



Ice Boy

Stu Jakes heard her drive up, but he didn't pull his head out of the icemaker just to get a look at the Wiggler. He'd seen it all before—the short shorts, the halter top, the come-ons. No, it was a hundred and one degrees at the Boat Basin Marina. A hot wind had blown everybody off the water, and Stu was happy to keep his head in the machine. He could see his breath in there. Furry hoods framed the Eskimo Boys' friendly, round faces. He filled a dozen bags with ice and twisted them closed. The Eskimo Boys flashed big smiles. Stu stacked them in the wheelbarrow so they all faced the same way. The Boys smiled and waved. They didn't care about a single thing.

He shoved and cussed the wheelbarrow out onto the porch where the Wiggler stood, hand-on-hip, next to the chest freezer. She was a speed freak and a whore. Everybody at the Basin knew that. Usually she aimed herself at bikers or cops because, as far as her nose cared, they had what she needed. But now she wanted something from Bo, who ran the Basin, and so she was giving her little show for the guys there on the porch.

"Anybody know," she said, "where Rickie's at?"

"Gone," Bo said. "Couple hours ago."

The Wiggler clicked her tongue. She switched hips. "Where?"

"Augustine Beach is what he told us."

"Well," she said. "Who wants to take me?" Her eyes flashed, and she turned from face to face. "Hmm?" she said. "Who?"

Bo looked at Lefty and smiled. They were both doing the math—what it would cost and what they would get. Their speedboats burned

a hundred dollars of gas an hour. But the real cost of a ride with the Wiggler would be their marriages, their peace of mind. Bo flicked his cigarette into the boatyard. "Too windy," he said.

"That's it?" she said. "Wind?"

Bo dug the wallet from his pocket and pulled out his boat's registration card. "See there?" He showed it to the Wiggler. "It says 'pleasure craft.' It don't say 'asswupper.'"

"What you need," Lefty said, "is a workboat."

"Ahh," Bo said. "That's right. Workboat's made for rough weather, ain't that right, Stew Beef?"

Stu opened the chest freezer. He lifted a bag from the wheelbarrow and sank it into the cold fog. He knew what Bo was trying to do—throw the girl with too much past in with the geezer who didn't have enough.

Stu lived in an old crabbing boat that had no name, only the numbers 247 painted free-hand on the sides of the cabin. He did odd jobs around the Basin to pay for his slip. He crabbed. He eeled. But beyond those things, they didn't know much about Stu.

Not that there was much to know—a daughter, Gloria, had gone over to her mother's side in the divorce. She was probably twenty-four or -five by now. She'd had a baby too, but Stu only heard about that fourth hand. He didn't even know if it was a boy or a girl. No, his daughter had followed the money into her mother's second marriage.

And nobody at the Basin knew about his old boss, either. For twenty years, he had promised to set Stu up in business. But when Pressy died, there was no will and no provision for Stu. The business turned out to be mostly debt, anyway, and Pressy's niece planned to sell the land, the salvage yard, the dredge—everything. Stu was living on 247 by then. The boat had never been titled, and so four days before the sale, he started the motor and simply powered away from Pressy's place.

Now here he was, a water hermit doing odd jobs during the day and drinking rum at night to keep down the dreams. On a good morning, his day dawned without memories. He'd sit on the edge of his coffin-berth and boil up a pot of coffee there in the tiny cabin. No wife, no daughter, no dreams, no problems.

“This wind ain’t nothing,” Bo said, “for that boat of yours, is it, Beef?”

Stu turned from the freezer and gave them the Eskimo smile. It was friendly and meant nothing.

“Fifty dollars,” Bo said, “if you take this young lady across the bay and bring me back a case of that Blue Crab beer they sell over there.”

The case would cost twenty-five or thirty dollars, Stu figured. That left twenty for his time and trouble. “Tank of diesel?” he said.

“This is a damned damsel in distress, Beef. How can you worry about diesel?”

Stu shrugged. Water dripped from the wheelbarrow.

“Alright,” Bo said. “Five gallons of diesel and fifty dollars. When I get the beer, you get the money.”

Stu put the rest of the bags in the freezer. He closed the lid and a puff of cold air fell on his feet. He turned to the Wiggler.

Her eyes were a washed-out blue, and the sun had bleached her eyebrows so blonde that they were almost clear. The story at the Basin was that her ex had friends on the police force, and after the divorce, they kept pulling her over. It was only a matter of time before they found drugs. That cost her custody of their kid. And after a while, when she started to date again, her boyfriends always seemed to get caught with drugs, too. That was the way it went for the Wiggler until she found Rickie. Bikers, it turned out, could take care of themselves. It was a deal with darkness, but that was the offer life made her.

