint raised his rifle to bar the way. The driver waved a sheet of paper printed in heavy Gothic type under

the sentry's nose. The guard read the document, snapped to attention and pointed along the dock.

The professor didn't move. He had been watching someone on board the ship anchored at the dock throw a bundle down to the crowd on the pier. The throw was short and the bundle fell into the water. A wailing went up from the crowd.

'What's happening?' the professor said.

The guard barely glanced in the direction of the commotion. 'Refugees with a baby can get on board. They toss the baby back down and use it as a boarding pass over and over. Sometimes they miss and the baby goes in the water.'

'How gruesome,' the professor said with a shudder.

The guard shrugged. 'You'd better get moving. Once the snow stops, the Reds will send their planes to bomb and strafe. Good luck.' He raised his rifle to bar the next person in line.

The magic document got Kovacs and the driver past a pair of tough-looking SS officers who were looking for able-bodied men to press into duty on the front. They eventually reached a ramp leading onto a ferry crammed with wounded soldiers. The driver again showed his documents to a guard, who told them to hurry aboard.

As the overloaded ferry left the dock, it was watched by a man wearing the uniform of the naval medical corps. He had been helping to load the wounded on

board, but he slipped through the mob and away from the waterfront to a maritime junkyard.

He climbed onto a rotting derelict of a fishing boat and went below. He pulled a crank-operated radio from a galley cupboard, fired it up and muttered a few sentences in Russian. He heard the reply against the crackle of static, replaced the radio and headed back to the ferry dock.

The ferry carrying Kovacs and his tall companion had come around to the seaward side of a vessel. The ship had been drawn several yards from the dock to keep desperate refugees from sneaking aboard. As the ferry passed under the ship's bow, the professor looked up. Printed in Gothic letters on the navy-gray hull was the name *Wilhelm Gustloff*.

A gangway was lowered and the wounded were carried aboard the ship. Then the other passengers scrambled up the gangway. They wore smiles of relief on their faces and prayers of thanks on their lips. The German fatherland was only a few days' cruise away.

None of the happy passengers could have known that they had just boarded a floating tomb.

Captain Third Class Sasha Marinesko peered through the periscope of the Submarine S-13, his dark brow furrowed in a deep scowl.

*Nothing.*

Not a German transport in sight. The gray sea was as empty as the pockets of a sailor returning from

shore leave. Not even a stinking rowboat to shoot at. The captain thought of the twelve unused torpedoes aboard the Soviet sub and his anger festered like an open sore.

Soviet naval headquarters had said that the Red Army offensive against Danzig would force a major sea evacuation. The S-13 was one of three Soviet subs ordered to wait for the expected exodus off Memel, a port still held by the Germans.

When Marinesko learned that Memel had been captured, he called his officers together. He told them he had decided to head toward the Bay of Danzig, where the evacuation convoys were more likely to be found.

Not one man objected. Officers and crew were well aware that the success of their mission could mean the difference between a hero's welcome and a one-way ticket to Siberia.

Days earlier, the captain had run afoul of the secret police, the NKGB. He had left the base without permission. He was out whoring on January 2 when orders had come down from Stalin for the subs to sail into the Baltic and wreak havoc among the convoys. But the captain was on a three-day bender in the brothels and bars of the Finnish port of Turku. He returned to the S-13 a day after it was supposed to sail.

The NKGB was waiting. They became even more suspicious when he said he could not remember the details of his drunken binge. Marinesko was a cocky

and tough submarine skipper who had been awarded the orders of Lenin and the Red Banner. The swash-buckling submariner exploded in anger when the secret police accused him of spying and defection.

His sympathetic commanding officer put off the decision on conducting a court-martial. That ploy fell apart when the Ukrainians who served aboard the sub signed a petition asking that their captain be allowed to rejoin his boat. The commander knew that this display of simple loyalty would be seen as potential mutiny. Hoping to defuse a dangerous situation, he ordered the sub to sea while a decision was made about a court-martial.

Marinesko reasoned that if he sunk enough German ships, he and his men might avoid being severely punished.

Without telling naval headquarters of their plan, he and his men quietly put the S-13 on a course that would take it away from the patrol lanes and toward its fateful rendezvous with the German liner.

Friedrich Petersen, the *Gustloff*'s white-haired master captain, paced back and forth in the wardroom, sputtering like a walking pyrotechnics display. He stopped suddenly and shot a red-hot glare at a younger man dressed in the spit-and-polish uniform of the submarine division.

'May I remind you, Commander Zahn, that I am the captain of this ship and responsible for guiding this vessel and all aboard to safety.'

Bringing his iron discipline to bear, Submarine Commander Wilhelm Zahn reached down and scratched behind the ear of Hassan, the big Alsatian dog at his side. 'And may I remind *you*, captain, that the *Gustloff* has been under my command as a submarine base ship since 1942. I am the senior naval officer aboard. Besides, you forget your oath not to command a ship at sea.'

