

New York Times Bestselling Author

STEVE MARTINI CRITICAL MASS

“DOUBLE
CROSSES
GALORE
AND AN
INGENIOUS
ENDING.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

CRITICAL MASS

STEVE MARTINI



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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CRITICAL MASS

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PROLOGUE

WEST OF CAPE FLATTERY AND STRAIT OF JUAN DE FUCA

The *Dancing Lady* was not a thing of beauty. She was sixty-three feet of welded steel, much of it dripping rust down her sides like dried blood.

Her raised forecastle deck and flaring prow were plowing the dark waters west of Vancouver Island at seven knots. She climbed the swells and plunged into the deepening troughs, straining to make headway in weather that was quickly turning foul. Her usual crew of five was down to three—the skipper, Nordquist; his son; and one other crewman who was like family, and like the family was now working for nothing.

The boat was a durable stern trawler with twin diesels designed for deep water. On her aft deck was a massive reel, and wrapped around it was a half mile of open mesh netting, window dressing for this cruise.

The *Lady* was a bottom fisher, a work boat as common as ten-penny nails in these waters. It was the reason they used her. She wouldn't be noticed even by overhead surveillance.

She rolled in the swells and wallowed in the troughs. Hydraulic fluid seeped from the hoses that drove her massive boom, and one of her engines was a thousand hours past a needed overhaul, but Nordquist didn't have the money for the repairs. Working eighteen-hour days in bone-numbing cold water and ice-covered riggings, Nordquist was going broke.

His wife was doing her shopping at the food bank, and loans were overdue on the boat. And still, the federal government did nothing to stop the Canadians from overfishing the areas west of Vancouver Island. They had killed the northwest salmon runs and were now busy taking everything they could find off the bottom. Nordquist and his compatriots couldn't afford the campaign contributions necessary to bribe their own government into action.

He looked out over the prow from the raised wheelhouse. She kept losing RPM on the starboard engine. Nordquist had to fight to hold her steady in the increasing swells. They rose up in front of him like ominous mountains, there one instant, and gone the next. The *Lady* was starting to pound. The weather was getting worse.

His son was straining to find a horizon through the fifty-power binoculars, eyes fixed to the west.

"Oh, shit." The boy didn't have to say more.

Nordquist looked over his shoulder and saw it: a thirty-foot wall of water rushing down on them, on their starboard beam. He spun the wheel to the right, and thirty years of hands-on experience brought the bow of his boat like a knife toward the mountainous wall of water. It cascaded around the wheelhouse and shuddered the *Lady's* steel to her keel. She plowed through and came out, plunging down the back side of the wave.

The wave had knocked the kid to the deck. He sat there in amazement, looking at his old man and marveling at his power to focus, even in the face of death.

THE *ISVANIA* WAS a rusted-out hulk, a remnant of the once powerful Soviet fishing fleet. She'd been condemned for scrap the year before, but like everything else in the new Russia, even this was behind schedule. Heading for the boneyard, she was on her last voyage. She crossed the Bering Sea, threading her way through the Aleutians and the Gulf of Alaska, then down the Canadian coast. Her holds, fore and aft, were empty except for a light load of scrap metal. In the captain's safe were papers transferring the ship's title to a scrap yard outside of Bangkok. She ran with a skeleton crew of seven and made only one brief stop at Prince Rupert on the Canadian coast to pick up a small load of lumber, which now rested, stacked on

her decks. This was a cover in case she was stopped and boarded by coastal authorities, her justification for crossing the Bering Sea and hugging the American coast. Bills of lading showed the lumber to be delivered to Oakland, California, though her captain had no intention of going there. The lumber would be thrown overboard once *Isvania* dropped its real cargo. Then the ship would head west and south, toward the Indian Ocean and its final resting place.

