



the **DARKENING**
ARCHIPELAGO

A COLE BLACKWATER MYSTERY

STEPHEN LEGAULT



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1 The rain began suddenly. From the west, skipping like a flat stone over the broad waters separating Vancouver Island from the convoluted knot of smaller islands at the mouth of Knight Inlet, the storm raced toward the steep slopes of the Coast Mountains. When it reached them, it ricocheted up their flanks and back and forth across the narrow passage at the mouth of the fjord. With the rain came wind that moulded the water into small waves, churning it into ten-foot swells within an hour. The sky pressed down and pounded the water with machine gun volleys of driving rain. The tops of the densely forested mountains rising from the inlet disappeared as a tattered blackness settled against the sea.

Archie Ravenwing felt the storm approaching before he saw it, before it soaked him through. He could feel it coming on for most of the day. Maybe someone had done the weather dance last night, their blankets twisting as they moved back and forth to the chorus of voices, to the beating of drums. Maybe he should have paid closer attention to that morning's marine weather forecast.

He felt the storm in his hands. Twisted and corded like the ropes he had spent his sixty years working with, his joints always ached when a storm loomed. From November to March, and sometimes well into April, his hands always seemed to ache. There was no denying it — he was well past his prime. But he still had work to do.

Ravenwing had set off from Port Lostcoast on the Inlet Dancer before dawn. On the north shore of Parish Island, Port Lostcoast was where he was born and where he had spent most of his life working as a fisherman. But he wasn't fishing today. The salmon season wasn't set to open for another two months, if it opened at all. For thousands of years, people along the wild, ragged coast of British Columbia had guided their boats through the heaving waters of the Pacific, harvesting the fish for food and ceremony. Among the tribes of the West Coast, salmon was the most important animal in the world. Life turned on salmon seasons. But in the last twenty years, so much had changed. Ravenwing thought of this as he powered up the inlet that morning, intent on his destination but aware of the shifting weather around him.

Salmon smolts had been running for nearly two weeks, and Ravenwing had spent every day on the water since they started. These silvery darts spent as many as three years living in the tiny headwater tributaries of Knight Inlet. Most of the salmon born there were eaten or died of natural causes. Only ten percent survived to grow large enough to migrate down river and out into the salty water at the mouth of the creeks and then into the Inlet itself.

The morning had been bright enough, with nothing more menacing than a few clouds hanging over the mountains of Vancouver Island, far to the west. But now Ravenwing suspected that by day's end there would be rain. He flexed his thick, burlled hands as he lightly played the wheel of his thirty-two-foot troller, heading east up the inlet.

By the time the day started to warm, Ravenwing had reached Minstrel Island and the narrow mouth to Clio Channel, the ideal place for a couple hours of dip-net sampling before he turned his attention to the small bays and coves that marked the jigsaw puzzle shore. Archie shut down the Inlet Dancer's powerful Cummins 130-horsepower inboard motor and let the silence of the morning wash over him. He stepped from the wheelhouse onto the aft deck with a Thermos of coffee, stretching and yawning. Thermos in hand, he deftly walked the high, narrow gunwale and sat on the raised fish box, which doubled as a table. He unscrewed the cap of the Thermos and closed his eyes to savour the scent of hot, rich coffee. The smell mingled with the tang of the ocean, salty and spiced with the yin and yang of coastal life and decay, and the pungent fragrance of the thick Sitka spruce and red cedar forest rising up along the towering cliffs just a hundred metres off his port side. Archie Ravenwing smiled broadly as he drew these fragrances deeply into his lungs.

He poured coffee into the Thermos cap and blew on it gently, squinting at the steam that swirled up and disappeared on the breeze. Later, Archie guessed, that breeze would turn into a squall. But for the moment the morning was warm and gentle, and he savoured it. He sipped his coffee and looked around him.

Born into the Lostcoast band of the North Salish First Nation, Archie Ravenwing had been fishing, guiding, hunting,

and exploring the coastal estuaries, inlets, reaches, and straits from as far away as Puget Sound to the Queen Charlotte Islands since he was old enough to manage a bowlegged stance in a boat. As he let his eyes roll over the massive sweep of land and water and sky before him that morning, he was happy that this reach of the Broughton Archipelago had remained unchanged for generations. The hills jutted steeply from the rich waters, their shoulders cloaked in spruce and fir. Beneath those giant trees, tangles of salmonberries and alders gripped the soil. And between them walked another totem species for the Lostcoast people — the grizzly bear. Bears and salmon and the ancient forests that surrounded them were a holy trinity for Archie and his people. Grizzly bears fed on the salmon as the fish bashed their way up through the ankle-deep waters of the tiny tributaries to their spawning grounds each fall. The grizzly bears grew fat, often eating only the fish brains, rich in the nutrients they would need for their winter hibernation. The dead fish, left to rot in the woods, nourished the stalwart trees, which in turn held the entire ecosystem together with their wide, spreading roots. The trees sheltered and cooled the salmon rivers and fed the many smaller creatures that made their homes among them. When the trees fell into the streams, downed logs created places for the spawning salmon to hide and rest as, exhausted and crazed, they struggled back to their source of life.

Archie sipped his coffee, thinking about this cycle of existence. He pushed back the sadness that approached whenever he thought this way. There was some question as to whether there would be enough wild salmon in this year's run to allow for a commercial fishery. Talk in Victoria, the provincial capital, and among senior federal officials responsible for the fishery, suggested that a complete ban might be necessary to allow decimated salmon runs to recover.

