he had said. Mariah accepted that. She didn't ask him not to go. She didn't ask for promises he had not offered. But two weeks became three. Three became four. The silence between them stretched.

At first, she told herself it was part of who he was. By the third week, she checked her phone more often than she liked. By the fourth, she stopped, not out of anger but out of self-respect. When Zander returned, the harbor greeted him with calm water and familiar surroundings. But something felt off. There were no messages waiting, no simple acknowledgments, just quiet.

He called. She answered. "Mariah?"

"Zander." Her voice was even. That was worse than anger.

"I'm back," he said.

"I assumed so." A pause.

"I'd like to see you." Another pause.

"Alright," she said. "Tomorrow evening, 7:00 at El Compadre's."

They met at the small café, not near the harbor. Mariah chose neutral ground. She was sitting already when he arrived. She didn't stand or smile. But she didn't look closed either, just steady. "You're well," she said.

"I am," he replied. "You?"

"Yes."

Zander sat down across from her. For a moment, neither spoke. Then Mariah said, “You were gone longer than you said.”

“I was.”

“And you didn’t contact me.”

“No, and I have no good excuse, and I’m sorry.”

That caught Mariah’s attention. “Why? Why didn’t you contact me?” she asked.

Zander leaned back slightly. “Because I didn’t want to feel obligated to explain every change of course that we made.”

Mariah nodded. “Well that’s honest--but not considerate.”

He agreed and said, “You are one hundred percent right. Now that we are together again, I am embarrassed. My thoughtless behavior was selfish, and I am sorry.”

Silence settled between them. Then she spoke again, her voice calm but firm. “I’m not asking to control your life, Zander. I’m not asking you to stop sailing. But if you expect me to build anything with you, I need to know if I matter enough to be considered.”

Zander’s eyes narrowed slightly, not in anger, but in thought. “I don’t belong to anyone,” he said.

“I’m not asking you to belong to me. I’m asking you to *choose* me.”

That landed. He studied her, this woman who did not chase, did not plead, did not compete. She simply stood where she was. And she expected honesty in return.

“You think I do not choose you?”

“I think you have not decided if you want to,” she said.

The truth of it unsettled him. Zander had built his life on freedom. No ties. No obligations that could not be cut if they became too heavy. It had served him well until now.

“Most people,” he said slowly, “see what I have and want to be part of it.”

“I don’t,” she said.

“I know,” he replied.

“And that confuses you?”

Zander said, “It does.”

Mariah leaned forward slightly. “Then let me make it simple. I like you. I respect you. But I will not build my life around uncertainty.”

Zander held her gaze. “And if I can’t give you certainty?” he asked.

“Then we shouldn’t continue.”

No anger. No drama. Just truth. That night, Zander returned to his ship. The city lights reflected across the water, broken and shifting. He stood alone on the deck feeling the familiar rhythm of the harbor beneath him. For the first time in years, it did not feel entirely like home. He thought of her words. *I'm not asking you to belong to me. I'm asking you to choose me.* He had always believed he was free because he could leave. But now, he began to wonder if freedom might also mean the ability to stay. The next day, he called her.

"Mariah."

"Yes."

"I'd like to try again." A pause. "This time, with intention."

Another pause. "What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means that when I leave, you'll know when I will return. It means I don't disappear. It means I don't treat our relationship as temporary."

Mariah listened carefully. "You're offering effort," she said.

"Yes."

"Not perfection."

"No."

She exhaled softly. "That's enough to continue," she said. And so they did. But now, the ground beneath them had changed. This was no longer curiosity. It was no longer casual. This was something being tested, something that would either grow or break, and both of them knew it.



Chapter 3 — A Storm Zander Could Not Sail Around

Winter came early that year. The harbor hardened into steel-gray mornings with winds that cut through Zander's thick coat. The *Northern Star* rocked sharply against her lines, as if impatient with stillness. Zander felt it too: the pull to move, to chart a course, to disappear into the wide freedom of open water.

But he did not leave, not yet. Instead, he found himself in places he had once avoided: quiet dinners that turned into conversations about the future, evenings in Mariah's small but carefully kept apartment, mornings where time was measured not by tides but by hot chocolate that grew cold on the table. It was unfamiliar, but increasingly, it mattered.



Figure 1 Mariah, a successful attorney in NYC

One evening, snow fell steadily outside her window. It softened the noise of the city into something almost peaceful. Mariah sat at her table, files spread out, a pen in her hand but not moving. Zander stood near the window, watching the snowfall drift past the glass.

“You’re thinking,” she said without looking up.

“I often do.”

“Not like this,” she said.

He turned toward Mariah. “Like what?”

