

Bering Storms

By G.T. Harper

Sample chapter

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Chapter 1

The Bering Sea between Buldir and Kiska
Islands, Aleutians, Alaska
December 23rd, 2:33 A.M.

Five feet underwater, Max Sinclair thrashed—his chest seizing. He looked for the surface but saw only the enveloping blackness of the sea.

Max kicked and pulled with his arms, trying to propel himself upward, his eyes smarting from the salt. He needed oxygen. NOW. But which way was up?

Long-ago Coast Guard training taking over, Max let an exhalation of air escape his mouth and felt it run up his cheek. He followed the bubbles, clawing through the thick, pulsing sea towards the surface.

It was bad enough being under several feet of frigid water. Worse was not knowing how he got there.

His head broke through the surface. A gale-force gust of spray and rain blasted his clean-shaven face, blinded his eyes, and filled his mouth, choking him. He gasped, coughed, spit out seawater, and sucked in as much air as his lungs could hold.

Looking around, Max saw that he bobbed in what looked like black, liquid lead that heaved and throbbed all around him. The water held him tight, like the cold grip of a living organism. He searched for his ship.

Above him the sky glowed red, like some cold, wet hell. The work lights! The *Pyrrhus* must be near, but waves the size of mobile homes surrounded him, black silhouettes that rose like walls, blocking everything from view. Hoping he might be seen at this distance, he reached for the ACR C-strobe light attached to his life vest and clicked it on.

Nothing happened.

He raised it to his eyes. Clicked it on and off. No light—nothing.

This ACR was the best emergency strobe light you could buy. The flash from it reached over two miles. Max knew the battery wasn't bad; he'd just put in a new lithium a week ago when he joined the crew of the king crab fishing boat. They were supposed to last five years. And he'd checked it twice since then. But now the strobe was dead.

Why didn't it work, the one time he needed it most?

Max kicked with all his strength, trying to stay afloat against the weight of his foul-weather gear. His slim life vest helped, but not much. He reached for the adjustable straps on the vest and pulled them as tight as they would go. The tighter it was to his body the higher in the water he'd ride, and the thin foam core might provide some insulation against the freezing water.

He thought about how he'd gotten here. He remembered being tired, dead tired after working on the deck of the fishing boat for twenty hours straight. But how the hell did he

go over? Had he passed out and collapsed over the railing? Impossible. Did a wave wash him overboard? He didn't remember one. *What was it?*

He treaded water furiously with arms and legs, narrowly keeping his head above the surface as a swell, then another, heaved beneath him.

A sharp pain throbbed across his back, as if someone had hit him across the shoulders with a bat. No, the pain wasn't that spread out. More concentrated: the back of the neck and across his left shoulder. But who cared? Who cares about a little pain when you were about to die?

The water was so cold it burned. Despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins, he was having trouble feeling his fingers beneath their layer of thick rubber gloves and cotton inserts. And his toes, several feet below the sea, seemed too far away to matter.

During his time in the Coast Guard, Max had heard plenty of stories of men going overboard in the Bering Sea. He'd heard of a fisherman who'd gone overboard and survived twenty-three minutes before they found him and pulled him out alive. He'd heard of another who'd gone over and been lifted back into his boat after three minutes—dead. Most men lasted no more than ten. Many simply disappeared.

Max was in excellent physical condition. He could make it—*had* to make it. Somehow he had to get out of here, back to the ship,

back to work. But where was the damn boat? What was he doing here? The last thing he remembered was standing at the railing of the *Pyrrhus* untying a crab pot.

His foul-weather gear, sweats, and long johns provided no insulation against the near-freezing water. The foam life vest, now clamped tight around his chest, helped a little, but not enough—and not for long. He felt himself burning up, but knew he wasn't warm: he was becoming hypothermic. His body's temperature was rising to combat the cold. Soon it would crash. He'd shake violently; blood would leave his hands and feet, then his arms and legs, in an effort to salvage the vital organs. Within minutes he'd be unable to tread water, his heart rate dropping, his breathing retreating from quick gasps to shallow breaths. The shaking would stop. Still awake, he'd slip beneath the water, able to see but unable to move, watching as the surface disappeared above him.