The people of the Lostcoast band had been fishing there for thousands of years, but they had never contributed to the decimation of salmon the way the modern industrial fishery had. Now Archie Ravenwing's people would pay the price incurred by the greed and short-sightedness of the commercial fishing industry

and its proponents in government. In the years since British Columbia's current Liberal government had lifted the moratorium on new salmon farms in the province, there had been an explosion of interest in new aquaculture developments along BC's knotted west coast. In the Broughton Archipelago, where Archie Ravenwing fished and lived, there were nearly thirty salmon farms in operation. Many of these open-net farms were located on the migration routes of native wild salmon. And though industry advocates argued that the two were unrelated, along with the development of salmon farms came a corresponding decline in the number of wild salmon. Archie knew that, in a recent count, only one hundred and fifty thousand wild salmon returned to the Broughton, down from the historical three and a half million. In 2002 the wild pink salmon stock collapsed, with only five percent of the native wild fish returning to spawn. Archie knew the numbers by heart.

For Ravenwing, it was as if part of his own body, his own soul, had vanished. The part of his heart that swam through the waters of Tribune Channel and up the mouth of Knight Inlet was gone, lost like the spirit of the once-great salmon.

Archie tried to keep his darkening sadness at bay. How could it have come to this? he wondered. After a thousand years of tradition, his family wouldn't be allowed to fish their ancestral waters? He turned his face toward the sky. A throaty call greeted him, and he opened his eyes to see a jet-black shape cruise overhead. He heard the husky chortle again. Archie raised a hand in greeting. "Good morning, Grandpa," he said quietly, waving at the raven, a smile creasing his face. "U'melth, Raven, who brought us the moon, fire, salmon, sun, and the tides," he recited. "Trickster, grandfather of a thousand pranks. Okay! I'll lighten up!" He drained his mug and slung the dregs into the water. "Time to get to work," he added.

Archie rose, stretched out the stiffness that had accumulated in his joints, and walked back to the wheelhouse, where he opened a large bin and removed the tools he would need for his morning work. He put the long, flexible net together on its pole and readied half a dozen plastic sample jars. These he put on the

fish box on the deck of the boat. Without ceremony he began his sampling, drawing forth the tiny salmon fry to be funnelled into the jars. So few, so few. Ravenwing shook his head as he dipped again into the waters.

By noon he had filled the jars with juvenile salmon, whose tiny, finger-sized bodies were being consumed by sea lice. This was what Archie Ravenwing was seeking — irrefutable evidence that the wild salmon stocks of Knight Inlet and the Broughton Archipelago were being parasitized by sea lice.

Archie held a jar up to the light and counted the lice clinging to the salmon. On one smolt he counted four parasites from two different species. Adults might succumb when they had six or seven sea lice on their fins, gills, or skin. Smolts like those in Archie's sampling jars would die with only a few sea lice feeding on them. Archie regarded his unfortunate catch. "Not doing so good, are you, little friends?" He kept finding more and more smolts with more and more sea lice on them, and he had yet to reach his day's destination: Jeopardy Rock. There he expected to find the epicentre of sea lice contamination.

"Not so good..." he repeated, his voice trailing off.

Ravenwing knew that sea lice were a natural parasite that preyed on wild salmon along British Columbia's wild coast and elsewhere across North America. But in the last ten years there had been a shocking rise in the number of lice infesting wild salmon. Where before the numbers had been low, and very few salmon actually died as a result of playing host to the lice, now entire runs of wild pink and other salmon were being devastated by them. Despite protests from the salmon farming industry, irrefutable evidence pointed to the rash of farmed Atlantic salmon as the source of the outbreak. The Atlantic salmon could survive with many more sea lice than the native pink, chum, and coho.

Archie took a black felt pen from his shirt pocket and labelled the jars. He would return these to Dr. Cassandra Petrel for her study.

Archie flexed his big hands and looked at the sky. "Starting to crowd in," he said aloud to nobody in particular. "Fixing to churn up pretty good, I think."

He knew he should head back down the inlet toward Port Lostcoast before the storm set upon him, but he had one more thing to do that day. Something was eating Archie Ravenwing, and he had to set it straight. So instead of turning the Inlet Dancer for home, he powered across the inlet toward the mouth of Tribune Channel, skipping the heavy boat across the small waves already being formed by the wind.

■ Now the rain fell in torrents, churning the waves like knives thrust into the sea. The Inlet Dancer bounced and rocked, nose into the waves, powering past the fish farms at Doctor Islets and into the main body of Knight Inlet, making for home. Archie stood in the pilothouse near the stern of the boat, one hand locked on the wheel, the other clenching the throttle. This blow was bigger than he had foreseen and, though he was prepared to moor and wait out the storm, this stretch of water had few safe harbours.

After what he had seen at Jeopardy Rock, a new urgency filled Archie Ravenwing and made him push for home against what seemed prudent for the weather.

A wave crashed over the bow of the Inlet Dancer, and the boat dipped into the trough behind it, rising up the side of another stack of water. The swells now topped fifteen feet and came in irregular patterns, every fourth, fifth, or sixth wave taller than the rest, coming on faster than the others. Ravenwing firmly held the wheel, keeping the boat head-on to the storm, not wanting the narrow vessel to get punched side-to by one of the rogue waves.

He had suspected for some time that what was happening at Jeopardy Rock was more than just simple salmon farming. He had suspected for some time that the company was doing more than just breeding Atlantic salmon. Now he was certain. He would make his calls when he reached Port Lostcoast and begin to set the record straight. He would begin to make amends. Did Archie Ravenwing believe in redemption? He believed in justice, even if his own actions hadn't always seemed just. He believed that a man's motivation sometimes propelled behaviour that appeared inconsistent with his espoused values. But we are complex creatures, reasoned Ravenwing.

Another wave rocked the Inlet Dancer, and Archie pitched forward. He patted the wheel and remembered that she had survived worse.

It was growing dark. The day was slipping from the sky, and the clouds pressed down so low that the tops of the trees on mighty Gilford Island were hardly visible. Ravenwing switched on his running lights — not so he could see, but so he could be seen. Sonar and radar would guide him down the inlet, through the darkness and the storm, but he worried about small pleasure crafts caught in the weather with no such second sight.

