

Conflagration

USCG Cutter *Kauai*, North Atlantic Ocean, two nautical miles west of Grand Turk Lighthouse

03:05 EDT, 23 June

Ben

The burning boat was clearly visible from the foredeck as *Kauai* approached at high speed. Hopkins was at the conn on the bridge and was a specialist at the quick stop, the goal being to cut the time to contact as short as possible without overshooting or, God forbid, colliding violently with the other boat. Ben had been with Hopkins for over two years now and was supremely confident in her ability to pull it off. This was his first shipboard fire, and Ben had plenty of fears right now, but the approach maneuver was not among these. He could see the shadow of the boat's foredeck now, silhouetted in the bright yellow flames billowing high from the stern. Although he couldn't make them out yet, Lee had reported there were dozens of people crowded onto the foredeck.

Lee had quickly closed the distance in the speedy RHIB and now held a position twenty feet off the *Conch Rounder's* port beam. Chen and Machinery Technician Second Class Brown were directing a stream of water from the P-1B portable pump to hold back the flames and keep them from spreading forward to where the survivors had gathered. The P-1B, designed to pump water out of damaged vessels to keep them from sinking, put out 140 gallons of water per minute and Lee had to use her considerable skill with helm and engine control to keep the boat in position against the thrust from the hose. She and Ben had agreed that as soon as the fire could be reached by the hose teams on *Kauai*, he would call out "clear" three times on the radio. Lee would immediately maneuver the RHIB clear while Brown and Chen shut down the pump.

Ben did another check of his deck crew, all fitted with helmets, ballistic vests, and white anti-flash hoods and gloves to protect them from the fire. Hebert was the lead on the first hose with two junior seamen backing him up, and Deffler, Marcus, and Lincoln manned the second hose. While they held off the fire from aft, Ben and his rescue party on the foredeck, Bondurant, Boatswain's Mate Third Class Brian Jenkins, and Seaman Mitchell Pickins, would handle lines and help the survivors aboard. *Kauai's* medical expert, Health Services Technician Second Class Michael "Doc" Bryant, was standing by with oxygen and his medical kit to render first aid.

There was no time to research the *Conch Rounder's* layout or dimensions, so this rendezvous was a veritable blind date. It would have been too good to be true that the dive boat's foredeck would be the same height as *Kauai's* and when the spotlight above the bridge came on and illuminated the other boat, Ben was not surprised to see it was about six feet higher. As they slowed down to start the approach, he called his team together. "Boats, I think one guy on the dive boat supervising lines and handing the survivors down to the rest of us," Ben said to Bondurant. "Boats" was a traditional nickname for a boatswain's mate and by *Kauai* tradition was the moniker used for the senior of that rating aboard *Kauai*.

“Roger that, XO. I’m the one for that job,” Bondurant said.

“Yes, I had you in mind,” Ben replied. With his size and strength, Bondurant was the obvious choice. “Pickins, I need someone on the fender, but it will be tricky. Think you can handle it?” The fender was a large elastomer cylinder that would serve as a bumper, preventing *Conch Rounder’s* bow from making direct contact with and possibly damaging *Kauai’s* hull. It was a difficult and hazardous job, particularly under these circumstances.

“No problem, XO,” the big seaman said with a smile.

“Good. Jenkins, you’ll handle the line. I don’t quite know how this is going to work yet. We’re kind of playing it by ear.”

“Yes, sir,” Jenkins replied.

Ben nodded and then scanned their faces. “OK, guys. It’s dark. We don’t know exactly what we are dealing with on this boat and we’ve going to be face-to-face with twenty-nine desperate people. What I’m saying is don’t take anything for granted and if you see something going wrong, shout it out. Questions?”

“No, sir,” they all replied.

“Right,” Ben said, then he picked up an electric megaphone and stepped up to the rail. Putting to his mouth, he broadcasted to the burning vessel, “Ahoy! On the *Conch Rounder*, can you hear me?”