Max rose up on the face of a wave. When he neared the top, he saw the *Pyrrhus*, its halogen work lights illuminating the deck. But the crab boat seemed so far off, impossibly far. Worse, it was moving away.

He kicked hard and raised his head and arms a few more inches out of the water. The *Pyrrhus* had to see him, had to come about now, or there'd be no point in searching for him. He waved his arms over his head. "Over here! I'm over here! Help. Help me!"

But the noise from the wind, the rain

and the breaking white caps ate his cries as the sea swallows falling snow.

* * *

In the middle of the *Pyrrhus*, Dwight Hamilton knelt on the black metal deck and twisted closed the round opening of tank No.1, filled now with crabs. Rainwater dripped from his orange hood and blond beard.

Something flew by his face. He glanced up, startled. The twenty-pound gaff hook, attached to the crane by a steel cable, sailed out and up over the starboard railing. Dwight blinked several times, his vision fogged by the warring effects of fatigue and coffee. But it wasn't a mirage. Like a pendulum, the gaff sliced through the black night and drenching rain.

Christ. That almost hit me.

Dwight jumped to his feet, keeping his eyes focused on the gaff as it began its return arc over the deck. He ran to the side, crouched, and prepared to pounce. As the gaff skimmed just above the railing, Dwight caught the cable two feet above the hook with his gloved hand. The momentum pulled him off his feet, but he hung on, regained his balance, and tied off the gaff to the starboard railing with a spare line.

Why hadn't it been winched back up to the top of the crane? What was it doing down? Dwight frowned. He'd been using the crane to lift a crab pot on deck and move it to the

launcher. But he'd winched the gaff hook back to the top of the crane before checking the forward tank. He was sure of it. There's no way he would ever have left it down, swinging. Something was wrong here. It wasn't adding up.

He looked around the deck. Frank and Ted Bright, cousins and fishermen, stood at the bait pin with their backs to the deck. The men worked in unison filling bait jars, their motions synchronized. When in the zone, as they were now, not much distracted them.

Dwight scanned the deck for Max. He was nowhere in sight.

Dwight looked up at the pilothouse rising twenty feet above the deck's stern. Through the rain-streaked windows, he saw the side of Captain Agee Mathews's head as he gazed at a computer screen. Was no one on this boat paying attention? And where the hell was Max?

Dwight turned to the forecastle, rising ten feet off the deck. The door to the equipment room was latched open. He could see no one inside.

The prow of the ship rammed into a house-sized wave as the *Pyrrhus* motored to the next crab pot. Dwight clung to the gaff's cable for balance. With his free hand, he cupped his mouth and called above the wind.

"Max!"

Nothing.

Again, screaming over the howling wind, "Max!"

Dwight's stomach tightened. He spun about and searched the ocean. Still in the halo of work lights, Dwight spotted something a hundred yards to the stern off the starboard side. Dwight spotted something that made him feel sick.

At the top of a swell, two yellow objects waved back and forth.

"Oh, hell." He stumbled frantically to the forward bulkhead. The black button on the intercom beckoned like a solitary object at the end of a tunnel. *Oh God. Oh God.*

As he ran past, Dwight slapped Frank Bright on the shoulder, hard. He reached the intercom, punched the button, and screamed into it. The speakers amplified and echoed his panicked voice.

"MAN OVERBOARD! MAXWELL IS OVERBOARD!"

* * *

The sound of the croaking speakers clawed through the rain and wind. They knew he was here. They'd seen him. *Thank God.*

But Max Sinclair had been in the water several minutes, and the boat could not stop and pivot, or back up, in less than another five. To make it that long—nearly ten minutes in this ice bath—seemed impossible. Already he struggled to keep his head above water.

"Goddamn it," Max mouthed, realizing how slim his chances of getting back on board were. He was going to have to swim for it. No

way were they going to get to him in time. He had to get to them. Another accident was the last thing the *Pyrrhus* needed. Max had been flown up from Seattle just a week ago when Peter Maas, the regular fourth deckhand on the ship, had gotten his hand crushed between a sliding crab pot and the railing. Max's uncles had brought Max up on the same helicopter that had medevaced Peter out. He had agreed to come to save his uncles' season, the best crab fishing they'd seen in two decades. But here Max was floating around in the water, about to die. Some help.