Ravenwing counted the waves, counted the minutes. A half hour passed and the hulk of Gilford Island started to recede. The waves still crashed on the Inlet Dancer's bow, and now he was moving across the channel toward the eastern tip of Turnour Island. At his pace of seven or eight knots per hour, it would be another two hours or more before he would be abreast of Parish Island, and home.

The VHF marine radio in the pilothouse crackled and, intuitively, Ravenwing set it to scan. Static filled the wheelhouse, the white noise engulfed by the sound of the storm that darkened the archipelago around Ravenwing. Then there was a voice, clear as a bell: "Any craft in the vicinity of Deep Water Cove, this is Rising Moon. I've lost my primary and am taking on water."

Ravenwing snatched up the handset and spoke over the howl of the storm. "Rising Moon, this is Inlet Dancer. I'm passing Ship Rock now, about to make the crossing. What is your position?"

"Glad to hear your voice, Inlet Dancer. I'm about one mile west of Deep Water, but I'm getting pushed toward the rocks on Deep Water Bluff."

"Do you have secondary?"

"I'm running on my little Evinrude 25, Inlet Dancer."

"Okay, hold on, I'll circle back for you."

"I'm glad to find you out here," came the static-filled response.

"I'm not," Ravenwing said over the VHF and returned the handset to the radio.

For a moment he would be side-to the brunt of the storm, so

Ravenwing determined to make that quick. He throttled up, pushing over the breaking waves, and counted. The big waves pushed a wall of water over the boat's bow onto the deck, momentarily flooding it until the water drained away through the breaks in the gunwales. He counted. A wave crested, ebbed, and Ravenwing throttled back, spun the wheel, and turned to lee, then powered back up again as the stern of the boat was engulfed in the next white breaker. The ocean flooded into the wheelhouse, washing Ravenwing to his ankles in icy water.

In ten minutes he was adjacent to Deep Water Cove, the massive bluffs that guarded the opening black through the shadowless night.

Ravenwing spoke calmly into the handset. "Rising Moon, this is Inlet Dancer. Can you see my running lights?"

There was no response. He peered at his sonar and radar, watching the rocky coast weave its white line along the left side of the screen, searching for rocks and logs in his path, scanning for the tell-tale shape of a boat. "Rising Moon, this is Inlet Dancer..."

"I see you, Archie," came the voice, clear through the radio.

"What's your location?"

"I'm right behind you."

Archie turned in the pilothouse and saw the Rising Moon's running lights emerge from the cove.

"I found some shelter to wait in. Can you come alongside me?"

"Yup," Archie said, turning again in the roiling waters. Another wave broke over his boat, and he was slammed hard into the fibreglass wall of the pilothouse. He stayed standing, his fingers locked on the wheel and the throttle.

The Rising Moon was a small pleasure craft that had seen better days. Archie cut his throttle as much as he dared so close to the shore and eased toward the smaller boat. The canopy was up, the pilot eclipsed by the windshield and the rain that drove down on the inlet like an angry fist.

"Do you want me to tow you into the cove, Rising Moon?" Archie asked into the handset.

"Can you come alongside, and we'll talk it through?"

Archie cursed. It was always the same with this guy it seemed. "Sure, but let's make it quick, as it's fixing to blow pretty good and I don't want to be out longer than need be." He put the handset down and guided the Inlet Dancer alongside the drifting Rising Moon.

When the two boats were just ten feet apart, Archie killed his motor and stepped out from the pilothouse, grabbing a gaff hook from the wall. He stepped onto the narrow deck of the boat and peered through the storm, holding onto the gunwale for support. "Jesus Christ, man, come on deck and let's get this over with," Archie cursed into the howling night.

Finally a shape emerged from beneath the canopy of the Rising Moon. The man waved and moved to the stern of his vessel, holding on for dear life. Over the clamour of the storm he yelled, "Imagine me needing help from you."

"Imagine," mocked Ravenwing. "So what exactly are you doing out on a night like this? And in that little tub?"

"I could ask you the same question," replied the man, who was using a gaff of his own to hook the stern gunwale of Ravenwing's boat. Ravenwing used his tool to reach for the Rising Moon's fore cleats. The boats rose and fell, waves surging against them, and they came together with a crash of the Inlet Dancer's sturdy, fibreglass-covered wood against the Rising Moon's aging hull.

"Your boat is going to be crushed if we stay out like this," Ravenwing yelled. "Let's hook a line and I'll tow you into the cove. We can find a place to secure this tub and we'll motor back to Lostcoast on the Dancer."

The man on the Rising Moon gave a thumbs up and manoeuvred himself to the bow of his boat on hands and knees, clinging to the craft. He tossed his bowline to Archie. Ravenwing secured the line from the Rising Moon to a cleat on the port side of the Inlet Dancer's stern. The man on the Rising Moon held on to his line with his left hand, the three-foot gaff in his right, made a knot fast on the bow cleat, then turned and clambered for the safety of the stern of his boat.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain," he barked to Ravenwing,

who had stepped back into the pilothouse to crank up the boat's powerful motors.

"You know the way," Ravenwing yelled, shaking his head.

The man, gaff still clenched in his hands, stepped onto the Inlet Dancer and grabbed the handrail on the side of the pilothouse for stability. Ravenwing engaged the throttle and the boats began to cut into the cresting waves again.

"What the hell were you doing out on a night like this?" Ravenwing asked, his voice disappearing into the storm.

"I have my reasons."

"They must have been good ones. Only a fool would venture out on a night like this."

"Well, you're out."

"I am. But everyone around here knows I'm a fool."

The two men stood side by side as the Inlet Dancer began west toward the mouth of Deep Water Cove.

"You said you took shelter. Where?"

"I just set the throttle to keep abreast of the cove and waited for you."

"I didn't see you."

"I was there."

"What happened to that nice E-Tec 115 you bought last year?"

"Don't know. Think I took on too much water. Washed it out. Maybe water in the fuel line. I couldn't get that thing going."