The helmsman brought her five degrees to port as her captain, Yuri Valentok, strained his eyes through binoculars for anything on the horizon. The *Isvania* was taking on water in the forward hold and getting sluggish in the deepening troughs. The bilge pumps were handling it for now, but Valentok wasn't sure how long they would hold up. He couldn't see a damn thing through the binoculars. Drops of rain, driven by the wind, pelted the windows on the bridge like bullets. Only one of the wipers was working, and that was useless. The wind-whipped mist and froth from the waves created an impenetrable haze. Valentok could scarcely see the prow of his own ship. To make things worse, his radar was out. It hadn't worked since the ship left Vladivostok. Twice they'd had to come to a dead stop in shipping lanes for fear of hitting other vessels. They laid on their foghorn and hoped the other ships could see them on their own radar. *Isvania* was like everything else in their crumbling country: coming apart with no money for repairs.

Valentok carried onboard one other waybill for an additional piece of cargo, but it was only to be used in the event of an extreme emergency, if his ship was forced into port. This particular waybill was forged. If the item was discovered, the captain would argue that he didn't know the nature of the cargo. Whether it would work with the American authorities he doubted, especially given the nature of what he was carrying. He would spend a long time answering questions, perhaps a long time in jail. He wondered if American jails were better than those in Russia.

He went to his charts on the table and braced himself against one of its metal legs. He checked the ship's position one more time. If his calculations were correct, they were precisely 112 nautical miles due west of the Strait of Juan de

Fuca, the passage to Puget Sound, and the U.S. city of Seattle beyond.

Isvania's captain had never been to the U.S., though he had friends who sailed there recently, in a ship not unlike his own, a rusted-out scow ready for scrapping. It was becoming a common practice for Russian fishing vessels. They would clear customs and immigration, and as soon as the American officials left the ship, the entire crew, including her captain, would go over the side to start a new life, in a new land. They let the Americans deal with the scrap metal. Valentok thought he would like to go there himself one day, perhaps to Seattle, when this was over.

FOUR MILES TO the east in driving rain and surging seas, Jon Nordquist gripped the wheel of the *Dancing Lady* with a firm hand. He used the leverage of his body to fight off the force of a giant rolling comber as it slid under the hull and slammed against the rudder. The boat listed heavily to port. For an instant he thought perhaps she might not come back. Then she responded to the helm, slowly.

"It's turning to shit out there. Can't see a damn thing." Ben had his face pressed tightly into the covered scope of the ancient Furuno radar screen. "How the hell are we supposed to find it?"

"Keep looking." Nordquist cast a quick glance at his son and then back out to the mountainous wave that loomed before them, dwarfing the sixty-foot vessel. Their boat was like a matchstick in a flood.

The towering waves created vaporous green images on the radar screen like islands thrust up from the bottom of the sea. On the next sweep of the radar beam they were gone.

"She could run over us, and we'd never see her." Ben was scared, and it showed. He'd sailed in heavy seas, but nothing like this.

The thought of collision had entered Nordquist's mind, but it remained for his son to say it. For the moment he was more worried about broaching, or pitchpoling down the face of one of the waves, nosing in, never to come up again. There were a million ways to die at sea.

"Nothing." Ben pressed his head closer to the radar screen

until the pressure against his forehead actually hurt. "Besides, even if we find 'em, how the hell are we supposed to bring the thing on board in this?"

"One crisis at a time," said his father. He checked his watch. From his pocket he took a small black plastic object, not much larger than a calculator. With his teeth he pulled out the three-inch antenna and pressed a couple of buttons, then waited, one eye on the sea, the other on the portable global positioning satellite (GPS) unit in his hand. Two sets of numbers appeared, one over the other for longitude and latitude. The pocket GPS unit was not as reliable or accurate as its larger cousins that ran from fixed computers on bigger ships, but still it was not likely to be off by more than a few hundred feet. At this location the Russian ship should be no more than a quarter mile off their starboard beam, that is, if it was on time and hadn't gotten lost.

There was no way to communicate by radio. Other ships were certain to pick up the signal, perhaps the Coast Guard. They patrolled the waters, even at two hundred miles out, the limits of their jurisdiction. They had satellites and planes and used both to interdict drugs and track vessels carrying human cargo, seeking to deposit their huddled masses on American soil. Two vessels meeting in open sea were not likely to go unnoticed. For this reason a careful procedure for drop and recovery had been worked out. But would it work in this weather? Nordquist didn't know. No one had anticipated the fucking storm of the century.