A man stepped from the mass of people on the bow, waved, and shouted back faintly, “Yes! I hear you!”

“Are you the captain?”

“Aye, yes, I am!”

“Sir, we are going to come under your bows and will pass over a line! One of us will follow to help transfer your survivors to our foredeck! Do you understand?”

“Aye!”

“OK! Please tell your passengers to stand away from the bow! We will take them one at a time and it’s vital they not to try to board until our man calls them over! I know it’s scary, but we will hold back the fire until they are all on board! Clear?”

“Yes, clear!”

Kauai was now about one hundred yards away and had already lined up on a perpendicular with the stricken vessel’s bow. Ben knew Hopkins was using both differential thrust and rudder to keep their orientation and eventually slow the cutter to a stop. He glanced at the RHIB, where Lee was doing the same to keep the boat in position as the stream of water reached out onto the deck just ahead of the flames. “Hose teams ready?” Ben shouted.

“Team One ready!” Hebert replied.

“Team Two ready!” Deffler followed immediately.

Ben keyed his radio transmit button and said, “*Kauai* One, clear, clear, clear!”

“*Kauai* One, roger!” came Lee’s reply. The crewman handling the hose immediately directed it toward the water while the pump ran down and the RHIB sheared off to the right.

“Hose teams engage!” Ben shouted. Within three seconds, two powerful streams of water had converged on the *Conch Rounder’s* deck at the head of the flames. Knowing they required no more attention from him, Ben turned back to the situation on the bow. Bondurant was standing by with a heaving line, a thin rope with a weighted end that

tied to the larger and heavier mooring line laid out on the deck. Ben put the megaphone to his mouth again. "On the *Conch Rounder*, stand by to receive the heaving line!"

"We're ready!" the captain shouted back.

Ben turned to Bondurant. "OK, Boats. Show us how it's done!"

Bondurant nodded, swung his arm holding the rope back and forth three times, then hurled it upward toward the other vessel. The end landed there with an audible clang and was immediately seized by two men, who began pulling up the rope and then the mooring line. Ben, Bondurant, and Jenkins tended the line as Pickins rushed forward with the fender, lowering it just slightly over the side. The two vessels pressed together with a shrill squeak from the fender and Ben shouted, "Hold the line!"

With the line acting as a pivot while Hopkins held the two vessels together, Bondurant grabbed hold of *Conch Rounder's* bow and pulled himself up and over the rail. After disappearing for a few seconds, he reappeared at the rail and shouted over the roar of the flames and the two fire hoses, "Ready, XO!"

Ben nodded and said, "Jenkins and Pickins, tend your lines! Doc, come up here and help me out!"

"Yes, sir!" Bryant said as he trotted alongside.

The first survivor, a young woman in shorts and an oversized tee-shirt, was already sitting on the bow. Bondurant grasped her under the armpits and lowered her until Ben and Bryant had a grip, then released her as they took her down to the deck.

"Are you alright?" Ben asked. The woman did not answer, just nodded furiously. "OK, please stand over there," Ben said, pointing to the empty deck between the superstructure and the gun. After she stumbled off, Ben turned up to see Bondurant was already in position with another woman.

And so it went for the first dozen survivors, with Bondurant passing them down to the other two men. The thirteenth, a shirtless man in shorts, was coughing non-stop and was not able to stand on his own. "Smoke inhalation, sir," Bryant said. "I need to attend to him."

"Right. Take him," Ben said. As Bryant put the man's arm around his shoulders and half-carried him to his medical station, Ben turned to Pickins. "That's good enough, Pickins. Come here and help me out!"

"Yes, sir!" The seaman dropped the rope he was holding and trotted over. Once he was in position, the process resumed with Bondurant handing down survivors to the two men on *Kauai's* foredeck.