Ravenwing looked at the man, who looked straight ahead, his face hidden by the bill of his cap, his body snug in an orange float coat.

"But you could use the 25 to keep abreast of this storm?"

"You're not the only one in this country who can pilot a boat, Archie."

"Who's towing who?" Ravenwing spat. Then he sighed and said, "Okay, let's see if we can't find a place to leave this tub for the night and make for home." He looked at his sonar for the depth of the water beneath him, and then at his radar to search the shore for a safe harbour.

"You're still pissed at me," the man said through the pelting rain.

"You done anything that would change my mind otherwise?"

"That's the thing with you, Archie. You hold everybody to such a high standard, no one can ever live up to your expectations."

"That isn't true and you know it. But I do expect some common sense. And what you've done is beyond the pale. You know it, so don't play dumb with me. I know you got plenty of brains in that thick head of yours. You've got a responsibility."

"You can be a real jackass, Archie."

"Don't I know it. But at least I know when I've done something wrong. I aim to fix it. You? I just never figured this sort of thing from you. But then I should have guessed this was coming."

The man turned to regard Archie Ravenwing, who was watching his sonar, the VHF still crackling. He said, "Don't you think that your people deserve better? Don't you think that I deserve better?"

"Of course we do. Of course you do!" Archie's voice was coarse over the din. "So act that way. Act like you deserve better. Stop waiting around for someone to hand you things. Go out and get what you want."

The man stepped back a few feet from Archie. "I'm goin' to."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say it..."

But Archie didn't finish the sentence. The gaff hook caught him in the side of his head, just above the ear, behind the softness of the temple. The blow made no sound over the clamour of the storm. The curved hook pierced Ravenwing's skull and he fell sideways and down, hard, onto the pilothouse floor. There he lay as the water washed into the pilothouse. In the darkness, the deep pool of blood from where the gaff pierced Ravenwing's skull was indiscernible from the dark water that sluiced across the deck of the Inlet Dancer.

The assailant dropped the gaff on top of the body and took control of the fishing boat. He pulled back on the throttle, easing the boat's speed, and turned off its running lights so it could not be seen. He set the wheel to veer the boat into the inlet, toward open water. He flipped open the seat top in the pilothouse and found what he was looking for — a short, stout bungee cord. He used it to secure the wheel of the boat so that it maintained its current course. There was no time to set the boat's autopilot.

The killer dropped to one knee and looked at the body of Archie Ravenwing on the deck of the boat. His eyes open, lifeless. He then dragged Ravenwing from the pilothouse onto the narrow aft deck, pulling him to the lee side gunwales and heaving him into the ocean. He threw the gaff hook overboard.

The man took hold of the rope that connected the Inlet Dancer to the Rising Moon and reeled in the smaller craft. When the pleasure boat was close enough, he tied a clove hitch in the rope and fastened it to the aft cleat. Then he lowered himself onto the bow of his own craft, holding on to the boat's safety rail. He turned and tried to untie the ropes from the cleat on the stern of the Inlet Dancer. His clove hitch came loose, but the second knot wouldn't come free with the weight of both boats on it.

He slid on his belly down the length of the bow of the Rising Moon and scrambled under the canopy. Moments later he emerged with a hatchet in his right hand and felt his way back toward the bow. As he reached the tip of his boat, he pulled again so that the two boats were bow to stern, and began to chop where Archie had made the rope fast around a metal cleat. A giant wave broke over the bow of the Inlet Dancer and then the Rising Moon, sending a wall of white foam and black ocean into the man's face, washing him down the slick nose of his boat. He managed to grab the safety rail with his left hand, his right hand still clinging to the hatchet. The water streamed from the bow of the pleasure craft, pushing the man's legs over the port side as he scrambled to hold on to the boat. Eyes wild with panic, he heaved himself back on to the bow and slid back to the fore of the craft. He pulled the boats together again, raised his right hand, and hacked at the rope on the stern cleat — once, twice, three times — and then he was free. He threw the remnant tatters of the rope into the ocean and slid back to the cockpit, under the canopy. Then he fired up the boat's 115 outboard motor, switched on the craft's running lights, and made for home.

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Archie sipped his coffee, thinking about this cycle of existence. He pushed back the sadness that approached whenever he thought this way. There was some question as to whether there would be enough wild salmon in this year's run to allow for a commercial fishery. Talk in Victoria, the provincial capital, and among senior federal officials responsible for the fishery, suggested that a complete ban might be necessary to allow decimated salmon runs to recover.

The people of the Lostcoast band had been fishing there for thousands of years, but they had never contributed to the decimation of salmon the way the modern industrial fishery had. Now Archie Ravenwing's people would pay the price incurred by the greed and short-sightedness of the commercial fishing industry

and its proponents in government. In the years since British Columbia's current Liberal government had lifted the moratorium on new salmon farms in the province, there had been an explosion of interest in new aquaculture developments along BC's knotted west coast. In the Broughton Archipelago, where Archie Ravenwing fished and lived, there were nearly thirty salmon farms in operation. Many of these open-net farms were located on the migration routes of native wild salmon. And though industry advocates argued that the two were unrelated, along with the development of salmon farms came a corresponding decline in the number of wild salmon. Archie knew that, in a recent count, only one hundred and fifty thousand wild salmon returned to the Broughton, down from the historical three and a half million. In 2002 the wild pink salmon stock collapsed, with only five percent of the native wild fish returning to spawn. Archie knew the numbers by heart.

For Ravenwing, it was as if part of his own body, his own soul, had vanished. The part of his heart that swam through the waters of Tribune Channel and up the mouth of Knight Inlet was gone, lost like the spirit of the once-great salmon.

