



THE SWIMMER

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PROLOGUE

“Everyone dies alone.”
- Blaise Pascal

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe right side.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe left side.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke.

Mitch Hamilton was swimming nude in Monterey Bay. He'd left his clothes above the high tide line on Natural Bridges beach, gazed at the lights of Monterey and Pacific Grove across the Bay, and started swimming. Having surfed almost every day over the past forty plus years, this seemed like an appropriate way to end his life.

The water was a chilly 55 degrees. He'd worn his surfing ear plugs and one of his triathlon caps to eliminate the discomfort he felt in his ears when swimming in cold water. Although this was a suicide, he wanted it to be painless. In fact, he was relying on what he'd discovered years before when training for his first triathlon – he loved to swim. It wasn't just something you did when you lost your board, it was meditative. Your body and breathing got into a rhythm and you could just empty your mind. You could forget the pressures of the day and the sins of your life.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe right side.

If all went as planned, he'd last an hour, maybe a bit more. But in an hour, he'd be well out to sea. The tide was dropping so it would help him along. He'd probably be two miles from shore.

Mitch had studied the effects of hypothermia when he'd worked as a beach lifeguard during college, and revisited them the week before. It usually took at least twenty to thirty minutes for the first effects to set in. Once your body temperature dropped below ninety-five degrees, you start to lose coordination. In an hour or so, he'd be so exhausted that he'd lose consciousness. Then he'd drown. His lifeless body would sink and maybe he'd be lunch for a passing shark. He certainly hoped he wouldn't wash up on a local beach and frighten some poor child. No. He would be far enough from shore that his body would never be found.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe left side.

And the swimming should help speed the process. He'd burn much more energy swimming than just floating. Exhaustion should overcome him soon.

Mitch paused in his swim. He looked back at lights from the homes on West Cliff Drive, then east at the Wharf, the Boardwalk, the East Side, and the power plant at Moss Landing. It looked like he'd been swimming pretty straight.

Rising up on a passing swell, he looked south and could still make out the lights of Monterey and Pacific Grove some twenty-five miles away. Mitch double checked the position of the soon to be setting moon on his right side and began swimming again. He knew this was the right thing to do.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe right side.

CHAPTER 1

“*Mann* Tracht, Un Gott Lacht
Man makes plans and God Laughs”
- Old Yiddish saying

Karin Latham loved walking on the beach at night with Brette, her Brittany Spaniel. True, Natural Bridges State Beach was officially closed at night, but she'd only encountered a ranger once, and the ranger had just asked her to be careful.

The beach was partially moonlit, but it would be completely dark in a few hours once the moon set. Natural Bridges beach was largely protected from the lights of the city.

In the distance, she could see the lights of Pacific Grove. The ocean was so beautiful at night. Tonight the small waves were almost lapping at the shore, but the dancing reflections of the moonlight on the profoundly dark rippled water made the ocean seem alive. Sparking diamonds in a black sea. It was so beautiful.

Brette ran ahead of her back and forth across the beach, occasionally disturbing small groups of sand pipers who had yet to move on for the night. Then she'd come running back to check in. Whether it was runs in Wilder ranch, swims in mountain lakes, or unleashed walks, Brette always went ahead, clearing the way, verifying its security, and hunting birds before returning to Karin.

Karin loved to watch Brette run. Too bad there weren't more off-leash parks in Santa Cruz.

Brette continued ahead in her zig-zag pattern but then suddenly stopped and barked. That was unusual. Karin made her way over to where Brette was nuzzling something on the sand. She certainly hoped it wasn't a dead sea lion. The last time it took days to get all the smell out of Brette's fur.

Karin took her cell phone out of her pocket and touched the icon for the Flashlight app. On the beach was a pile of neatly folded clothes, a cell phone, and an envelope with the word 'Marina' on it. Did this have something to do with boats?

She looked around the beach but saw no one.

"Is there anyone there?" she called out.

The only sound she heard was the lapping of the waves at the shore.

Karin scanned the shoreline. Maybe someone was just skinny dipping. She had occasionally encountered young couples swimming au naturel at night, but that was in the summer. It was the middle of winter now. Still, she looked. There was no one in the water that she could see. Wait! Was that someone swimming in the distance? No. It was probably just her imagination.

She returned to the clothes, picked up the phone and turned it on. It required a security code. She tried a few sequences of numbers (after ensuring it wasn't an iPhone which were known to permanently lock if you tried too many wrong codes), to no avail. She decided to open the envelope, but just as she slipped her finger under the flap, the phone rang. It so startled her that she dropped it.

She quickly recovered the phone, saw the name I C E Marina with a picture of a stunning redhead, and answered tentatively, "Hello?"

“I’m sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number. Hmm, no. Isn’t this Mitch’s phone?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know Mitch, but this might be his phone. It’s here on Natural Bridges beach along with a pile of clothes and an envelope. One sec. Um, it’s labelled Marina. What should I do?”

“Please open it and read the first few lines,” Marina replied urgently.