Ben kept a count as the people came aboard. All twenty-three passengers and two of the boat's crew had come aboard when a loud boom sounded from *Conch Rounder's* aft section. A large fireball shot into the sky, and *Kauai's* foredeck was showered with fragments. Ben ducked instinctively, then gazed in alarm as the boat's bow rose quickly into the air away from *Kauai* as the mooring line started moaning with the heavy strain.

"Ease the line! Ease the line!" Ben shouted, and Jenkins threw off the loop he had on the bit and frantically fed slack overboard. The explosion had blown open *Conch Rounder's* hull somewhere aft. She was sinking fast by the stern with the rotation lifting the boat's bow. The blast had apparently ruptured the boat's fuel tanks as fire spreading over the water added to the conflagration. The distance was already too great for any further ship-to-ship transfers and there was no way *Kauai's* hose teams could continue

to hold back the fire. Ben shouted at Bondurant, "Boats! Cast off and abandon ship! We'll have the RHIB pick you up!"

"Already done, sir!" Bondurant said, pitching the eye of the mooring line overboard. He had recognized the danger immediately and untied the line as soon as Jenkins had fed him slack. "There's only three of us left!"

"Roger, that!" Ben replied, the keyed his radio, "Conn, Deck Party, mooring line recovered, breakaway, breakaway, breakaway!"

"Deck Party, Conn, roger out!"

Ben felt *Kauai* lunge backward as Hopkins added a shot of full reverse on the motors and called out, "Hose teams secure!" As the water streams cut off, he keyed his radio again. "*Kauai* One, Deck Party, BM1 and two survivors are going into the water!"

"Deck Party, *Kauai* One, on it!" Lee's voice replied.

The *Conch Rounder's* bow was almost vertical now and Ben watched with concern as the RHIB darted across *Kauai's* bow to close on the sinking vessel, then stopped for a good minute and a half near the edge of the burning fuel. It was all Ben could do not to press the transmit button with a query. But he knew Lee's skill and judgment would be up to the task and the last thing she needed was kibbitzing from the boss.

"Deck Party, *Kauai* One, BM1 and two survivors aboard."

"Roger, well done, Lee," Ben replied. "I'm coming up two short. Ask the captain WTF. Over."

"Standby," Lee replied. After another half a minute, she called back. "XO, *Kauai* One. The captain says one was blown overboard and drowned and the other probably deserted. Over."

Damn! He keyed the radio. "Roger, standby." He then stepped over to where Bryant was working. "Doc, what's the score?"

"XO, I've got two on oxygen right now, two with severe burns, and six more that need at least a look in an ER. We need to get them to a hospital NOW, sir!" Bryant replied.

Bryant was an Army Combat Medic before he transferred over to the Coast Guard and was not one to exaggerate. There was no question now about hanging around to look for the missing crewman. Ben keyed his radio again. "Conn, XO, two of the boat's crew are missing, but four of these patients are critical. If we can't get a medevac lined up, we need to get them to a hospital soonest."

"XO, Actual," Haley's voice replied. "Concur. Not a chance at a medevac. We are heading to Cockburn Town now and will haul ass as soon as we recover the RHIB."

"Roger, ma'am." Ben turned to Jenkins and Pickins, who were gathering up the mooring line. "Jenkins, get aft to the crane. Pickins, help out Doc."

"Yes, sir!" the two men replied.

Ben stepped over to the starboard side, where the hose teams were breaking down their hoses for storage. "Chef, take the aviation group and tend to these survivors. Set them up with water on the messdeck, but no chow unless Doc says OK."

"Yes, sir!" Hebert replied, then turned to Deffler and his team. "Come along, gentlemen!"

After they passed by on the way to the tight group of people gathered on the foredeck, Ben turned to look at the *Conch Rounder*, receding in the distance. The fire on the water was still blazing brightly and the tip of the bow was still visible. What was left of the stern had settled onto the bottom, leaving the still buoyant bow above the surface. Ben

knew she would soon sink completely, but that event and the intervening hazard to navigation was the problem of the Turks and Caicos government. Ben put his head down, suddenly very exhausted from both the lack of sleep and the exertion of lowering over two dozen people to the deck.

