

1 The rain began suddenly. From the west, skipping like a flat stone over the broad waters separating Vancouver Island from the convoluted knot of smaller islands at the mouth of Knight Inlet, the storm raced toward the steep slopes of the Coast Mountains. When it reached them, it ricocheted up their flanks and back and forth across the narrow passage at the mouth of the fjord. With the rain came wind that moulded the water into small waves, churning it into ten-foot swells within an hour. The sky pressed down and pounded the water with machine gun volleys of driving rain. The tops of the densely forested mountains rising from the inlet disappeared as a tattered blackness settled against the sea.

Archie Ravenwing felt the storm approaching before he saw it, before it soaked him through. He could feel it coming on for most of the day. Maybe someone had done the weather dance last night, their blankets twisting as they moved back and forth to the chorus of voices, to the beating of drums. Maybe he should have paid closer attention to that morning's marine weather forecast.

He felt the storm in his hands. Twisted and corded like the ropes he had spent his sixty years working with, his joints always ached when a storm loomed. From November to March, and sometimes well into April, his hands always seemed to ache. There was no denying it — he was well past his prime. But he still had work to do.

Ravenwing had set off from Port Lostcoast on the *Inlet Dancer* before dawn. On the north shore of Parish Island, Port Lostcoast was where he was born and where he had spent most of his life working as a fisherman. But he wasn't fishing today. The salmon season wasn't set to open for another two months, if it opened at all. For thousands of years, people along the wild, ragged coast of British Columbia had guided their boats through the heaving waters of the Pacific, harvesting the fish for food and ceremony. Among the tribes of the West Coast, salmon was the most important animal in the world. Life turned on salmon seasons. But in the last twenty years, so much had changed. Ravenwing thought of this as he powered up the inlet that morning, intent on his destination but aware of the shifting weather around him.


Salmon smolts had been running for nearly two weeks, and Ravenwing had spent every day on the water since they started. These silvery darts spent as many as three years living in the tiny headwater tributaries of Knight Inlet. Most of the salmon born there were eaten or died of natural causes. Only ten percent survived to grow large enough to migrate down river and out into the salty water at the mouth of the creeks and then into the Inlet itself.

The morning had been bright enough, with nothing more menacing than a few clouds hanging over the mountains of Vancouver Island, far to the west. But now Ravenwing suspected that by day's end there would be rain. He flexed his thick, burlled hands as he lightly played the wheel of his thirty-two-foot troller, heading east up the inlet.


By the time the day started to warm, Ravenwing had reached Minstrel Island and the narrow mouth to Clio Channel, the ideal place for a couple hours of dip-net sampling before he turned his attention to the small bays and coves that marked the jigsaw puzzle shore. Archie shut down the *Inlet Dancer's* powerful Cummins 130-horsepower inboard motor and let the silence of the morning wash over him. He stepped from the wheelhouse onto the aft deck with a Thermos of coffee, stretching and yawning. Thermos in hand, he deftly walked the high, narrow gunwale and sat on the raised fish box, which doubled as a table. He unscrewed the cap of the Thermos and closed his eyes to savour the scent of hot, rich coffee. The smell mingled with the tang of the ocean, salty and spiced with the yin and yang of coastal life and decay, and the pungent fragrance of the thick Sitka spruce and red cedar forest rising up along the towering cliffs just a hundred metres off his port side. Archie Ravenwing smiled broadly as he drew these fragrances deeply into his lungs.

He poured coffee into the Thermos cap and blew on it gently, squinting at the steam that swirled up and disappeared on the breeze. Later, Archie guessed, that breeze would turn into a squall. But for the moment the morning was warm and gentle, and he savoured it. He sipped his coffee and looked around him.

Born into the Lostcoast band of the North Salish First Nation, Archie Ravenwing had been fishing, guiding, hunting,




and exploring the coastal estuaries, inlets, reaches, and straits from as far away as Puget Sound to the Queen Charlotte Islands since he was old enough to manage a bowlegged stance in a boat. As he let his eyes roll over the massive sweep of land and water and sky before him that morning, he was happy that this reach of the Broughton Archipelago had remained unchanged for generations. The hills jutted steeply from the rich waters, their shoulders cloaked in spruce and fir. Beneath those giant trees, tangles of salmonberries and alders gripped the soil. And between them walked another totem species for the Lostcoast people – the grizzly bear. Bears and salmon and the ancient forests that surrounded them were a holy trinity for Archie and his people. Grizzly bears fed on the salmon as the fish bashed their way up through the ankle-deep waters of the tiny tributaries to their spawning grounds each fall. The grizzly bears grew fat, often eating only the fish brains, rich in the nutrients they would need for their winter hibernation. The dead fish, left to rot in the woods, nourished the stalwart trees, which in turn held the entire ecosystem together with their wide, spreading roots. The trees sheltered and cooled the salmon rivers and fed the many smaller creatures that made their homes among them. When the trees fell into the streams, downed logs created places for the spawning salmon to hide and rest as, exhausted and crazed, they struggled back to their source of life.



Archie sipped his coffee, thinking about this cycle of existence. He pushed back the sadness that approached whenever he thought this way. There was some question as to whether there would be enough wild salmon in this year's run to allow for a commercial fishery. Talk in Victoria, the provincial capital, and among senior federal officials responsible for the fishery, suggested that a complete ban might be necessary to allow decimated salmon runs to recover.