HE TURNED HIS ship into the weather.

"All ahead slow." Valentok couldn't wait. Besides, the cargo he was carrying was not something he wanted onboard an instant longer than was necessary. *Let the Americans find it*, he thought. He had been paid handsomely to carry it, but it was their problem now.

He gave orders to raise the cover on the aft hold and swing the crane over the opening. He sent his first mate aft to supervise and watched from the outside starboard wing of the bridge as the cargo hook slipped into the hold and disappeared. He waited two anxious minutes. It seemed an eternity. The hook rose on its steel cable. Valentok saw it. It was attached

to a heavy metal ring. Connected to the ring was a net, ringed with three large floating buoys. The entire package looked like a pouch closed by a drawstring at the top. Inside the net was an object wrapped in a canvas tarp. It wasn't large, about the size of a washing machine, and heavy for its size, though it was no problem for the massive cargo crane of the factory ship. It was lifted easily over the deck and swung toward the stern of the *Isvania*. Slowly it slipped into the water, the cable descending.

Valentok had his back to the bow of his own vessel, watching the action, when he heard a scream from the wheelhouse. He turned, and in a flash of lightning from the darkening sky, he saw it. Barreling down the face of an oncoming wave was a sixty-foot stern fisher, the glass on its forecastle windows gleaming in the flash of lightning.

"Hard to port." Without thinking Valentok gave the order to turn. His ship was still in the trough of the wave.

The helmsman didn't question, but spun the wheel.

Isvania began to heel to starboard. She listed as the luminous green and white wall of water hit her on the curve of her prow like a tidal wave. It washed over the forward deck and slammed into the windows of the bridge twenty feet up, blowing out glass like an artillery shell.

A thirty-foot wall of water swept down the companionway on the port side, slamming men and machinery into the bulkhead and washing them over the side. Like Niagara it swept toward the yawning uncovered hatch of the open aft hold. Thousands of tons of green water cascaded over the edge, down into the ship's belly.

Valentok's grip on the rail was the only thing that kept him from being ripped over the side by the onrushing water. Like steel, his fingers bit into the railing as he found himself contemplating the strange sensation of being totally submerged in the sea while standing on the deck of his own ship. He was waiting for the wave to pass, waiting for an eternity. He held his breath until his lungs felt like fire, until he realized that neither he nor his ship was coming up.

SHE TURTLED in front of his eyes. There was a flash of barnacled keel and two mammoth bronze propellers still turning

as the ship rolled over. Then, before Nordquist could blink, the Russian ship was swallowed by the sea.

He stood motionless at the wheel, stunned, his knees locked as cold sweat ran down his face.

He was quickly jarred back to reality by the pounding of the *Lady* as she plunged to the bottom of the wave's trough. He held his breath, wondering if the wall of water rising in front of him held a deadly surprise: a hundred tons of twisted Russian steel tumbling just under the surface.

He gripped the wheel, white-knuckled, and waited for the screech of metal ripping metal. The diesel engines lugged down as the *Lady* climbed the face of the wave and seemed to pass harmlessly up and over.

It shot from the depths directly in front of him, and Nordquist caught only a glimpse before he felt it slam against the hull, a stack of lumber still bound by its metal bands. It rolled under the hull of the *Lady* like a giant square log. Nordquist threw the engines into neutral, trying desperately to save the props. He felt the lumber bounce along the bottom and watched as it drifted to the surface behind them.

He had his back turned, so he got only a fleeting glimpse when he turned. There in the white-tipped froth on the crest of the next wave were three large orange buoys.

They slid from view down the back side of the wave.

"Did you see them?" Nordquist pointed for the kid to look.

His son's attention was focused toward the stern, to the place in the sea where the Russian had been swallowed.

"Shouldn't we go back?" He was looking now at his father.

"What for?"

"Maybe some of them are alive."