He looked up as the RHIB scooted by to line up and be craned aboard. As usual, the crew had performed superbly, particularly Lee. When Bondurant detached for officer candidate school in a few weeks, Lee would be promoted into his billet as a Boatswain's Mate First Class. She was well-deserving and long overdue for the promotion, but she expressed some reluctance to accept it. "I'm not convinced an extra three hundred bucks a month is worth giving up the RHIB for babysitting the deck force, sir," she had told Ben.

He and Hopkins had worked together to persuade her to accept. After listening patiently while Ben outlined the advantages and appealed to teamwork, when her turn came, Hopkins simply said, "Don't be a jackass. Take the damn promotion!" The question of which of them made the most convincing argument would remain unanswered.

Ben strolled aft to meet the crew after the RHIB was craned aboard. A still-dripping Bondurant was shepherding the two survivors forward when Ben arrived. "Nicely done, Boats," Ben said, shaking Bondurant's hand. "We are gathering the walkers on the messdeck. Chef can hook them up with water and I'll see about getting some blankets."

"Thanks, XO," Bondurant replied tiredly and then continued forward.

As *Kauai* kicked up to full speed, Ben stepped over to the crane, where Lee, Brown, and Chen were packing up the P1B pump. "Helluva job, guys," Ben said. "Especially you, Shelley. It was a near-enough thing as it was. Without your quick thinking, we'd have had a lot of dead people on our hands."

"Thank you, sir," Lee replied. "What about the other two? Aren't we going to at least take a stab at looking for them?"

Ben shook his head. "We've got four criticals we need to get to an ER. Can't risk them for one guy who's probably dead and another who abandoned everyone to die. He chose his fate."

"Yes, sir," Lee said, the dissatisfaction apparent on her face.

"Look, it was a job well done. Take the win," Ben said, patting her on the shoulder. "Now, you'll have to excuse me, we should pull in at Government Dock in about twenty minutes and I need to be on the bridge. Well done again, everybody!"

"Thanks, sir," Lee said with a smile.

After climbing the ladder from the deck, Ben entered the bridge from the port rear door and walked straight over to Haley, seated in the command chair. Firing a salute, he said, "Survivors are settled in, Captain."

Haley reached out and gave his upper arm a quick pat. "Nicely done, XO. It looked pretty hairy down there."

"Only when she started going down. When that mooring line hung up, I thought we'd had it. Happy ending though."

"Mostly. Too bad about those two crewmen."

"Too bad about one. Looks like the other one deserted rather than stay and help fight the fire. Either way, it will not end well for him. How are we doing on getting a port clearance? Do I need to do anything?"

Haley grinned. “No, XO. While you were having fun forward, we managed to make contact with the local mounties. They’ve got ambulances and other transport on the way to meet us. As long as we are just dropping off survivors, they’ve agreed to forego putting us through the ass pain of a port clearance. We can file our statements later. ”

“No complaints here, ma’am,” Ben said with considerable relief. His day was full enough without the additional administrative hell of an unplanned foreign port call. “Bondurant and Lee are pretty wrung out from the operation. I can take the mooring if you like, or relieve Chief so she can jump onto the brief.”

Haley cocked her head and said, “Remember, you were in the thick of that operation too, but you can take the mooring if you feel up to it.”

“On it, skipper.” Ben sat in the unoccupied left-hand seat of the FC3 console, pulled up the PortBrief application, and typed in “Cockburn Town,” selecting “Turks and Caicos” and “Government Dock” from succeeding pop-up menus. The application then ran through a series of screens in an electronic version of the standard entering port brief, showing the physical characteristics of the mooring site, winds, sea currents in the area, and known hazards to navigation.

After completing the last screen, he walked over to Hopkins and said, “I’ll be taking her in, Chief. I offer my relief.”