The people of the Lostcoast band had been fishing there for thousands of years, but they had never contributed to the decimation of salmon the way the modern industrial fishery had. Now Archie Ravenwing's people would pay the price incurred by the greed and short-sightedness of the commercial fishing industry



and its proponents in government. In the years since British Columbia's current Liberal government had lifted the moratorium on new salmon farms in the province, there had been an explosion of interest in new aquaculture developments along BC's knotted west coast. In the Broughton Archipelago, where Archie Ravenwing fished and lived, there were nearly thirty salmon farms in operation. Many of these open-net farms were located on the migration routes of native wild salmon. And though industry advocates argued that the two were unrelated, along with the development of salmon farms came a corresponding decline in the number of wild salmon. Archie knew that, in a recent count, only one hundred and fifty thousand wild salmon returned to the Broughton, down from the historical three and a half million. In 2002 the wild pink salmon stock collapsed, with only five percent of the native wild fish returning to spawn. Archie knew the numbers by heart.

For Ravenwing, it was as if part of his own body, his own soul, had vanished. The part of his heart that swam through the waters of Tribune Channel and up the mouth of Knight Inlet was gone, lost like the spirit of the once-great salmon.

Archie tried to keep his darkening sadness at bay. How could it have come to this? he wondered. After a thousand years of tradition, his family wouldn't be allowed to fish their ancestral waters? He turned his face toward the sky. A throaty call greeted him, and he opened his eyes to see a jet-black shape cruise overhead. He heard the husky chortle again. Archie raised a hand in greeting. "Good morning, Grandpa," he said quietly, waving at the raven, a smile creasing his face. "U'melth, Raven, who brought us the moon, fire, salmon, sun, and the tides," he recited. "Trickster, grandfather of a thousand pranks. Okay! I'll lighten up!" He drained his mug and slung the dregs into the water. "Time to get to work," he added.

Archie rose, stretched out the stiffness that had accumulated in his joints, and walked back to the wheelhouse, where he opened a large bin and removed the tools he would need for his morning work. He put the long, flexible net together on its pole and readied half a dozen plastic sample jars. These he put on the

fish box on the deck of the boat. Without ceremony he began his sampling, drawing forth the tiny salmon fry to be funnelled into the jars. So few, so few. Ravenwing shook his head as he dipped again into the waters.

By noon he had filled the jars with juvenile salmon, whose tiny, finger-sized bodies were being consumed by sea lice. This was what Archie Ravenwing was seeking – irrefutable evidence that the wild salmon stocks of Knight Inlet and the Broughton Archipelago were being parasitized by sea lice.

Archie held a jar up to the light and counted the lice clinging to the salmon. On one smolt he counted four parasites from two different species. Adults might succumb when they had six or seven sea lice on their fins, gills, or skin. Smolts like those in Archie's sampling jars would die with only a few sea lice feeding on them. Archie regarded his unfortunate catch. "Not doing so good, are you, little friends?" He kept finding more and more smolts with more and more sea lice on them, and he had yet to reach his day's destination: Jeopardy Rock. There he expected to find the epicentre of sea lice contamination.

"Not so good...." he repeated, his voice trailing off.

Ravenwing knew that sea lice were a natural parasite that preyed on wild salmon along British Columbia's wild coast and elsewhere across North America. But in the last ten years there had been a shocking rise in the number of lice infesting wild salmon. Where before the numbers had been low, and very few salmon actually died as a result of playing host to the lice, now entire runs of wild pink and other salmon were being devastated by them. Despite protests from the salmon farming industry, irrefutable evidence pointed to the rash of farmed Atlantic salmon as the source of the outbreak. The Atlantic salmon could survive with many more sea lice than the native pink, chum, and coho.

Archie took a black felt pen from his shirt pocket and labelled the jars. He would return these to Dr. Cassandra Petrel for her study.

Archie flexed his big hands and looked at the sky. "Starting to crowd in," he said aloud to nobody in particular. "Fixing to churn up pretty good, I think."

He knew he should head back down the inlet toward Port Lostcoast before the storm set upon him, but he had one more thing to do that day. Something was eating Archie Ravenwing, and he had to set it straight. So instead of turning the *Inlet Dancer* for home, he powered across the inlet toward the mouth of Tribune Channel, skipping the heavy boat across the small waves already being formed by the wind.

■ Now the rain fell in torrents, churning the waves like knives thrust into the sea. The *Inlet Dancer* bounced and rocked, nose into the waves, powering past the fish farms at Doctor Islets and into the main body of Knight Inlet, making for home. Archie stood in the pilothouse near the stern of the boat, one hand locked on the wheel, the other clenching the throttle. This blow was bigger than he had foreseen and, though he was prepared to moor and wait out the storm, this stretch of water had few safe harbours.

After what he had seen at Jeopardy Rock, a new urgency filled Archie Ravenwing and made him push for home against what seemed prudent for the weather.

A wave crashed over the bow of the *Inlet Dancer*, and the boat dipped into the trough behind it, rising up the side of another stack of water. The swells now topped fifteen feet and came in irregular patterns, every fourth, fifth, or sixth wave taller than the rest, coming on faster than the others. Ravenwing firmly held the wheel, keeping the boat head-on to the storm, not wanting the narrow vessel to get punched side-to by one of the rogue waves.

He had suspected for some time that what was happening at Jeopardy Rock was more than just simple salmon farming. He had suspected for some time that the company was doing more than just breeding Atlantic salmon. Now he was certain. He would make his calls when he reached Port Lostcoast and begin to set the record straight. He would begin to make amends. Did Archie Ravenwing believe in redemption? He believed in justice, even if his own actions hadn't always seemed just. He believed that a man's motivation sometimes propelled behaviour that appeared inconsistent with his espoused values. But we are complex creatures, reasoned Ravenwing.