"None of them are alive," said Nordquist.

"How can you be sure?"

"Could you survive that?"

The answer was obvious to them both. Still the kid wanted to do the right thing.

"We could look," he said.

"For what? To make ourselves feel good?"

"If it was us . . ."

"It wasn't us. They knew the risks." Nordquist had no love for the Russians. His boat had been nudged twice in the last

year by larger Russian trawlers seeking an edge in the good fishing grounds. They brought their huge factory ships in and took what they wanted. They would slice you in half if you got in their way.

“Don’t argue with me. Turn that thing on.” The old man gestured with his head toward a drab green metal box mounted on the boat’s console as he struggled with the wheel.

In the mounting seas, the kid had to fight his way back across the wheelhouse to the radarscope and the metal box mounted next to it. He flipped the switch, and the screaming signal nearly pierced his eardrums. He reached for a knob on the side and squelched the noise. The subsonic transceiver was Russian military surplus, part of the deal. It could pick up a signal a hundred miles away. This one was coming from a transmitter very close. It could not be heard on normal marine radio bands. The transceiver was a backup in case the two vessels missed each other in the open ocean. The buoys were designed to float for four days, then to sink with their cargo if no one picked it up. The subsonic transmitter would beam its signal for the entire period until it went down. Then the pressure of the deep sea would crush it.

The signal was confirmation. Somehow they’d delivered before they went down.

“How . . . ?” The kid looked at his father.

Nordquist shook his head. He wasn’t sure.

The *Lady* mounted the next wave and Nordquist saw them again. He was drawing up on the orange buoys quickly. If he wasn’t careful, he would run over them, foul his prop in their lines or net. Without power, in heavy seas, they would quickly join the Russian at the bottom.

“Get to the winch. Tell Carlos to come up.”

“What about the pumps?”

“Forget the pumps. Right now we got to get it onboard.”

Nordquist’s son headed out the cabin door toward the open aft deck.

The old man brought the bow of the *Lady* into the wind and reduced power just enough to hold her in the heavy seas. It gave him lateral maneuvering with little or no headway. He would wait for the sea to bring the buoys to him.

They would have only one chance to pick them up. If they missed, by the time he came about in these seas, they would

lose visual contact. Then they would have to track the package using the subsonic signal. Nordquist had been warned to get it onboard as quickly as possible and to turn off or disable the device. While the Coast Guard might not pick it up, American submarines, the so-called "killer subs" that hunted their Russian counterparts, listened on these frequencies. If they got curious, they might take a look.

Nordquist saw them on the crest of the wave, bobbing like orange barrels. Tethered beneath them in the depths probably fifteen feet down was the cargo, wrapped in a net. He had no idea of its weight or size. The fact that the Russian had rolled made him wonder if the load was heavy. Maybe that and the fact that a wave had hit them on the beam with so much weight over the side had caused them to capsize. If the Russian couldn't handle it, how could he?

Nordquist maneuvered using the wheel, as well as the throttle controls for the two engines. He guided the *Lady* so that the package would pass on her starboard side. Nordquist alerted the two men aft using the boat's bullhorn, then looked over his right shoulder and saw his son leaning over the side straining for a view. The men swung the boom over the side and with a long gaff guided its cargo hook toward the buoys as the current carried them along the side of the boat. Nordquist could hear the cable of the net's line scraping the hull as the load passed beneath them.

Suddenly he felt the *Lady* heel over heavily to starboard. The hook had snagged the buoys. The drag caused the *Lady* to make a slow, lingering turn in the trough, a ten-degree list, fifteen. This was what the old man was worried about: getting caught in the trough of one wave and hit from behind by another. The classic broach. She would roll and capsize.

He goosed the controls for the starboard engine, giving her more thrust on that side, then brought the wheel to port a few degrees. This brought the *Lady*'s bow into the wave at a forty-five-degree angle. The engines strained as she climbed the wall of water, dragging her cargo alongside.

The two crewmen struggled with the winch controls and finally swung the boom around the stern. They kept the cargo amidships and in the water, neutralizing its weight until they could get a break between seas to try to lift it onboard.