Petersen had signed the agreement as a condition of his repatriation after being captured by the British. The oath was a formality because the British thought he was too old to be fit for service. At the age of sixty-seven, he knew his career was washed up no matter the outcome of the war. He was a *Leigerkapitän*, the 'sleeping captain,' of the *Gustloff*. But he took some comfort in the knowledge that the younger man had been withdrawn from active operations after he botched the sinking of the British ship *Nelson*.

'Nonetheless, Captain, under your supervision the *Gustloff* has never left the dock,' he said. 'A floating classroom and barracks anchored in one place is a far cry from a ship at sea. I have the highest regard for the submarine service, but you cannot argue that I am the only one qualified to take the vessel to sea.'

Petersen had commanded the liner once, on a peacetime voyage, and would never have been allowed to take the helm of the *Gustloff* under ordinary circumstances. Zahn bristled at the thought of being under the command of a civilian. German

submariners considered themselves an elite group.

‘Still, I am the ranking military officer aboard. Perhaps you have noticed that we have antiaircraft guns mounted on the deck,’ Zahn retorted. ‘This vessel is technically a warship.’

The captain replied with an indulgent smile. ‘An odd sort of warship. Perhaps *you* have noticed that we are carrying thousands of refugees, a mission more fitting of the merchant marine transport.’

‘You neglected to mention the fifteen hundred submariners who must be evacuated so they can defend the Reich.’

‘I would be glad to acquiesce to your wishes if you show me written orders to do so.’ Petersen knew perfectly well that in the confusion surrounding the evacuation, no orders existed.

Zahn’s complexion turned the color of a cooked beet. His opposition went beyond personal animosity. Zahn had serious doubts about Petersen’s ability to run the ship with the inexperienced polyglot crew at his command. He wanted to call the captain a burned-out fool, but his stern discipline again took hold. He turned to the other officers, who had been witnessing the uncomfortable confrontation.

‘This will be no “Strength Through Joy” cruise,’ Zahn said. ‘All of us, navy and merchant marine officers, have a difficult task and bear heavy responsibility. Our duty is to do everything possible to make things easier for the refugees, and I expect the crew to go out of their way to be helpful.’

He clicked his heels and saluted Petersen, then strode from the wardroom followed by his faithful Alsatian.

The guard at the top of the gangway had glanced at the tall man's document and handed it to an officer supervising the boarding of the wounded.

The officer took his time reading the letter. Finally, he said, 'Herr Koch thinks highly of you.'

Erich Koch was the murderous *Gauleiter* who had refused to evacuate East Prussia while preparing his own escape on a ship carrying looted treasure.

'I like to think that I have earned his respect.'

The officer hailed a ship's steward and explained the situation. The steward shrugged and led the way along the crowded promenade deck, and then down three levels. He opened the door to a cabin that contained two bunks and a sink. The room was too small for the three of them to enter at the same time.

'Not exactly the *Führer* suite,' the steward said. 'But you're lucky to have it. The head is four doors down.'

The tall man glanced around the cabin. 'This will do. Now, see if you can get us some food.'

A flush came to the steward's cheeks. He was tired of being ordered about by VIPs traveling in relative comfort while ordinary mortals had to suffer. But something in the tall man's cold blue eyes warned him not to argue. He returned within fifteen

minutes with two bowls of hot vegetable soup and chunks of hard bread.

The two men devoured their food in silence. The professor finished first and put his bowl aside. His eyes were glazed with exhaustion, but his mind was still alert.

‘What is this ship?’ he said.

The tall man scraped the bottom of his bowl with the last of his bread, then lit up a cigarette. ‘Welcome to the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, the pride of Germany’s “Strength Through Joy” movement.’

The movement was an ongoing propaganda stunt to demonstrate the benefits of National Socialism to German workers. Kovacs glanced around at the spartan accommodations. ‘I don’t see much strength or joy.’

‘Nonetheless, the *Gustloff* will again one day transport happy German laborers and party faithful to sunny Italy.’

‘I can hardly wait. You haven’t told me where we’re going.’

‘Far beyond the reach of the Red Army. Your work is too important to fall into Russian hands. The Reich will take good care of you.’

‘It looks as if the Reich is having trouble taking care of its own people.’

‘A temporary setback. Your welfare is my utmost priority.’

‘I’m not concerned about *my* welfare.’ Kovacs

hadn't seen his wife and young son for months. Only their infrequent letters had kept hope alive.

'Your family?' The tall man regarded him with a steady gaze. 'Have no worry. This will soon be over. I suggest you get some sleep. No, that's an order.'

He stretched out on the bunk, hands clasped behind his head, and shut his eyes. Kovacs was not deceived. His companion seldom slept and could snap fully awake at the slightest provocation.

Kovacs examined the man's face. He could have been in his early twenties, although he looked older. He had the long head and craggy profile portrayed in propaganda posters as the Aryan ideal.

Kovacs shuddered, remembering the cold-blooded way the Russian soldier had been dispatched. The past few days had been a blur. The tall man had arrived at the lab during a snowstorm and produced a document authorizing the release of Professor Kovacs. He had introduced himself only as Karl, and told Kovacs to gather his belongings. Then came the madcap dash across the frozen countryside and the narrow escapes from Russian patrols. Now this miserable ship.