Archie tried to keep his darkening sadness at bay. How could it have come to this? he wondered. After a thousand years of tradition, his family wouldn't be allowed to fish their ancestral waters? He turned his face toward the sky. A throaty call greeted him, and he opened his eyes to see a jet-black shape cruise overhead. He heard the husky chortle again. Archie raised a hand in greeting. "Good morning, Grandpa," he said quietly, waving at the raven, a smile creasing his face. "U'melth, Raven, who brought us the moon, fire, salmon, sun, and the tides," he recited. "Trickster, grandfather of a thousand pranks. Okay! I'll lighten up!" He drained his mug and slung the dregs into the water. "Time to get to work," he added.

Archie rose, stretched out the stiffness that had accumulated in his joints, and walked back to the wheelhouse, where he opened a large bin and removed the tools he would need for his morning work. He put the long, flexible net together on its pole and readied half a dozen plastic sample jars. These he put on the

fish box on the deck of the boat. Without ceremony he began his sampling, drawing forth the tiny salmon fry to be funnelled into the jars. So few, so few. Ravenwing shook his head as he dipped again into the waters.

By noon he had filled the jars with juvenile salmon, whose tiny, finger-sized bodies were being consumed by sea lice. This was what Archie Ravenwing was seeking — irrefutable evidence that the wild salmon stocks of Knight Inlet and the Broughton Archipelago were being parasitized by sea lice.

Archie held a jar up to the light and counted the lice clinging to the salmon. On one smolt he counted four parasites from two different species. Adults might succumb when they had six or seven sea lice on their fins, gills, or skin. Smolts like those in Archie's sampling jars would die with only a few sea lice feeding on them. Archie regarded his unfortunate catch. "Not doing so good, are you, little friends?" He kept finding more and more smolts with more and more sea lice on them, and he had yet to reach his day's destination: Jeopardy Rock. There he expected to find the epicentre of sea lice contamination.

"Not so good..." he repeated, his voice trailing off.

Ravenwing knew that sea lice were a natural parasite that preyed on wild salmon along British Columbia's wild coast and elsewhere across North America. But in the last ten years there had been a shocking rise in the number of lice infesting wild salmon. Where before the numbers had been low, and very few salmon actually died as a result of playing host to the lice, now entire runs of wild pink and other salmon were being devastated by them. Despite protests from the salmon farming industry, irrefutable evidence pointed to the rash of farmed Atlantic salmon as the source of the outbreak. The Atlantic salmon could survive with many more sea lice than the native pink, chum, and coho.

Archie took a black felt pen from his shirt pocket and labelled the jars. He would return these to Dr. Cassandra Petrel for her study.

Archie flexed his big hands and looked at the sky. "Starting to crowd in," he said aloud to nobody in particular. "Fixing to churn up pretty good, I think."

He knew he should head back down the inlet toward Port Lostcoast before the storm set upon him, but he had one more thing to do that day. Something was eating Archie Ravenwing, and he had to set it straight. So instead of turning the Inlet Dancer for home, he powered across the inlet toward the mouth of Tribune Channel, skipping the heavy boat across the small waves already being formed by the wind.

■ Now the rain fell in torrents, churning the waves like knives thrust into the sea. The Inlet Dancer bounced and rocked, nose into the waves, powering past the fish farms at Doctor Islets and into the main body of Knight Inlet, making for home. Archie stood in the pilothouse near the stern of the boat, one hand locked on the wheel, the other clenching the throttle. This blow was bigger than he had foreseen and, though he was prepared to moor and wait out the storm, this stretch of water had few safe harbours.

After what he had seen at Jeopardy Rock, a new urgency filled Archie Ravenwing and made him push for home against what seemed prudent for the weather.

A wave crashed over the bow of the Inlet Dancer, and the boat dipped into the trough behind it, rising up the side of another stack of water. The swells now topped fifteen feet and came in irregular patterns, every fourth, fifth, or sixth wave taller than the rest, coming on faster than the others. Ravenwing firmly held the wheel, keeping the boat head-on to the storm, not wanting the narrow vessel to get punched side-to by one of the rogue waves.

He had suspected for some time that what was happening at Jeopardy Rock was more than just simple salmon farming. He had suspected for some time that the company was doing more than just breeding Atlantic salmon. Now he was certain. He would make his calls when he reached Port Lostcoast and begin to set the record straight. He would begin to make amends. Did Archie Ravenwing believe in redemption? He believed in justice, even if his own actions hadn't always seemed just. He believed that a man's motivation sometimes propelled behaviour that appeared inconsistent with his espoused values. But we are complex creatures, reasoned Ravenwing.

Another wave rocked the Inlet Dancer, and Archie pitched forward. He patted the wheel and remembered that she had survived worse.

It was growing dark. The day was slipping from the sky, and the clouds pressed down so low that the tops of the trees on mighty Gilford Island were hardly visible. Ravenwing switched on his running lights — not so he could see, but so he could be seen. Sonar and radar would guide him down the inlet, through the darkness and the storm, but he worried about small pleasure crafts caught in the weather with no such second sight.

Ravenwing counted the waves, counted the minutes. A half hour passed and the hulk of Gilford Island started to recede. The waves still crashed on the Inlet Dancer's bow, and now he was moving across the channel toward the eastern tip of Turnour Island. At his pace of seven or eight knots per hour, it would be another two hours or more before he would be abreast of Parish Island, and home.

The VHF marine radio in the pilothouse crackled and, intuitively, Ravenwing set it to scan. Static filled the wheelhouse, the white noise engulfed by the sound of the storm that darkened the archipelago around Ravenwing. Then there was a voice, clear as a bell: "Any craft in the vicinity of Deep Water Cove, this is Rising Moon. I've lost my primary and am taking on water."

Ravenwing snatched up the handset and spoke over the howl of the storm. "Rising Moon, this is Inlet Dancer. I'm passing Ship Rock now, about to make the crossing. What is your position?"

"Glad to hear your voice, Inlet Dancer. I'm about one mile west of Deep Water, but I'm getting pushed toward the rocks on Deep Water Bluff."