Another wave rocked the *Inlet Dancer*, and Archie pitched forward. He patted the wheel and remembered that she had survived worse.

It was growing dark. The day was slipping from the sky, and the clouds pressed down so low that the tops of the trees on mighty Gilford Island were hardly visible. Ravenwing switched on his running lights—not so he could see, but so he could be seen. Sonar and radar would guide him down the inlet, through the darkness and the storm, but he worried about small pleasure crafts caught in the weather with no such second sight.

Ravenwing counted the waves, counted the minutes. A half hour passed and the hulk of Gilford Island started to recede. The waves still crashed on the *Inlet Dancer's* bow, and now he was moving across the channel toward the eastern tip of Turnour Island. At his pace of seven or eight knots per hour, it would be another two hours or more before he would be abreast of Parish Island, and home.

The VHF marine radio in the pilothouse crackled and, intuitively, Ravenwing set it to scan. Static filled the wheelhouse, the white noise engulfed by the sound of the storm that darkened the archipelago around Ravenwing. Then there was a voice, clear as a bell: “Any craft in the vicinity of Deep Water Cove, this is *Rising Moon*. I’ve lost my primary and am taking on water.”

Ravenwing snatched up the handset and spoke over the howl of the storm. “*Rising Moon*, this is *Inlet Dancer*. I’m passing Ship Rock now, about to make the crossing. What is your position?”

“Glad to hear your voice, *Inlet Dancer*. I’m about one mile west of Deep Water, but I’m getting pushed toward the rocks on Deep Water Bluff.”

“Do you have secondary?”

“I’m running on my little Evinrude 25, *Inlet Dancer*.”

“Okay, hold on, I’ll circle back for you.”

“I’m glad to find you out here,” came the static-filled response.

“I’m not,” Ravenwing said over the VHF and returned the handset to the radio.

For a moment he would be side-to the brunt of the storm, so

Ravenwing determined to make that quick. He throttled up, pushing over the breaking waves, and counted. The big waves pushed a wall of water over the boat's bow onto the deck, momentarily flooding it until the water drained away through the breaks in the gunwales. He counted. A wave crested, ebbed, and Ravenwing throttled back, spun the wheel, and turned to lee, then powered back up again as the stern of the boat was engulfed in the next white breaker. The ocean flooded into the wheelhouse, washing Ravenwing to his ankles in icy water.

In ten minutes he was adjacent to Deep Water Cove, the massive bluffs that guarded the opening black through the shadowless night.

Ravenwing spoke calmly into the handset. "*Rising Moon*, this is *Inlet Dancer*. Can you see my running lights?"

There was no response. He peered at his sonar and radar, watching the rocky coast weave its white line along the left side of the screen, searching for rocks and logs in his path, scanning for the tell-tale shape of a boat. "*Rising Moon*, this is *Inlet Dancer*..."

"I see you, Archie," came the voice, clear through the radio.

"What's your location?"

"I'm right behind you."

Archie turned in the pilothouse and saw the *Rising Moon's* running lights emerge from the cove.

"I found some shelter to wait in. Can you come alongside me?"

"Yup," Archie said, turning again in the roiling waters. Another wave broke over his boat, and he was slammed hard into the fiberglass wall of the pilothouse. He stayed standing, his fingers locked on the wheel and the throttle.

The *Rising Moon* was a small pleasure craft that had seen better days. Archie cut his throttle as much as he dared so close to the shore and eased toward the smaller boat. The canopy was up, the pilot eclipsed by the windshield and the rain that drove down on the inlet like an angry fist.

"Do you want me to tow you into the cove, *Rising Moon*?" Archie asked into the handset.

"Can you come alongside, and we'll talk it through?"

Archie cursed. It was always the same with this guy it seemed. "Sure, but let's make it quick, as it's fixing to blow pretty good and I don't want to be out longer than need be." He put the handset down and guided the *Inlet Dancer* alongside the drifting *Rising Moon*.

When the two boats were just ten feet apart, Archie killed his motor and stepped out from the pilothouse, grabbing a gaff hook from the wall. He stepped onto the narrow deck of the boat and peered through the storm, holding onto the gunwale for support. "Jesus Christ, man, come on deck and let's get this over with," Archie cursed into the howling night.

Finally a shape emerged from beneath the canopy of the *Rising Moon*. The man waved and moved to the stern of his vessel, holding on for dear life. Over the clamour of the storm he yelled, "Imagine *me* needing help from *you*."

"Imagine," mocked Ravenwing. "So what exactly are you doing out on a night like this? And in that little tub?"

"I could ask you the same question," replied the man, who was using a gaff of his own to hook the stern gunwale of Ravenwing's boat. Ravenwing used his tool to reach for the *Rising Moon*'s fore cleats. The boats rose and fell, waves surging against them, and they came together with a crash of the *Inlet Dancer*'s sturdy, fibreglass-covered wood against the *Rising Moon*'s aging hull.

"Your boat is going to be crushed if we stay out like this," Ravenwing yelled. "Let's hook a line and I'll tow you into the cove. We can find a place to secure this tub and we'll motor back to Lostcoast on the *Dancer*."

The man on the *Rising Moon* gave a thumbs up and manoeuvred himself to the bow of his boat on hands and knees, clinging to the craft. He tossed his bowline to Archie. Ravenwing secured the line from the *Rising Moon* to a cleat on the port side of the *Inlet Dancer*'s stern. The man on the *Rising Moon* held on to his line with his left hand, the three-foot gaff in his right, made a knot fast on the bow cleat, then turned and clambered for the safety of the stern of his boat.