“Just a sec. Ah. Okay. Here goes. *Marina my love, you have been the best thing that ever happened to me. A true gift. Years ago, you saved my life, but now –*“

“Stop!” Marina shouted. “I’ll call 911 and I’ll be right there. Where are you?”

“I’m in the middle of the beach at Natural Bridges. About where the lifeguard stand is in the summer. Okay. I’ll wait. How long will you be?”

“Ten minutes max.”

And the phone went dead.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe left side. Come on. It had been twenty minutes. Mitch was nearly a mile from shore and he wasn't feeling the effects of hypothermia yet. Where was the loss of coordination? Where was the disorientation? Had his years of surfing in cold water conditioned him for this? What was going on?

Mitch had told Marina he was going out for a run but would be back in an hour. He'd figured that would be plenty of time. When he didn't return, Marina would wait at least another hour before she started worrying. She'd call his cell and would get his voicemail. Then she might call 911. They probably wouldn't be too helpful. A husband gone for a few hours who didn't answer his phone? It probably happened all the time. No, he'd have plenty of time before anyone started looking for him, though Marina would probably start driving along Westcliff, thinking he'd sprained an ankle and was probably limping home.

His one regret about his suicide was Marina. They'd been together more than twelve years. She had prevented him from doing this very thing after his devastating divorce. He'd never seen it coming. He and Lauren, his ex, had been so happy together. And then he came home to an empty house after an overseas business trip. No note; nothing. Just a few blank spots on the walls where her favorite art had hung. He'd tried her cell phone but the number was no longer in service.

Mitch had called her office and discovered that Lauren had quit her job. Her best friends hadn't heard from her recently and seemed surprised that she was gone. They knew she'd talked about starting her life over, someplace far away, but they thought she was just fantasizing like all of them often did.

A few days later, a process server showed up to Mitch's office and served him divorce papers. Her address was c/o – care of – her attorney. The attorney wouldn't talk to him and the private investigator he'd hired had come up blank. Credit cards had been cancelled, accounts closed, no income had showed up against her social security number. She'd just vanished.

Mitch didn't know why she'd left him. They'd had what he thought of as a perfect marriage. They both worked, earned decent incomes, took multiple vacations each year, danced together twice a week, had a reasonable circle of friends – what had happened?

In his more imaginative moments, Mitch thought about some of the movies he'd seen, like *The Long Kiss Goodnight* with Geena Davis. Maybe Lauren was a spy and their years together were just a cover for something darker. Then again, when he really thought about it, Mitch became convinced that she'd found out his terrible secret and was so disgusted by it that she wanted out. He didn't know. He sunk into endless self-examination, despair, and depression. His life as he'd known it, after years of building the perfect home, the perfect relationship, and the

perfect work/life balance, was over. He needed Lauren. She was solid and good. Being with her made him better – made him a good person. What would happen to him with Lauren gone?

Sure that he'd descend into depravity, Mitch had decided to end his life instead. Much like tonight, he'd gone down to the beach, stripped off his clothes, and started towards the ocean to swim to his death. But by some quirk of fate, he crossed the path of Marina who was walking alone on the beach that night, and his life changed again.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe right side.

Marina kicked herself. She knew something was wrong. Beginning a few months before, Mitch had seemed more stressed. He was often distracted, at a loss in the midst of one of their conversations, not having heard what she said even though he was looking right at her.

“Mitch, we were having a conversation and you just went elsewhere,” Marina chided.

Mitch’s deep blue eyes sparkled and sent a warm thrill through her as he smiled and quipped, “Just because a woman is talking doesn’t mean there’s a conversation.”

She’d smacked him with a napkin, a more measured response than throwing her drink in his face. Of course she knew he was joking, and that he was an expert at distracting her from any real issue. It worked that time as it would many times afterwards.

As weeks progressed, Mitch’s distraction turned to worry. He was nervous all the time. He raced to answer any phone call, check any text that came in, and was always the first to get the mail. She’d asked what was wrong, but Mitch avoided answering, changed the subject, or distracted her.

More recently, Mitch was clearly depressed. Marina proposed getting some help, counseling for Mitch, counseling for the two of them, but Mitch assured her he’d be fine. Some things at work were bothering him but he’d work it out.

Clearly he hadn’t.

Marina thought back to how they met.

It was nearly midnight and a full summer moon high in the sky lit up the ocean and beach. The small waves breaking on the rocks below the cliff fluoresced from the red tide that had afflicted the beaches of Santa Cruz for the past few weeks.

Marina, who grew up in one of Santa Cruz’s well-known Italian fishing families, worked as a marine scientist at Long Marine Lab on the west side of Santa Cruz. Her father began taking her fishing before she had learned to walk and had taught her about the ocean and how it was both dangerously powerful and surprisingly fragile. And now, she was working to save it.

Living less than a mile away, she often walked to work and she particularly enjoyed taking the cliff trails and beach back home on these rare, clear summer nights when she’d worked late to finish project.

That night was a far cry from the chilly foggy evenings that Santa Cruz summers were known for. A northeasterly breeze had brought warm air from the inland valleys and chased away the fog.