"Do you have secondary?"

"I'm running on my little Evinrude 25, Inlet Dancer."

"Okay, hold on, I'll circle back for you."

"I'm glad to find you out here," came the static-filled response.

"I'm not," Ravenwing said over the VHF and returned the handset to the radio.

For a moment he would be side-to the brunt of the storm, so

Ravenwing determined to make that quick. He throttled up, pushing over the breaking waves, and counted. The big waves pushed a wall of water over the boat's bow onto the deck, momentarily flooding it until the water drained away through the breaks in the gunwales. He counted. A wave crested, ebbed, and Ravenwing throttled back, spun the wheel, and turned to lee, then powered back up again as the stern of the boat was engulfed in the next white breaker. The ocean flooded into the wheelhouse, washing Ravenwing to his ankles in icy water.

In ten minutes he was adjacent to Deep Water Cove, the massive bluffs that guarded the opening black through the shadowless night.

Ravenwing spoke calmly into the handset. "Rising Moon, this is Inlet Dancer. Can you see my running lights?"

There was no response. He peered at his sonar and radar, watching the rocky coast weave its white line along the left side of the screen, searching for rocks and logs in his path, scanning for the tell-tale shape of a boat. "Rising Moon, this is Inlet Dancer..."

"I see you, Archie," came the voice, clear through the radio.

"What's your location?"

"I'm right behind you."

Archie turned in the pilothouse and saw the Rising Moon's running lights emerge from the cove.

"I found some shelter to wait in. Can you come alongside me?"

"Yup," Archie said, turning again in the roiling waters. Another wave broke over his boat, and he was slammed hard into the fibreglass wall of the pilothouse. He stayed standing, his fingers locked on the wheel and the throttle.

The Rising Moon was a small pleasure craft that had seen better days. Archie cut his throttle as much as he dared so close to the shore and eased toward the smaller boat. The canopy was up, the pilot eclipsed by the windshield and the rain that drove down on the inlet like an angry fist.

"Do you want me to tow you into the cove, Rising Moon?" Archie asked into the handset.

"Can you come alongside, and we'll talk it through?"

Archie cursed. It was always the same with this guy it seemed. "Sure, but let's make it quick, as it's fixing to blow pretty good and I don't want to be out longer than need be." He put the handset down and guided the Inlet Dancer alongside the drifting Rising Moon.

When the two boats were just ten feet apart, Archie killed his motor and stepped out from the pilothouse, grabbing a gaff hook from the wall. He stepped onto the narrow deck of the boat and peered through the storm, holding onto the gunwale for support. "Jesus Christ, man, come on deck and let's get this over with," Archie cursed into the howling night.

Finally a shape emerged from beneath the canopy of the Rising Moon. The man waved and moved to the stern of his vessel, holding on for dear life. Over the clamour of the storm he yelled, "Imagine me needing help from you."

"Imagine," mocked Ravenwing. "So what exactly are you doing out on a night like this? And in that little tub?"

"I could ask you the same question," replied the man, who was using a gaff of his own to hook the stern gunwale of Ravenwing's boat. Ravenwing used his tool to reach for the Rising Moon's fore cleats. The boats rose and fell, waves surging against them, and they came together with a crash of the Inlet Dancer's sturdy, fibreglass-covered wood against the Rising Moon's aging hull.

"Your boat is going to be crushed if we stay out like this," Ravenwing yelled. "Let's hook a line and I'll tow you into the cove. We can find a place to secure this tub and we'll motor back to Lostcoast on the Dancer."

The man on the Rising Moon gave a thumbs up and manoeuvred himself to the bow of his boat on hands and knees, clinging to the craft. He tossed his bowline to Archie. Ravenwing secured the line from the Rising Moon to a cleat on the port side of the Inlet Dancer's stern. The man on the Rising Moon held on to his line with his left hand, the three-foot gaff in his right, made a knot fast on the bow cleat, then turned and clambered for the safety of the stern of his boat.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain," he barked to Ravenwing,

who had stepped back into the pilothouse to crank up the boat's powerful motors.

"You know the way," Ravenwing yelled, shaking his head.

The man, gaff still clenched in his hands, stepped onto the Inlet Dancer and grabbed the handrail on the side of the pilothouse for stability. Ravenwing engaged the throttle and the boats began to cut into the cresting waves again.

"What the hell were you doing out on a night like this?" Ravenwing asked, his voice disappearing into the storm.

"I have my reasons."

"They must have been good ones. Only a fool would venture out on a night like this."

"Well, you're out."

"I am. But everyone around here knows I'm a fool."

The two men stood side by side as the Inlet Dancer began west toward the mouth of Deep Water Cove.

"You said you took shelter. Where?"

"I just set the throttle to keep abreast of the cove and waited for you."

"I didn't see you."

"I was there."

"What happened to that nice E-Tec 115 you bought last year?"

"Don't know. Think I took on too much water. Washed it out. Maybe water in the fuel line. I couldn't get that thing going."

Ravenwing looked at the man, who looked straight ahead, his face hidden by the bill of his cap, his body snug in an orange float coat.

"But you could use the 25 to keep abreast of this storm?"

"You're not the only one in this country who can pilot a boat, Archie."

"Who's towing who?" Ravenwing spat. Then he sighed and said, "Okay, let's see if we can't find a place to leave this tub for the night and make for home." He looked at his sonar for the depth of the water beneath him, and then at his radar to search the shore for a safe harbour.

"You're still pissed at me," the man said through the pelting rain.

"You done anything that would change my mind otherwise?"

"That's the thing with you, Archie. You hold everybody to such a high standard, no one can ever live up to your expectations."

"That isn't true and you know it. But I do expect some common sense. And what you've done is beyond the pale. You know it, so don't play dumb with me. I know you got plenty of brains in that thick head of yours. You've got a responsibility."

"You can be a real jackass, Archie."