The food had made Kovacs drowsy. His eyelids drooped, and he drifted off into a deep sleep.

While the professor slept, a squad of military police swept the *Gustloff* in search of deserters. The ship was cleared for departure, and a harbor pilot came

aboard. At around one in the afternoon, the deckhands cast off the mooring lines. Four tugs came alongside and began to pull the ship away from the dock.

A fleet of small boats, loaded mostly with women and children, blocked the way. The ship stopped and took the refugees aboard. The *Gustloff* normally carried 1,465 passengers, served by a crew of four hundred. As she began this voyage, the once-elegant liner was carrying eight thousand passengers.

The ship headed into the open sea, and dropped anchor late in the afternoon to rendezvous with another liner, the *Hansa*, to wait for their escorts. The *Hansa* had developed engine trouble and never showed up. Naval Command was worried that the *Gustloff* would be exposed to danger in open waters and told the ship to go it alone.

The liner plowed into the whitecapped waters of the Baltic, fighting a stiff northwest wind. Hailstones rattled the windows of the bridge, where Commander Zahn seethed with anger as he looked down at the two so-called escorts that had been sent to protect the liner.

The ship was built for southern climes, but, with any luck, it could survive bad weather. What it could not survive was *stupidity*. Naval Command had sent the liner into harm's way with an old torpedo boat called the *Lowe*, or 'Lion,' and the T19, a worn-out torpedo recovery vessel, as escorts. Zahn was thinking that the situation could not get any worse when

the T19 radioed that it had developed a leak and was returning to the base.

Zahn went to Captain Petersen and the other officers gathered in the bridge.

‘In view of our escort situation, I suggest that we pursue a zigzag course at high speed,’ he said.

Petersen scoffed at the suggestion. ‘Impossible. The *Wilhelm Gustloff* is a twenty-four-thousand-ton ocean liner. We cannot go from one tack to the other like a drunken sailor.’

‘Then we must outrun any U-boats with our superior speed. We can take the direct, deepwater route at the full speed of sixteen knots.’

‘I know this ship. Even without the bomb damage to the propeller casings, there would be no way we could reach and maintain sixteen knots without blowing out our bearings,’ Petersen said.

Zahn could see the veins bulging in the captain’s neck. He stared through the bridge windows at the old torpedo boat leading the way. ‘In that case,’ he said in a voice that seemed to echo in a tomb, ‘God help us all.’

‘Professor, wake up.’ The voice was hard-edged, urgent.

Kovacs opened his eyes and saw Karl bending over him. He sat up and rubbed his cheeks as if he could squeeze the sleep out of them.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’ve been talking to people. My God, what a

mess! There are two captains and they fight all the time. Not enough lifeboats. The ship's engines are barely keeping us up to speed. The stupid submarine division ordered the ship to sail with an old torpedo boat escort that looks as if it was left over from the last war. The damned fools have got the ship's navigation lights on.'

Kovacs saw an uncharacteristic alarm in the marble features.

'How long have I slept?'

'It's nighttime. We're on the open sea.' Karl shoved a dark blue life jacket at Kovacs and slipped into a similar jacket.

'Now what do we do?'

'Stay here. I want to check the lifeboat situation.' He tossed Kovacs a pack of cigarettes. 'Be my guest.'

'I don't smoke.'

Karl paused in the open doorway. 'Maybe it's time you did.' Then he was gone.

Kovacs spilled a cigarette from the pack and lit up. He had quit smoking years ago, when he got married. He coughed as the smoke filled his lungs, and he felt dizzy from the strong tobacco, but he recalled with delicious pleasure the innocent debauchery of his college days.

He finished the cigarette, thought of lighting up another but decided against it. He had not had a bath in days, and his body itched in a dozen places. He washed his face in the sink and was drying his

hands on a threadbare towel when there was a knock at the door.

‘Professor Kovacs?’ a muffled voice said.

‘Yes.’

The door opened, and the professor gasped. Standing in the doorway was the ugliest woman he had ever seen. She was more than six feet tall, with broad shoulders straining the seams of a black Persian lamb coat. Her wide mouth was painted in bright red lipstick, and, with such heavily rouged lips, she looked like a circus clown.

‘Pardon my appearance,’ she said in an unmistakably male voice. ‘This is not an easy ship to get aboard. I had to resort to this silly disguise, and a few bribes.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Not important. What is important is *your* name. You are Professor Lazlo Kovacs, the great German-Hungarian electrical genius.’

Kovacs grew wary. ‘I am Lazlo Kovacs. I consider myself to be Hungarian.’

‘Splendid! You are the author of the paper on electromagnetism that electrified the scientific world.’

Kovacs’s antenna quivered. The paper published in an obscure scientific journal had brought him to the attention of the Germans, who kidnapped him and his family. He said nothing.