"Permission to come aboard, *Captain*," he barked to Ravenwing,

who had stepped back into the pilothouse to crank up the boat's powerful motors.

"You know the way," Ravenwing yelled, shaking his head.

The man, gaff still clenched in his hands, stepped onto the *Inlet Dancer* and grabbed the handrail on the side of the pilothouse for stability. Ravenwing engaged the throttle and the boats began to cut into the cresting waves again.

"What the hell were you doing out on a night like this?" Ravenwing asked, his voice disappearing into the storm.

"I have my reasons."

"They must have been good ones. Only a fool would venture out on a night like this."

"Well, you're out."

"I am. But everyone around here knows I'm a fool."

The two men stood side by side as the *Inlet Dancer* began west toward the mouth of Deep Water Cove.

"You said you took shelter. Where?"

"I just set the throttle to keep abreast of the cove and waited for you."

"I didn't see you."

"I was there."

"What happened to that nice E-Tec 115 you bought last year?"

"Don't know. Think I took on too much water. Washed it out. Maybe water in the fuel line. I couldn't get that thing going."

Ravenwing looked at the man, who looked straight ahead, his face hidden by the bill of his cap, his body snug in an orange float coat.

"But you could use the 25 to keep abreast of this storm?"

"You're not the only one in this country who can pilot a boat, Archie."

"Who's towing who?" Ravenwing spat. Then he sighed and said, "Okay, let's see if we can't find a place to leave this tub for the night and make for home." He looked at his sonar for the depth of the water beneath him, and then at his radar to search the shore for a safe harbour.

"You're still pissed at me," the man said through the pelting rain.

“You done anything that would change my mind otherwise?”

“That’s the thing with you, Archie. You hold everybody to such a high standard, no one can ever live up to your expectations.”

“That isn’t true and you know it. But I do expect some common sense. And what you’ve done is beyond the pale. You know it, so don’t play dumb with me. I know you got plenty of brains in that thick head of yours. You’ve got a responsibility.”

“You can be a real jackass, Archie.”

“Don’t I know it. But at least I know when I’ve done something wrong. I aim to fix it. You? I just never figured this sort of thing from you. But then I should have guessed this was coming.”

The man turned to regard Archie Ravenwing, who was watching his sonar, the VHF still crackling. He said, “Don’t you think that your people deserve better? Don’t you think that I deserve better?”

“Of course we do. Of course you do!” Archie’s voice was coarse over the din. “So act that way. Act like you deserve better. Stop waiting around for someone to hand you things. Go out and get what you want.”

The man stepped back a few feet from Archie. “I’m goin’ to.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you say it....”

But Archie didn’t finish the sentence. The gaff hook caught him in the side of his head, just above the ear, behind the softness of the temple. The blow made no sound over the clamour of the storm. The curved hook pierced Ravenwing’s skull and he fell sideways and down, hard, onto the pilothouse floor. There he lay as the water washed into the pilothouse. In the darkness, the deep pool of blood from where the gaff pierced Ravenwing’s skull was indiscernible from the dark water that sluiced across the deck of the *Inlet Dancer*.

The assailant dropped the gaff on top of the body and took control of the fishing boat. He pulled back on the throttle, easing the boat’s speed, and turned off its running lights so it could not be seen. He set the wheel to veer the boat into the inlet, toward open water. He flipped open the seat top in the pilothouse and found what he was looking for—a short, stout bungee cord. He used it to secure the wheel of the boat so that it maintained its current course. There was no time to set the boat’s autopilot.

The killer dropped to one knee and looked at the body of Archie Ravenwing on the deck of the boat. His eyes open, lifeless. He then dragged Ravenwing from the pilothouse onto the narrow aft deck, pulling him to the lee side gunwales and heaving him into the ocean. He threw the gaff hook overboard.

The man took hold of the rope that connected the *Inlet Dancer* to the *Rising Moon* and reeled in the smaller craft. When the pleasure boat was close enough, he tied a clove hitch in the rope and fastened it to the aft cleat. Then he lowered himself onto the bow of his own craft, holding on to the boat's safety rail. He turned and tried to untie the ropes from the cleat on the stern of the *Inlet Dancer*. His clove hitch came loose, but the second knot wouldn't come free with the weight of both boats on it.

He slid on his belly down the length of the bow of the *Rising Moon* and scrambled under the canopy. Moments later he emerged with a hatchet in his right hand and felt his way back toward the bow. As he reached the tip of his boat, he pulled again so that the two boats were bow to stern, and began to chop where Archie had made the rope fast around a metal cleat. A giant wave broke over the bow of the *Inlet Dancer* and then the *Rising Moon*, sending a wall of white foam and black ocean into the man's face, washing him down the slick nose of his boat. He managed to grab the safety rail with his left hand, his right hand still clinging to the hatchet. The water streamed from the bow of the pleasure craft, pushing the man's legs over the port side as he scrambled to hold on to the boat. Eyes wild with panic, he heaved himself back on to the bow and slid back to the fore of the craft. He pulled the boats together again, raised his right hand, and hacked at the rope on the stern cleat—once, twice, three times—and then he was free. He threw the remnant tatters of the rope into the ocean and slid back to the cockpit, under the canopy. Then he fired up the boat's 115 outboard motor, switched on the craft's running lights, and made for home.

2 Through the greasy light, Cole Blackwater eyed Frankie “Fingers” Delarosa. Circling his opponent, Cole shuffled sideways, bouncing, always trying to keep his feet moving. Hands up in front of him, he tracked the glistening form of the man in front of him, who travelled the perimeter of the ring, bouncing lightly. They traded punches, each absorbing the force of the blows in his gloves as they circled. Fingers threw a left-right combination that caught Cole on the chin, and he stepped back heavily but kept moving. Sweat poured from Cole’s curly brow into his eyes, and he winced, his vision blurring. Waiting for the bell again.