"Don't I know it. But at least I know when I've done something wrong. I aim to fix it. You? I just never figured this sort of thing from you. But then I should have guessed this was coming."

The man turned to regard Archie Ravenwing, who was watching his sonar, the VHF still crackling. He said, "Don't you think that your people deserve better? Don't you think that I deserve better?"

"Of course we do. Of course you do!" Archie's voice was coarse over the din. "So act that way. Act like you deserve better. Stop waiting around for someone to hand you things. Go out and get what you want."

The man stepped back a few feet from Archie. "I'm goin' to."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say it..."

But Archie didn't finish the sentence. The gaff hook caught him in the side of his head, just above the ear, behind the softness of the temple. The blow made no sound over the clamour of the storm. The curved hook pierced Ravenwing's skull and he fell sideways and down, hard, onto the pilothouse floor. There he lay as the water washed into the pilothouse. In the darkness, the deep pool of blood from where the gaff pierced Ravenwing's skull was indiscernible from the dark water that sluiced across the deck of the Inlet Dancer.

The assailant dropped the gaff on top of the body and took control of the fishing boat. He pulled back on the throttle, easing the boat's speed, and turned off its running lights so it could not be seen. He set the wheel to veer the boat into the inlet, toward open water. He flipped open the seat top in the pilothouse and found what he was looking for — a short, stout bungee cord. He used it to secure the wheel of the boat so that it maintained its current course. There was no time to set the boat's autopilot.

The killer dropped to one knee and looked at the body of Archie Ravenwing on the deck of the boat. His eyes open, lifeless. He then dragged Ravenwing from the pilothouse onto the narrow aft deck, pulling him to the lee side gunwales and heaving him into the ocean. He threw the gaff hook overboard.

The man took hold of the rope that connected the Inlet Dancer to the Rising Moon and reeled in the smaller craft. When the pleasure boat was close enough, he tied a clove hitch in the rope and fastened it to the aft cleat. Then he lowered himself onto the bow of his own craft, holding on to the boat's safety rail. He turned and tried to untie the ropes from the cleat on the stern of the Inlet Dancer. His clove hitch came loose, but the second knot wouldn't come free with the weight of both boats on it.

He slid on his belly down the length of the bow of the Rising Moon and scrambled under the canopy. Moments later he emerged with a hatchet in his right hand and felt his way back toward the bow. As he reached the tip of his boat, he pulled again so that the two boats were bow to stern, and began to chop where Archie had made the rope fast around a metal cleat. A giant wave broke over the bow of the Inlet Dancer and then the Rising Moon, sending a wall of white foam and black ocean into the man's face, washing him down the slick nose of his boat. He managed to grab the safety rail with his left hand, his right hand still clinging to the hatchet. The water streamed from the bow of the pleasure craft, pushing the man's legs over the port side as he scrambled to hold on to the boat. Eyes wild with panic, he heaved himself back on to the bow and slid back to the fore of the craft. He pulled the boats together again, raised his right hand, and hacked at the rope on the stern cleat — once, twice, three times — and then he was free. He threw the remnant tatters of the rope into the ocean and slid back to the cockpit, under the canopy. Then he fired up the boat's 115 outboard motor, switched on the craft's running lights, and made for home.

THE DARKENING ARCHIPELAGO

Stephen Legault on the evolution of a series

Back to the beginning

The Cole Blackwater mysteries were conceived during a rain-soaked trip to Costa Rica in the fall of 2003. Before the metaphorical ink for the plot of the first book had dried, I began to think about what other kinds of trouble Cole might find himself in.

Cole Blackwater is, in the words of his drinking buddy, Dusty Stevens, an environmental crusader — a champion of lost causes. But the greatest compliment anybody gave me after *The Cardinal Divide* was released was that the environmental message was “subtle.” Because, first and foremost for me when writing the Cole Blackwater series is the plot. If the book is to be just a thinly disguised polemic on environmental and social justice issues, then I may as well just write essays. That said, the Cole Blackwater mysteries are an avenue for bringing important issues facing the future of our society, and our planet, to a new audience. As I continue to develop this series, I find no shortage of subjects to choose from.

In 2003, when I first pieced together *The Cardinal Divide*, I was working for a small national conservation organization called Wildcanada.net. One of the campaigns we championed was called “Farmed and Dangerous.” On behalf of the Living Oceans Society we helped people take action to ensure a future for wild salmon and stop massive new salmon farming operations from being developed along the BC coast. I began to wonder what the illustrious/altruistic Cole Blackwater might have to say about salmon farming, and how he could get involved in the effort to rid the province’s coastal waters of these death traps for wild salmon.

Before I even had a plot, I knew the title: *The Darkening Archipelago*. The archipelago in question is the Broughton — ground zero for the explosive growth of salmon farming in BC. From the very beginning, I knew that this book would relate an ominous story indeed. *The Darkening Archipelago* maps out a

race against time and overwhelming odds to keep both human souls and wild ecosystems from falling into unending darkness. But it is also a story about redemption. The three protagonists in the story — Cole, Nancy, and Archie Ravenwing — all contemplate their belief at some point in the power of redemption. None of them reach any conclusions.

That is the “what” of the story process. Here is the “how”: during the summer of 2006 I received the gift of time from my friend Joel Solomon. He helped me spend a week at the Hollyhock Retreat Centre on Cortes Island, away from ringing phones and petty distractions, like the need to feed myself. There I sequestered myself in the tiny upstairs library. On massive sheets of butcher paper I drew out a twenty foot long storyboard for *The Darkening Archipelago*. In the afternoons I would sit on the beach and review what I had written, and work on character development and narrative. The whole story took shape before my eyes. The three converging plot lines featuring Cole, Archie and Nancy formed separate chapter “bubbles” which, two thirds of the way through the book, coalesced into one narrative arc.