Nordquist tried to steady the boat as he looked out one of

the stern portholes from the wheelhouse. He saw smoke and steam rising from the winch drum. The load was too heavy. Even over the howl of the wind, he could hear the screeching of the winch's clutch as it struggled to catch and pull the cargo up out of the water. He could see the tethered cables below the buoys as they rose slowly from the depths.

Another wave, and Nordquist had his hands full. He could only hope that the weight of the load wasn't out of the water yet. His eyes to the front, he deftly handled the engine throttles and wheel to keep the boat balanced. The cargo dragging in the water acted like a sea anchor and actually helped him. For now, it was a friend. The moment they got it out of the water, it would be another matter. If a wave struck, the load would begin to swing like a pendulum. Its weight could bring them over.

The boat seemed to settle in the water. The winch was cranking again, smoke rising from the drum as it turned slowly. Nordquist got the first glimpse of the tethered net. It rose slowly, dripping seawater over the stern. The canvas wrapping around the cargo had opened and filled with water, adding to the weight.

Slowly it came up until it cleared the transom and hovered over the stern. Another wave hit the prow of the *Lady*, and the load began to sway with the motion of the sea. The kid didn't wait. He panicked, pushed the winch lever forward and the entire weight crashed down on the afterdeck. There was a thunderous roar as the weight buckled one of the deck plates. Splintered wood and tons of seawater spilled out of the canvas cover as it ripped along one side. A small silvery sphere the size of a grapefruit rolled out of the smashed container and across the steel deck. It hit the gunwale with a deadening thud and began to roll back the other way with the motion of the ship.

Stunned, the two crewmen were frozen in place, their gaze glued to the object now loose on the *Lady's* deck.

From the wheelhouse, Nordquist could see it.

The men moved, trying to corral it, but they were too slow. The *Lady* heaved forward over the crest of a wave, and the heavy metal sphere rolled along the passageway, beneath the forecastle deck and out onto the prow. Over the steel deck, it sounded like a bowling ball. Nordquist could hear it slamming

against equipment and metal bulkheads. The only thing keeping it onboard was the boat's high gunwales. It careened around the boat like a pinball, slamming into a hatch cover. Nordquist could tell that it was dense and very heavy. He didn't know precisely what it was, but he had a good guess. The guys from Deming and Sedro-Woolley hadn't told him everything, but they'd given him hints, enough to put him on guard. He tried to warn his son with frantic hand signals. Finally he got to the microphone and pushed the button for the bullhorn.

"Stay away from it. Get clear." His words echoed from the loudspeaker mounted atop the wheelhouse.

The boy looked up at him, anxiety written in his eyes. They'd ridden heavy seas for days, survived a near collision with the Russian, and managed to snatch the buoys from the teeth of the storm. He wasn't going to lose it now.

The boy dove onto the deck trying to trap it between the steel gunwale and his outstretched hands. He got his fingers on it and held on, as Carlos came in on top of him.

"No!" Nordquist screamed into the bullhorn.

They managed to subdue it, trap it against the gunwale. With their bare fingers underneath, rubbing and chafing at the sphere, it seemed to coat their hands with something like shimmering chalk. The powdery substance filled the air and drifted against the steel bulkhead beneath the wheelhouse window. The sphere was like a magical substance, and very heavy. Neither of them had ever seen anything like it before.

From the wheelhouse above, Nordquist looked on, slack-jawed, from under dark, furrowed brows. For some strange reason, he didn't have to be told. He knew that his son was as good as dead.

ONE

FRIDAY HARBOR, WA

Burned out at thirty-two, she'd had enough.

They knock L.A., but it isn't the place. It's the people. Too many of them. Lincoln talked about the better angels of our nature, but even angels have limits. Put them in a congested maze, pump in heat and foul air, and you can watch while they rip off one another's wings. Joselyn Cole's were long gone.

