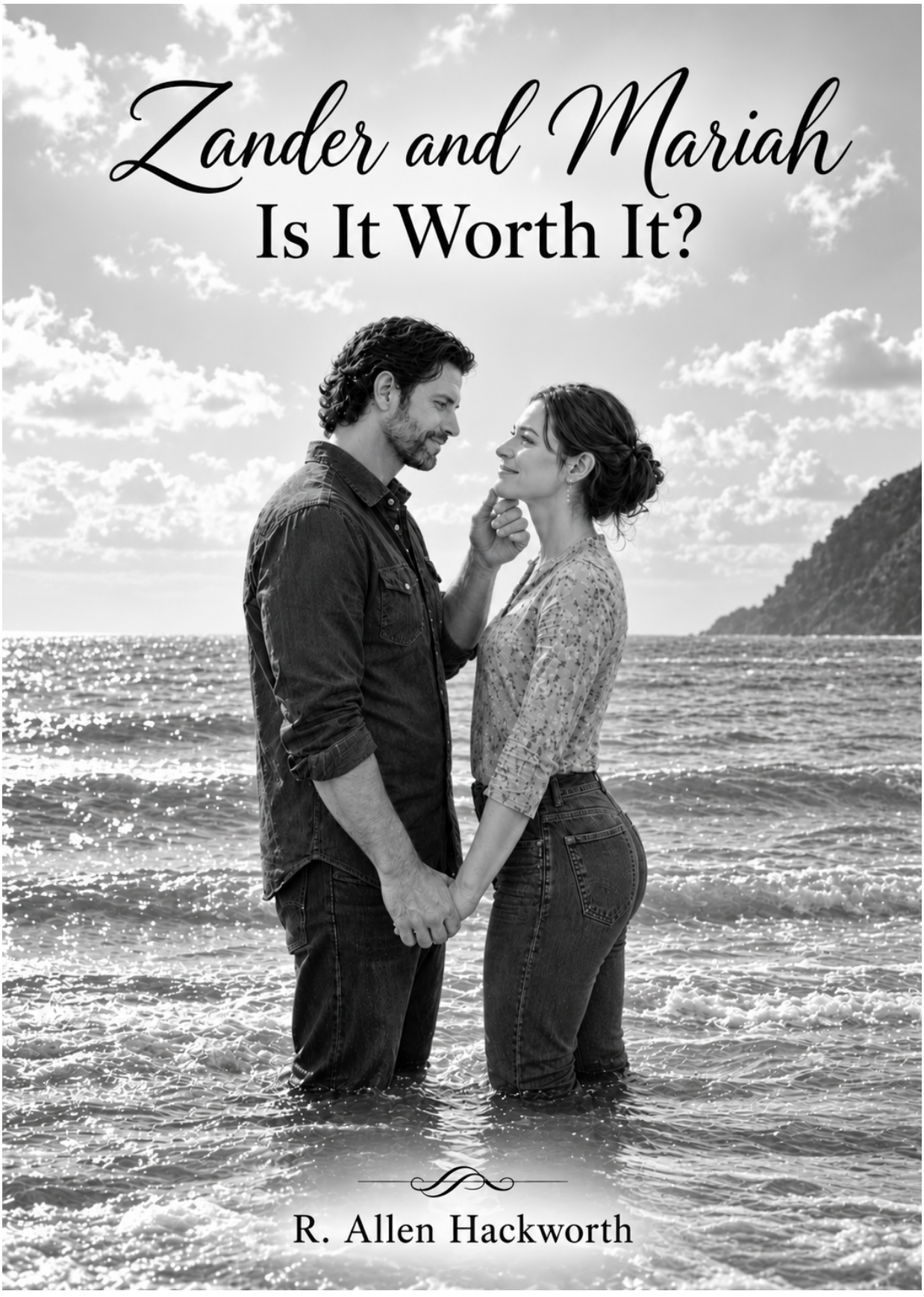

Zander and Mariah
Is It Worth It?
R. Allen Hackworth

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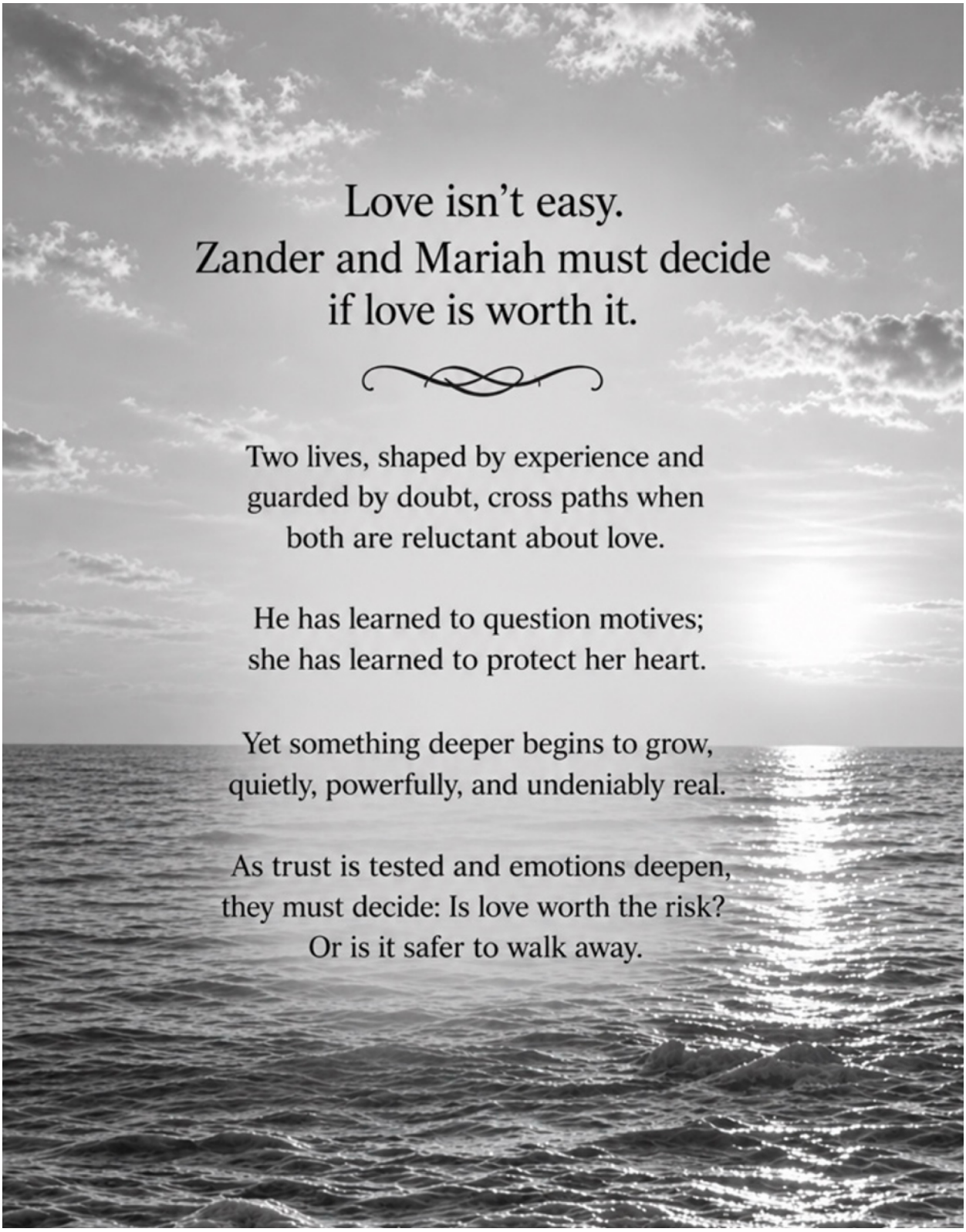
What does it mean to live freely? And what happens when the life we have chosen begins to compete with the person we have come to love?

Zander Martineau has the means to go almost anywhere, but his ambitions have little to do with money. Since childhood, he has dreamed of the sea and the adventure of sailing. As an adult, he builds the *Northern Star*, a ship inspired by vessels of centuries past, and makes exploration his way of life.

