

## **Hard North**

By C.M. Miller

*“I long for the Lord...  
More than sentries long for the dawn,  
yes, more than sentries long for the dawn.”*

-Psalm 30

### **Chapter One – *Mendocino***

Crane’s dreams brimmed with water.

From where he stood, toes hugging the trail that snaked down to the ocean, he could already feel the chilled sapphire flowing over him, nipping and biting his exposed skin. His looked out at his daughter, the svelte figure tip-toeing along with a shortboard under her arm. In less than a minute she’d be out on the water, in the thick of it and not looking back.

Crane pulled his longboard snug.

With a low sigh, he panned the bay.

Waves were rolling, no doubt about that. The chest-high swells were fat wrinkles, curving as they appeared from a heavy mist. He watched one wobble, crash, and then cast itself along the cove’s pebbled shore. Rocks rattled like marbles as the water surged, then rattled again as it pulled backwards. The rattle climbed the cliffs, right to the millennia-old trunks guarding the cove.

Out in the water, Aideen was paddling.

Crane took the rocks carefully, squatting as he lowered the longboard to the dark, frothy water. With a shove and a lunge, he landed prostrate. As he got to work, reaching an arm across the water, Crane felt the ancient strength in his biceps and shoulders stirring to life, warming like an engine on a cold morning. His muscles groaned, but they remembered what to do.

*Too old for this* he thought.

Lifting his chin from army-crawl, he saw Aideen ahead of him, sitting near the breakers, insect-like in her black wetsuit. Even in the water, her hair was unmistakable—a mane of crimson plastered to her back, clumped and twisted but glowing like a halo against the obsidian blue water. A wave towered, and Crane watched her disappear over the crest. In a minute she'd be on her feet, squatted and soaring down the face of one, red hair swaying behind her like a medieval banner.

Aideen was fearless—twenty to the day and invincible.

She lived for this.

The broken wave rolled toward him, whitewash threshing. Crane reached over the longboard's flank and flipped the whole thing over, crouching and sinking like a submariner beneath a hatch. For a few moments, the swishing cold stung his face, touching his brow and temple like tongs of dry ice. Back on the surface, Crane sat and rubbed the warmth back into his face.

Out ahead of him, Aideen rose and fell.

He turned back to shore. With a squint, he recognized the two figurines stood side by side, their feet in the surf. Daren's navy blue UCLA cap was a bright oval. Daren's wife Ruth, plump and heavy beside her scrawny husband, was fortified against the cold in jeans and a sweatshirt. Even at a distance, the sheer opal eyes, the soft cheeks and sleek, graying hair blowing straight across her face hinted at her regal, Japanese ancestry. Crane waved to his friends and watched them wave right back.

On the bluffs beyond them, the rectangular snout of Crane's olive green Volkswagen Rabbit looked out at them. Beneath the cheap roof rack and the cracked windshield, both high beams lit the beach in blazing triangles.

He frowned.

Why on earth were its *lights on*?

Without warning, a mound of whitewash knocked Crane off the longboard and into the soup. Brow and temple stung all over again, and when Crane surfaced, he gasped in shock.

But when he peered back at shore, everything stopped.

A crowd of people were spilling down the trail.

They scrambled over the rocks to the shoreline, shouting, waving, holding up what had to be bats, or sticks. As Crane's mind scrambled to make sense of it, he thought of a scene from an old T.V. show—a blurred, violent crowd racing across the sand as a main character stumbled in the foreground, stunned and helpless. Except now the fallen character was Daren, down on his back in the surf, his foot kicking upward at a young man swinging a trashcan lid.

*What the hell...*

He swam toward them, dragGing the longboard behind him.

The water felt as thick as syrup.

Crane watched as Ruth ran forward like a linebacker, arms braced to repel the attackers. Somehow, the Rabbit was inching forward on the bluff, its high beams rising like twin suns over the bluff, blinding everything. Blocking the light with a forearm, Crane thrashed the waist-high water, looking around for a longboard that had vanished behind him.

He heard Ruth shouting

“Go Crane! *Swim to her!*”

Crane saw her trudging forward, lifting leg after leg out of the water as molten high beams burned behind them

“It's Aideen!” Ruth shouted. “Go help her!”

Then she was stumbling backward, falling as a masked woman with tattooed sleeves clamped onto her back like a child playing rough. The woman shrieked as she and Ruth crashed against the water. Fighting every instinct to wade toward Ruth and her attacker, Crane turned around. The words echoed in his ears, ringing and scorching his mind. Aideen was in trouble.

*Go help her.*

Aiming for the breakers, Crane dove and swam, flailing blindly. He thrashed until his lungs gave out, forcing him to lift his head and gulp air. Up ahead, Aideen's shortboard bobbed along the surface without a rider.

*Oh, God.*

Crane turned, thrashed forward.

And then he saw her—the red knob of hair drifting like seaweed toward an unbroken mountain. A huge one. He saw her tiny hands cutting the water, inching closer and closer to the mountain's base.

Crane swam as hard as he could, stopping when he heard a rustle—the top of the mountain lurching, shifting, and breaking like a fractured glacier. He groaned as thousands of gallons began their fall, tumbling like an avalanche toward his daughter below

*"Aideen!"* He croaked.

But as he shouted, he knew he was too late. The avalanche roared, landing in a burst of spray, right as the knob dipped beneath the surface.

Before he could think of what to do, Crane was right beneath it. Twisting underwater, yanked around by invisible currents, Crane heard the crash echoing like a thousand pins scattering across a wooden floor. As the scattering sharpened, crystalizing to the crunch of glass beneath rubber boots, Crane woke up.

