

# *Eagle Rock*

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Barry heard Jed's shouted warning, carried faintly on the screeching wind, and looked up. His mouth went instantly dry as he saw the massive wall of grey water, its incline tilting dangerously, rise out of the gloom in front of him. *This is it*, he thought. *This is the big one.*

The wave sprang out of the darkness, striking the yacht almost square to the bow. The boat quivered as it absorbed the shock. Tonnes of water spilled onto the deck, and Barry went under, clinging with every fibre of his strength to the twisted cord in his hands. If it snapped, he knew, he was lost.

After what seemed like an eternity, the enormous gravity began to ease, and he found himself suspended in an absoluteness of thudding, turbid water. It occurred to him that this must be what people heard before they drowned, and he wondered, quite objectively, what death would be like. He had no concept where the surface might be, or how far he was beneath it; for all he knew the boat might have sunk, and he was never going to emerge. His eyes began to bulge from the pressure of his lungs, but just as he started to accept that it was hopeless, that he was defeated, the wall of water miraculously parted, and he gasped in mouthfuls of cold wet air.

The foaming backwash poured from the deck, tugging at Barry's legs as he scudded across the tangled rigging and scrambled into the cockpit. His eyes were glowing with concern as he crouched behind the spray shield. 'Jesus, I thought I was

gone then! That bastard must've been thirty feet high! I never seen a sea like this!

He glanced around the foc'sle. 'She gonna take it, you reckon?'

Jed grimaced, the muscles drawing back tightly from the cheekbones of his long, bird-like face. 'Concrete hull!' he shouted. 'She'll take it, long as we don't take on too much water. How's it look?'

Barry crouched and peered into the cabin. In the dull glow of the lantern within, he could make out objects swirling about on the floor. 'We're fillin' up! You get those pumps workin'??'

Jed glanced at the instruments in front of him, then shook his head. 'No go, mate! Stuffed!'

In spite of himself, Barry grinned. 'Yeah, like everythin' else on this boat, includin' the skipper! Dunno how I let m'self get talked into this, puttin' out to sea with a mad prick like you!'

Jed took mock offence. 'Hey, I promised you a holiday with a difference, didn't I? What're you complainin' about?'

Barry laughed, brushing the strands of wet hair from his brow. 'You're a mad cunt, Jed, I'll say that for ya! Never thought I'd ever find any cunt madder'n me, but I dunno – you'd about do the trick, I reckon!'

Before Jed could reply, another wave, almost as large as the one before it, bore down on them. Again the craft trembled as its bow slapped into the approaching wall of water. Once more the sea engulfed them.

As they sucked free of its grip, Barry gestured towards the cabin. 'Might go below - check the pump, see how the women're getting' on!'

He waded to the cabin door and hauled up the washboard, releasing a cascade of

water into the interior. The thick puff of air that came up the steps reeked of diesel fumes and vomit. Clambering down the steps, he rammed the shutter closed, bracing himself against the bulkhead until his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. The water slopped around his ankles as he made his way to the small pump housed in the aft section of the boat.

He found the starter easily, but when he depressed the button the pump's motor churned feebly, causing the feeble emergency light to dim perceptibly, then stopped. After two or three further fruitless attempts, he cursed and went back down the pitching cabin towards the galley, dodging warily around the pirouetting lamp.

Leith was wedged into the long, curving bench seat behind the dining table, gripping the edge of the varnished surface with both hands, her thick arms enfolding the children, both of whom looked up at him with pale, frightened faces. Her dark, chocolate eyes studied Barry's face. 'So whaddaya reckon, Bazz?'

Barry glanced around the cabin, licking his thick lips. 'Dunno. Doesn't look too good, though. You okay?'

Leith rolled her eyes. 'Oh yeah, just fine. How come we didn't know about this?'

Barry sniffed and released a hand to quickly rub the end of his nose. 'Jed never checked the forecast, apparently.' The well developed laugh-lines around his eyes crinkled. 'Tell y' what: we ever get out of this, I'm gonna kill the silly bastard!'

Leith managed a weak smile. 'Yeah, well, you might be waitin' in line, I reckon. I told him before we went to check it out. No worries, he reckoned, right as rain.'

'You tried the two-way again?'

Leith shook her head. ‘Dead as a doornail.’

Barry nodded. ‘Yeah, antenna must’ve come down when we lost the mast. You get through, though, you reckon?’

‘Hard to say. Never heard nothin’ back.’ She hesitated. ‘You reckon they’d be able to find us anyway, in this?’

‘Not sure. It’s only a couple of hours off daylight. That’ll make it a bit easier, I guess.’ Barry looked away, trying to conceal his concern. There was no way of knowing how long the storm would last, but he knew that at the rate they were going another few hours would be about it for them. Once they got heavy enough, the boat would go under the waves, not through them, and after that it was only a matter of time. Abandoning ship in the kind of seas they were experiencing would be suicidal. There was nothing to do but try to see it out and hope for the best. He glanced around the cabin. ‘Where’s Sue?’