Fingers feigned left, and as Blackwater stepped to the right, he caught a solid blow to the cheek. A spray of sweat leaped from his face and speckled the dingy canvas as Blackwater stumbled toward the mat.

Fingers dropped his hands but remained vigilant as Cole caught himself on the ropes, his arms behind him. Frankie stepped side to side, waiting. Breathing heavily, Cole shook off the sting from the solid right-hand blow, his hair wet against his forehead, his eyes dark and focused.

He raised his gloves and motioned for Fingers to begin again.

The men circled in the pool of light from four lamps that hung from the low ceiling, its shadows accentuated by the network of pipes and ducts that crossed it. The long, squat room was filled with the sounds of fists on heavy bags and speed bags and bodies shuffling, moving, colliding. In the corners, the shapes of men glistening with sweat could be seen jumping rope and doing push-ups and sit-ups, holding up punch mitts while their training partners worked through a combination. The sound of a tinny radio rattled in a far corner, where no one listened to it.

Cole Blackwater stepped in, gloves up, and Frankie Fingers began to circle again. They traded punches, Cole landing a blow to Frankie’s belly, which didn’t move the man at all. Their shoulders touched and the two men stepped back. More punches. Fingers tried to feint again, but this time Cole saw it and, instead of stepping to the right, stepped forward and caught Fingers with

a left-right combination. But he still took Fingers' roundhouse on the cheek.

The bell sounded and both men retreated.

"Pretty good, pretty good," came a voice from the darkness beyond the ring. "Grab a seat." Cole stepped back into his corner. Frankie Fingers did the same, his smile exaggerated by the mouthguard he pushed out of his teeth.

A small black man, not more than five-foot-six, hoisted himself onto the ring. "You're doing okay there, Cole," he said, wiping Cole's face with a towel. "You're learning. You're learning. You didn't step into that right hook that Frankie likes to throw. Good for you. Good for you. But you've still got to stop thinking about what to do after you avoid that sort of set up. Got to just let your body respond. Don't think. There's no time for that. Just let your body do what it knows how to do. Respond."

The man made a jab with his small hand. "Let your body get the information from your eyes without *you* getting in the way." He tapped Cole's head. "I see you hesitate for just a second, and that's why you're not landing that left-right combination." The man picked up a water bottle and squirted some water on Cole's face and in his hair, then wiped him down again. He pushed the bent straw from the bottle between Cole's teeth and let him drink.

"I'm feeling old, Jessie," Cole said, spitting a mouthful of water into a bucket.

The man grinned. He wore a pork-pie hat at a rakish angle over his tight black curls. "You *are* old, Cole. But don't let that stop you from having some fun in there. Okay?"

"Thanks, Jessie," Cole said sardonically, still breathing hard. He fit his mouthguard back in place.

Jessie turned to the shadows and said, "Okay, Denny, let 'em have it."

The bell rang and Cole moved in quickly with a series of punches, all of which Fingers blocked with arms and shoulders. The men circled each other, looking for openings with quick punches.

Somewhere in the room a cellphone chimed, and for a moment Cole's attention was diverted. He paid for it as Fingers landed a

quick left jab, but Cole managed to step away from the right that followed. The phone rang again.

“You want me to get that, Cole?” came a voice from the shadows.

“Busy right now,” Cole mumbled through his mouthguard.

He could hear Denman Scott rummaging through his bag next to the ring. The ringing stopped.

Cole stepped forward with two left jabs and a right hook, but Fingers absorbed the blows and hit Cole with an uppercut that set him back on his feet. His stomach was his weak spot. Cole stepped in with a punch to Frankie’s gut and the two men locked for a moment.

“Knock it off!” came Jessie’s voice from the side, followed by laughter.

“Cole, it’s Mary,” Denman said.

Cole stepped away and Frankie stepped in.

“Cole, it’s important.”

Cole and Frankie circled, eyes low, brows streaked with sweat, panting.

“Cole!”

Cole Blackwater’s attention slipped off Frankie Fingers like a wet bar of soap off the side of a bathtub. Fingers saw the opening, feinted left, and landed a solid right. Cole didn’t even see it. His left cheek took the whole force of the blow, and he dropped to the canvas. Frankie stepped back. Cole pushed himself to a sitting position and shook his head. A trickle of blood seeped from his mouth.

“Cole,” said Denman, standing at the ropes with the cellphone in his hands.

“What in the name of God’s green earth is it?” said Cole, spitting his mouthguard into his gloved hand, a string of saliva and blood coming along for the ride.

“Cole, that was Mary. Archie Ravenwing is dead.”

■ Cole stuffed his gloves into his gym bag and pulled on his leather jacket over his sweater.

“Cole, I’m real sorry to hear about your friend,” said Frankie Fingers from behind him.

“It’s okay, Frankie. I appreciate that. Hey, good fight.” Cole straightened, felt the stiffness in his neck and shoulders, and picked up his bag with his left hand. He extended his right toward Frankie.

“Yeah, good fight, Cole. You’ve really come a long way, man.” Frankie extended his hand.

“Pop any fingers this time around?” Frankie got his nickname because he dislocated a finger or two during nearly every fight – loose ligaments, his trainer told him – and it kept him from turning pro a few years back.

“Two,” he said, smiling. “But it ain’t no-thing.” He stepped toward the mirror and combed his hair into a point in the front. “And hey, I’m sorry about that last cheap shot.”