‘Never mind,’ the man said genially, the clown smile even broader. ‘I can see that I have the right

man.' He reached under his fur coat and pulled out a pistol. 'I'm sorry to be rude, Professor Kovacs, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to kill you.'

'Kill me? Why? I don't even know you.'

'But *I* know you. Or, rather, my superiors in the NKGB know you. As soon as our glorious Red Army forces crossed the border we sent a special squad to find you, but you had already left the lab.'

'You're *Russian*?'

'Yes, of course. We would love to have you come and work for us. Had we been able to intercept you before you boarded the ship, you would be enjoying Soviet hospitality. But now I can't get you off the ship, and we can't let you and your work fall into German hands again. No, no. It just wouldn't do.' The smile vanished.

Kovacs was too stunned to be afraid, even when the pistol came up and the muzzle pointed at his heart.

Marinesko could hardly believe his good luck. He had been standing on the S-13's conning tower, oblivious to the freezing wind and spray that stung his face, when the snow cleared and he saw the enormous silhouette of an ocean liner. The liner appeared to be accompanied by a smaller boat.

The submarine was riding on the surface in heavy seas. Its crew had been at battle stations since sighting the lights from boats moving against the coast. The captain had ordered the submarine's

buoyancy reduced so that it would ride lower in the water and thus evade radar.

Reasoning that the ships would never expect an attack from shore, he ordered his crew to bring the sub around the back of the convoy and run a course parallel to the liner and its escort. Two hours later, Marinesko turned the S-13 toward his target. As it closed in on the port side of the liner, he gave the order to fire.

In quick succession, three torpedoes left their bow tubes and streaked toward the unprotected hull of the liner.

The door opened, and Karl stepped into the cabin. He had been outside, listening to the murmur of male voices. He was puzzled when he saw the woman standing with her back to him. He glanced at Kovacs, still holding the towel, and he read the fear in the professor's face.

The Russian felt the blast of cold air through the open door. He whirled and shot without aiming. Karl was a millisecond ahead of him. He had put his head down and rammed it into the Russian's midsection.

The blow should have cracked the assassin's rib cage, but the heavy fur coat and the stiff corset he wore were like padded armor. The head butt only knocked the wind out of him. He crashed into a bunk, landing on his side. His wig fell off to reveal short black hair. He got off another shot that nicked Karl's right shoulder muscle at the base of the neck.

Karl lunged at the assassin, and with his left hand groped for the throat. Blood from his wound spattered them both. The assassin brought his foot up and kicked Karl in the chest. He reeled back, tripped and fell onto his back.

Kovacs grabbed the soup bowl from the sink and threw it at the assassin's face. The bowl bounced harmlessly off the man's cheekbone. He laughed. 'I'll tend to you next.' He aimed the pistol at Karl.

*Va-room!*

A muffled explosion thundered off the walls. The deck slanted at a sharp angle to starboard. Kovacs was flung to his knees. Unused to the high-heeled boots on his feet, the assassin lost his balance. He fell on top of Karl, who grabbed the man's wrist, pulled it to his mouth and sank his teeth into cartilage and muscle. The pistol clunked to the deck.

*Va-room! Va-room!*

The ship shuddered from two more massive explosions. The assassin tried to rise, but again lost his balance when the ship lurched to port. He teetered on the verge of standing. Karl kicked him in the ankle. The Russian let out an unladylike yell and crashed to the floor. His head came to rest against the metal base of the bunk.

Karl braced himself against the sink pipes and drove his hobnail boot into the man's throat, crushing his larynx. The man flailed at Karl's leg, his eyes bulged, his face went dark red, then purple, and then he died.

Karl staggered to his feet.

‘We’ve got to get out of here,’ he said. ‘The ship’s been torpedoed.’

He muscled Kovacs from the cabin into the passageway, where there was pandemonium. The corridor was filled with panic-stricken passengers. Their screams and shouts echoed off the walls. The ringing of alarm bells contributed to the din. The emergency lights were on, but a pall of smoke produced from the explosions made it difficult to see.

The main stairway was clogged with an unmoving crush of panicked passengers. Many of them had stopped in their tracks as they gagged from the throat-burning fumes.

The mob was trying to push against the river of water that spilled down the stairs. Karl opened an unmarked steel door, dragged Kovacs into a dark space and shut the door behind them. The professor felt his hand being guided to the rung of a ladder.

‘Climb,’ Karl ordered.

Kovacs dumbly obeyed, ascending until his head hit a hatch. Karl shouted from below to open the hatch cover, and to keep climbing. They went up a second ladder. Kovacs pushed another cover open. Cold air and wind-driven snowflakes lashed his face. He climbed through the hatch, and helped Karl into the open.

Kovacs looked around in bewilderment. ‘Where are we?’

‘On the boat deck. This way.’

The icy, sloping deck was eerily quiet, compared to the horror in the third-class section. The few people they saw were the privileged passengers whose cabins were on the boat deck. Some were clustered around a motorized pinnace, a sturdy boat built to cruise in the Norwegian fjords. Crew members had been chipping away with hammers and axes at the ice on the davits.