Because of this preparation, I was able to sit down and pen the first draft of *The Darkening Archipelago* in January and February of 2007. During a paroxysmal period of scribbling I wrote 310 pages and 90,000 words in 28 days. As winter slowly ebbed on the “wet coast,” I took advantage of the pivot towards spring and the burst of energy it brought, and sometimes rose as early as 4 AM to write.

There are many factors that contribute to such voluminous outbursts. It would be another six months before I heard from NeWest Press that the first book in the series, *The Cardinal Divide*, would be published. The creation of a second book in a series that was yet to have its first volume accepted for publication was an act of pure faith.

But having just received some excellent feedback on *The Cardinal Divide* from Victoria bookseller Frances Thorsen, I spent the first couple of weeks of the new year editing for the eighth or ninth time the entire manuscript. That got me pretty excited about the

characters — Cole and Nancy in particular — and I wanted to see what might happen to them in the second book of the series.

While the first draft of *The Darkening Archipelago* took shape very quickly, it took two more years to finish it. The version I finally submitted to NeWest for publication was draft number nine or ten — I lost track. But every single time I sat down to work on the manuscript was a pure joy.

From writing procedures to police procedurals

One of the highlights of writing *The Darkening Archipelago* came towards the end of the process. I met with Corporal Darren A. Lagan, Strategic Communications Officer for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Island District. I wanted to learn more about police procedure to provide additional realism to the investigation of the disappearance of Archie Ravenwing.

During our discussions Corporal Lagan would say things like, “Well, Cole would likely have to do this...” and I found myself thinking, wow, he’s referring to a character in one of my books as if he were real! And while I have taken some liberties with those police procedures, it was a great experience, and I think it makes *The Darkening Archipelago* a more credible novel. My thanks go out to Corporal Lagan for his generous assistance. I take full responsibility for any errors and divergence from actual procedure in the book.

Mysteries in multiples

As I mentioned above, I’d always imagined the *Blackwater* books as a series. Once I had settled on the theme for the second one — salmon farming — and worked through the who dunnit aspect of the plot, I spent some time considering the broader narrative arc of the books. I began to reflect on the various sub-plot possibilities for three novels, because as I was jotting down the initial notes for *The Darkening Archipelago*, I was also considering a third book called *The Lucky Strike Manifesto*.

Mystery novels should come in threes. One book is just long

enough to resolve a murder mystery, but it takes three to really explore the intricacies of a character's neurosis. I'm not saying that Cole Blackwater is doomed at the end of *The Lucky Strike Manifesto*, but there should be some resolution to the broader themes in the novel in order to make the series satisfying. I'm just not promising what shape Cole will be in after that resolution.

That Cole Blackwater had a less than cheery relationship with his father was made clear in *The Cardinal Divide*. In the epilogue of that book, I tried to make it apparent, without being overtly explicit, that Cole was somehow entangled in his father's violent death. My intent was to leave the reader guessing as to the cause of Henry Blackwater's death, and what role Cole played in it.

In *The Darkening Archipelago*, Cole's unfortunate part in this tragic event becomes clear, and with it we begin to glimpse the depth to which Cole has been damaged. His violence, his rage, his myopic drive to prove himself to the world and to those around him, start to make sense in the face of his abusive relationship with his father.

There are other elements to the narrative arc of the Blackwater series. Cole's relationship with the Edmonton Journal reporter Nancy Webber is crucial to the development of his character. The mistakes he made that lead to their mutual exodus from Ottawa, and the tentative steps they took in *The Cardinal Divide* to rebuild the trust between them, nearly come undone in *The Darkening Archipelago*.

These sub-plots, of course, become intertwined as Nancy pursues her insatiable curiosity about Cole's past and begins to openly ask, "did Cole Blackwater kill his father?" If you take Cole Blackwater for his word, *The Darkening Archipelago* answers this question. However, two significant elements of the plot remain to be resolved: first, how will Cole deal with the reawakened trauma born from reliving the final moments of his father's angry life, and second, will Nancy's role in rehashing that suffering impact their relationship? *The Lucky Strike Manifesto*, in addition to introducing readers to an antagonist that frightens even me, will address these loose story threads.

A critical point in history: the end of wild salmon

This book has been published at the best and worst possible time.

The Darkening Archipelago arrives in the spring of 2010 — at a critical juncture for the wild salmon of British Columbia. In the fall of 2009, a judicial inquiry was called into one of the worst disasters in fisheries management in Canada, if not the world. The vast schools of sockeye salmon that return annually to BC's Fraser River have disappeared. Of the projected 10,000,000 fish that were expected to swim up the Fraser River in 2009, only 600,000 returned. That's six percent.

As the Fraser sockeye disappear, so also do hundreds of other salmon populations from Alaska to California. After more than a decade of the salmon's decimation, the Canadian federal government, charged with protecting this international miracle of life, has finally acted on their behalf.

The inquiry will take two years. In that time, many more salmon runs could vanish.

As a reader, what can you do? Get involved. Sign a petition. Send a letter to or call your Member of Parliament. Talk about this with friends. Attend the hearings. Follow up. Don't take no for an answer. As my friend and mentor Brock Evans of the US Endangered Species Coalition says, only "constant pressure, constantly applied" will ensure that the wild creatures we love, and the wild places they need to survive, will be protected.

Thank you for reading this book, and thanks also for anything you can do to protect wild salmon and the wild oceans that are needed for them to survive.

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Stephen Legault has been a social and political activist for twenty years. In July 2005 he launched Highwater Mark Strategy and Communications, an environmental consulting company that advises social-profit companies and ethically driven businesses on their business practices. His first book, *Carry Tiger to Mountain: The Tao of Activism and Leadership*, was published in April 2006. *The Cardinal Divide*, Legault's first Cole Blackwater mystery, was released in October 2008. For more information, visit www.coleblackwater.com.

Legault is the adoring father of two boys, Rio Bergen and Silas Morgen, and loving husband to wife Jenn. They live in Victoria, BC.