

NIGHT WATCH

An Em Ridge Mystery
Book One

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Published by the author as a member of the
Alexandria Publishing Group

Night Watch

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Formatting by RikHall.com
Cover by BookGraphics.net
Editing by Joyce Lamb

eBook ISBN: 978-0-9877613-6-1
Print ISBN: 978-0-9877613-7-8

Dedicated to pirates gone

Bob, Ron and Ed

I am pleased to present *Night Watch*, the first novel in my new mystery/suspense series featuring Em Ridge, a female boat delivery captain. This book has been in my "to write" list for many, many years. Six books ago this story was there, wanting to be launched, to get on paper. I didn't have the chance then. I have now.

My husband and I spend most of our summers aboard our 34' sailboat, aptly named *Mystery*. We cruise the waters in New Brunswick in eastern Canada and we always head down to Maine. We've met so many wonderful people on our travels including a number of female boat delivery captains. Their stories over glasses of 'sun downers' are fascinating.

I love boats and being out on the water, but my husband will tell you that I'm not especially brave when it comes to storms. I turn into a bit of a scaredy cat when the engine fails and we're heading toward rocks. Em, however, my alter-ego, is not. She's brave and competent and strong and can out sail anyone around. She can climb down and fix the engine, and she's well used to repairing heads, propane lines, ripped sails and anything else that comes her way. It's fun for me to "be her" as I write these books.

I've set Book One near Portland, Maine. It resembles Portland, but I've done what authors do when they need landmarks that Mother Nature hasn't quite provided - they make them up. The tidal island of Chalk Spit does not exist on any map. I needed a place for Em to live and nothing in and around Portland, Maine quite suited. If Chalk Spit resembles anything, it would be Minister's Island, St. Andrews, New Brunswick - but with a high tide ferry.

Book Two in the series, *The Bitter End* should be out in the spring.

I'd love to hear from you. If you have any questions or comments, my contact information is at the end of this book.

Linda

Since 1915, all U.S. Merchant vessels over 100 gross tons have, by law, divided the crew into three watches, working four hours on and eight hours off, and turning the dog watches into one evening watch. The Lore of Ships by AB Nordbok, Gothenberg, Sweden, 1975

Chapter 1

I was in the middle of a Jesse dream when Cricket disappeared. It was the best Jesse dream I'd had in a long time, and I wanted to stay in that place forever.

We were sailing. We always sail, the two of us, in Jesse dreams. We were out in the middle of the bay on my old wooden catboat, the one I had before I knew Jesse, before he was such a part of my life. I sold that boat years ago to someone who trailered it to Lake Ontario. But dreams are like that, full of curiosities and strange chronologies, yet somehow making full sense at the time.

The wind was a steady ten knots, the sun warm on our necks. We moved effortlessly on the tops of the waves as if across silk. I leaned back, held the tiller with both hands and pressed my sandaled feet down onto the leeward side. The creaking of the pintles, the whoosh of the water beneath us, and the wind filling the sail were the only sounds. We didn't talk.

We don't talk in Jesse dreams.

Down, almost at water level, Jesse was winching the sail in tighter, tighter, one beat-up boat shoe braced against the bulkhead. I looked with longing at the curve of his bare ankle. I wanted to reach out, trace my fingers along its bone, cradle it against my cheek. It had been so long. Too long. Almost two years gone. Yet, in some ways, it will always be yesterday.

I wanted to call out to him, but have learned not to in Jesse dreams. If he turned to look at me, would I see the face with the sun-

ruddied grin? The mussed hair always in need of a cut? Or would he stare at me with cold, unseeing eyes, face streaked with blood? Would it be a stranger's face even, which turned to gaze up at me?

Jesse dreams always hold a sharp edge of terror that leaves me breathless and gasping when I finally claw my way up toward waking. Yet, despite this, I crave them, hunger for them. I will take the horror—all of it—for one moment more with Jesse.

Em?

He was calling to me? He never speaks to me in Jesse dreams. I held my breath, and watched the muscles in his forearms as he gripped the lines tightly, barely moving as the boat made its way toward ever-deeper water. He moved his foot, and I saw it on the bottom of the boat, wrinkled, wet, lying there—the postcard. I looked away as fear rose in my throat like bile.

Em? He was tapping at my foot, touching it. Over and over. Tap. Tap. Louder.

I tried to speak, could not.

“EM!”