With the davit fastenings finally freed, the crewmen surged aboard, pushing aside women, some of them pregnant. Children and wounded soldiers didn’t have a chance. Karl drew his pistol and fired a warning shot in the air. The crewmen hesitated, but only for a second, before they continued to fight their way onto the lifeboat. Karl fired another shot, killing the first crewman who had climbed into the boat. The others ran for their lives.

Karl lifted a woman and her baby into the boat, then gave the professor a hand before climbing in himself. He allowed some crewmen aboard, so they could throw the dead man out and lower the boat to the water. The hooks attached to the lowering lines were unfastened and the motor started.

The heavily burdened boat wallowed as it moved slowly across the sea toward distant lights from a freighter that was headed their way. Karl ordered that the lifeboat stopped to pick up people floating in the water. Soon it became even more dangerously overloaded. One of the crewmen protested.

‘There’s no room in the boat,’ he yelled.

Karl shot him between the eyes. ‘There’s room now,’ he said, and ordered the other crewmen to toss the body overboard. Satisfied that the short-lived mutiny was under control, he squeezed next to Kovacs.

‘You’re well, Professor?’

‘I’m fine.’ He stared at Karl. ‘You’re a surprising man.’

‘I try to be. Never let your enemies know what to expect.’

‘I’m not talking about that. I saw you help the wounded and women. You cradled that baby as if it were your own.’

‘Things are not always what they seem, my friend.’ He reached into his coat and brought out a packet wrapped in a waterproof rubber pouch. ‘Take these papers. You are no longer Lazlo Kovacs but a German national who has lived in Hungary. You have only a slight accent and will easily pass. I want you to disappear into the crowd. Become another refugee. Make your way toward the British and American lines.’

‘Who are you?’

‘A friend.’

‘Why should I believe that?’

‘As I said, things are not always what they seem. I am part of a circle that has been fighting the Nazi animals long before the Russians.’

Light dawned in the professor’s eyes. ‘The *Kreisau*

*Circle?* He had heard rumors of the secretive opposition group.

Karl brought his finger to his lips. 'We are still in enemy territory,' he said with a lowered voice.

Kovacs clutched Karl's arm. 'Can you get my family to safety as well?'

'I am afraid it is too late for that. Your family is no more.'

'But the letters –'

'They were clever forgeries, so you would not lose heart and give up your work.'

Kovacs stared into the night with a stunned expression on his face.

Karl grabbed the professor by the lapel and whispered in his ear. 'You must forget your work for your own good and the welfare of mankind. We cannot risk that it will fall into the wrong hands.'

The professor nodded dumbly. The boat banged up against the freighter's hull. A ladder was lowered. Karl ordered the reluctant crewmen to take the boat out again to pick up more survivors. From the freighter's deck, Kovacs watched the boat push off. Karl gave one last wave and the boat disappeared behind a veil of falling snow.

In the distance, Kovacs saw the lights of the liner, which had turned onto its port side, so that the funnel was parallel to the sea. The boiler exploded as the ship slipped below the surface about an hour after being torpedoed. In that short time, five times more lives were lost on the *Gustloff* than on the *Titanic*.

# I

## *The Atlantic Ocean, the present*

Those who laid eyes on the *Southern Belle* for the first time could be forgiven for wondering whether the person who had named the huge cargo ship possessed a warped sense of humor or simply bad eyesight. Despite a genteel name that suggested eyelash-fluttering, antebellum femininity, the *Belle* was, simply put, a metal monstrosity with nothing that hinted at female pulchritude.

The *Southern Belle* was one of a new generation of fast, seaworthy vessels being built in American shipyards after years of the United States taking a backseat to other shipbuilding countries. She was designed in San Diego and built in Biloxi. At seven hundred feet, she was longer than two football fields put together, with room enough to carry fifteen hundred containers.

The massive vessel was controlled from a towering superstructure on its aft deck. The hundred-foot-wide deckhouse, which resembled an apartment building, contained crew and officer quarters and mess halls, a hospital and treatment rooms, cargo offices and conference rooms.

With its glowing ranks of twenty-six-inch touch display screens, the *Belle's* bridge, on the top level of the six-deck superstructure, resembled a Las Vegas casino. The spacious center of operations reflected the new era in ship design. Computers were used to control every aspect of the integrated systems and functions.

But old habits die hard. The ship's captain, Pierre 'Pete' Beaumont, was peering through a pair of binoculars, still trusting his eyes despite the sophisticated electronic gadgetry at his command.

From his vantage point on the bridge, Beaumont had a panoramic view of the Atlantic storm that raged around his ship. Fierce, gale-force winds were kicking up waves as big as houses. The waves crashed over the bow and washed halfway across the stacks of containers tied down on the deck.

The extreme level of violence surrounding the ship would have sent lesser vessels scurrying for cover and given their captains sweaty palms. But Beaumont was as calm as if he were gliding in a gondola along the Grand Canal.