"Goddamn it," Max mouthed again and lifted his right foot to the surface and pulled off the boot. He switched legs, pulled off the left. Then, against his better instincts, he put his head in the water and began a strong crawl toward the boat.

* * *

Dwight Hamilton grabbed a life ring off the bulkhead, ran back to the railing, and with the might of an Olympic discus thrower, flung it into the dark, rain-soaked air. It sailed forty feet out over the sea, the line attached to it trailing back to the *Pyrrhus* like a tail.

Short. Pointless, really, but what else could he do? Besides it was part of the drill.

Dwight's chest heaved. Everything seemed a blur, moving too fast.

Don't panic.

The last man who went overboard, five

years ago, didn't survive. *No, no, oh God, that can't happen again. Not to Max.*

When Peter Maas was injured a week ago, it was Dwight who'd suggested bringing up Max. After all, Max had worked with them before. Sure, it had been eight years ago. Not during a fishing season, and not in rough waters. But who else were they going to get? Max's uncles had been against it, but they needed a worker badly, and Dwight had finally convinced them.

On deck Frank and Ted Bright leaned over the railing, their large, muscular frames tensing as they shouted directions to Captain Mathews in the pilothouse.

The engines revved, hard reverse. Then right hard reverse, left full forward. The two 1000-horsepower diesels shook the boat, churned the water, screamed beneath the deck. But 133 feet and 22 tons of boat came about as slowly as a beached whale.

"Come on, come on." Dwight pounded his fists on the railing. "Move, you son of a bitch! MOVE."

The *Pyrrhus* began to spin and edge backwards. Dwight stared at the yellow dot, fearing he'd lose sight of it. But it seemed to be getting closer. He thought the yellow arms were still waving at them, but that wasn't it; they were churning through the water. Max was swimming.

The life ring floated some thirty yards away now, and Max was swimming towards it. During his fifteen years as a king crab

fisherman, Dwight had seen four men go over. He helped rescue three. But in all that time, he'd never seen anyone swim—and not like Max was swimming. The guy had his head in the water. It looked like he was swimming a race. And in a sense, he was. But in water this cold, how long could he keep it up? Then Max disappeared behind a swell.

Come on. Keep going.

“Get this goddamned tub moving,” Frank shouted up at the captain on the bridge. “God, I can’t believe it. Dwight, how’d he go over? Did you see it?”

Dwight shook his head without shifting his gaze.

“Hell, no, he didn’t see it,” Ted shouted, water spraying from his black beard. He took off his thick, black-framed glasses, also dripping with water, shook them clear, then replaced them. “Max wouldn’t be so far away if he had! Come on, think.”

“You just get the hell ready to lower the harness when we get near. We got one shot. Can’t screw it up.”

Dwight swayed back and forth, as if his motion might make the boat move faster.

Come on, Max. Swim you mother.

The yellow dot reappeared—closer. Max was still swimming, but the stroke was not as powerful; his arms were barely clearing the water. He looked spent. But still, if he could just reach the life ring, they should be able to pull him in the rest of the way.

“Come on, Max,” Dwight yelled.

Roaring, the boat reversed and twisted, hitting swells sideways, spray flying across the deck, drenching the fisherman who, protected in their bright-orange foul-weather gear, hardly seemed to notice.

Ten yards from the ring and closing. Max was still swimming, barely. Five yards. One.

“He’s got it,” Dwight screamed. “He’s got the ring!”

Dwight saw Max hug the ring to him, looping an arm through it. Max’s face looked toward the boat, glassy doll-eyes staring at them. *The face of a ghost*, Dwight thought. *Or a corpse.*

The engines blasted full throttle reverse. Propellers churned the water into a chalky foam. No one on earth could maneuver this boat as well as Agee Mathews. The man was a damn ballerina on the controls. Agee wasn’t wasting a second reaching Max. He’d reversed this fat boat and twisted it sideways so it ended up on the windward side of Max. In these seas such a maneuver was next to impossible to pull off, at least for anyone but Agee.