Mariah, a dedicated New York attorney, has built a different kind of independence. She values her work, her responsibilities, and the stability she has earned. When the two meet, their attraction brings together people who understand freedom in very different ways.

Their relationship asks something of them both. As voyages, distance, unexpected events, and difficult choices test their trust, Zander and Mariah must discover whether love requires surrendering their dreams—or finding a new way to share them.

Zander and Mariah: Is It Worth It? is a story about commitment, family, and the possibility that the greatest adventure may be the life two people choose together.


Love isn't easy.
Zander and Mariah must decide
if love is worth it.
Two lives, shaped by experience and
guarded by doubt, cross paths when
both are reluctant about love.
He has learned to question motives;
she has learned to protect her heart.
Yet something deeper begins to grow,
quietly, powerfully, and undeniably real.
As trust is tested and emotions deepen,
they must decide: Is love worth the risk?
Or is it safer to walk away.

Chapter 1 — Wander Lust Is Born



As a child, Zander knew what he wanted to be when he grew up. He wanted to be a pirate. Sitting on his bed, he was surrounded by stuffed pirates. He watched pirate films with wide attention and was drawn to the ships, the oceans, the freedom with endless possibilities. But he never admired the pirate's violence. "When I am a pirate," he once told his dad, "I'll not hurt anyone."

His father smiled. "Then you wouldn't be much of a pirate."

Zander shook his head firmly. "No Daddy, I will be a better pirate." That idea stayed with Zander. He did not want to be lawless and mean.

As Zander grew up, he was surrounded by affluence. Yet he didn't think about wealth. He thought his life was normal. Wealth was invisible to him. It was simply his family's way of life.

Years passed and eventually Zander enrolled in college. He chose to major in World Geography. His roommate and family friend was Pete Fisher. Pete was majoring in Data Science. One time these students were sitting in a quiet corner of the campus library when Pete closed his laptop and leaned back in his chair. "Do you realize how rare we are?" he asked.

Zander looked up. "In what sense?"

Pete gave a small laugh. "In every sense that matters financially. Out of over three hundred million people in the U.S., there are roughly only one thousand billionaires." Zander listened, but didn't react.

"That means," Pete continued, "being born into our kind of wealth is almost impossible. You're more likely to be struck by lightning." Zander considered that. Not with excitement or pride, he pondered Pete's words. "That doesn't change anything," he finally said.

Pete raised an eyebrow. "It changes everything."

Zander shook his head. "No. It just means I have options."

Pete leaned forward. "Exactly. And we're wasting them here at college."

Zander smiled slightly. "You call this wasting?"

"I call it sitting still," Pete said. "We don't need this path. We don't need to follow anyone's structure. We can build something different."

That conversation stayed with Zander for a long time after the semester ended. In spite of Pete's points about money and the uses of one's time, Zander completed his degree in World Geography. That major fit his plans for exploring the world. While in college and after college, Zander spent many hours studying navigation, sailing techniques, and maritime history.

He trained. He earned his captain’s license, and he was prepared to be an honest, law-abiding pirate.

As it turned out, Pete Fisher finished his Data Science degree. But Pete also spent a lot of time dating. That behavior continued after Pete graduated.