The soft-spoken Cajun loved storms. He reveled in the give-and-take between his ship and the elements. Watching the way the *Belle* blasted her way through the seas in an awesome display of power gave him an almost sensual thrill.

Beaumont was the vessel's first and only captain. He had watched the *Belle* being built and knew every nut and bolt on the ship. The ship had been

designed for the regular run between Europe and America, a route that took it across some of the most cantankerous ocean on the face of the earth. He was confident that the tempest was well within the forces that the ship had been built to withstand.

The ship had loaded its cargo of synthetic rubber, fiber filaments, plastics and machinery in New Orleans, then sailed around Florida to a point halfway up the Atlantic coast, where it began on a straight-line course to Rotterdam.

The weather service had been right on the nose with its forecast. Gale-force winds had been predicted, developing into an Atlantic storm. The storm caught the ship about two hundred miles from land. Beaumont was unperturbed, even when the winds intensified. The ship had easily survived worse weather.

He was scanning the ocean when he stiffened suddenly and seemed to lean into the lenses. He lowered the binoculars, raised them again and muttered under his breath. Turning to his first officer, he said:

'Look at that section of ocean. Around two o'clock. Tell me if you see anything unusual.'

The officer was Bobby Joe Butler, a talented young seaman who hailed from Natchez. Butler had made no secret of his wish someday to command a ship like the *Belle*. Maybe even the *Belle* itself. Following the captain's lead, Butler surveyed the ocean around thirty degrees off starboard.

He saw only the gray, mottled water stretching

toward the misted horizon. Then, about a mile from the ship, he sighted a white line of foam at least twice as high as the sea in the background. Even as he watched, the mounding water grew rapidly in height as if it were drawing power from the surrounding waves.

‘Looks like a real big sea coming our way,’ Butler said in his Mississippi drawl.

‘How big do you estimate it to be?’

The younger man squinted through the lenses. ‘Average seas have been running around thirty feet. This looks to be double that. Wow! Have you ever seen anything this big?’

‘Never,’ the captain said. ‘Not in my whole life.’

The captain knew his ship could handle the wave if the *Belle* faced into it bow first to cut down the area of impact. The captain ordered the helmsman to program the auto-steer to face the oncoming wave and keep it steady. Then he grabbed the mike and flipped a switch on the console that would connect the bridge with speakers all over the ship.

‘Attention all hands. This is the captain. A giant rogue wave is about to hit the ship. Get to a secure location away from flying objects and hold on. The impact will be severe. Repeat. The impact will be *severe*.’

As a precaution, he ordered the radioman to broadcast an SOS. The ship could always send out a recall, if needed.

The green, white-veined wave was about a half

mile from the ship. 'Look at that,' Butler was saying. The sky was lit up by a series of brilliant flashes. 'Lightning?'

'Maybe,' the captain said. 'I'm more concerned about that damned sea!'

The wave's profile was unlike anything the captain had ever seen. Unlike most waves, which slope down at an angle from the crest, this one was almost straight up and down, like a moving wall.

The captain had a peculiar out-of-body sensation. Part of him watched the advancing wave in a disinterested, scientific fashion, fascinated by the size and power, while another part stood in helpless wonder at the immense, menacing power.

'It's still growing,' Butler said with unabashed awe.

The captain nodded. He guessed the wave had grown to a height of ninety feet, nearly three times as high as it was when it was first sighted. His face was ashen. Cracks were starting to appear in his rock-hard confidence. A ship the size of the *Belle* couldn't turn on a dime, and it was still facing the oncoming sea at an angle when the gigantic wave reared up like a living thing.

He was expecting the shock from the wave but was unprepared when a trough big enough to swallow his ship opened up in the ocean in front of him.

The captain looked into the abyss that had appeared before his eyes. 'It's like the end of the world,' he thought.

The ship tilted into the trough, slid down the side and buried its bow in the ocean. The captain fell against the forward bulkheads.

Rather than strike head-on, the wave collapsed on top of the ship, burying it under thousands of tons of water.

The pilothouse windows imploded under the pressure, and the entire Atlantic Ocean seemed to pour into the bridge. The blast of water hit the captain and the others on the bridge with the force of a hundred fire hoses. The bridge became a tangle of arms and legs. Books, pencils and seat cushions were thrown about.

Some of the water drained out through the windows, and the captain fought his way back to the controls. All the control screens were dead. The ship had lost its radar, gyro compasses and radio communication, but, most seriously, its power. All the instrumentation had become short-circuited. The steering gear was useless.

The captain went to a window and surveyed the physical damage. The bow had been destroyed, and the ship was listing. He suspected that the hull plating may have been penetrated. The lifeboats on the foredeck had been swept from their davits. The ship wallowed like a drunken hippopotamus.

The big wave seemed to have stirred up the seas around it like a demagogue rousing a mob. Waves rolled across the foredeck. Worse, with its engines having failed, the ship was lying transversely to

the seas, drifting in the worst possible position.

Having survived the wave, the ship lay with its side exposed, in danger of being 'holed,' in the colorful jargon of the sea.