“Like you’re deciding something you don’t want to decide.”

That made him just barely smile. “You’re observant.”

“It’s part of my job.”

“Mariah, look at me. I’ve been offered a charter.”

Mariah spun her chair around and looked at Zander. She did not say anything, but then she said, “A long one?”

“Six months,” he replied. “Mediterranean route. Private client. It’s a good opportunity.”

“And you want to go.”

“Yes.”



Silence settled between them, not sharp, not sudden, just heavy.

“And when were you planning to tell me?” she asked.

“I’m telling you now.”

“After you’ve already decided?” she said, her voice still calm, but tighter now.

Zander leaned forward and took her hand. “I haven’t finalized it.”

“But you want to,” she said.

“Yes.”

Mariah nodded slowly, absorbing it. “This is what I meant,” she said. “This exact thing.”

“I told you I wouldn’t stop sailing,” he replied.

“I didn’t ask you to,” she said. “I asked you to build something with me.”

“I am,” he said. “This doesn’t change that.”

She looked at him and pulled her hand away. “Zander, this does change things. It does because it tells me where I fall in your priorities.”

Zander’s jaw tightened. “That’s not fair.”

“It’s accurate,” she said. “Six months, Zander. That’s not a short trip. That’s a life decision.”

“It’s part of who I am.”

“And what about who *we* are?” she asked.

That question landed harder than any accusation because he didn’t have an immediate answer. The next few days were strained, not explosive, not dramatic, but distant. They still spoke; they still saw each other. But something had shifted. The easy rhythm was replaced by careful steps, unspoken thoughts. Zander found himself restless, and the ship dream still pulled on him. But now, so did something else.

Then came the night that changed everything. Mariah had stayed late at work, long past when she should have gone home. A difficult case included a client who had been misled, and had, consequently, nearly lost everything. She had fought hard for him. Mariah was relentless, and she won.



By the time she stepped out into the cold, the city was nearly quiet. She didn't see the car until it was too late. The driver was neither speeding nor driving recklessly. The driver had just misjudged a turn. The impact was not violent, but it was enough.

Zander got the call an hour later. He was on the *Northern Star*, going over charts related to his pending charter voyage.

"Zander?" The voice was unfamiliar. "I'm calling from St. Luke's Hospital. We have Mariah. She listed you as an emergency contact."

Everything inside him went still. "What happened?"

"A minor accident. She's stable, but we'd like you to come."

"I'm on my way."

The hospital room was quiet. Too quiet. Mariah was sitting up in the bed, her arm in a cast, a bandage on her cheek. She was awake. When she saw him, she smiled. "Well," she said softly, "this wasn't in the plan."

Zander crossed the room quickly. "Are you alright?"

"I've been better," she admitted. "But I'll be fine."

He stood there for a moment, looking at her. He saw her not as the composed, steady woman he knew, but as someone vulnerable and, suddenly, irreplaceable. "You should have called me sooner," he said, his voice low.

"I didn't want to interrupt your decision-making," she replied.

There was no bitterness in it. That made it worse. Zander stood beside her bed, holding her hand. "Don't do that," he said quietly.

“Do what?”

“Act like you don’t matter.”

She held his gaze. “I don’t act that way. I just accept what people show me.”



That cut deeper than anything she could have said in anger. The doctor entered briefly and explained the injuries. Nothing permanent but recovery would take time--weeks, at least.

Zander listened, nodding. But his attention kept returning to the idea of her being alone: recovering alone, continuing alone because he had chosen the horizon.

Later, Mariah spoke. “You don’t have to stay,” she said. “I’ll be discharged tomorrow. I can manage.”

Zander shook his head. “I’m not leaving.”

“For tonight?” she asked.

“For longer than that.”

She studied him carefully. “You have a ship waiting.”

“And you have a life that needs support,” he replied.

“I’ve always handled my life.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s not the point.”

She was silent. Then, “Why now? Why does it matter now?”

Zander looked down at his hands, then back at her. “Because I almost wasn’t here,” he said.

She frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, his voice steady, “I could have been halfway across the

ocean when this happened. I wouldn't have known. I wouldn't have been here."

Mariah's expression softened, but she didn't speak.

"And I realized," he continued, "that I don't want a life where the most important things can happen, and I'm not part of them." The room was still, completely still.

"You're choosing," she said quietly.

"Yes."

"Not because I asked?"

"No."

"Because you want to?"

"Yes."

Mariah looked at him for a long moment. Then she nodded. "Alright. That makes me happy."

Zander did not take the charter. He stayed, not as a grand gesture, not as a sacrifice, but as a decision. He helped Mariah through recovery, not hovering, not controlling, but present. He drove Mariah when needed. He sat with her on quiet evenings, and he learned the rhythm of a life that didn't move with tides, but with commitment.