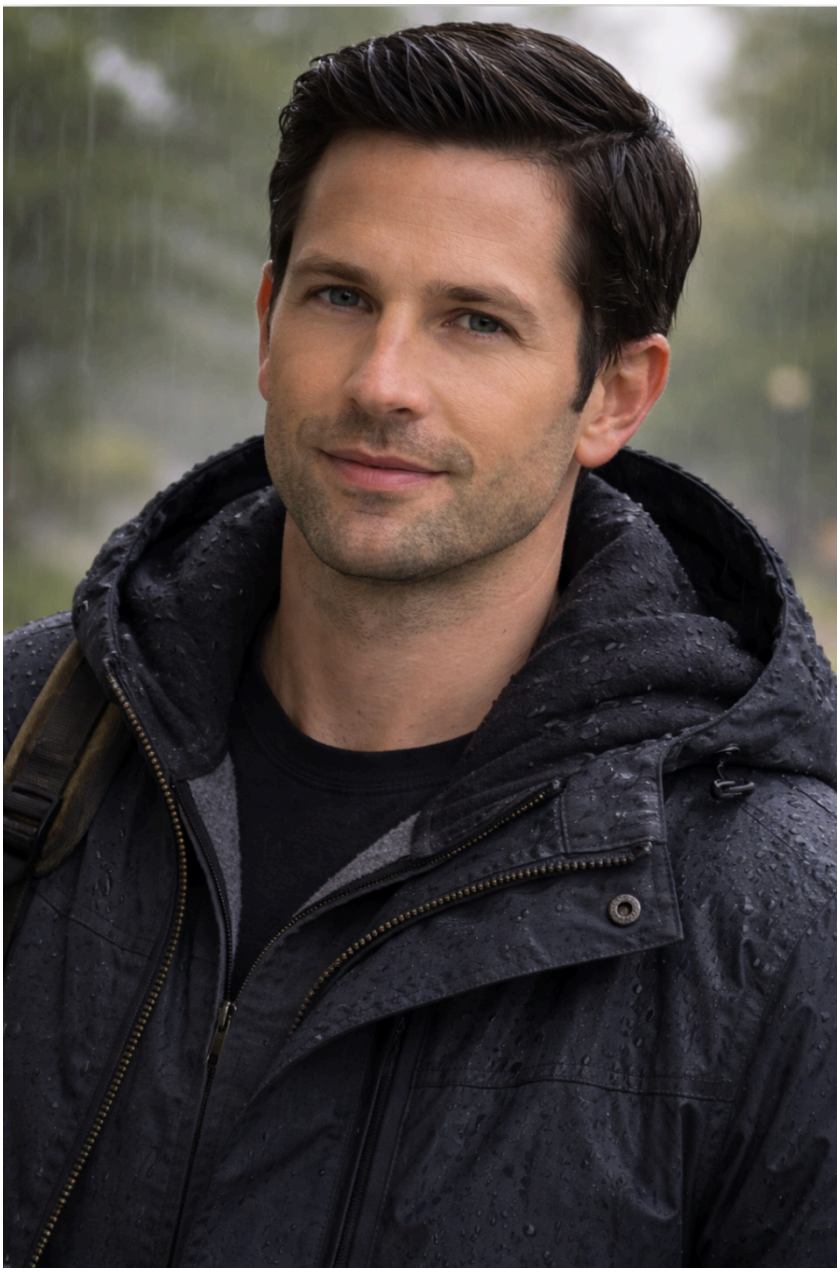


Figure 1 Pete Fisher



Figure 2 Zander finished college and continued to move toward his goal: to live like a pirate.

In contrast to Pete's active dating, Zander seldom dated, mostly because he focused on preparations for exploring the world using a sailing ship. And he did not think a woman would want a life with a man who was always away, always exploring the world.

Consequently, dating for Zander was a low priority. After college, when Zander was 23 years old, he hired a ship-building company to construct a ship based on designs of ships from the 1700s, minus the cannons.

On Zander's ship there would be discipline, skills, and challenges that came with navigating open waters. Finally, after four years of construction, the Northern Star was christened.

Zander picked up his phone and texted Pete. "Hey Dude. I have my ship. Come tomorrow. Hike up the walkway to the main deck. Let me know. New York Harbor. Pier 49."

Pete sent a text. "See you tomorrow, Captain. Coming at 11:00 a.m."

Zander rented pier space which included a full hookup: services for water, sewer, and electricity. For Zander, the Northern Star would become a home away from home.



Figure 3 The ship amazed Pete Fisher. Great planning, beauty, and construction showed.

After Zander and Pete inspected the ship, they moved to the galley where Zander made fresh beef sandwiches with mustard, sliced pickles, and onions. As they drank their cold drinks, Zander said, “I want you to come with me on our maiden voyage down to Miami and back. I’ve hired a crew of six men. I have been training these men daily for the last three weeks at my house. We leave one week from today.”

Pete said, “Whoa, just like that, you think you can sail this ship?”