The captain tried to remain optimistic. The *Southern Belle* could survive even with some compartments flooded. Someone would have heard the SOS. The ship could float for days, if necessary, until help arrived.

'*Captain.*' The first officer interrupted the captain's thoughts.

Butler was staring through the broken window. His eyes were locked in an unbelieving stare on a distant point. The captain's gaze followed Butler's pointing finger, and he began to tremble as the thrill of fear went through him.

Another horizontal line of foam was forming less than a quarter of a mile away.

The first airplane arrived two hours later. It circled over the sea and was soon joined by other planes. Then the rescue ships began to arrive, diverted from the shipping routes. The ships lined up three miles apart and combed the sea like a search party looking for a lost child in the woods. After days of searching, they found nothing.

The *Southern Belle*, one of the most advanced cargo ships ever designed and built, had simply vanished without a trace.

*Seattle, Washington*

The arrow-slim kayak flew across the sapphire surface of Puget Sound as if it had been shot from a bow. The broad-shouldered man in the snug cockpit seemed at one with the wooden craft. He dipped his paddles in the water with an easy, fluid motion, concentrating the power of his brawny arms into precise strokes that kept the kayak moving at a steady speed.

Sweat glistened on the kayaker's rugged, sun-burnished features. His piercing, light blue eyes, the color of coral under water, took in the broad expanse of the sound, the fog-shrouded San Juan Islands and, in the distance, the snowcapped Olympic Mountains. Kurt Austin gulped the salty air into his lungs and spread his lips in a wide grin. It felt good to be home.

Austin's duties as the director of the Special Assignments Team for the National Underwater and Marine Agency constantly took him to far-flung parts of the world. But he had acquired his taste for the sea on the waters around Seattle, where he was born. Puget Sound was as familiar to him as an old flame. He had sailed boats on the sound almost from the

day he could walk, and had raced boats since he was ten. His big love was racing boats; he owned four of them: an eight-ton catamaran, capable of speeds of more than a hundred miles an hour; a smaller, outboard hydroplane; a twenty-foot sailboat; and a scull that he liked to row early in the morning on the Potomac.

The latest addition to his fleet was the custom-made Guillemot kayak. He had bought it on an earlier trip to Seattle. He liked its natural wood construction and the graceful design of the thin hull, which was based on an Aleut craft. Like all his boats, it was fast as well as beautiful.

Austin was so intent absorbing the familiar sights and smells that he almost forgot that he was not alone. He glanced over his shoulder. A flotilla of fifty kayaks trailed a few hundred feet behind his ribbonlike wake. The heavy, fiberglass, double-cockpit kayaks each carried one parent and one child. They were safe and stable, and no match for Austin's racehorse. He removed a turquoise NUMA baseball cap, revealing a jungle of prematurely gray, almost platinum hair, and waved it high above his head to urge them on.

Austin had not hesitated when his father, the wealthy owner of an international marine salvage company based in Seattle, had asked him to lead the annual benefit kayak race he sponsored to raise money for charity. Austin had worked six years for Austin Marine Salvage before being lured into a

little-known branch of the CIA that specialized in underwater intelligence gathering. After the Cold War ended, the CIA closed down the investigative branch, and Austin was hired by James Sandecker, who headed NUMA before becoming vice president of the United States.

Austin dipped his paddles in the water and steered the kayak toward two boats anchored about a hundred feet apart, less than a quarter of a mile ahead. The boats carried race officials and press people. Stretched between the boats was a huge red-and-white plastic banner with the word FINISH written on it. Rafted together on the other side of the finish banner were a barge and a chartered ferryboat. At the end of the race, the kayaks would be pulled up on the barge and the participants would be treated to lunch aboard the ferry. Austin's father was watching the race in a forty-eight-foot white-hulled powerboat named *White Lightning*.

Digging his paddle in, Austin was preparing for a sprint to the finish when he noticed a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to his right and saw a tall curved fin cutting through the water in his direction. As he watched, at least twenty more fins popped up behind the first one.

Puget Sound was home to several pods of orcas, who fed on salmon. They had become local mascots, and a big boom to the economy, attracting tourists from all over the world who flocked to Seattle to come out on whale-watch boats or take part in kayak

adventures. The killer whales would come right up to the kayaks and often put on a show, breaching partially or jumping clear out of the water. Typically, the orcas would glide harmlessly past, often within a few feet of a kayak, without disturbing it.

When the first fin was about fifty feet away, the orca stood on its tail. Nearly half its twenty-five-foot length was out of the water. Austin stopped paddling to watch. He had seen the maneuver performed before, but it was still an awesome sight. The whale inspecting him was a big bull, probably the leader of the pod, and must have weighed at least seven tons. Moisture glistened on its sleek, black-and-white body.

The whale splashed back into the water, and the fin again moved rapidly in his direction. He expected from experience that at the last second the orca would duck under the kayak. But when it was only a few feet away, the whale again reared up and opened its mouth. The rows of razor-sharp teeth set in the pink mouth were close enough to touch. Austin stared in disbelief. It was as if a beloved circus clown had morphed into a monster. The jaws began to close. Austin jammed the wooden paddle into the creature's maw. There was a loud snap as the teeth closed on the paddle.

