

**Sample chapter from  
“Life on the Meridian”  
by  
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**Can We Sink Her Again?**

Charlie was a great guy to pal around with. He could tell one joke after another all day long. I befriended him when he was employed at Sea Camp as a houseparent. Sea Camp no longer had a staff house, but he had to live somewhere. Howie would have taken him in, but Charlie’s conservative background wouldn’t allow him to associate with gays.

Charlie was interested in purchasing a boat to live aboard and had asked me to meet him at a marina. “Jim, I wanna see what you think about a boat that’s for sale.”

“I don’t know much about boats,” I said. I liked boats, but had always heard that they were expensive to keep.

“Yeah, but you’re always going fishing with Carlos and you have a small sailboat, yourself. How can you know nothing about boats?”

“I only do what Carlos tells me. I raise and lower the anchor and I help him to untie and tie the dock lines. Carlos is the mechanic. As for my Styrofoam sailboat: well, it’s a toy.” I was a boating idiot.

Charlie showed me the boat. It was a twenty-four foot Bayliner. It had an aluminum hull and twin sixty horsepower Johnson outboard engines, although one of the engines didn’t run. Down below in the cabin were a head, a small stove, sink, and a bed at the v-berth. It was a real tight bachelor’s pad.

“I need someone to go in halves with me. I can get the boat for five hundred dollars, but I only have two hundred and fifty,” he confessed. “We can go fishing at the reef at night. If you go in halves with me, I’ll pay for the dock rent.”

I thought about it for a minute or so. “Yeah, well, if you’re going to live in it, you can pay to keep it at a dock.” Then against my better judgment I said, “sure, why not.”

We paid the happy boat seller the five hundred dollars and took it away. That night, we went fishing near molasses reef. We couldn’t get her up on plane with one of the engines out, but we managed.

It was a clear and calm night on Molasses Reef, one of the best living coral reefs, great for fishing and diving. We’d been fishing for a couple of hours and had already downed a couple of six packs of beer. When I went down below to use the head, I couldn’t help but notice the water on the floor. It wasn’t there before. When I told Charlie about it, he ran below and handed me

a two-gallon pail full of the water and told me to start bailing. He'd scoop it up, hand it to me, and I'd pitch the water back from whence it came. No matter how hard we worked at it, our mini bucket brigade wasn't getting rid of the water fast enough.

Charlie fired off an emergency flare and we both hurried to get on our floatation devices. Realizing, today, we should have started the boat engine and chugged our way back in-to harbor or at least to shallower water.

"I thought this thing had a bilge pump?" I asked.

"It does, but it doesn't work," Charlie replied.

It was about one o'clock in the morning and we were the only ones near the reef. The boat filled with water faster and faster. When the water filled the deck we jumped out and swam away from the boat. For a minute or so it seemed as though she was going to stay above water. Then she violently twisted to the right, showing the port side up and slid down thirty feet to the bottom. Well, there we were, bobbing above the water, seven miles offshore with empty beer cans and other such debris all around us. An hour earlier, we were fishing for fish and now we were swimming with them.

"Welcome to the food chain," I said with mixed feelings. I was pissed off, cold and scared. We were way out of our element. We didn't blame one another for anything. However, I was sorry for having to pay two hundred and fifty dollars just to become shark bait.

I knew that I could swim the seven miles back to shore, but Charlie was not a swimmer and could barely stay afloat. The floatation device kept only his head above water.

Sunrise was only a few hours away. It couldn't come too soon. We kept commenting about what the marine patrol or coast guard was going to think if they picked us up. There were enough empty beer cans around us to qualify us to take some sort of sobriety test. Of course, the only things they could get us for were littering and swimming in public while being intoxicated. Many things went through our minds and out of our mouths. Charlie kept talking about what to do with his body if he didn't make it. Drowning was the least of my problems. I had to deal with the possible shark and barracuda attacks and trying to keep a level head.

When we finally saw the first hint of daybreak, our spirits improved. The eastern sky had a violet tint and more lights at the shore began to come on. It was a sure sign that people were dragging themselves out of bed. We had drifted a couple of miles southwest and our debris had scattered over a much wider area. It wasn't long before the sky took on some more pink, which gave way to the first signs of orange and yellow. The sunset was the grandest I'd ever seen. I doubt that I'll ever enjoy one more than I did then. The water

seemed to have equal the color as the sky brightened, and it felt good on my face.

“Hey, ya’ll okay?!” screamed someone on a boat.

I turned away from the sun to see a small fishing boat trolling its way toward us. Charlie and I began to scream and waive our arms. “Help us!”

They helped us to get on their boat. “You have no idea how glad we are to see you. We’ve been out here since about one in the morning,” Charlie told them.