Dwight grabbed the line to the ring. “Come on. Frank, Ted, let’s pull him in.” The two fishermen joined Dwight and began pulling on the rope like they were in the finals of a tug of war contest. The resistance was tremendous. Max was six feet two inches, Dwight figured, at least 190 pounds, and with all those soaked clothes must be closer to 250 pounds. He did not just slide through the

water.

They were making progress when the loudspeaker suddenly blared a warning: "WAVE!"

Dwight turned his head and saw the top five feet of a wave crash over the port side and rush at them like a moving wall. It hit the three fishermen at hip height and knocked their legs out from under them. They tumbled over like dominoes. The wading pool of water sloshed on the deck for a second before it disappeared through the scuppers.

The men jumped back to their feet, grabbed the rope and gave a mighty pull. It resisted at first, then slackened. The men stumbled backwards. Dwight fell again to the deck. He scrambled to his feet and was first to the railing.

Max had let go of the ring. Ten feet from the boat his head bobbed above the water, just barely, and then it went under.

Ted and Frank joined Dwight at the railing, screaming. Dwight ripped off his slicker. Dreading what he was about to do, but realizing he had no other choice, he took a few steps back, then ran and leaped over the railing.

Frank screamed, "No!"

The cold water hit Dwight like a wall of ice.

From under the surface of the sea, he aimed for the vague yellow shimmer already sinking deeper. The foul-weather overalls and rubber boots he wore made it hard to swim,

hard to make any progress. He kicked harder and pulled with everything he had through the oily blackness.

Close enough now, Dwight reached out and touched the blurry yellow object. Lifeless, unmoving.

Dwight tried to grab hold of Max's hood, but the slick material slipped through his rubber gloves. His lungs burned. A few more seconds and he'd have to come up without Max.

Swimming deeper, Dwight hooked his arms underneath Max's armpits and hunted for the surface. He saw air bubbles rising, a ghostly glow above him, the deck lights, and kicked madly towards it. With Max's added dead weight, swimming was like moving through quicksand.

The exertion from swimming and the fear of being under the Bering Sea pounded through Dwight, sapping him of energy and oxygen. His head spun. Dots of light flashed on the periphery of his vision. He broke the surface.

Kicking to keep afloat, he gulped air and sea spray, coughed, and pulled Max closer to him.

A few feet away, the side of the boat rose out of the water.

* * *

Inside the *Pyrrhus*, Max's uncle, Sam Mathews, brother of the captain, sprang up in

his bunk. Something was wrong with the engines. Why were they revving like that?

A wet film of perspiration covered his forehead. As the ship's engineer, Sam found that such noises made his insides clench as tight as a fist.

The engines whined louder, then stopped, and surged again. Hell on the gears, that. Agee was going to blow something.

Silence again.

Without bothering to turn on the light, Sam lifted his bum leg with his hands and swung it over the side of the bunk. The brace, which he hadn't bothered to take off when he lay down four hours ago, grazed against the wooden railing, sending a shot of pain through his knee.

Cursing his bad leg, Sam pulled on his baggy coveralls, then his boots, flipped his long graying hair back behind his ears, and hobbled out the door. As he mounted the stairs that led up to the pilothouse, he called up, "What the hell's going on?"

No response from his brother.

He reached the bridge. "What're you doing, Agee?"

"Max is overboard." Agee sounded frantic, almost hysterical. "He's in the water. Get out there. They need help!"

"Max? Our Max?" Sam called up.

"Who else, goddamn it. Get out there. Save his ass."

Oh, Christ.

Sam glanced around the galley. No one.

Staggering toward the hatch leading to the deck, he stopped at the head, opened the door and leaned in.

Two men crowded next to the porthole, looking out. Sheldon Johnson, the taller of the two, was one of the four processors on board—the one Sam couldn't quite figure out. Not your typical processor, that was for sure. He was a handsome, strong, twenty-something kid, with brains and charisma: just the qualities you didn't need in a processor and almost never found. Next to him stood an elfin man in his fifties, Brock Jones, the cook. Sheldon turned back to look at Sam and nudged Brock, who also turned, his weathered face pinched into a scowl, reddened eyes flashing.