I blinked, opened my eyes wide, and in an instant came fully awake in the half-light. I scrambled out of my berth, knocking my glasses to the sole as I did so.

“Wha-what?” I bent down, grabbed for them. No, I wasn't on a catboat with my dead husband. I was the delivery captain of *Blue Peace*, a fifty-two-foot luxury sailboat, and we were somewhere out in the Atlantic Ocean en route to Bermuda. It was night, and I was being shaken awake by a crew member. No one wakes a captain unless it's a Mayday-Batten-Down-The-Hatches-All-Hands-On-Deck-9-1-1 emergency.

I put on my glasses, tried to focus. Rob Stikles, one of my three crew members, was standing in front of me, opening and closing his mouth, Adam's apple bobbing. The boat moved unnaturally in the sea swells, and I grasped for a handhold.

“You turned the engine on,” I said.

“Yeah, um...”

“The winds die? If you're on watch, Rob, you don't need to wake me up every time you have to turn on the engine. I presume you know how to pull in the sails and turn on the engine—”

“It's—it's—not that...”

“What then?” At eye level, we were exactly the same height.

“It's Cricket.”

I sighed. He woke me for Cricket? “What? She forget to take her seasick pills again? Is she puking over the side at”—I glanced at the brass clock affixed to the teak bulkhead—“two thirty in the morning?”

I pulled a gray sweatshirt, one of Jesse’s, over the T-shirt and sweats I wear when I sleep on boats. “Let me go talk to her.” I moved determinedly into the main salon. Cricket would be there, I was sure, lying on a settee in a fetal position, clutching at her stomach and demanding that we turn this boat around right now—*right now*—and take her home.

Behind the nav station, Joan, my chief navigator, was sleeping soundly, only the tiniest scruff of gray hair peeking out from under her thick woolen Hudson Bay blanket. I switched on one of the overhead lights, and the salon glowed eerie red. To maintain our night vision, we use only red LEDs down below after sunset. The light made Rob’s face look ghostly, and it reminded me of tenting trips with my two younger sisters and holding the flashlight under my chin and growling at them, and them screaming and holding on to each other until our parents demanded that we all go back to sleep.

“Where is she, then?” I made my way toward the stern and to Cricket’s aft stateroom.

Rob followed me. “She’s not seasick. She’s um, she’s gone.” He wailed this out, face flushed. His hands would not be still. His fingers kept crawling up the sides of his squall jacket like crabs. Joan stirred slightly.

Gone? What did he mean? Gone, as in dead? But, no one dies of being seasick. I pressed my palm into my forehead to get rid of the last remnants of Jesse. “Rob,” I said, quietly now and trying to muster a certain amount of command to my voice. “Where is she? Where is Cricket?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know. Well, not for sure. She’s...” He paused. “She’s not on the boat.” He stopped.

I raced up the companionway and out into the icy air which ripped at once through my sweatshirt. “Where is she?” I looked frantically around me but all I saw was black ocean. “She fell off the boat? Is that what you’re saying? How did this happen?” I studied the chart plotter.

“Yes.” He was behind me and shivering.

“Did you hit the Man Overboard button?”

“The what?”

“On the GPS.” I turned and looked him straight in the eyes. “When you saw she went overboard, did you at least hit the Man Overboard button?” Even though I tried to keep my voice even, it was painfully strident at the end of all my words.

“I don’t—No. I thought maybe she went down below. So, I didn’t. No.” His teeth were actually chattering.

The boat made a sideways lunge as we plunged through a sea swell. I grabbed the edge of the binnacle. Carefully studying our track on the chart plotter, I wrenched the wheel around. We would retrace our track. Maybe, just maybe we would be lucky. Once I had again engaged the autopilot, I raced down through the companionway. Rob followed.

“Joan! Peter!” I yelled. “Man overboard! We need you! We need everyone.”

Rob slumped down into a settee and put his head in his hands. I didn’t have time to evaluate whether he was crying or not. I didn’t know Rob. My other two crew members, Joan Bush and Peter Mauer, were almost family to me. Joan has always been like my wiser, older aunt. She and her husband, Art, were closer to me than my own family after Jesse died. Peter, cook extraordinaire, is like my hunky little brother. I’d known Peter forever. I first met him when I was in high school and taught sailing as a summer job. He was the brightest and smartest little kid in my class of ten-year-olds. I connected with him again when he was a cook on Windjammer cruises, where I crewed for two summers. He’d gone to chef school for a year, but then dropped out to work on boats. We’d been buddies ever since.