She descended the trail down to Natural Bridges beach gazing out at the glistening ocean and the lights of Pacific Grove across the Bay, and she almost bumped into a naked man making his way to the water.

The man covered his private parts and appeared embarrassed. In the moonlight, Marina couldn’t help but notice his athletic body and powerful shoulders. He looked harmless; actually,

somewhat afraid of her.

“Skinny dipping?” she asked, somewhat amused.

“Ah. Ah.”

He looked down at his feet and turned and ran towards what appeared to be his clothes, but he tripped over a large strand of kelp and fell flat on his face.

Marina laughed. Then, not seeing him get up, she asked. “Are you okay?”

As she approached, she could tell that the man was crying.

She made her way over to the pile of clothes looking for a towel, but there wasn't one. She saw a large white envelope atop a pair of black boxer briefs, a sweatshirt, sweatpants, and a pair of sandals. She picked them up and then returned to the sobbing man.

“Here,” she offered. “Put your clothes back on.”

He turned over self-consciously and accepted the proffered clothes.

“You look really cold. You should probably go home and warm up.”

And then she started laughing. She didn't want him to think that she'd been looking at his penis when she made the remark about looking cold.

The man looked up and suddenly he was laughing too.

“I'm sorry,” he began. “I can't seem to do anything right these days. Not even kill myself.”

Seeing alarm in her face, the man continued.

“You know, that's the first time I've laughed in months. Maybe this was a bad idea after all. Let's start over. My name is Mitch Hamilton. I'm the founder of a high tech startup here in Santa Cruz, recently retired after a successful sale of the company two years ago.”

Marina recognized the name and now his face. Mitch Hamilton had made the front page of the local paper when his company was sold. He was one of the first high tech entrepreneurs from Santa Cruz to make it big. She remembered that his company was unusual. As a CEO, he had given a large part of the company to his employees and created a previously unheard of egalitarian structure with flexible hours and the ability to work from home. Since then more and more high tech companies had adopted his ideas and were moving to the area. It seemed that with this success, venture capital investors suddenly decided that their startups didn't have to be located in the heart of the Silicon Valley and didn't need classic management organizations. Her friend Consuela was one of his lucky employees who was now a millionaire. She's raved about him, saying she couldn't imagine working for a nicer boss. And now, here he was trying to kill himself. What could drive someone so successful to such a desperate act?

“I'm Marina Florek. I work over at Long Marine Lab,” she replied holding out her hand.

Mitch shook it firmly but gently. He dressed quickly as Marina

returned her gaze to the ocean and the moonlight dancing on the rippled water.

Would he try it again? He seemed to need help, someone to talk to. What could she do?

“I live just a few blocks from here. Would you like to come up for a hot drink??” Marina suggested, thinking she might be able to occupy him long enough to be sure he wouldn’t make another attempt.

Mitch looked out at the water, back at Marina, then down at his feet nodding. “That would be great,” Mitch agreed after a moment’s reflection.

They made their way up the sand dune leading to the park entrance, then along Westcliff Drive for a few hundred yards before turning up Chico. Marina had always found it odd that in a beach town like Santa Cruz, they’d named all of this neighborhood’s streets after inland towns and cities. What were Reno, Stockton, Modesto, Coalinga, Sacramento, Chico, Auburn and others doing in Santa Cruz?

Entering her house, Marina slipped off her shoes and led Mitch upstairs. Like most of the homes on the lower Westside, Marina’s had a reverse floor plan: the main living area, kitchen, and dining room were upstairs; bedrooms were usually downstairs. The arched window in the living room looked down Chico to the ocean a block and a half away. The lights of Monterey, Pacific Grove, and the Moss Landing power plant flickered in the distance.

“I’m going to change out of my work clothes and will be right back. Make yourself comfortable. Feel free to look around.”

Marina’s home was warm and welcoming. There was a subtle nautical theme. Her bookcases seemed to contain an eclectic mix of fiction, some classic, some modern, and quite a few scientific texts. But what caught Mitch’s attention were the weathered glass balls on the mantle above the gas fireplace. He picked up a smaller teal colored one about four inches in diameter. He had one just like it.

“Do you know anything about those?” Marina asked, now dressed in sweats, her long dark hair tied back in a French braid.

“Actually I have one. I’ve had it about thirty years. My family lived in Hawaii for a time and one day the lifeguard at Kaneohe Beach called me over. I climbed up the life guard stand and he pointed out the ball a couple hundred yards offshore. He said he’d keep an eye on me if I wanted to retrieve it so I raced into the water.

“I looked back from time to time and he signaled me to go left, right, or straight and ten minutes later, I was the happiest kid on earth. I started swimming back, focused on the beach, and felt a sudden burning in my arm. I stopped and looked and saw that I was in the midst of countless Portuguese man-o-war jellyfish. I got tangled in their tentacles and tried to fight my way to shore. But my arms and legs were wrapped up and I couldn’t move well. I did as I was taught and flipped onto my back. I called for help.