“Damn!” was about all one of them could say.

“It’s a good thing we went fishing this morning,” the other one said.

They gave us a ride back to shore. We met with them that night at the tiki bar and bought them enough drinks to get them both plastered. We were grateful to have our feet back on dry land.

The next day, we hired a boat salvage company to float the boat and bring her into Bud n’ Mary’s Marina in Islamorada. We had them set her up on fifty-five gallon drums so that we could work on the hull. We examined the aluminum hull with its multitude of small rivets for any sign of a hole. It had to be a sizable hole. She sank so fast. We even scrutinized her with a magnifying glass and we still couldn’t find any visible leaks.

I called Carlos. He advised me to flush out the engines and get them started as soon as possible. The only engine we were able to get started was the one that ran in the first place.

One of the marina employees was generous with his advice. “You need to paint the bottom with marine sealant paint for aluminum hulls. You probably don’t have just one leak. My guess would be every damn rivet is leaking. Gawd, you couldn’t give me an aluminum boat.”

We took heed to his advice and bought two gallons of the guck. It stuck to the hull good; I have to give it that much credit. Once it was completely dried, we put her back in the water and cleaned the interior of the boat. The cushions had to be drained and sun dried for a couple of days. All in all, it gave us a chance to give her a good clean up.

It was a week to the day and we were back on the water fishing for grouper and snapper. We were anchored practically in the same spot as we were when she sank. We didn’t believe in jinxes, voodoo, or any other superstitions.

I went below to grab a couple of cold brewskis and discovered water on my feet. I knew that wasn’t a good sign. Charlie was tempted to throw his fishing pole overboard in a fit of rage when I told him. Even if he did throw it overboard it wouldn’t have mattered much since nearly everything found its way to the bottom in about an hour.

Well, there we were again, floating around near molasses reef at one in the morning. The seas were a little rougher that night and the current was drifting us in toward shore. We weren't as worried about possible shark attacks that time. We were too busy being pissed off. We were pissed at the marina know-it-all who gave us the advice about how to fix the leak. We were pissed at the used boat salesman who sold the boat to us. We were pissed that we lost all of our fish. And to top it off, we were pissed that no one ever saw any of our distress flares.

We had become veteran castaways. Charlie was beginning to learn how to tread water with the aid of a floatation device.

"So... what do you want to do, Charlie? Do you think you could swim back in? If you wanna try, I'm game." I just wanted to do something other than float around and get water logged again.

"No, we should stay here and wait for someone to rescue us. I know we might have to wait here until the sun comes up when the fishermen arrive, but we'll be safer that way." Apparently, Charlie wasn't bothered by the boredom.

And so, again, we waited for someone to fish us out of the ocean. I just hoped it wasn't going to be the same fishermen that pulled us out of the water the first time. That would have been a little embarrassing. They would have to have wondered if we actually had a boat.

It was the strangest thing that happened next. I closed my eyes to rest them and to flush out some of the salt water. When I reopened my eyes, the sun was already in the sky. I had skipped through at least three more hours of night and the color changes that took place during sunset. At first, I thought that I had just slept through it all. Charlie made the same claim. He thought that he'd slept through it all, too. We talked about it for a few minutes. We wondered if aliens had picked us up and put us back in the water several hours later. We thought of all the possibilities until we took a glance in back of us. There was a boat with two fishermen. Actually, one was a fisherman and the other was a fisherlady. Naturally, we both did our SOS act, just as we had done one week prior. They helped us onto their boat.

"We didn't see you guys until you started shouting. Where did you come from?" asked the fisherman. The fisherman and the fisherlady were husband and wife. They looked to be the typical match made in heaven. They wore the same garb down to the long-bill hats. I envied him for having a wife that enjoyed fishing.

"We've been floating around all night," Charlie told them. "Our boat went down twice now."

"This is getting to be a bad habit. We need to think of a better way to meet people," I said to humor things.

They took us to shore. That time I paid our rescuers fifty dollars for their trouble. I figured they'd rather have a romantic dinner than a good drink.

The next day, we had our new friends at the boat salvage company float the boat. Once she was back up on the fifty-five gallon drums, we looked her over. We couldn't find a single reason why she would sink.

"Charlie, she's all yours. I'm giving you my share of this submarine." I had had enough with the boat. Besides, my savings account was tapped out. I'd been financing our sour luck. "I hope you figure it out."

We shook hands and I went on to live another episode of my life on the meridian. Charlie sold the boat for one hundred dollars and moved back to Michigan.

After many years of boating experience, I've looked back and formulated some theories as to why we couldn't keep our boat afloat. Each theory had too many ifs, buts and maybes. It was just one of those mysteries of life.