Hopkins nodded and replied, “I stand relieved, sir. On the bridge, Mr. Wyporek has the deck and conn!”

“Aye!” responded everyone on the bridge.

Ben was tired but looking forward to flexing his mariner muscles. Although the weather was good, clear with light winds, it was still night, with dawn not for another two hours. There was also a strong current just off the end of Government Dock that would disappear when *Kauai* entered the shadow of the mole. Ben would have to anticipate this change of velocity with advance rudder or risk slamming into the mooring. He had made the mistake of not leading a current change once before on his previous ship, slamming the pier hard enough to tear a fender in half. Ben was mortified, but there was no damage to the ship and the captain regarded it as a good teaching moment. The worst part, of course, was that the crew stuck Ben with the nickname “Captain Crunch” for months afterward.

There were no surprises on this occasion as the dock was well lit and it was a straight-in shot with deep water almost to shore. The two ambulances had already arrived, their red emergency lights still flashing, and as they drew closer, he could make out police vehicles and vans. It was a surprisingly quick reaction for the time of night, and Ben suspected they might have been alerted before *Kauai*’s call by someone ashore who had seen the *Conch Rounder* on fire. It only took a few more minutes for Ben to ease the cutter into her mooring and the deck crew to secure the lines. Since they were only making a brief stop to offload the boat’s survivors, they kept the engines running. Ben kept the conn on the bridge while Haley went below to meet with the port official.

The situation was quite anticlimactic—Haley shook hands with a tall man in uniform, presumably the senior port official, then waved to Bryant, who supervised the offload of the four patients to the ambulances first, then the six more who trudged to one of the vans. As each patient stepped off, Bryant spoke to another man in white clothing, whom Ben supposed was an ambulanceman, completing a formal medical handoff.

Once those destined for the hospital departed, the other survivors were escorted ashore by *Kauai* personnel and handed off to local police. Ben felt tremendous sympathy for those people who had been jarred awake in the middle of the night, nearly burned to death, and now faced a long fact-finding interrogation in police custody. *Definitely not my choice of a vacation*, Ben thought, shaking his head.

Ben watched Haley finish her discussion with the port official and shake his hand. She then gazed up at Ben and gave him a thumbs up, signaling they were cleared to depart. Ben saluted and then trudged back into the bridge to begin the process of leaving port. Forty-five minutes later, they were rounding Northeast Reef, three miles northeast of the northern most point of Grand Turk to resume their journey to Mayagüez. The remaining three hundred miles of their trip would take about twelve hours, putting them off the dock around 16:30 local time.

Ben handed the O.O.D. watch over to Bondurant and then stepped over to and saluted Haley, who was sitting in her command chair. "I've been relieved of the O.O.D. by Petty Officer Bondurant, Captain."

Haley returned the salute with a smile. "Very well. I'm thinking about calling holiday routine and letting everyone relax until around 14:00. Any objections?"

"I always support my CO, particularly when she is suggesting I can get in some unexpected sack time," Ben replied with a grin.

"Good enough. Everybody did well, of course, but is there anyone in particular I should call out on my report?"

Ben dropped to a whisper. "Yes, ma'am. Lee and Bondurant for sure. If possible, a special mention for the Airedales—I know Chief Deffler would appreciate it and it will give Porter some cred when he gets back to the Academy."

"You read my mind, XO."

"Good, good," Ben said, lowering his head.

"What?" Haley asked.

"I'm not so hot about leaving two guys in the water without at least some search. Lee mentioned it too."

Haley smiled again. "Sorry, I meant to tell you. The police caught the runner swimming ashore about a mile north of Cockburn Town and arrested him. He told them he saw the other man blown overboard without a vest and he never came to the surface. They're satisfied everyone is accounted for."

Ben's grin returned. "That is a relief. Thank you, Captain."

"Backatcha. Now get your ass out of here and down in your rack."

"Aye, aye, Captain."