We hadn’t needed a fourth crew member, yet Peter asked to have Rob come along. His friend was trying to build up his sailing résumé and needed more blue-water experience, he told me.

Yet, after less than a week on the water, I seriously doubted whether Rob had ever been on any kind of boat before. Something as easy as tying a bowline or a simple clove hitch had him fumbling all his fingers. And why had he not thought of hitting the MOB button? There was something else, too, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. He seemed very familiar to me, like I should know him from some place. And it wasn’t a good memory.

On top of that, it was clear that there was no love lost between Peter and Rob.

Then there was Cricket. She was the owner’s daughter and had come aboard her father’s yacht with great reluctance. I’d been told

that her father ruled his family like he ruled his corporations and felt his wild daughter needed a bit of an “outward bound” experience.

“And put her to work,” Roy Patterson had told me on the phone. “I’m going to be asking you if she pulled her weight.”

That little part of the equation had proved difficult, if not impossible.

“What’s going on?” Joan sat up now and ran her fingers through her hair. A few strands of it were sticking up at the back. None of us looked our best this time in the morning.

“Kricket’s missing,” I said. “Possibly overboard.”

“What! How? Was she wearing her PFD?” Joan quickly pulled a long-sleeved shirt over her slim frame. I frowned. We had not yet reached the Gulf Stream, where the water suddenly warmed. If Kricket had gone into the frigid Gulf of Maine water, it would be unlikely she would survive, personal flotation device notwithstanding.

“Yes.” This came from Rob.

I turned to face him.

“She was wearing her PFD,” he said.

“That’s something, anyway,” I said.

Peter was by now entering the main cabin in sweats and a Mount Gay Rum T-shirt that showed off his biceps. He ran a hand across his unshaven face.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“It’s Kricket,” I said. “We think she’s overboard.”

A look passed between Peter and Rob, a look I didn’t have time, at this point, to evaluate. I grabbed my yellow squall jacket from the hook at the bottom of the companionway and my PFD, stepped into my sea boots and headed topside. Too much time had passed with no one at the helm. Even on autopilot, a careful eye needed to be kept for stray containers from ships and other floating debris.

Joan followed. The wind on this night held a bitter edge and sliced into my face like a sea urchin’s spines. In all directions, the ocean was a molten gray of constant movement. It wasn’t white-capping, but the swells were high. It caught at me, as it always does, that here we are, a mere speck of flotsam on a huge indifferent sea. I tugged the hood of my jacket up over my head and pulled the elastic toggles tight under my chin, wishing I’d remembered my wool toque. Next time I went down below, I’d get it, along with my gloves.

I tried to collect my thoughts as I followed our jagged line backtracking on the chart plotter. I increased the RPMs and let out a

bit of jib to steady us. I tried to remain calm, but I kept swallowing. My cold hands shook. The boat was pitching and yawing in the waves, and I fought back a flutter of nausea. Even in the calmest of weather, the sea is never still. It moves back and forth and sideways, a motion that experienced sailors get used to. It's called "getting your sea legs." But right now all I was feeling was sick.

"Em," Joan said behind me. "Why don't you and I give this boat a thorough going over? There are lots of places where she could be curled up sleeping, cubbyholes and things. Peter and Rob can watch."

Her idea gave me hope. It would be a good idea to exhaust all possibilities before I called a Mayday.

The opulent interior of this custom-built Morris sailboat included two staterooms with their own heads, plus a crew cabin consisting of two bunk-like berths. There were many places where Cricket could be even now. Joan and I went into her stateroom. Because Cricket was the owner's daughter, she got the best room, the aft cabin with its queen-size bed and private head. As captain on this trip, that room should have been mine, but I took the second-best bed, the one on the forward starboard side.

This was the first time I'd been in her room since we left Canada, and I stood in the doorway. If I didn't know better, I would have thought that someone had come in here and trashed the place. Shirts, jeans, sandals, bikini tops and bottoms, and bottles of this and that hair product and makeup looked as if they had been cast here and there in no particular order. Her phone lay across her unmade bed, its earbuds trailing across the mound of clothes like worms. Her Louis Vuitton suitcase was open and heaped with clothes—scarves, sundresses, tank tops, shorts and more.