And something unexpected happened. He didn't feel trapped. He felt grounded. One evening, weeks later, they stood again at the harbor. Mariah's arm had healed. The cast was gone. Only a faint soreness remained.

“You didn’t go,” she said.

“No.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No,” he said.

Zander looked out at the water, then back at her. And for the first time, he knew that answer was complete. But something else had changed, too. Because now, this was no longer a question of *if* they could build a life together. It was a question of *how*. And whether they were ready for the final step that would bind everything they had begun.



Part 4 — The Harbor Zander Chose

Spring did not arrive all at once. It came slowly, like trust. Yet the harbor came alive as ice lost its grip. The bay waters turned restless again as they remembered their purpose. The air carried a hint of warmth, though winter had not fully surrendered.

Zander stood on the deck of the *Northern Star*, hands resting on the rail. He had not left for sailing, not for weeks, not for months. And what surprised him most was not the discipline it required, but how natural it felt.



Figure 2 Zander Ponders His Choices

Inside the city, life moved with energy. Mariah had returned to work, not at full pace, not yet, but with the same steady resolve that had carried her through years of study and long nights. She walked with confidence again, her voice strong in the courtroom, her mind sharp, her presence undeniable.

But something in her had shifted too. She enjoyed not carrying life's burdens alone. A week earlier, Zander had made up his mind, so he did some shopping. Now, standing on the deck, Zander went to his cabin, took off his clothes, and dressed in his suit and tie. Then he walked to Mariah's office.

"Oh my, what's the occasion, Zander? You didn't tell me we were going out for a formal dinner tonight. What's with the suit?"

"You'll see," he replied.

They left Mariah's office and took a taxi over to the harbor. They walked along the pier. Zander offered his arm, not out of formality, but because of familiarity. She took it. That alone would have been unthinkable months ago. They walked in silence for a time, not with the uncertain silence of strangers, but with the comfortable silence of people who no longer needed to fill every minute with words.

"You've changed," she said at last.

Zander glanced at her. "That sounds dangerous."

"It's not," she replied. "It's just noticeable."

"How so?"

"Well, you're still yourself," she said, "but these past months, you don't act as though you always want to leave."

He let that settle. "That's because I don't always want to leave."

They continued walking, now moving along the harbor. The city lights stretched behind them, but the water held their attention.

“This place used to feel like a boundary,” Mariah said, “between your world and mine.” She looked at him. “Now it feels like a bridge.”

Zander smiled. “What a wonderful statement. What a wonderful feeling. I’m glad you are feeling that way.”

He reached into his coat and retrieved a small box. “I’ve spent most of my life believing that staying in one place meant losing something. It felt like a loss of freedom, identity, and control.”

Mariah listened, her emotions on edge with anticipation. She was guessing what he had in the box. What was in the box would explain why he wore his suit.

“I was wrong,” he continued. “I always believed that movement with purpose and distance meant strength. I can’t explain my changing attitude. It just changed.”

Mariah thought, “Get to the box.”

“I want to be who I am, but I also want to change who I am. I want both conditions. Also, I want a life that builds on a foundation that leads to a solid, lasting relationship with you.”

Zander took the ring from the box and gently slipped it onto Mariah’s finger. Mariah screamed, laughed, and shouted, “Oh Zander. I’m so happy. Of course, I will marry you. I love you.”

Her emotions were strong. She stepped closer, close enough now that there was no distance left between them. “You’ve taken your time,” she said softly.

“I needed to be certain.”

“And now you are?”

“Yes.”



She studied him, this man who once belonged only to the horizon, but who was now choosing something and someone permanent. Mariah whispered, “This means building something that lasts.”

“I want that, Mariah.”

“And being a father someday.”

Zander’s expression softened. “I would like that very much.”

Mariah smiled. “Zander, we are in this relationship for our own voyage--a long-haul voyage.”

Their wedding was not extravagant. It didn’t need to be. It was held near the harbor, close enough that the water could be seen, but grounded firmly on land. It included friends, family, and a small gathering of people who knew them not for what they owned or achieved, but for who they were. Zander stood steady. Mariah stood beside him, equal in every way. And when they spoke their vows, there were no illusions in them, no fantasies, only commitment.



After the wedding celebration was over, Zander and Mariah were alone. Mariah suggested she was ready to take Zander to her apartment. She had prepared her bedroom for this special honeymoon night.

But Zander had a surprise for her. Now, for the first time, he told Mariah he owned a home in Brooklyn. He explained that he made preparations including fresh flowers in vases, soft music, a soak in the hot tub, and new, freshly scented sheets.