“The lifeguard used his bullhorn to clear the water and to tell me to stay where I was. He made it to me faster than I could imagine and towed me to shore. My parents came running up as he carried me to the bathrooms. There, he began unwinding the tentacles. They had dug deep into my skin and I bled as he pulled them out. Once he was done, he wiped me down with ammonia and told my parents to keep an eye on me for a possible allergic reaction. During the whole ordeal, I didn’t let go of the ball. I even slept with it that night.

“It sits on my mantle, much like yours, and every time I see it, it brings back memories of that adventure. Weirdly, even though I can remember the pain, I remember it as one of the best experiences in my life.”

“How old were you?”

“I was eight.”

Marina stepped into the kitchen. “Do you like hot chocolate?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Mind if I add a drop of Grand Marnier?”

“That sounds like the perfect drink for a cold Santa Cruz night. Yes. Please!

Mitch turned back to the mantle and examined each of the colorful glass balls.

“So how is it you have so many of these balls?”

“My story certainly isn’t as exciting as yours. I came across my first one when doing research on the Oregon-Washington coast. There was a flurry of these floats that hit the beaches for a couple of weeks, and our crew got more than our fair share because we had access to remote beaches that even the locals couldn’t get to.

“As you know, these balls or glass floats were used by Japanese fisherman years ago. They would often break loose from their nets. Over the decades, thousands were lost. From time to time they’d wash up on beaches. The one you found in Hawaii is unusual, but then again, that was thirty years ago and maybe they were still in use then. Today, I don’t think you’d ever find any in Hawaii.

“The interesting part for me is that they are pretty much all travelling in a giant circle around the Pacific. They only wash up on beaches if there’s a storm that pushes them out of a current near one of the coasts. Most are found in Washington and Oregon; sometimes they’re seen in Taiwan. I could go into details about the specific currents that carry them – that’s actually part of my work – but I don’t want to bore you.”

Marina carried over two steaming mugs of spiked hot chocolate, handed one to Mitch, and took a seat on the elegant blue leather sofa. Mitch sat down in the matching recliner facing her.

Taking a sip of the chocolate, Mitch replied, “I don’t think I’d be bored at all. You said you work at Long Marine Lab, but what exactly do you do there? This chocolate is incredibly good by the way.”

“Thanks. I find it takes the chill off and settles me down for

the evening after a late night.

“I’m a Marine Scientist. Currently, I’m working on the acidification of the Pacific. Those currents I mentioned are a critical part of its propagation.”

“Is this due to pollution? I know quite a bit about the ocean since I spend so much time there, but not about acidification.”

“Well, acidification is the ugly twin of climate change. Just as CO₂ is causing climate change, it’s also causing acidification of the oceans. They absorb and create carbonic acid along with other carbonates. The impact is becoming severe. With decreased alkalinity, mollusks have difficulty forming shells. Corals suffer, and the food chain gets interrupted as we lose these lower-level animals, and coral reefs. It’s killing ocean life.

“People worry about climate change. But I tell you, if the oceans die, life on this planet is over.”

“That sounds pretty bleak,” Mitch replied seriously. “I love the ocean. I surf, kayak, fish, and dive. I try to do my part by cleaning up wherever possible, and eliminating plastic. But it sounds like I’m focusing on the wrong thing.”

“No. You’re not. I do get a little pedantic about what’s happening in the ocean. I wish it got more attention. It might be enough to push the climate skeptics into recognizing what’s at stake. When the winters seem more extreme, it’s hard for many to associate that with ‘Global Warming’. It might be easier to sound the alarm that all this carbon is going to kill the oceans.”

“Yeah. I see your point. I’ll have to think about this.”

“So not to change the subject too much, and I’m sorry to be so direct, but how did you end up on the beach tonight with the intent of killing yourself?”

Mitch told her his almost unbelievable story and over the next few months, a developing friendship turned into much more.

And now, twelve years later, Mitch was on his way to killing himself again. How could he throw away all that they’d built together?

Karin Latham waited nervously on the beach petting Brette, looking out at the ocean, hoping to see a swimmer returning while regularly checking the beach for help to arrive. She started to consider reading the note but just as she began to unfold it again, she spotted Marina running across the sand. Karin leapt up and waved frantically.

"Are you Marina? Did you call 911? I don't see anyone swimming out there. Is this guy a good swimmer? Mitch?"

"Yes, yes. I called 911. And yes, my husband's a good swimmer. But... Do you have his note?"

"Here," Karin said, handing her the envelope.

"I'm Karin, by the way," she added as Marina pulled the note out and quickly read it.

Seconds later, they heard sirens approaching.

They both turned. A fire department rescue truck pulled up on the beach as a fire engine parked on the cliff above. A tall blond woman stepped out of the truck and approached them.

The woman introduced herself, "I'm Ingrid Kovalski, team lead tonight for the Marine Rescue Unit. This is Mike Connors, Jim Francis, and Julio Etcheverria. Is one of you Marina Hamilton?"

