

A large cargo ship is shown from a rear perspective, sailing on a dark blue sea. The ship's funnel is emitting a plume of white smoke. The sky is a dramatic mix of orange, yellow, and dark blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The ship's reflection is visible in the water, but instead of a ship, it is a white skull with dark eye sockets and a jawline. The title 'THE BARGE GHOST' is written in large, white, distressed, block letters across the top half of the image. The word 'THE' is smaller and positioned to the left of 'BARGE'.

THE BARGE GHOST

QUICKREADS

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Sunni McCoy glanced over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. It was now 2:00 A.M. The slim, dark-haired young woman had checked the time just 15 minutes ago. “Still four more hours to go,” she groaned. “My feet are killing me!”

“We’ll make it,” smiled her best friend, Bree Emerson. “Break time is right around the corner, girlfriend! We’ll just get ourselves a blast of hot coffee and you’ll be fine.”

The 22-year-old friends were college students from Seattle. They were spending the summer working as salmon processors in Alaska. For three months their home was a four-story “floating processor” barge called

the *Aleutian Sun*. The huge blue-and-white steel vessel was anchored in a coastal inlet. Sitka, the nearest town, was about six hours away by ferry.

The workers' 16-hour shifts were grueling, but Sunni and Bree were gradually getting used to the grind.

Bree, an athletic blonde, tried to cheer up her weary friend. "Just pretend we're at a really awesome party back in Seattle," she said. "How can you be tired if we're at a party? Hear that throbbing techno music? See that cute guy over there?"

Sunni grinned in spite of herself. Luckily, the two girls never seemed to run out of steam at the same time. One was always there to add some pep when the other was pooped.

"Well, I guess this beats studying for finals," Sunni sighed.

"It sure does," Bree agreed. "Except for one thing. Up here, there are *fish guts* all over the floor!" At that, they both doubled over with laughter.

Sunni picked up a six-inch-long sac of reddish-colored salmon eggs. In their clear membrane, the shiny, round eggs felt cold and slimy through her gloves. She playfully tossed them at Bree. “Catch! Here’s some caviar to take to the party,” she giggled.

“Watch out, you guys!” whispered Hassan, their coworker and buddy. “Jules walked by just a minute ago.”

A big Samoan man, Jules was the production supervisor. It was his job to make sure the “slime line” kept running efficiently. As a boss, Jules was tough but fair. He realized that a little horseplay helped keep the workers in a good mood. But everyone knew not to push him too far.

Straightening up, Sunni and Bree tried to stifle their giggles.

“Okay—act like nothing’s happening,” Bree said, out of the side of her mouth. That always made Sunni laugh.

Actually, Sunni was feeling much better now. Hassan was smiling, too.



Finally, it was 6:00 A.M. Their 16-hour shift was over. Sunni showered and went straight to bed. But Bree was hungry, so she went down to the galley for a bite to eat.

After selecting a bran muffin and a juicy green apple, she sat down at one of the long tables. A few minutes later Hassan joined her.

“You won’t believe what I just heard,” he said. “A guy told me this barge used to be a fishermen’s morgue! A long time ago, it was used to store the bodies of sailors and fishermen who’d died at sea.”

“Ugh, that’s really creepy,” Bree groaned. “Why didn’t they just take the bodies home for burial?”

“Well, apparently, the fishing boats would stay out at sea for months,” Hassan said. “Especially in winter. The captains couldn’t afford to go all the way back home just because some sailor had died. So they’d take the body to the fishermen’s

morgue—*this barge!*

“After a few months, all the bodies would be taken back to Sitka so their families could bury them. I guess it was always cold enough so the corpses wouldn’t decay.”

“Come on, Hassan!” Bree said. “You know as well as I do that this place is a rumor mill. You can never believe the wild stories you hear around here.”

The *Aleutian Sun* was always abuzz with gossip; that was a fact. Still, the story made Bree uneasy. She wondered if it might be true. In a way, it seemed to make sense. And she knew the barge was very old. One of the machines on the production line had a metal plate saying it was made in 1928. The barge itself might be that old—or even older.

When Bree got back to their room, Sunni was still awake. After Bree told her friend Hassan’s story, they both drifted off into an uneasy sleep.



Brrrrrrring! Brrrrrrring! It was the alarm clock. That meant it was half past noon—time for Sunni and Bree to get out of bed. Since they were both on B shift, they'd need to start work again at 2:00 P.M.

Today was laundry day. Sunni had set the alarm clock a little early so she and Bree would have time to get their dirty clothes bagged up.

“C'mon, sleepyhead,” Sunni said as she reached up to the top bunk and shook her friend's shoulder. “We have to bag our laundry. You wouldn't want to wear those same smelly clothes again all week, would you?”

Bree sighed. “If it meant I could sleep for another half hour, I would,” she said. Sunni knew Bree wasn't serious. Stinky clothes were a fact of life here. The two young women wouldn't dream of missing laundry day. But some days they were almost willing to trade their very souls for a little extra sleep.



Sunni dragged her laundry bag and Bree's down to Marge, the laundry lady. Marge was about 50. She had pale skin and badly dyed strawberry-blonde hair. Usually, she was grouchy.

"You brought Bree's bag, too, huh?" Marge asked Sunni. "I swear, that girl is such a prima donna! You'd think it would kill her highness to bring her own laundry down here."

Sunni was mildly annoyed. "Oh, Bree's just not a morning person," she said. She hated it when anyone badmouthed her friends.

"Well, it's not exactly morning, is it?" Marge snapped sarcastically.

"It seems pretty early to us B shift people," Sunni answered.

Marge had been working since 6:00 A.M., so she was nearing the end of her day. Unlike the production crew, she worked only a 12-hour shift.

“Say, you’ve been working on this boat for a long time, haven’t you?” Sunni asked Marge.

“Yeah, what of it?” Marge growled.

“Did you ever hear anything about the *Aleutian Sun* being used as a fishermen’s morgue?” Sunni asked. “Somebody said this boat was used to store fishermen’s bodies until they could be brought home.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty close,” Marge said. “Actually, it was used as a morgue barge in the Vietnam War. It was called the *Tropical Queen* back then. It took soldiers’ bodies to the Philippines. From there, they’d be flown back to the States for burial.”

“Wow!” Sunni said. “This boat sure has been around for a long time.”

“Yes, it has,” Marge said. She was being a little nicer now that she was warming up to her story. “In fact, this old barge even has a ghost.”

“A ghost?! For *real*?” Sunni cried.

“Of course!” Marge snapped. “Do you think I’m making this up? Just ask the cook! Both

of us know plenty of big, strong guys who won't go down into the hold alone. They say there's a room down there that still has a ghost in it. It's icy cold inside, and you can hear clanking in the walls."

"Hmm," Sunni mused. "Maybe it was a soldier who can't accept that he was killed in the war."

"Might be," Marge agreed. "Now get out of here, so I can get back to work. I don't have the time to stand around flapping my jaws all day."



Sunni and Bree suited up in their heavy rubber gloves, boots, hairnets, and rain gear. Bree waved at Hassan as they got in line. It was 2:00 p.m., time to punch in.

"Hey, I was just talking to Marge a little while ago," Sunni said. "She said this boat was never a *fishermen's* morgue. It was a *soldiers'* morgue during the Vietnam War!"

Then Sunni told Bree and Hassan the rest of Marge's story.