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"Wakey, wakey."

It was the guard named Ian.

The deep, gravelly voice echoed around the curved aluminum, filling out the bus turned cabin. Crane murmured, his nostrils taking a deep drink of sweetish, musty air. Footsteps thumped past the driver's seat, and a hollow floor groaned under the weight.

"Shit's brewing down Highway One," Ian said. "You and your friends should get moving. Remember that backroad you drove in on?"

Crane nodded, rubbed his eyes.

For the first night in a week, he'd slept hard, dipping all the way to his dream about the ocean and his daughter. The dust-caked mattress laid flat on the floor had been a Godsend. He wondered what Jessica would think about chucking the camping gear out of the Rabbit and taking the mattress instead.

"Brought you this."

Porcelain clattered on a small wooden stool. The floor groaned again as the guard stepped to the gravel outside. Crane sat, stretched his neck, and reached for the mug. As he slid it from the table, he found a sideways slogan, dangling from marionette strings—'The DAD father'

*Yeah, buddy* he thought.

With a gentle scoff, he sipped the coffee. Almost on cue, he felt the ache from his swollen, bandaged brow radiating through his crown, his temples. Hadn't the sleep helped it? Feeling the threat of a massive migraine, he peeled some of the bandage, hissing in pain.

The voice outside echoed through the missing windows. "You good in there?"

"Fine," Crane shouted.

"Hurry it up."

Inhaling sharply, he tore the bandage off.

Crane stuffed his items into the patch worn backpack they'd given him yesterday, just after he'd parked the Rabbit in the grassy clearing past the sign that read *Lord's Land*. Ready to leave, Crane paused when he noticed the tall mirror at the, streaked with water marks, leaned against the back wall. His reflection filled the frame—salmon-burnt cheeks sagging beneath sharp, hazel eyes, and a bruised, brow and temple, swollen but at least mellowed to light green and purple. Dried blood flecked week-old stubble. Crane chuckled, drawing his sweatshirt taut against his paunch. The bulge along the navy blue fabric was smaller than he expected.

Had the week's antics shredded some unsightly weight, along with his nerves?

Crane's fingernails scraped the stitched logo above the pouch: *Los Angeles, 2028*. The classic Olympic rings overlapping had gone retro, cracking and peeling over a decade of washing. Eyeing the logo, he pulled the sweatshirt off and turned it inside out. With no comb in sight, Crane raked his fingers through the thin tufts of browned but graying hair, wiry from eight hours against the mattress.

*Eight hours.*

A marathon of rest since he'd left the Triangle, five hundred miles to the south.

What a week—the face in the mirror understood. As Crane studied it, he wondered for the hundredth time how Aideen, now pushing thirty-five, would react to his appearance. She'd been no-nonsense as a teenager, for a couple years an outright smart ass. Even as a young woman, she could cut right to the bone.

*So what's this look, Dad? Full scarecrow? You should never go full scarecrow.*

Something like that.

Crane sighed.

Between being hijacked, beaten, and marched forward in a makeshift revolutionary army, this disheveled appearance was the best he could do for a reunion after fifteen years, the culmination of a decade and a half of searching. As he looked right now, he'd have to do... assuming he found her. Assuming he reached the coordinates within three days, just making the tail end of the ten she'd given him. Assuming it *was* her, his daughter in the flesh, not some phantom beacon and not some imposter who had made up the HAM radio message scrawled on newspaper—the one he'd memorized but still covered in plastic for the accompanying journey. Despite knowing every word, he'd kept it on him, guarding the message like some sacred relic.

And that wasn't far off.

As Crane had realized almost a week ago, the message itself was a miracle—one that a rich, educated agnostic of fifty-odd years could readily believe in.

*That girl*, he pondered, letting the thoughts drift back over her childhood.

*Talk about miracles.*

When the state's long-rumored secession from the United States broke ground, she'd just emptied her dorm room at Chico State. A day later, with the confusion, the scuttled communication, the fleeing refugees, and the fight for water escalating to an all-out implosion along the state's interior, Aideen was destroying her phone, packing, and squeezing into a van with the first wave of survivalists headed for California's northeastern forests. Crane hadn't heard from her since. As much as her disappearance grieved him, he'd finally come to the point of admiring the timing, that fact that his she'd right on the cusp of a boiling experiment with forty million people and the world's fourth largest economy.

Cal Exit—a revolution

*Great timing, girl*, he thought.

He took another look, then walked the invisible aisle to the steps up front. If, and when, he reached Aideen's coordinates, some two hundred miles inland, he'd look even different. Thinner, no doubt, but no less scarecrow.

Outside the bus, the road sloped upward through columns of redwoods. Crane sipped and walked, stopping when a patter of far-off gunfire drifted through the branches.

He paused.

The shots were far; at least a mile or two away.

He turned a corner and found the car, cluttered with a camouflage layer of ferns and torn branches, but still dignified—his Dad's ancient, olive green, eighty-three Rabbit. The camp's guards had parked it on an incline, hidden from the road behind clumps of young conifers, rear wheels raised on the slope. Crane climbed beside it and began whisking off the ferns and branches. The door was open and he sat inside, resting an arm against the wheel while he searched his pockets for the keys. When he found nothing, he realized that they'd likely spent the night with someone else.

*Jessica*, he thought, remembering that it was her, and *not* him, who'd driven the Rabbit onto the campground. He ruled out Dido, the scrawny, skittish blond who'd joined

them on their exodus from Sacramento—a Professional turned deserter who hadn't shown any interest in car, keys, or how the two went together.

He'd have to wait until Jessica woke up.

Crane cracked the window, letting in the damp, salty air.