

USCG Cutter *Kauai*, Turks Island Passage, eight nautical miles west of Cockburn Town, Turks and Caicos
13:07 EST, 16 November

Haley

What had started as just another low-key day on a quiet patrol had turned into the most exciting operation Haley had ever experienced. She was impressed with both the competence and confidence of the crew as they dealt with what Sam had said was a new challenge for all of them. She wanted to pitch in but realized that anything she did would disrupt the rhythm and likely hurt more than help.

Haley had been nervous as they closed on the fleeing cargo ship. If, as Ben speculated, they were smuggling arms, they could include man-portable rocket launchers that stood a good chance of sinking *Kauai* with one or two hits at her waterline. Sam admitted as much when she asked him about it privately in his cabin.

“That’s a fact, but it wouldn’t have come to that,” Sam said with a completely blank expression.

“How so? I don’t see the twenty-five-millimeter or the fifty-caliber being able to respond effectively in time,” Haley said.

“We had eyes on with both the UAV and the EO camera. If I had seen anyone carrying anything looking like a launch tube, I would have green-lighted Guerrero on the Flying Bridge.” During General Quarters, Gunner’s Mate Second Class Deke Guerrero was stationed in a fortified position on the Flying Bridge. He was trained and equipped with a fifty-caliber M2010 enhanced sniper rifle. Anyone using a rocket would have to step into the open because of the backblast, and Guerrero could hit any target center mass from up to a mile away under the conditions they had today. Haley had not realized that kind of capability was in play.

The dispatch of the boarding team and the chase after *Miho Dujam’s* crew had also surprised Haley, who doubted she would have assumed that risk. She said as much to Sam on the Bridge as *Kauai* drove at full speed to cut off the crew’s escape. Sam also had his worries, but answered frankly.

“It took me some time to accept it, but this is the job. The 252s are already a plague in Europe and are trying to establish themselves here with a ready narcotics supply and arms market. We have to keep them or any other TCO like them from linking up with the cartels, or we will have a war on our hands in our own backyard. This pushes beyond the standard law enforcement risk calculus.

“Ben and his team are combat-trained and can handle anyone left behind. They’ll do a quick sweep and bail if they see anything sketchy. But if we can grab something, anything that leads us to whomever the 252s are working with over here, it’ll be worth it. As for these mooks,” Sam said, pointing at the fleeing boat on the video screen. “They’re obviously not kamikazes, or they would have shot it out with us from a more defensible position.”

The old expression that a stern chase is a long chase was coming true today. Even loaded down with ten people, the *Miho Dujam’s* RHIB was only a few knots slower

than *Kauai's* top speed. But they were closing the distance and were within minutes of heading off the villains' escape when the call came from Drake on the *Miho Dujam*.

"*Kauai*, COB, request immediate assistance."

Sam bolted out of his chair and grabbed the microphone. "COB, *Kauai* Actual, what's going on?"

"Sir, they set up scuttling before they beat feet. They also left twenty-two female trafficking victims and no PFDs or rafts."

"COB, we're on the way." Sam turned to Hopkins, "Chief, return to the ship. Fast as possible, please."

"Aye, Aye, sir," Hopkins replied and turned to the helmsman. "Left full rudder."

"Left full rudder," the helmsman repeated. "Chief, my rudder is left thirty degrees."

"Very well, steer two-six-five," Hopkins added as *Kauai* heeled to the right in reaction to the hard left turn.

Sam followed the fleeing RHIB with his binoculars after *Kauai* steadied on her new course, then slammed his right hand on the bridge railing. "Dammit! I should have known they would have done something like this." After a few seconds, his face returned to its regular calm expression, and he grabbed the microphone and switched to the 1MC. "All hands not on watch, don life vests and helmets and muster on the foredeck for rescue and assistance operation. Health Services Technician provide." He hung the microphone and called out the port bridge door, "Hebert!"

"Yes, Captain!" Hebert replied from his post on Mount 52, the port machine gun.

"Secure the mount, get to the foredeck, and take charge! We will have twenty-plus survivors coming on board in a few minutes!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Haley saw a chance to contribute and pounced. "Captain, those women have probably been through hell, and it can't hurt to have a female face down there."

Sam glanced at her, smiled, and said, "Go!"

Haley ran to the main deck, grabbed a boat helmet and life vest out of the ready locker, and continued to the foredeck. Hebert was already briefing the crew and turned to her. "Ma'am?"

"You're still in charge, Petty Officer Hebert. I'm just another pair of hands."

"Yes, thank ya', ma'am." Hebert nodded and then turned to the other crew.

Haley looked across the water at the *Miho Dujam*. There was wispy black smoke still drifting upward from her smokestack, and the bright colors of individual clothing were just becoming visible on the decks. Haley estimated about a mile to go. Two pairs of line handlers detailed by Hebert were already laying out mooring lines and attaching heaving lines to the ends, and Hebert himself was suspending three large fenders over the side.

Bryant stepped beside her, carrying a litter in one hand and his medical kit in the other. He placed both on the deck next to the superstructure and said, "Ma'am."