The whale's massive body came down on the front part of the thirty-five-pound kayak and smashed it to splinters. Austin went into the cold water. He sank for a second, then bobbed to the surface, buoyed by

his personal flotation device. He spat out a mouthful of water and spun around. To his relief, the fin was moving away from him.

The pod of whales was between Austin and a nearby island. Rather than head in that direction, he began to swim farther out into the bay. After a few strokes, he stopped swimming and rolled onto his back. The chill that danced along his spine was not caused by the cold water alone.

A phalanx of fins was chasing after him. He kicked his water shoes off and slipped out of his cumbersome flotation vest. He knew that the gesture was a futile one. Even without his vest, he would have needed an outboard motor strapped to his back to outrun an orca. Killer whales can swim at speeds up to thirty miles per hour.

Austin had faced many human adversaries with an icy coolness, but this was different. He was driven by the primeval horror his Stone Age ancestors must have experienced: the fear of being eaten. As the whales neared, he could hear the soft watery sound they made as air was expelled through their blowholes.

*Souf-souf.*

Just as he expected sharp teeth to sink into his flesh, the chorus of steamy exhalations was drowned out by the roar of powerful engines. Through water-blurred eyes, he saw sun reflecting off a boat's hull. Hands reached down to grab his arms. His knees banged painfully against the hard, plastic side of

the boat, and he flopped onto the deck like a landed fish.

A man was bending over him. 'Are you okay?'

Austin gulped in a lungful of air and thanked the unknown Samaritan for his help.

'What's going on?' the man said.

'A whale attacked me.'

'That's impossible,' the man said. 'They're like big, friendly dogs.'

'Tell that to the whales.'

Austin scrambled to his feet. He was on a well-appointed powerboat around thirty feet long. The man who had pulled him from the water had a shaved bald head with a spider tattoo on the scalp. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses with reflective blue lenses, and he wore black jeans and a black leather jacket.

Set into the deck behind the man was a strange, cone-shaped, metal framework about six feet high. Thick electrical cables sprouted from the framework like vines. Austin stared at the weird construction for a second, but he was more interested in what was happening out on the water.

The pod of orcas that had chased him like a pack of hungry sea wolves was swinging away from the boat and was now headed toward the other kayakers. A few people had seen Austin go over, but they had not been close enough to witness the attack. With Austin gone, the racers were in a state of confusion. Some continued to paddle slowly. Most had simply

stopped dead in the water, where they sat like rubber ducks in a bathtub.

The orcas were closing in fast on the bewildered racers. Even more frightening, other pods of whales had appeared around the kayak flotilla and were gathering around for the kill. The racers were unaware of the sharp-toothed danger headed their way. Many of them had paddled the sound and knew that the orcas were harmless.

Austin grabbed the boat's steering wheel. 'Hope you don't mind,' he said as he punched up the throttle.

The man's reply was lost in the roar of twin outboard motors. The boat quickly got up on plane. Austin pointed the bow at the narrowing gap between the kayakers and the moving fins. He hoped that the noise of the engines and hull would disrupt the orcas. His heart sank when the whales split into two groups and went around him, still intent on their targets. He knew orcas communicated with each other to coordinate their attacks. Within seconds, the pod hit the kayak fleet like a spread of torpedoes. They rammed the light boats with their huge bodies. Several kayaks went over and their passengers were thrown into the water.

Austin slowed the boat's speed and steered between the bobbing heads of children and their parents and the knifelike orca fins. The *White Lightning* had moved closer to some capsized kayaks, but the situation was too chaotic for it to be of any help.

Austin saw one of the tallest fins bearing down on a man who was floating in the water holding his young daughter in his arms. Austin would have to run over the other kayakers to get to them. He turned to the boat's owner.

'Do you have a rifle speargun on board?'

The bald man was fiddling frantically with an instrument box that was connected to the framework by a cable. He looked up from what he was doing and shook his head.

'It's okay,' he said. 'Look!' He pointed toward the mass of overturned kayaks.

The big fin had stopped moving. It remained stationary, playfully wobbling in place, only feet from the man and his daughter. Then it began to move *away* from the broken kayaks and their hapless paddlers.

The other fins followed. The surrounding pods that had been closing in broke off their attack and meandered back into the open waters. The big bull breached in a high, playful leap. Within minutes, none of the orcas was in sight.

A young boy had become separated from his parent. His flotation vest must have been donned improperly, because his head was slipping below the surface. Austin climbed up on the gunwale and launched his body into the air. He hit the water in a shallow racing dive and stroked his way to the boy. He reached him just before he went under.

Austin treaded water, holding the youngster's

head above the surface. He only had to wait a few moments. The *White Lightning* had launched its inflatable life rafts, and racers were being plucked from the water. Austin handed the boy up to his rescuers and pivoted in the water. The bald man and his boat had disappeared.