I rooted through the pile of clothes on her bed. She wasn't underneath. I opened the door to her private head. This was a girl, I realized, who was not used to having to pick up after herself. A cylindrical bottle of designer shampoo rolled back and forth across the sole in rhythm with the sea. I picked it up and put it in the sink.

A feeling of raw fear began to gnaw at my insides. This was my first captaining job after getting my Coast Guard captain's license, and Cricket had to be okay. She had to be. I promised Roy Patterson that I'd take good care of his daughter. Back out in her stateroom, I opened the door to her hanging locker. This is where most sailors keep jackets, fleeces, woolies and foul-weather gear. Not Cricket. Her

locker was hung up with pretty summer dresses. Clearly, she was looking forward to party time in the Caribbean. Without speaking Joan and I went through all of her cupboards and cubbyholes before we left that room to search through the remainder of the boat.

After we had exhausted every locker, every cubbyhole, every closet, every closed and open space on the entire boat, I, Captain Emmeline Ridge had to concede that the absolute worst had happened. We were out in the middle of the ocean, a day from landfall and Katherine “Krieket” Patterson, the daughter of the very rich owner of this magnificent yacht, who’d given me my first-ever captaining job, had truly gone overboard.

I made my way to the nav station. With shaky fingers, I picked up the mic on the SSB radio.

I said clearly and distinctly and slowly, “Mayday. Mayday. Mayday. This is *Blue Peace, Blue Peace, Blue Peace*. We have a man overboard and missing. Repeat, we have a man overboard and missing. We are at latitude—”

Chapter 2

Morning was beginning to break over the sea above us, and shafts of pale gray gave an otherworldly quality to the light throughout the cabin. Down below at the nav table, I rested my forehead in one hand and held the satellite phone in the other. How do you tell a billionaire boat owner that his daughter is missing and feared overboard? How do you tell any parent that their child is probably dead?

The rest of the crew was up on deck. Peter and Rob were arguing in low tones, while Joan seemed to be trying to soothe frayed spirits. I couldn't catch specific words, and at this point I didn't care. Wispy smoke trails from Rob's cigarette wafted down toward me. I needed to make this phone call. That was first. Then I would go up and ream him out for smoking. Again.

I took a breath. Right now Roy Patterson would probably be asleep, his wife, Elaine, beside him in bed, neither realizing that they were about to receive the phone call that would forever change their lives. I exhaled and punched in the number. The phone was answered on the third ring by a tired-sounding female.

"Mrs. Patterson?"

"Yes?"

"This is Captain Emmeline Ridge aboard *Blue Peace*. May I speak with your husband, please?"

His first words were, "Something wrong with the boat?"

"No. It's your daughter, sir. I'm afraid she's gone missing. We fear she may have gone overboard. We're combing the area where this may have happened. She was wearing her PFD, so there's a good chance we may find her. I've contacted the Coast Guard, and they're sending a fast rescue boat. They promised aircraft at first light. We're still about a day away from the nearest landfall in Maine, which would be Portland."

There was a moment's silence. Then his measured words, "How on God's green earth did you let this happen?"

Just a sample 😊

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About the Author

Linda Hall spent the early years of her writing career as a journalist and freelance writer. She also worked in the field of adult literacy and wrote curriculum materials for adults reading at basic reading levels. In 1990 Linda decided to do something she'd always dreamed of doing, she began working on her first novel. The book she wrote, *The Josiah Files* was published in 1992.

Since that time she's written seventeen more mystery and suspense novels and many short stories and essays.

Most of her novels have something to do with the sea. Linda grew up in New Jersey and her love of the ocean was born there. When she was a little girl Linda remembers sitting on the shore and watching the waves and contemplating what was beyond. She could do that for hours.

Linda has roots in two countries. In 1971, she married a Canadian who loves the water just as much as she does. They moved to Canada and have lived there ever since. One of the things they enjoy is sailing. In the summer they basically move aboard their 34' sailboat, aptly named - *Mystery*.

Both Linda's husband Rik and Linda have achieved the rank of Senior Navigator, the highest rank possible in CPS. The U.S. sister organization is the U.S.P.S. Linda's Senior Navigator diploma hangs proudly on her office wall. What this all means is that she knows how to use a sextant and can 'theoretically' find her way home by looking at the stars.

Rik and Linda have two grown children, seven grandchildren and a very spoiled cat.