It all sounded good to Mariah, so Zander and Mariah spent their first night in Zander's Brooklyn home. Later in the evening, Zander told Mariah he had a wedding gift for her which he would reveal tomorrow morning.

Mariah and Zander had a wonderful honeymoon night. In the morning, they showered, dressed, and ate Zander's specialty breakfast: loaded omelets. After the kitchen was cleaned up, they settled in the living room.

Zander said, "Mariah, I have grown to love and cherish you, as strongly as I cherish breathing. As you know from my vows yesterday, I will work with you to sustain a binding and enriched marriage. Now for your wedding gift. This gift will make you happy. It's a new car. Let's go see it. It's downstairs in the garage."

When she saw the car, Mariah was stunned and uncomfortable. She said, "This car is too nice. I wouldn't dare drive it."

Zander said, "Mariah, nice cars like this are so easy to drive. Let's take a ride right now and start out right. That means you do the driving."

All went well, and oh, so quickly, Mariah fell in love with her new car. She said, "Zander, I have never owned anything as nice as this."

"It's a great car for a great woman," Zander said.



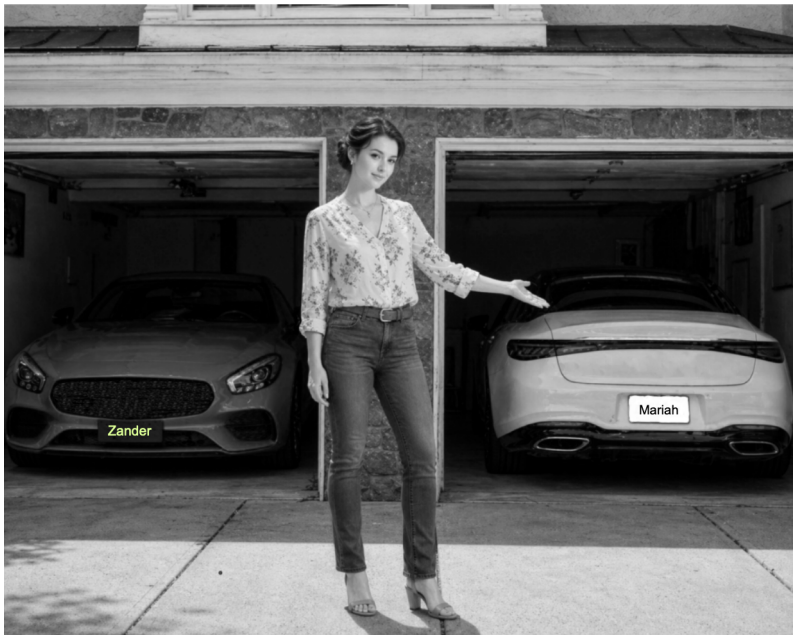
Figure 3 This is Mariah's wedding gift.

As they rode along, Zander explained his home situation. “Mariah, I didn’t talk to you about my home before our wedding, but actually, I own three homes, all modern, all beautiful. I didn’t talk about this because I wanted you to marry me *because you wanted me, not my homes*. As far as you knew, I just lived in the *Northern Star.*”

Mariah said, “You are right. I didn’t know about your homes. I thought your ship was your home. I expected that after our wedding, we would live in my apartment. We hadn’t talked about where we would live. My apartment just seemed to be the logical, natural spot.”



Figure 4 Mariah's New Home in Brooklyn



“Now that you know about our homes, I remind you that after we finish three days in Brooklyn, we fly to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. We will stay in our second home.”

Zander ordered the installation of a permanent, metal sign in front of the Wyoming home.



Mariah moved from her apartment into their Brooklyn house. Very quickly, she began to feel comfortable in her new setting. Here she had her own office with bookshelves, file cabinets, and closets for storage.

Rather quickly, Zander and Mariah learned that the feelings of wedding-night love and wedding-gift love did not remain constant. They both learned that marriage required a series of choices, some easy, some not. Zander still felt the pull of the sea.

Mariah still carried the weight of her work. And there were evenings when schedules clashed, when exhaustion replaced patience, when old instincts resurfaced. But they had built something stronger than impulse. They talked. They adjusted. They chose again.

One night, Zander and Mariah were reading, propped up with pillows at the head of their bed. Zander said, “Mariah, as soon as you can schedule two weeks off from work, I want to take you to our Houston home.

It is the most elegant of our three homes. I always stay there when I have business in Houston. While there, I like to watch the horse races at the Sam Houston Race Park. I want us to go watch some races, and if you want to do it, you should make a few bets on the races.”



Figure 5 Zander and Mariah's Home in Houston, Texas.