“My fault,” said Cole. “For twenty-five years people have been telling me to stay focused, not to let my guard down. Seems I’ve still got a ways to go.”

“Well, you’re looking good out there, man,” said Frankie. “See you next week.” Frankie exited the dim locker room, and Cole took his place in front of the mirror. He straightened as he peered at himself. Not so bad, he thought. He’d dropped almost ten kilos since he’d been back in the ring. He was still a little soft in the middle, still carried fifteen pounds more than he liked, but progress was progress and he shouldn’t complain. He was aiming to be super middleweight by summer. Maybe then he’d actually take his shirt off when he fought.

He examined his face. The twisted white scar that cut across his right eyebrow was still visible after ten months, and likely always would be. The disfigurement on his left cheek was also plainly evident. They were ugly reminders of his time in Oracle, Alberta last spring, when he had come face to face with a killer and had nearly become a victim himself. It was hard to believe it had been almost a year.

He pushed back the memory and studied the most recent round of bruising. His left cheek was red and a little puffy. Maybe he’d put some ice on it when he got home. Or he might find a cheap cut of steak in his fridge and slap it on like they did in the movies. Either way, by morning he’d have a good bruise. He pushed

his hair into some semblance of order and stepped out of the locker room.

“How you doing, Cole?” asked Denman Scott. Scott was seated on a plastic orange chair in the dim lobby of the East Hastings Boxing Club. He wore a jean jacket over a hooded sweatshirt and sported a tan flat cap on his closely shaved head.

“I’m all right,” Cole said.

“Sorry about that. About distracting you.”

Cole smiled at him. “I’ll never learn, it seems.”

“Aw, come on now,” said Denman, rising and moving toward the flimsy doors that opened into the night. “You’re looking really good in the ring. Really.”

Cole smiled again. “I actually feel pretty good. Lighter, you know? I feel like my movement is coming back. Like I’m actually moving like a fighter again. But I’m slow with my hands, and when I fight a guy like Fingers, who’s what, half my age? Man, it’s tough going.”

“I’m proud of you, Cole.”

“Thanks, Denny.”

They stepped into the night. The air was damp but mild.

“Where to?” asked Denman.

“I’ve got to head downtown. Go to the office. Make a few stops.”

“You want to catch a bite to eat and a pint?”

Cole sighed. “Can’t say no. Could use a few jars right now.”

They walked west along Hastings, past Main Street and the crowd of drug dealers, prostitutes, vagrants, homeless people, and frightened tourists in front of the Carnegie Centre. People nodded to Denman, a few said his name, and three or four stopped him to chat briefly. All Cole warranted was, “Up, down, or rock?” A query about his preferred narcotic. He smiled and said he was just passing through, and nodded toward Denman. “You’re quite the celebrity these days,” Cole said.

“Depends on who you ask.”

“Those folks think you’re a hero. A modern-day Robin Hood.”

Scott smiled. “That would make the mayor Prince John, wouldn’t it?”

Cole looked serious. “And the chief of police the Sheriff of Nottingham.”

Denman smiled even wider. “Guess you’re Little John then?”

“Who you calling Little John?” Cole tried to punch Scott in the arm, but his friend simply shifted his weight and Cole slipped past him and down onto the street. Scott pulled him back by the sleeve of his jacket. “Easy there, slugger.”

“You’re a slippery little bugger. ”

“Not so much slippery as sleek.”

“One of these days you’re going to have to teach me how to do that.”

“Anytime. The offer stands. But you’ve got to leave your boxing gloves at home.”

“One step at a time. It took a near-death experience to get me back in the ring. I don’t know what it’s going to take to get me to dress up in those pyjamas you wear and prance around your dojo.”

“How about a near-life experience?” asked Scott.

“Don’t start on me tonight, Denny.”

Scott simply smiled. “As you wish, grasshopper,” he said with an accent more practiced than real. Cole couldn’t keep the grin off his face, though it did hurt to smile.

They arrived at the corner of Hastings and Cambie and waited for the light, while the working poor and the desperate did business in the Quick Cash store on the corner, making criminally large interest payments to cash a cheque without an address. The light changed and they crossed the street to the Dominion Building, an ancient office tower that was home to Cole’s Blackwater Strategies and another dozen lost causes. The building had been the tallest in the British Empire in its day, but it was now dwarfed by dozens of office towers, condominiums, and the phallic Harbour Centre a few blocks away.

“Stairs?” asked Denman, turning to start the climb to the eighth floor.

“Not tonight,” said Blackwater, pushing the elevator button.

“Come on, you promised.”

“And I take them every morning, I swear it, Denman. But Mary is waiting.”

Denman chuckled and positioned himself next to his friend.

“I mean it. Every morning.”

“I didn’t say a word,” said Scott, looking up at the floor indicator above the elevator.

Blackwater Strategies had been on the eighth floor of the Dominion Building for nearly four years. When Cole Blackwater had signed the lease on the two-room office, he had promised himself that he would take the stairs up in the morning and down at night, but soon he had abandoned that pledge, slipping into a self-imposed sloth. His arrival in Vancouver, in pursuit of his estranged daughter and in deference to the will of his ex-wife, Jennifer Paulson, had marked the nadir in his short life. The lethargy it induced was a vicious cycle, thought Cole, waiting for the elevator. You stop exercising, and your body starts to go to pot. You start to go to pot and you get depressed. You get depressed and you want to eat more. You eat more and you get more depressed. You get more depressed and it gets harder to exercise. So you lie around and watch television and feel sorry for yourself. Okay, Cole admitted to himself, *he* felt sorry for himself. But Oracle had delivered the much-needed slap on the side of the head that Cole needed to get off the couch and back into action. When he’d returned from Oracle, he’d started visiting the gym and taking the stairs again.