"I am!" Marina responded, starting to lose control. "My husband Mitch left this suicide note for me that Karin found. He's out there swimming."

"Mitch Hamilton?" Julio and Jim shouted at the same time. "Middle-aged surfer extraordinaire?" Jim asked.

"Yes, Mitch is my husband. You know him?"

"Yeah. We surf with Mitch at the Lane and up north pretty regularly. I can't believe he'd do this."

Taking a serious tone, and turning toward Karin, Ingrid continued.

"And you're Karin? You found the note. Did you see Mitch in the water?"

"Brette, my dog, found his clothes and I saw the note. I scanned the water and I'm pretty sure I saw someone swimming a hundred yards or so off the beach. And look, the tide is going out. You can see footprints leading to the water."

After a quick inspection of the footprints, Ingrid turned back to Marina.

"Marina, as you know, time is critical. We need to know about Mitch. Is he a strong swimmer?"

"Are you kidding? He's a waterman. He surfs most days, kayaks, dives, and does triathlons without a wetsuit. He's very strong in the water."

Julio jumped in. "Mitch is strong. He keeps up with the younger guys in the lineup, no problem."

"And how long do you think he's been out there?"

"I called him about fifteen minutes after he left for a run to ask him to pick up some cilantro that I needed for dinner."

Sobbing now, she continued, “Karin here answered and told me about the clothes and the note. You know he tried to do this before about twelve years ago, but I stopped him.”

“I’m sorry, Marina, but how long do you think he’s been in the water?”

“Well, with the fifteen minutes, maybe he got here a few minutes before so I’d guess it’s been maybe twenty or thirty minutes max?”

“Maybe a bit less,” Karin interrupted. “It’s only been fifteen minutes or so since I thought I saw a swimmer.”

Ingrid nodded.

“Marina, we’ll do the best we can. Hold on a sec.”

She stepped away and made a call on the radio while Julio and Jim tried to keep Marina calm.

“We’ve seen some rescues in much worse situations than this, Marina. Don’t give up hope,” Julio soothed.

“Absolutely,” Jim continued. “Between us, the Harbor Patrol, and the Coast Guard, we’ve got the best teams!”

Returning, Ingrid explained, “We can’t take a boat out at night unless the subject is within a couple hundred yards of the beach.”

Seeing Marina’s distress, Ingrid put her hand on Marina’s shoulder and continued, “I’ve spoken with Brian Ackerman, Assistant Harbormaster, and he contacted the Coast Guard while I was on the radio with him. The Coast Guard has dispatched a helicopter. Brian assured me that he’ll have a crew together in the next ten minutes or so and will start the ocean search with the Harbor Patrol Boat. They have some cool tech like thermal imaging and side radar, and should have a good chance at finding Mitch. They’re plotting ocean currents and estimating his swimming speed, narrowing the search area.

“More for thoroughness than anything else, my team will work with other Fire Department teams to scan the cliffs and the shorelines. He might have changed his mind and tried to swim back, ending up in an inaccessible place.

“The good news is that it’s a clear moonlit night with calm winds, and virtually no swell action. I suggest you go home. I know it’s hard to wait, but we’ll contact you as soon as we know anything.”

Jim and Julio gave Marina reassuring hugs and the team left her and Karin on the beach alone.

Karin turned to Marina.

“What now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Would you like to come up to my place for a warm drink?”

“Ah. What about Brette?”

“She’s certainly welcome. Come on. I could use some company while I wait.”

Brette followed patiently as Karin and Marina made their way up the beach and the past the well-lit homes to Marina’s. Once inside and up the stairs to the living room, Brette examined the room carefully while Marina turned on the gas fireplace. Feeling the warmth, Brette came over and after turning around a few times, curled up in front of the fire, gazing patiently at Karin.

“How old is she?” Marina asked.

“She’s ten. These Brittanys are an interesting breed. Sean and I got her as a puppy. A family friend had bought her from a farm in the Central Valley. Unfortunately, her four-year-old son was abusive to the young puppy so they had to give her up. They called Sean and he agreed to take her.

“I wasn’t a dog person at the time and was even less so the first few years. Although she was quickly housebroken, her non-stop energy was exhausting and if she didn’t get out for a run every day, she’d chew things up or would dig in the garden.

“Luckily, Sean loved to run and he and Brette would go on long runs in the hills. She came back completely worn out. After a few years, she settled down.”

“Is spiked hot chocolate okay?” Marina asked, thinking of another similar night years before.

“That would be wonderful!”

Trying to keep Marina’s mind off of Mitch, Karin continued.

“You know, just a few weeks after we got her, we were up at Clearlake. We’d just had dinner at a great Japanese restaurant in Lucerne where I’d had my first fried ice cream. If you haven’t ever had it, you should try it.

“Anyway, after dinner, Sean and I took Brette out for a walk. There’s a long low pier on that part of the lake and we walked out to the end. It’s probably a few hundred yards. It was a warm fall evening and Sean turned to kiss me when we heard a splash. We looked around for Brette, and found her in the water, swimming happily. She couldn’t have been more than nine or ten weeks old.