"Petty Officer Bryant." Haley stood silently for about half a minute. Bryant was one of the few people aboard *Kauai* who seemed less interested in small talk than she was. "Have you handled any human trafficking before?"

“When I was in the army, ma’am. Not here.”

“I imagine communication might be a challenge. Do you speak any foreign languages?”

“Some German, Czech, and Polish, ma’am.”

“Really, how much?”

Bryant turned to face her. “Enough to do the job. Do you speak any foreign languages, ma’am?”

“A little Spanish,” Haley answered.

“Won’t do much good with this crowd. Here’s what you need to say: *Komm mit mir* is ‘Come with me,’ and *bleib hier* is ‘Stay here.’”

“You think they speak German?”

“Enough of them will, ma’am,” Bryant nodded and handed her a travel-sized jar of Vicks Vapor Rub.

“What’s this for?” Haley asked as she looked at the jar.

“The smell, ma’am. Those gals have been locked in a box on that tub for two weeks on a North Atlantic crossing in November. I prescribe a swipe of that under your nose if you don’t want to be hurling yourself.”

They were within a quarter-mile now. Haley could clearly see the deck was crowded with individuals, and the ship had a visible list to port. They were still charging at full speed. *Hopkins had better hit the brakes if she doesn’t want to overshoot.*

As if reading her mind, Hopkins’s voice came over the 1MC, “All hands, prepare for crash-back!”

Haley observed the deck crew kneeling and grabbing a handhold. As she did the same, the bow suddenly dipped down, and the hull began to shudder. Haley recognized as engines going full astern with a high forward speed. She almost fell forward in the deceleration as *Kauai* came to a halt about thirty feet off the *Miho Dujam*.

“Heaving lines, let fly!” Hebert shouted, and two small lines with weighted balls at the end streaked across the water to where Ben and Bondurant were standing. They hurriedly pulled over the two mooring lines, threading them through the hawseholes on the ship and giving a thumbs-up to show they had been attached. In the meantime, Hopkins was working motors and rudder to walk *Kauai* sideways into the larger vessel, with the crewmen pulling in the slack from the mooring lines. The two vessels came together with the loud squeak of compressing fenders. “Hold all lines!” Hebert shouted. “Second men, report to me!”

The second man at each position dropped his mooring line and trotted over as Hebert said, “Help Doc get the litter over there.” As they assisted Bryant, Hebert turned to Haley. “Ma’am, it’s gonna get mighty crowded mighty fast. Can you take them to the messdeck when we gather half a dozen? I have water bottles laid out for them.”

“No problem!” Haley answered.

“Thank ya, ma’am.”

The litter with the catatonic woman came across first, with Drake and Bondurant on each side handing it carefully across to their counterparts on *Kauai*, followed by Bryant. The men carried it aside, laid it on the deck for Bryant to do his work, and returned to their place on the rail. Like the litter, Drake and Bondurant handed off each survivor to the crewmen waiting on the patrol boat while Ben was herding the others into a single file for the transfer. Haley beckoned over each new arrival to keep the path clear. The fear they showed of the male crewmembers and the contrasting expressions of gratitude on their faces when they saw Haley almost made her tear up. As they huddled close to her, Haley was grateful for Bryant's gift—even in the open air and through the Vapor Rub smear she applied under her nose, the stench of waste and old sweat and vomit was almost overpowering.

When she hit the required critical mass of six victims, she led them aft to the open messdeck, sat them in the chairs, and handed out water bottles. There was concern among the women when she turned to leave, so Haley smiled, waved her hand, and said, "*Bleib hier.*" as Bryant suggested. Those who had stood sat again, although their looks of concern remained until Haley returned with the second half dozen survivors. Some faces were more expressive than others, but the new arrivals brought signs of relief and hope.

On her second return to the foredeck, Haley noticed Ben was no longer herding the remaining women in line. In fact, he was nowhere to be seen, and she wondered if he had returned on board while she was shuttling survivors to the messdeck. After her third run, she remained on the foredeck and watched as the last survivor came aboard, followed by Drake and Bondurant after they cast off *Kauai's* mooring lines. As the two vessels drifted apart, Haley walked directly to Drake and asked, "Chief, where's the XO?"

"He's inside looking for evidence, ma'am," Drake replied.

"He's *what?*"

"The XO told us to cast off and return on board after the last survivor crossed over. He's taking the RHIB back." Drake and Bondurant shared a worried look.

"How much longer will that ship last?"

"Ma'am, I'm surprised she's still upright."

Haley hated stepping in, but things seemed to be getting out of hand. "Chief, call the RHIB!"

"*Kauai*-One, COB, is the XO with you?"

"Negative," Lee's voice replied.

Drake lifted his radio again, but before he could speak, a series of loud bangs erupted from the *Miho Dujam*, and she quickly rolled to the left. He keyed the radio and shouted, "*Kauai*, COB, XO is still on board!"

The ship continued to roll with a cacophony of bangs and crashes and, within twenty seconds, had completely capsized with only her hull bottom visible. Haley, Drake, and Bondurant were transfixed in shock until the 1MC jolted them into motion.

"Man Overboard Port Side, repeat Man Overboard Port Side! This is no drill!"