It hadn’t solved all his problems, not by a long shot. But it had helped.

The elevator chimed and the two friends waited for the door to open.

“Last chance,” said Denman.

Cole shot him a look and stepped into the waiting elevator.

Another thing had changed since his return from Alberta. Cole had begun spending more time with Denman Scott. He had considered the compact aikido master his best friend since moving to Vancouver four years ago, but when Cole came unravelled the previous spring, it was Denman who had helped him pull himself back together.

The door to Blackwater Strategies was ajar when the two men stepped onto the eighth floor.

As they entered the brightly lit room, Mary Patterson was seated behind her desk, talking on the phone. Cole looked at his watch. It was seven-thirty on a Friday night. Denman sat in a club chair opposite Mary's desk, while Cole opened the door to his own office and entered to turn on the desk lamp. When Mary hung up the phone, she greeted Denman. Cole emerged and said hello.

"Grace Ravenwing is hoping for a call, Cole. And I've looked into tickets to Port Hardy as you asked."

"Thanks, Mary, you're amazing. What's it going to set me back?"

"About five hundred round trip, with taxes."

Cole sighed. Five bills was still big money for the financially challenged Cole Blackwater. "Okay," he said. "Go ahead and book the flights. But just one-way. I have no idea when this thing is going to happen. I can book the return myself when I'm there."

"When do you want to leave?"

"What did Grace say?"

"She was pretty upset. I think she could use your support."

"Okay, book it for tomorrow afternoon. I'll clear it with Jennifer. And I guess we'll have to postpone the Nexus Energy thing."

"I'll take care of it, Cole," said Mary.

He didn't like putting off a paying client, especially one like Nexus Energy, who held the distinction of being his first business client who paid him a monthly retainer. And all he had to do for them was join a weekly conference call to discuss communications and government relations. It was easy money.

"What are you doing for Nexus?" asked Denman, leaning against the door frame.

"Going to get all the company brass in a room next week and talk them through the government-relations angle of this big tidal power project they want to do. See if we can't pry some cash out of the feds for something other than the tar sands. Maybe get some diversification happening in our national energy policy."

“Can I tell them that you can be available by phone if they need you?” asked Mary.

“Sure, that’s great. Please,” said Cole. “You’ll have to give them Archie’s— Grace’s number,” he said, his face growing pale. “I never can seem to get a strong cell signal up there. And no internet on Parish Island.”

Cole busied himself in his office. Denman stepped inside. “Jesus, Cole, this place is a shithouse. When are you going to let Mary get this place organized?”

Cole was seated at his desk, which was buried beneath papers. His laptop was open on a stack of newspapers nearly a foot high. He held a wireless keyboard on his lap. “It’s all good in here, Denman. I know where everything is.”

“This place is a fire hazard is all I’m saying.”

“Out,” he said, not turning to look at his friend.

■ They crossed Cambie between traffic and threaded their way between college kids smoking outside the doors of the Cambie Hotel. Always the same every Friday night, the Cambie was a raucous riot of sound and sight and smells. Televisions playing a hockey game blared from every corner. The dozen round and rectangular tables were crowded with young men and women from the surrounding campuses, along with a rougher assortment of mostly men, but some women, from the eastside neighbourhood. Cole and Denman pushed their way to the bar, Cole performing his perfunctory scan of the joint for friend or foe. He’d been doing this for so long that it was second nature. And though he’d had the snot beaten out of him in a bar in Oracle when he failed to notice three thugs lying in wait for him, he felt he could let his guard down a little when he drank with Denman. Not only was Denman a black belt, but he was universally respected in East Vancouver. College kids didn’t pick fights with the stout Cole or the solid Denman, and the locals knew that Denman was on their side, watching their backs.

The men ordered pints of Kick-Ass from the bar, and Denman paid for the beer with a ten-dollar bill. They touched glasses and drank deeply.

Cole sighed appreciatively. Denman licked a bit of foam from his lips and looked around the room. Denman nodded toward the far corner of the bar, past the pool tables. "Over there," he said, distracting Cole from the twenty-year-old college girl he was admiring. "Marty and Dusty." Cole looked up to see Dusty Stevens waving.

"I don't want to get into it with those guys tonight, Denman."

"Then don't," said Denman, deftly slipping between bodies to make his way toward the waving arm.

The four men sat at a long rectangular table occupied by half a dozen other drinkers, only a few of which had retained all their teeth. The further you got from the door, thought Cole, the older and rougher the clientele got. But Cole didn't care. He had finished his second pint and was well into his third, and dinner in the form of a greasy hamburger and fries had just arrived. Cole bit into the burger and felt relieved. It had been two hours since he had left the East Hastings Boxing Club, and he was famished.

"Sorry to hear about Archie," said Dusty Stevens, looking over his spectacles at Cole. "From everything you've told us, he was a stand-up guy. A good man."

"He was," said Cole, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin and taking a gulp of Kick-Ass. "He was one of the good guys."

"How'd he die, if you don't mind my asking?" said Martin Middlemarch, sipping his orange juice. Cole had chided him upon joining the table, saying he didn't even know they served OJ at the Cambie. "They call it mix," grinned Middlemarch as he raised his glass, explaining that he had stopped drinking altogether and was training for an ultramarathon that would take place in June. That had taken the wind out of Cole Blackwater's sails, given that Middlemarch was ten years his senior.