“What the hell? Get outside and help, you little shits!”

“I, I, I just don't think I'd, you know, be of—” Brock shrank back.

Sheldon looked down, then back up at Sam with a pleading smile, eyebrows raised. “Listen, I don't get paid enough to help with this kind of shit.” He said it nicely, like he wanted to help but just wasn't allowed to because of some unwritten rule. “Show me the money, I'll be right behind you.” He raised his hands, palms up, feigning helplessness.

“You asshole.” Sam scowled. “I'll remember this.”

“Please do.” Sheldon looked back out the porthole without another word.

Sam turned, slammed the door behind

him and raced outside.

* * *

From the deck, Frank Bright threw the harness into the water next to Dwight Hamilton. Dwight grabbed it with one arm, holding onto Max with the other.

Barely managing to keep his own head above water, Dwight slipped the harness around Max and under his arms. On deck Ted moved the controls of the winch until the line from the crane was tight, and then Max's pliant body began to rise out of the water. As he came up out of the sea, Dwight peered into his unconscious face. The sight made his shivering body tighten.

Max's face glistened pale blue. Dwight had seen a man that color once before.

Five years ago.

* * *

Captain Mathews pressed his face to the pilothouse window, his hands braced against the glass, shielding out the glare from the halogen work lights. The deck was as bright as day, the sea beside the ship a black, undulating monster and beyond an empty, impenetrable void. He watched Frank and Ted pull Max's limp body over the railing. Sam shuffled across the deck to help them.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Agee banged his forehead off the half-inch thick glass. *No,*

not again. Not Max. He opened his eyes and stared down as the two fishermen laid Max on the deck. Sam dropped down next to him. He turned Max onto his side and thumped him in the middle of his back.

Come on, Sam.

Frank and Ted rushed back to the railing to retrieve Dwight. They moved low and balanced—men used to moving fast on a heaving deck. Agee wanted to get down there, now, but he had to wait. Wait until Dwight was out of the water. As soon as he saw the two fishermen begin to pull Dwight out with the harness, Agee checked to make sure the engines were at idle, and bolted downstairs.

His plaid shirt flapping over his paunch, Agee hopped through the hatch onto the deck. The wind blasted him in the face. He felt it blow through his thick hair as he dashed across the wet steel. He stopped above Sam and Max.

Sam took a deep breath and placed his lips over Max's open mouth. He pinched Max's nose shut and then exhaled deeply.

Now on his knees, Agee held Max's wrist, searching Sam's face. "Anything?"

"Not yet." Sam pressed his lips to Max's purple mouth and blew. Agee choked back phlegm that was rising up, squeezed his eyes tightly shut. He wanted to sob, scream, but forced himself to hold back this throbbing, overwhelming panic and despair. "Come on, Max, come on. Don't die on us, kid."

Max's chest rose. He gagged, coughed,

sputtered out water, sucked in air, and lay still, a crimson color seeping back into his face. Then he threw up, water erupting out of his mouth, hitting Sam in the face.

Sam pulled back, wiped his face, smiling.

“Yeah, buddy, that’s it. Let it out,” Agee said. *Thank God, thank you, God.* He plopped back down on the deck and exhaled.

Max shook, the muscles contracting suddenly, lifting his head off the deck. Sam rolled Max onto his side as he vomited more seawater and food, breathing deeply between convulsions.

Sam wiped at his eyes. “Damn, that was close.”

“You’re the man.” Agee grabbed his brother’s shoulder and squeezed. He’d never been so glad to have Sam on board. “You are the goddamn man.”

“Yeah. Nice,” Ted said behind them, pulling his glasses off once more with one hand and licking them clean so he’d have a better view.

Agee turned and looked at the fishermen. Ted and Frank held Dwight between them. Dwight’s face shone a pale blue in the ship’s lights, and he shivered uncontrollably.

Agee flashed the thumbs up as he rose. “Frank, Ted, get Dwight inside. He looks cold as shit. Gotta get his temperature up. We got Max.”

Frank and Ted helped Dwight across the

deck.