As if on cue, there was a shriek from the toilet cubicle as the cabin abruptly yawed towards the horizontal. Barry grabbed for a spar and held on as the floor tilted beneath him. He heard the rumble of water outside, and a loud clatter as the cutlery drawer burst open and spilled among the flotsam on the floor. Sharp streams of water squirted in around the edges of the cabin door, and a small hatch in the roof flew open. A surge of cold, dead water poured in, flooding the lantern and re-casting the cabin in the dim red glow of the emergency light.

The rotation stopped, and for several seconds Barry hung suspended in the darkness, until at last the boat plunged with inexorable force back towards the vertical. As soon as his feet touched the floor, he scrambled forward and re-secured the hatch. No sooner had he done so than another wave took them,

tumbling him helplessly back into the galley. When he got to his feet and touched his arm, the fingers came away sticky with blood. He called down the cabin to his wife. ‘Y’ right, Suzie?’

There was a brief pause before her voice came out of the darkness. ‘Ohhh, Shit, you wanna see this: there’s puke everywhere!’

‘Musta been them pies y’ had before we came, darlin’, whaddaya reckon?’ Barry shouted back, grinning at Leith and winking at the kids.

‘Fuck off, Barry, you asshole!’ Sue retorted, half laughing. ‘Tell you what, you better be prayin’ we go down with the boat, you bastard, because if we ever get out of this you’re dead!’

Barry’s reply was cut short by another gigantic concussion, which struck the *Eagle Rock* amidships and sent a deep tremor down the entire length of the vessel. The yacht slowly began to roll onto its side again. This time they seemed to tip more than ninety degrees, the vessel hovering on its side for several interminable seconds before sluggishly righting itself. Barry cursed. ‘Jesus, what’s got into the silly bastard? Feels like he’s turned side on to the swell! I better get back up there!’

He pawed his way hastily back along the length of the cabin, conscious that the water was now lapping about his calves. The shrieking wind greeted him as he emerged into the foc’sle, the rain driving into his face with blinding force.

Jed’s inane smile beamed down as he wrestled with the wildly spinning wheel. ‘Whaddaya reckon, Bazza? Be a nice day if it don’t rain, eh?’

Barry stared dully back at his bizarre companion, but said nothing. What could he say? He should have known what to expect. They’d worked together at the mine for years, and Jed had never been any different. He was one of those rare individuals

who had an uncanny talent for disaster. Yet somehow he seemed to survive unscathed, for his other singular quality was an unerring optimism, a totally illogical confidence that, whatever calamities might have befallen him in the past, the next time would be different. It was this blissful, simple-minded naiveté, and the sense of risk that went with it that Barry supposed made Jed's company so compelling. But this time, he decided, it was too much; the man was dangerous, and Barry vowed to himself that if they got back to shore, he'd never again let himself be talked into any of Jed's hare-brained ventures.

Between them they secured the wheel, lashing it firmly into place. When the job was done, the two men clung grimly to their places, peering helplessly into the blackness as wave after monstrous wave exploded across the deck.

It was Barry who spotted the light, a brief flash of red among the surging swells. For several minutes there was nothing further, and he was just at the point where he thought he must have imagined it when it re-appeared, closer this time, and he made out the squat orange hull of the police launch. He grabbed the flashlight and began waving it wildly in the air, shouting uselessly into the storm.

The rescue proved to be a drama in itself. It took over an hour for the rescue vessel to get close enough to secure a towline. Twice the rope snapped, and it was only a miraculous easing of the storm's ferocity, in the first light of a sullen dawn, that made a third and successful attempt possible. They arrived back in harbour late in the day, exhausted, the crippled yacht finally secured at the marina before a crowd of curious onlookers.

Barry slept for two days, and took sick leave for several more on account of his injured arm. When he got back to work, he found that Jed had already circulated his

own, suitably embellished version of the escapade, and for weeks he was forced to collude in this fanciful history of events. Jed seemed oblivious to any discrepancy between his own account and what had actually occurred, and once Barry got over his initial annoyance about it, he decided to let it pass.

It wasn't until a fortnight later, when the two of them were sharing a shift on the mine's gigantic drag-line, that Jed raised the matter.

'Boat's fixed, mate,' he declared triumphantly.

Barry kept his eyes on the swinging bucket in front of him. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah, right as rain.' There was a long pause. 'I'm thinkin' of taking her up the coast for a bit, check out the Whitsundays. Whaddaya reckon?'

'What?'

'Well... you wanna come?'

Barry tapped at the computer and moved the toggle. The bucket seized a single boulder, several tonnes in weight, and hoisted it into the air. The crane's gargantuan arm swung back, the bucket trailing behind it, then reversed towards the edge of the scarp. With another flick of the controls, Barry released the machine's massive jaws, his dark eyes gleaming as he watched the huge rock tumble slowly towards the canyon floor below. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Why not.'

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