“Well, I am a licensed captain. Getting that legal clearance took many hours and days of study, training, and testing.”

“But how do you get this huge ship out of the harbor without bumping into something?”

Zander said, “We have a diesel engine and a gearbox which moves us forward or backward. Plus, our large rudder allows us to turn left or right. We’ll use the engine to clear the harbor. Once in open water, we’ll unfurl the sails and ride the waves with the winds. The weather predictions are favorable, and we’ll be gone for at least a month.”

Pete seemed interested. Zander continued, “Before you answer, I’ll tell you about two challenging conditions that can arise: 1. storms that demand fast, disciplined work for focused sail adjustments, and 2. calm waters that test one’s patience.”

Pete said, “Thanks for inviting me. My answer is yes. Why not? Being here caused me to remember when we were roommates. I told you then that we were lucky dudes to be part of billionaire families? On that occasion, I said we should drop out of school and start an adventure. Well, now I’m glad we both finished college, and now, here comes the adventure. I’m glad you can follow your dreams. I know it’s a new subject, but tell me, how did you and your family acquire so much wealth.”

Zander pondered quietly, and then said, “Our family’s wealth was first accumulated in Texas from Grandpa’s ownership of land and oil wells. Grandpa’s wealth started growing, and it never stopped. His wealth and businesses were passed on to my father, and Dad’s wealth and investments have been passed on to me. Plus, I am the only child in my family. I got it all. By the way Pete, my disclosures to you regarding my wealth are for your ears only. And I mean it.”

Dusk hovered, then melted into darkness, and both Zander and Pete agreed it was time to call it a day. Before leaving, Pete said, “Have you met a good woman these days? Are you interested in getting married?”

“Not really,” Zander said. “I think a woman would want me because I’m rich, but I need a woman who wants me because of who I am.”

“Okay,” Pete said. “Maybe I can find you a woman who appreciates you like I do. Bye Zander. Back in a week. I’ll be here at 7:00 a.m.”

As Zander pressed toward his goal, he started dressing like an 18th-century sailor. He played the part of an honest, non-violent pirate. He had no weapons and no interest in plunder. His commitments for honesty were set in stone. The clothing fixation would not last long. Zander just wanted to try out the pirate clothing and dream for a while.



Figure 4 Captain Zander Martineau

Again, although there was luxury below the deck, on this trip to Florida, Zander and crew would only navigate using skills and instruments from days of old.

Eventually, the maiden voyage was completed, and all went well. The onshore activities in Florida had been fun. After the ship returned to New York Harbor, Zander felt he had finally found his home. Zander asked, “Pete, do you want any more trips with us?”

Pete said, “No. I loved it, but it taught me I am a land animal. This will be my role: when you come back to Brooklyn, I will always buy your dinner, and I will be most anxious to listen to your stories.”

“I understand that, Pete. And I look forward to dinners and storytelling.”

A few years passed. Zander and crew learned many sailing skills. They visited different parts of the world. Sometimes, they would stay in a foreign country for two months, other times, only two weeks. Cares and worries faded, and they all became excellent sailors.

When return-home requests were made by the crew, they would sail back to New York for a few months, but then the team’s wander lust would grow. They would sail again. Although the crew liked sailing, the men really liked earning money, and Zander was a good paymaster. Plus, when they were in a foreign country, the crew’s salaries were still paid and he paid their housing costs.

At New York Harbor, Zander’s pier was a place of quiet contradictions. Steel and glass towers shimmered in the distance, symbols of permanence and ambition, while in the bay, the waters moved endlessly, restlessly, shifting, and impossible to possess. Most people who came to the harbor stood for a moment, took a breath of salt air, and returned to their structured lives.

Zander now lived in two worlds: one on his ship and one on land in one of his homes. His homes were located in Brooklyn, New York; Houston, Texas;

and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. But this day, he rested at his private dock like a person borrowed from another century.

The *Northern Star* was not a relic; it was a deliberate creation: polished teak decks, taut rigging, deep navy hull trimmed in brass. Below the top deck it was modern, powerful, and precise, but from the deck up, it was dressed in the spirit of a time when men crossed oceans with courage instead of schedules.

