

EVERY SUMMER, AWAKENED BY some imperceptible signal, a shining multitude of salmon leave the churning depths of the Pacific and return to Alaska to spawn and die. And in their own annual ritual, fishing vessels launch out of safe harbors to meet the migrating schools, which swarm homeward through cold waters, using stars, the moon, and nearly forgotten scents to guide them home, as they have done unerringly since the beginning of time. Just as storms and rough seas imperil the fleets, danger lurks for the salmon at every stage of their journey. All life at sea is precarious. Nothing rests easily. The massive schools must avoid salmon sharks, pods of killer whales, and long, ensnaring nets. And when the dogged salmon reach the mouths of freshwater rivers and streams, waiting impatiently for the incoming tide to boost their one-way race upriver to die, terrible dangers still confront them. Even when the tide has launched them into the familiar flowing waters of their birth, they can only hope to escape the teeth and claws of ever-hungry bears, the talons of vigilant eagles, and the flailing lines of hopeful fishermen. Vigilance, hunger, perseverance—the driving forces in all nature, from salmon to fishermen.

All'ingug

(One)

A long time ago, in a small village nestled along the banks of a river where it emptied into the sea, three brothers hunted and killed squirrels for the fun of it. They hung the tiny furs to dry and collected the bushy tails. They had killed so many squirrels that each day they had to go farther and farther away from the village to find more.

All around the *Erin Elizabeth* the shadow-blackened sea dipped and rose in the cold rain, the canyons between waves narrowing and widening beneath dark clouds swirling on a grey, thundering horizon. Among the great swells the fishing boat looked tiny and lost. On the pitching deck, Seth Evanoff clung to the railing, trying to steady himself and to keep from falling overboard. At sixteen, he had not yet developed his father's sea legs. His feet gave out beneath him when a rogue wave swashed across the

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deck, dashing a large, plastic tub against the starboard side. He watched in awe as a gust snatched the empty tub and hurled it tumbling into the tumultuous, sloshing sea.

Everywhere, fierce, wind-riven whitecaps were sliding across the bay, which was surrounded by rocky shores and steep, treeless mountains. Many still had snow on their cloud-tangled peaks, despite the warmth of an early Alaskan summer. The slashing wind carried the sound of waves breaking on the nearby shores scudding across the bay. Behind each foam-tumbling crest, endless waves piled up in the distance, mounting and rolling.

A net full of wagging salmon swung wildly above an open hold as the intrepid, forty-two-foot vessel bucked on the jostling waves and lurched sideways from the weight of the laden net. Screeching seagulls hovered above the whitecaps slapping to the port and starboard. At the bow of the blue-and-white boat, a golden retriever, his paws finding little traction on the slippery deck, barked at the noisy birds, sea spray blasting him each time the slicing bow plunged headfirst into the swells and white-tipped waves.

At the stern of the heaving craft, a man was deftly working the control levers to the boom winch, trying to guide the hoisted net into position, while a lean, old man with iron-grey hair hunkered on the deck beside the hold, trying to steady the swaying net by himself. His gnarled fingers clutched the net strings. His feet were planted far apart, his knees bent firmly against the jostling motion.

All three fishermen wore yellow raincoats, the bright rubber made slick by rain and sea. The fronts of the slickers were stained with fish blood.