“Sean asked me if I thought he should go in after her, but as we started back towards the shore, she followed, in the water. It was pretty impressive for such a young puppy.

“And then the next day, we met some friends at one of the Blue Lakes nearby. There was a rope swing on the other side of the lake about a quarter of a mile away. Two of the guys challenged Sean to a race across the lake and dove in. Sean followed, quickly passing them up – he was a competitive swimmer in college. I didn’t notice right away, but Brette decided

to chase Sean. When I did notice, I started yelling at Sean. Eventually he heard me, but he was more than halfway across the lake and Brette was right behind him. He figured that if she could make it that far, she could go the rest of the way.

“Sean and Brette crossed the lake with the two guys well behind and Sean climbed the tree to the rope swing. He was in such a hurry that he didn’t notice that Brett had climbed the tree too. I guess it had a long sloped trunk that extended over the water and was maybe six or seven feet high.

“He grabbed the swing, did a flip, and when he came up, he saw Brette standing above him. She jumped, went under water, and when she surfaced, she swam with Sean. The others arrived and the four of them had a great time with the rope swing.

“And of course, she swam back with no problems.”

Marina handed Karin the steaming mug of hot chocolate and sat beside her on the sofa facing the fire. Karin sipped cautiously.

“Orange?”

“Yes. A drop of Grand Marnier. It’s the same thing I served Mitch the last time... I’m sorry. Um Sean?”

“It’s okay. I don’t know how you can be so calm. I’d be a wreck. As for Sean, he died three years ago. It was sudden. A brain aneurysm. He went to bed with a headache and never woke up.”

“I’m really sorry! I can’t imagine what you must have gone through.”

“It was hard. In some ways it still is. Sean and I were together for twenty-three years. And he was only fifty-one. From what the doctors told me, it was likely hereditary – there was really nothing we could have done.

“His mother died of what everyone said was a stroke at about the same age, and the doctors now think it might have been an aneurysm too.

“But we had a lot of great years together that I’ll always cherish. I’ve come to learn that we can’t control life. We have to embrace the good moments.”

Looking over at Marina who was starting to lose her composure, Karin apologized, but Marina brushed it off.

“I knew what I was getting into when I ran into Mitch on the beach the night when he tried this before. But I put it all aside. I haven’t associated it with any kind of psychological problem. I thought it was situational depression. But I don’t know. We’ve had a great twelve years together though something’s been bothering him for several months and he’s been unwilling to talk about it. I raised the subject many times. We’re pretty good about discussing our issues. But Mitch is a master at deflection. I suggested he see someone, but he brushed it off.”

“Trouble at work?”

“Well, that’s what he says. But Mitch made a ton of money years ago with a software company. Now, his ‘work’ consists of investing in promising startup companies. He has an office in San Francisco and spends two days a week up there. Still, I can’t

imagine his work is that stressful. Certainly not something that would make him take his own life. I mean, he could walk away at any time.

“And no, before you ask, I don’t think he’s seeing anyone else. Even while he’s been depressed, our life together and our love life have been excellent. I’m sure I’d know.”

The two women sat in silence gazing at fire and the now sleeping Brette. Every minute or so, Marina checked her phone. They must have found him by now.

Sue Hernandez closed her laptop. She'd had a productive evening. A few more days and the first draft of her PhD thesis on the effects of nanoplastics on marine microorganisms would be ready for review by her advisor.

Sue had been fascinated by the ocean and in particular by marine life since she saw her first sea otter when she was 6 years old. Over the years, her father, a professional fisherman who operated a boat out of Moss Landing, taught her about sea life and about the delicate balances from the smallest organisms to the largest.

In her teens, she had been fascinated by Gary Griggs' Our Ocean Backyard articles in the Santa Cruz Sentinel. And over the last few years, she'd had the opportunity to discuss her research with Gary, a Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences (and Marine Science) at UCSC.

Few people realized that microorganisms make up seventy percent of the biomass in the ocean. Her research would show the impact of these very small pieces of plastic on these organisms and the resultant impact on the food chain. It's not just these organisms that are at risk, it's the world's oceans. And, in fact, the whole planet. The solutions were going to require drastic action. She would do everything possible to sound the alarm.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her cell phone. Brian Ackerman was calling. Sue supplemented her meager grad-student income from the University by working part time as a Marine Unit Team Member for the Santa Cruz Fire Department. Having just missed making the Olympic Team several years before, Sue poured her swimming expertise into becoming one of four of Santa Cruz's rescue swimmers. It didn't pay much but it didn't take much time either. She was on call only five days a month, and hadn't actually been called in nearly two months. Aside from regular training sessions, it was easy money - so far - and she enjoyed working with the honed athletes of the Marine Rescue Unit.

"Brian, my guess is you need me ASAP."

"Yeah. This might be a tough one. Get down here and I'll brief you on our way out. We have a swimmer in the water."

Sue didn't even think about the fact that Brian had said 'swimmer'. Usually it was fisherman, boater, sailor, or victim. Instead, she quickly slipped on her swimsuit, put on sweats over it, grabbed her wetsuit, and jumped into her aging Subaru.