Zander stood at the rail one morning, one boot resting lightly against the wood, coat shifting in the wind. He looked, as always, exactly like the life he had chosen. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and had a face that drew attention without effort. But it was his stillness that set him apart, the kind of stillness that comes from knowing you answer to no one.

Behind him, a voice called out. As he came onboard, Pete shouted, “You could sell this ship for a fortune, you know.” Pete moved forward while shaking his head. “Three houses, investments that could carry ten lifetimes, and you still choose this?”

Zander finally glanced back. “You say that like it’s a step down.”

Pete laughed. “Well, I know it’s important for you. You’re seeing the world. You’re learning a lot, and I know your life is fascinating.” Pete studied Zander for a moment and then said, “Do you ever think about settling down?”

Zander’s gaze returned to the water. “I have,” he said.

“And?”

“I’ve never found a reason strong enough that would anchor me.”

A few months later, the evening's events were far from the quiet harbor. Zander stepped into a world that always felt slightly artificial. The restaurant was one of Manhattan's finest: dim lighting, polished marble, conversations wrapped in soft laughter. It was a place where people dressed carefully and spoke carefully, where impressions mattered.

Zander did not dress carefully. He wore his long navy coat, brass buttons catching the warm light, boots polished but worn in the way of real use. He did not enter like a man hoping to be accepted. He entered like a man who had already decided he didn't need to be. Heads turned. They always did. He ignored them.

A familiar voice called, "Zander."

He turned around. Pete was smirking. "You look like you're about to commandeer the place."

"Only if the food disappoints."

Pete chuckled. "Come on. Your date is already here. I knew Mariah in high school. Good girl. Good student. Now she is an attorney. There she is. She's expecting you. Just go meet her. Have fun, and we'll talk later."

Zander saw where he was to go. He crossed the floor and then stopped. She wasn't what he expected. Mariah sat at the table with quiet composure, not scanning the room, not checking her phone, just present, a simple dark dress, no unnecessary display. Her posture was straight, her expression thoughtful. There was nothing about her that tried to impress. And that, more than anything, caught Zander's attention. As if sensing it, she looked up. Their eyes met.

Soft smile. No practiced charm, just recognition. Zander approached her and touched her hand as a greeting.

“Mariah?”



Her voice was calm. “Yes. And you must be Zander.”

“I’ve been told that’s who I am.”

A faint smile touched her lips. “Do you always dress like this?”

“Only when I intend to make a proper first impression.”

She gestured toward the chair. “Then please, impress me.”

He sat. For a moment, neither spoke. Zander was used to being silent. But Mariah didn’t rush to fill the space. She let it exist. “So,” she said at last, “I understand you travel.”

“I sail my ship,” he replied. “There’s a difference.”

“Explain that.”

“Sailing means I decide where I go. Traveling usually means someone else does.”

She considered his answer. “And you prefer control?”

“I prefer responsibility for my own direction.”

Mariah nodded slowly. “Okay, I’m understanding your point.”

“And you?” he asked. “You’re an attorney?”

“Yes.”

“By choice, or expectation?”

“Choice,” she said. “Very deliberate.”

“Why?” he asked.

She slowly leaned toward Zander and met his eyes directly. “Because I don’t like seeing people lose what matters to them simply because they don’t understand the system.”

There was no performance in her voice, no attempt to impress, just truth. Zander felt something shift.

“Then you fight,” he said.

“I advocate,” she corrected. “There’s a difference.”

He smiled slightly. “I stand corrected.”

Dinner unfolded without effort. They spoke of work, of upbringing, of decisions that shape a life. Mariah shared pieces of her story, not dramatically, not defensively. She talked about her parents and their sacrifices, their apartment in Manhattan, the long years of study, the debt

she carried without complaint. “I’ll pay it off,” she said simply. “It takes time, but it’s mine to carry.”

Zander watched her carefully. There it was again: no angle, no expectation, just ownership.

“And you?” she asked. “Your story?”

Zander leaned back slightly. “Less structured,” he said. “I’ve inherited a little rainy-day money and, I have invested well, but I choose not to let inheritance and investing define me.”