Cole regarded his friends across the table. He had known Martin and Dusty long before he had scuttled across the country from Ottawa four years ago. Now they managed to meet at least once a week at the Cambie to hoist a few and swap war stories.

"Are you okay, Cole?" asked Martin.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Not going to ride us about the latest green-washing from the

forestry or mining sector?” asked Dusty, almost sheepishly.

“Not tonight,” he said, shoving french fries into his mouth and chasing them with the last of his third pint.

“Don’t get him started,” said Martin, smiling.

“Oh, I still think you’re both sellouts. Hell, if Archie was here he’d probably tie you into the whole salmon farming thing he’s been working on. Likely pin the death of wild salmon stocks on logging in old-growth forests that the two of you used to fight for when you were with Greenpeace, and now try to spin for the forestry giants.” Cole spoke low and fast.

“Cole,” said Denman.

“Well, so long as you’re not getting into it....” said Martin, finishing his juice, still smiling.

“You know, you guys really —”

“Cole,” Denman said more forcefully. The sound of his voice stopped Cole’s train in its tracks.

Blackwater looked up. “What?”

“Cole, not tonight,” Denman said more quietly.

Cole searched the bar for a waitress and further refreshment. Distracted, he said, “Yeah, yeah, sorry.” He caught the waitress’ eye and made a circling motion with his hand to indicate that they wanted another round.

Dusty caught Cole’s attention. “So, you’re heading up to Lost-coast. When is the service?”

Cole drank deeply from his pint glass. “Don’t know,” he said, eating another fry. “Grace tells me they still haven’t recovered his body.”

“How do they know he’s dead?” asked Dusty.

“He’s dead. Archie Ravenwing isn’t the kind of guy to just wander off. It’s been a week since he went out in his boat to do some sea lice survey work for that researcher, Cassandra Petrel, and he hasn’t been seen since. Gracie tells me there was a hell of a storm that night, and that he didn’t come home. The Coast Guard has been up and down Knight Inlet, where he said he was heading, along with Tribune Channel, Nickol Pass, and as far south as the Johnstone Strait. At first they thought that maybe he’d had some kind of trouble, lost power, couldn’t motor or even call for

help, but Grace says they've searched every cove and there's no sign of him. The sea called Archie Ravenwing home."

The waitress brought their drinks, and Martin paid for the round.

"When did you last see him?" asked Martin, knocking back another OJ.

"A little while ago," said Cole, reflecting. "Archie hadn't been a client since, well, since last June, I guess. Right around the time I got back from Alberta, he lost an election and was no longer the band councillor for Port Lostcoast. He was just a private citizen. The new councillor, a fellow named Greg White Eagle, asked Archie to stay on as the North Salish First Nation representative on the Aquaculture Advisory Task Force, but that didn't last long. I guess the last time I talked to Archie was in August. He called to tell me he'd just been booted from the Task Force. Said he and White Eagle didn't see eye to eye, and that Greg had shown him the door. He seemed pretty pissed, but I was in the middle of things on the Spotted Owl file, and I guess I didn't give him much of my time. I meant to call him back but never did. You know how it goes," said Cole, looking at his friends.

"Anyway, it had been awhile. I know Archie always felt guilty about not paying me and all, but I wrote that debt off long ago. I really had put that out of my mind. I guess Archie never did. The little Lostcoast band didn't have any money. Those people are as poor as most of Denny's clients here. Difference is *they* don't have anybody watching their six. They live in the middle of nowhere. An island off an island off an island at the edge of Canada, and nobody could care less if unemployment is seventy percent or if nobody finishes grade six in that little God-forgotten town. The only people who seem to pay them any attention are the logging companies who want access to their timber and the salmon farmers who want access to the Broughton Archipelago."

Cole stopped and took a hearty swallow from his beer. He looked around at Dusty and Martin. "Sorry, Denny made me promise not to get into all that tonight."

"It's nothing. Neither of us has anything to do with salmon farming."

Cole looked down at his hands, as they gripped the pint glass. "I did what I could for Archie, but it never seemed like we could drive a wedge between the so-called Liberal government and salmon farming. When the moratorium was lifted in 2002 those buggers flooded the Broughton with dozens of permit applications. There must be thirty new salmon farms just in that little group of islands. Archie told me that the salmon runs were decimated. Sea lice, he said. Imagine that." Cole swilled the beer in his glass, his head down, his eyes dark and distant. "Sea lice. The size of your pinky nail." He held up his little finger, looking at it closely. "Something that tiny is wiping out a salmon population that is as old as time itself." The fever pitch of the bar suddenly seemed very distant.

"What do you know about this new band councillor?" asked Denman.

"Nothing but what Archie told me. He's originally from Alert Bay, but moved to Parish Island and Port Lostcoast maybe twenty years ago to fish. I think he's a booster of salmon farming, but I really haven't been following it. Archie wondered if White Eagle was on the pad with the salmon farmers, but I didn't take it too seriously. Archie could find a conspiracy under every bush and shrub in the forest."

Martin chuckled. "No wonder the two of you got on so well." Cole finished his beer and searched for a waitress.

"So, you're going up?" asked Martin seriously.

Cole was still looking for a waitress. "Yeah, tomorrow."

"Anything you need?"

"I need another beer," he said, distracted.

"Cole." Martin put his hand on Cole's arm and Cole turned to him. "Is there anything you need from us?"

Cole looked at his three friends.

"I don't know. I don't know what I need. This is new for me."

"Cole, you've been to funerals before," said Dusty.

"This is different."

"How?" asked Dusty, looking at Cole over his glasses.

"This isn't a funeral. It's a potlatch."