Arriving at the Harbormaster's office, she discovered Brian and Dan Kooper heads down over a map. With nearly thirty years working with the Harbor Patrol, Dan was famous for some truly phenomenal rescues.

Earlier this year, he and Brian were about to go off shift when two panicked women came racing into the office. Two brothers had taken a Hobie Cat out early in the morning and hadn't returned. It was now dark and they'd had no word.

Brian put in a call to the Coast Guard who dispatched a helicopter, and he and Dan raced out in the Harbor Patrol Boat to provide support. Seven hours later, they returned, unsuccessful and exhausted. The Coast Guard had called off the search.

Unwilling to give up, Dan pulled out maps of the Monterey Bay ocean currents and after much study, suggested that perhaps they'd been looking in the wrong area. Over the years, he had worked with Gary Griggs, the same Gary Griggs that Sue was working on her thesis with, to study ocean currents in the Monterey Bay and how they changed with the seasons.

Dan plotted a new search area and they raced back out. Within ninety minutes, they'd found the overturned Hobie Cat nearly ten miles offshore with one of the brothers clinging to it. "You've got to save my brother!" he shouted, as they approached. "He couldn't hold on."

They rescued the first brother and discovered that he was hypothermic. He had lost too much body heat and if he didn't get medical help as soon as possible, he could die. They made the difficult decision to take him back to shore to a waiting ambulance before returning to the area to search for the other brother.

As their remarkable luck (and skill) continued, the thermal imaging system of the Harbor Patrol Boat helped them locate the other brother in the water, alive and also hypothermic.

Two weeks later, Brian and Dan attended the wedding of the second brother. At the reception, most people expected the groom to toast his wife, but instead, he toasted Dan and Brian, who made it possible for him to be there that day.

Sue certainly hoped that tonight's rescue would be as successful, and hopefully not as harrowing.

"Hi guys!"

"Hey Sue," they both replied. "Let's go!"

As Brian navigated out of the harbor, Dan explained the situation and their strategy.

"The Coast Guard is at least twenty minutes out, so we're headed directly to the area Brian and I plotted. As weird as it sounds, the fact that this guy is a swimmer may make it easier. He'll swim at a constant pace until hypothermia sets in and will probably swim pretty straight. We've tried to account for current drift, so we have a pretty good idea where to start."

"Have you guys ever heard of someone committing suicide like this?" Sue asked.

"I seem to remember a movie about this with the final scene of a bathrobe washing around in the surf," Brian replied. "But no. In real life, this is a first."

"Well, if we find him, I sure hope he won't put up too much of a fight."

"We'll be there to help, but I think he'll probably be pretty exhausted by the time we find him."

Sue looked out at the vast ocean. Every one of her previous rescues had been near shore with the Marine Rescue Unit. The victims weren't far out and between the team on the cliffs or the

beaches and their inflatable boat in the water, she had spotters.

Out here, especially in the middle of the night, the ocean seemed vast. Even though it was beautiful with the moon reflecting off the water, the depth of the black water around them was intimidating. Sue knew about the thermal imaging of the Harbor Patrol Boat, but couldn't imagine how they were going to find this guy. Talk about a needle in a haystack! This haystack was about four hundred fifty square miles and they were looking for one six-foot man who didn't want to be found.

It seemed impossible.

7

"Do you need to get home?" Marina asked.

"No. There's really nothing waiting for me there. I'm happy to wait with you if that's okay. I kind of feel involved."

"Actually, I'd appreciate that. I think I've forgotten how to be alone and I really don't want to start now."

Then, realizing this wasn't the most politic thing to say, Marina apologized, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"No. Don't worry about it. It took me a while to get used to it and while I'm happy with my life now, it certainly isn't what it was with Sean.

"It was hard when he died but then it got easier. I think this may be harder though. Sean didn't choose to die. I can't imagine what you're going through."

"Mitch choosing to leave me is a real shock. We've faced some challenges over the years and have always overcome them together. Why didn't he trust me to help him? I just wish I knew why Mitch would do this. It must be something really bad. I really don't understand."

They sat in contemplative silence for a few moments.

"I hope it's not too intrusive of me to suggest, but have you thought about looking at Mitch's phone?"

"Not really. While we share pretty much everything, we've always felt that each of us should have some things that are our own. Phones certainly fit in there."

Marina looked over at Mitch's phone then stood up suddenly and retrieved it. She sat down next to Karin, turned it on and typed in a code to unlock it.

"I feel a little guilty doing this. But you know, he left the phone on the beach with the note so he would have expected me to look into it. On the other hand, Mitch is a technologist. He probably deleted anything that would reveal what's really going on. But, it's worth a look.

"We can start here and then move on to his computer."

Karin appreciated being included in the 'we' and was glad they

had something to do while waiting on the Harbor Patrol and Coast Guard.