Two years ago she pitched it in, sold her furniture, listed the condo at Marina Del Rey, and started looking for a life. She headed north, up the coast, and kept driving, reading population signs as she went. In three weeks traversing back roads and taking her time, she found she had gone about as far as she could without leaving the country. So she left the road and took a ferry. At her first port of call, she stopped, looked around, and decided she was home.

Friday Harbor in the San Juan Islands was a ninety-minute boat ride from Anacortes in Washington State. It may as well have been the back side of the moon. The island was small and the town was smaller. Some say it is like a scaled-down version of Martha's Vineyard. Joselyn would have to take their word for it, never having seen that other place. What she discovered was that it was quiet, and the people, for the most part, were friendly, while they minded their own business. Once the islanders realized that she was there to stay, she

became a local. Acceptance was automatic. Within a week, the clerks at the little grocery store were all calling her by her first name.

It took a few months to hurdle the Washington State bar exam. Once she did, she hung out her shingle.

JOSELYN COLE
ATTORNEY AT LAW

Those who knew her for more than a week called her "Joss." Business was slow. There were some drug cases, mostly marijuana grows, nurseries in houses and old barns run from generators big enough to light a small city. The Feds could detect them with thermal-imaging devices that picked up heat from the Gro-Lites through a six-inch wall.

There are more than four hundred islands in the San Juan chain. Some of these are nothing more than a few rocks that disappear at high tide.

But with an international border only a few miles across open water, Victoria to the west, Vancouver to the northeast, the islands were a smuggler's paradise. Joss thanked God for small favors. With the small-time drug cases, the occasional DUI (driving under the influence), and a few divorces, it kept the wolf from her door, even if her door wasn't much.

She learned that it was possible to survive without a VCR or, for that matter, a television. On Friday nights she found her feet tapping the floor to the strains of Jimmy Buffet off a hi-fi she had bought when she was a kid. She was slowly reading her way through volumes from the local library. Occasionally, she would lose all sense of economic perspective and buy a new paperback.

In winter it was dark by four in the afternoon, and the streets of Friday Harbor were usually empty. Most of the summer businesses shut down for the season. Like bears, the fishermen and blue-collar types would hole up in any cave they could find, mostly the few dimly lit bars that form hangouts for the locals. The winter was when you found out who was hard-core.

Joss stared across her desk into the face of one of these hard-core types. Weathered like leather, its only soft aspect were two brown, basset-hound eyes looking back at her.

“There oughta be something you can do. I mean at least get 'em to pay the doctor bills.” George Hummel was smiling at her, but she could tell that he was scared. George was not exactly a picture of health. He had some signs of bleeding at the gum line. His hair was falling out like dry straw. Hummel was a fisherman, or at least that was what he did for a living when he wasn't too sick to take to the water. He was a client, one of five sport fishers trying to get the state to pay disability benefits for what they claimed was an industrial-related illness. All five men had the same symptoms: red blotches on the skin, loss of appetite, bleeding gums, hair loss. George had become their spokesman.

“I know damn well it's industrial,” he said.

“You don't have to convince me, George.”

“Fine, then do something. I'm running out of money.” His savings was nearly gone. His wife and kids had to eat.

From his lawyer's expression, he could tell that the prospects were not good.

“What are the doctors saying?” She took notes on a legal pad at her desk, George's file spread out in front of her. Its contents were meager except for her own unanswered correspondence, mostly to doctors and state agencies that were not much help.

“The doctors. They don't know from nothing. They want to send me for tests to Seattle.”

“Do it,” she told him.

“It costs money. My health insurance won't pay. They say it's to pursue litigation, not for treatment.”

The great insurance circle jerk. What the politicians, for a hefty campaign contribution, called “managed care”: a panel of physicians under the insurance company's thumb saying “no” to anything that costs money. They had now managed to drive the system down the public's throat.

George told her that the insurance company was stalling, waiting for him to die. “Then it won't cost 'em anything.”

“I need medical records,” said Joss. “I can't do anything without a diagnosis.”

For the state to pay disability, she had to show some industrial connection, some job-related cause for George's condition. For this, she required a medical expert to go out on a