“Ready?” Stu asked.

The Wiggler flashed a smile. “Always.”

Stu led the way across the yard and out to the last run of slips. Most of the boats were slick fiberglass, but 247 was a grubby wooden thing that smelled like diesel fuel and dead fish. Bo made Stu keep it in the last run where the slips were mainly mud at low tide. That was fine with Stu. Using what nobody else wanted had become his personal method of being rich.

Fiddler crabs ducked into their mud holes when Stu walked by. The Wiggler narrowed her eyes when she saw the boat, but she didn’t flinch. She stepped over the gunwale and in. Stu started the motor, and the Wiggler helped him untie the lines. After a stop at the fuel dock, he powered out of the Basin and turned toward the salt breeze.

The Wiggler disappeared into the little cabin. It was all the home Stu had, and he did not like her being in there. But she was out in a flash—naked, a towel hanging from her hand. She had once been pretty, but her knees were too big now, and her hips were just points. She looked at him as if to say, “Want?”

But Stu did not want. He gave her the Eskimo smile. The secret was not wanting.

She shrugged and climbed onto the cabin top to sunbathe. 247 swung right as it climbed the waves and then left on the way down. Stu sat back in the captain’s seat, one finger on the wheel, and let the boat wallow its way across the bay. Off in the distance, he caught glimpses of his line of crab traps, the buoys rising and falling.

Half an hour later, they were motoring through the anchorage at Augustine Beach. The Wiggler had put her skimpy clothes back on and was looking through Stu’s binoculars. “I don’t see his boat,” she said.

When they got close to the dock, she showed good boat-sense—not trying to tie up until Stu had backed to a stop. She cleated off. Stu watched her do the figure eight and turn the hitch.

The Wiggler saw him looking. She stood up and winked. “Come on,” she said. “Keep me company. We’ll go home in a while.”

“I’ve got to get a case of that beer, anyhow,” he said.

She gave a little laugh at that, and they walked together across the beach and up the wooden steps of the Bayview Bar, where the long front porch smelled of piss and stale beer.

The Wiggler threw extra action into her walk as she approached the large man in denim on a stool outside the front door. “Hey, Bang,” she said. It was the same come-on that she tried with Bo. “Where’s Rickie?”

Bang’s lips disappeared into his toothless smile. “What side of the street you working today, cop-fucker?”

The Wiggler edged toward Bang and put a hand on his knee. “Where I get what I need,” she cooed.

Bang shifted his stare to Stu.

“He’s okay,” the Wiggler said. “Seen Rickie?”

Stu thought he could walk in, but Bang blocked the door. He stared over Stu’s head. “You ain’t a biker,” he said, “so this ain’t a bar.”

Now Bo’s game was clear—send old half-ghost Stu Beef with the

Wiggler as his date to buy un-buyable beer from bikers. It was bound to make a story worth the five gallons of diesel fuel.

Stu turned away and drifted down the porch. He stood at the long railing and watched 247 rocking at the dock. The bay was four miles across right there, and rising from the marshes on the far side was the nuclear plant, huge and all out of proportion to the landscape. Even miles away, it loomed over the Bayview's porch like some comic book image. The Wiggler came up beside Stu. She dragged her hand on the railing and sighed. She sat on one of the old kitchen chairs. Her foot tapped. She crossed and re-crossed her legs. She sighed again and looked at her wrist for the watch that wasn't there.

"I don't know," the Wiggler said. "Rickie usually scores for me. These guys." She sucked her lower lip. "They can be hard to deal with." She stood up and joined Stu at the railing. "You got a cigarette?"

"No," Stu said.

She turned and faced him. "Got anything else?"

The hot wind had dried Stu's sweat, and he could feel the crust of salt when he wrinkled his forehead. "Maybe I should go see about drinks," he said.

"No." The Wiggler turned away and looked out over the water. "I'll do it," she said. She took a breath, and when she let it out again, something in her left along with it. She folded her arms across her chest and made her way back to the door. Whatever she said to Bang turned his smile into a sinkhole. He motioned her into the bar.

Stu heard a sound, part laugh, part scream. He started for the door, but two bikers came out and turned him back toward the railing.

Stu stood there, bookended, and frowned out at the bay.

Hoots and another ragged laugh came from inside the bar.

Stu turned toward the door, but the biker with the patchy blond beard took his arm and turned him back around. "I used to work over there," he said, pointing with his fuzzy chin toward the nuke plant. He aimed the full force of his bad breath into Stu's face. "Used to make me go under the vessel."

"What?"

"Where the machinery's at. Under them domes. Hot every way there is to *be* hot—a whole barbecue of ways to die down in there."