Samantha Louis had just finished typing up her notes when her cell phone rang. She looked over at Jack, her fiancé, who was frantically typing away at his computer as she debated whether to answer. It was long after office hours and she usually let these calls go to the answering service who would call her back if the caller urgently needed a callback. But, seeing that the caller was Mitch Hamilton, she decided to answer.

“Hello Mitch, what can I do for you?”

“Uh, uh.”

Sam was surprised to hear a woman’s voice.

“Hello? Who are you and why are you calling on Mitch’s phone?”

“Uh, uh. I’m Marina Hamilton, Mitch’s wife. I went through his phone and saw that you had exchanged texts. I found out that you’re a psychiatrist. Have you been seeing Mitch?”

“I’m sorry Ms. Hamilton, but professional rules don’t allow me to discuss my patients without their express written permission.”

“But, but. He’s trying to kill himself. He left a note. He’s swimming in Monterey Bay. The Coast Guard and Harbor Patrol are searching for him – or his body. Can’t you tell me what’s going on?”

Sam caught her breath. She was afraid that something like this might happen. While there was nothing explicit in their recent sessions, she sensed that Mitch was continuing downhill. He was afraid, afraid that his life would come crashing down around him and that he’d hurt those closest to him.

Softening her tone, Sam answered. “I’m sorry Ms. Hamilton. I know this is hard and I’d like to help but my hands are tied. We need to hope for the best and get him under psychiatric care as soon as he’s rescued.”

“Psychiatric care?! Does Mitch have some mental illness?”

“Again. I’m really sorry but I can’t say any more. Hopefully we can get Mitch the help he needs.”

“Well, it’s clear you weren’t able to help him!”

Marina hung up abruptly and screamed, “That self-righteous bitch wouldn’t tell me anything. Looking at Karin’s shocked expression, Marina immediately regretted what she’d said to the psychiatrist. She knew several psychotherapists and doctors and they were legally prohibited from talking about their patients.

“I’m sorry Karin. I’m just really frustrated.”

At her home in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco, Sam put her head in her hands and was on the verge of tears.

Sensing a change in the room, Jack looked up.

“Are you okay?”

“I think I may have lost a patient.”

“I wouldn’t worry. You’re a great psychiatrist. There will be more patients.”

“No. When I say ‘lost’, I mean he may be dead. He’s apparently swimming in Monterey Bay trying to commit suicide.”

Jack came over, knelt beside her and took Sam's hands in his.

"I'm really sorry, Sam. Is this one of your seriously ill patients?"

"Jack, you know I can't go into detail, but no. He's not schizophrenic, borderline, or majorly depressed, and he doesn't suffer from anything the DSM would call a disorder. He's afraid. I feel like I should have seen this coming and should have done more. And I can't even talk to his frantic wife about what's going on.

"Sometimes I hate my job."

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe right side.

Mitch was tiring. He was also getting very cold. It was an effort to bring his arms out of the water and to maintain his rhythmic strokes and breathing. But, having swum for so many years, his body seemed to continue on automatic.

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe left side.

The mindless meditation of swimming was giving way to unbidden thoughts. He couldn't control them. It wasn't his life passing before his eyes. Or was it?

He'd imagined that his last thoughts would be about Marina and how he'd ruined their life together but instead, it was his childhood that invaded his peaceful path to the end.

Mitch had grown up in a military household. His father was an enlisted man in the Air Force, a former drill sergeant who raised his son like a recruit in boot camp. Nothing Mitch did was ever good enough. It didn't matter that he excelled in the many schools he attended, or that testing had shown him to be a genius. His father yelled. If Mitch made a mistake, it was the belt. His father had a thin leather belt that served as the instrument of choice for his 'spankings' that often drew blood from Mitch's bare behind.

White gloved inspections were routine and even dust on his bedsprings was grounds for punishment. His farm-girl mother who had been so independent in her youth bowed to his father's demands.

Mitch graduated from high school a year early with a full scholarship to Cal Tech, leaving home as soon as he could. Not long after, Mitch's mother divorced his father and reclaimed her independent life. She and Mitch became very close until a stroke took her a few years ago.

Mitch wasn't sure what possessed him to invite his father to his marriage to Lauren. It was a beautiful fall wedding on the UC Santa Cruz campus with views from the hillside all the way to Monterey. Mitch's career was off to an excellent start as was Lauren's. They'd bought a small home with ocean views not far from West Cliff drive and were well on their way to success.

As the newlyweds were about to leave, Mitch's father pulled him aside.

"You may think you're hot shit with your high-tech job and your beautiful wife. You may think you have it made, but I know better. I know you. I know what you are and it's disgusting. Your bride will know soon enough and your world will come crashing down. You'll get what you deserve and people will see you for what you are, not the admired tech genius. They'll see you as scum."

He turned and walked away.

Those words from the man that Mitch grudgingly admired and openly feared haunted him from that day on. And he was afraid. He was always afraid. People would find out. And that's why he was swimming in Monterey Bay. It was all going to come out. Maybe it wouldn't if he were gone. Whoever was seeking revenge would have no reason to go further if he were gone. Right?

Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Breathe right side.