“And the ship?”

Zander nodded while he said, “A choice.”

“To escape?” she asked.

He held her gaze. “No, not to escape. To live.”

Mariah listened, but now she wanted to give her opinion. “I think,” she said slowly, “there’s a time for exploration and living freely, but also there is a time for being responsibly tied to something meaningful, important, and lasting. For many, life is long enough to try out both approaches.”

Zander’s expression didn’t change, but he felt truth in her words.



Later, they stepped out into the cool night air. The city was alive around them. Zander found himself walking more slowly than usual. He didn't want the evening to end.

Mariah began, "Our date tonight, that was…"

"Unexpected?" he offered.

She smiled faintly. "Yes."

“For better or worse?”

“I’m pondering that, but I’d say–for better.”

They stopped near the edge of the street, the distant harbor just visible beyond the buildings. Zander looked at her, not as a passing interest and not as another evening.

“Here is a question, Mariah. Will you see me again?”

Mariah didn’t answer immediately. She studied him, not his coat, not his confidence, but something deeper.

“You’re an unusual man,” she said.

“I’ve been told.”

“And I don’t build my life on unusual things,” she continued.

“That sounds wise.”

“But in your case, I am fascinated by the unusual.”

Zander felt something he had not felt in a long time: not certainty, not conquest, but interest.

“Then let’s begin there,” he said. Mariah nodded.

As Zander walked away that night, he did not feel the usual sense of completion. He felt something unfinished, something beginning. And for the first time in years, the man who would not be anchored did not feel the urge to leave. He felt the quiet and unfamiliar desire to stay. Zander enjoyed being with Mariah. She greatly impressed him.



Figure 5 Zander's Cabin on the Northern Star

Chapter 2 — Mariah Is Impressive

Zander did not rush. That was the first thing that surprised Mariah. Men had pursued her before, some eagerly, some cautiously, but always with a kind of urgency, as though time itself might betray them. Zander did not press. He did not crowd her calendar or flood her with messages. When he called, it was deliberate. When he asked to see her, it was with purpose.

And when he was present, he was fully present. Their second meeting was simpler, no grand restaurant, no spectacle, just a quiet walk along the Hudson River. The wind carried the scent of salt. Boats drifted in the distance, their lights flickering against the water. Zander walked beside her, hands relaxed at his sides, his long coat moving with each step.

“You spend a lot of time on the water,” Mariah observed.

“It reminds me of the vastness of the earth, and that inspires me to find new locations for exploration. Those thoughts move me,” he said.

Mariah followed his gaze. She said, “I like the city.”

“I can see that.”

“It’s where things are built,” she said. “Careers. Families. Stability.”

“And pressure,” he added.

“That’s part of it.”

He studied her. “You don’t seem afraid of pressure.”

“I’m not,” she said. Then, with a small smile, “but I just prefer to choose which kind I live with.”

Zander nodded slowly. She was not naïve. She was not chasing something. She was building something. And that unsettled him more than he expected. Weeks passed. They settled into a rhythm, not frequent, but consistent. Zander would be in the city for stretches of time, and they would meet for dinner and take walks. Conversations grew deeper and less guarded. He told her about the Mediterranean at dawn, the way the sea turned to glass before sunrise, about storms that demanded precision and calm, about solitude where one is not lonely but lucky.

Mariah listened, not as someone impressed but as someone trying to understand. And in return, she let him see her world. He visited her office once, unexpectedly, not to show off but to observe. It was late evening. Most of the lights were dim, but her office was still bright. Papers were neatly arranged and files were open. Her attention was fixed on her tasks.

“You’re still here,” he said from the doorway.

She looked up, surprised but not flustered. “Deadlines don’t move.”

He stepped inside, glancing at the stacks of work. “And you carry all of this?”

“I chose it,” she said. “That matters.”

He leaned lightly against the doorframe. “You could choose differently.”

“I could,” she agreed. “But then I wouldn’t be who I am.”

Zander held her gaze. That answer stayed with him. The first crack between them came quietly, but it came. Zander left for a short voyage. Two weeks,