Agee kneeled next to Max, squeezed his arm, looked into his nephew's stunned face, then looked at Sam.

"Let's get him inside," Agee said.

Lifting Max up by his arms, Agee and Sam carried him across the deck, Max's feet dragging behind them. He was coming to his senses and began looking around him with a bewildered expression.

"What, what happened?" Max stuttered as he was carried toward the stern hatch.

"You went in. Overboard. But we got you. You're okay. Everything's okay." Agee looked over at Sam and said, "Thank God. I couldn't have called his mom with that kind of news. No damn way." Max was their only nephew—more like a son really. They had been lucky, damn lucky to get both men back on board so quickly. They could easily have lost both of them if a wave had knocked the *Pyrrhus* back, or worse, lifted the boat on top of the two men, crushing them. It had happened before, dozens of times on less fortunate boats to less fortunate fishermen. *Lost at sea*. The phrase had become a cliché.

Agee looked back at the black, roiling sea, remembering Emerich. Five years ago, Emerich had been overboard no more than five minutes. Probably died of a heart attack the second he went in. Hyped up on coke all the time, what did you expect? A bubble trapped in his foul-weather gear had kept the body afloat, face down; they'd almost gotten him

out. But Agee got too close, and the *Pyrrhus* rolled over on the body before they could grab it. Never saw Emerich again.

Agee couldn't get it out of his mind. Every time he looked down at the black water at night, he saw the back of that yellow jacket, floating next to the ship.

"Remember Emerich?" Agee asked.

"What do you think?" Sam stepped through the hatch into the sterile warmth of the processing room. Leaving the wind and rain to pelt the empty deck, Agee eased Max through and followed.

Breathing hard, teeth chattering, Max used his legs and moved to the other side of the room where Ted and Frank were helping Dwight out of his foul-weather gear.

Agee looked around the room: the bright fluorescent strips on the ceiling reflecting light off the stainless steel equipment; chutes that spilled crabs onto conveyor belts and sorting tables. The boat had originally been designed to both catch and process crabs so that it could stay on the fishing grounds longer—without wasting time off loading to processing plants onshore. But with the crash of the crab population, there had been little need for such efficiencies. You either fished during the lucrative seasons or processed; you never did both—until now.

The Adak fishing grounds had been closed for decades. They were the largest in the Bering Sea, stretching five hundred miles from Adak Island in the middle of the Aleutian

chain all the way west to Attu, which lay only two hundred miles from Russia. Fish and Game research showed red king crab populations in the area had exploded, even as they'd plummeted in the fishing grounds east of Dutch Harbor, and Agee with his ship were proving them right. So as much as Agee hated a crowded ship and a bunch of unruly processors, he had to admit they were making more money because of them. A lot more.

But how could it be worth it, if it led to an accident like this?

Agee helped Sam lower Max onto the bench next to Dwight.

"Can you sit okay?" Sam asked.

Max nodded and turned to Dwight. "Wait. How . . . how'd I go in?"

Dwight was still shivering himself, his face pale from the cold. He looked over at Max as Ted and Frank unharnessed his Farmer Johns.

"The gaff," he said. "Somehow it was lowered. It hit you. Did you lower it?"

"What? No. What? Are you kidding?"

Agee tended to agree. Leaving the gaff down was a huge mistake, something he could imagine one of the processors doing, but Max? His nephew was the last person who would make a mistake like that. But they'd been working him hard, a gazillion hours in the week since he'd flown up here. It hadn't seemed to faze Max a bit. He'd been a mule, a robot—perfect—until now.

Agee said, "You were tired. Dead tired.

We just worked you too hard. I'm sorry kid. It wasn't your fault." Max looked up at Sam. "The strobe, check the battery." He tried to hold the strobe up to Sam, but it was still attached to the vest.

"Not now," Sam said, putting a hand on Max's shoulder. "Let's get this gear off you and get you inside. Ted, Frank, get as many hot water bottles heated up as you can find. You're going to have to microwave the water or heat it up on the stove. Hot water heater's still busted." Sam tried to pry Max's grip from the strobe light.

Max looked up at Sam with burning blue eyes. "No," he said, sitting up. "Now."

Sam shook his head, then nodded. "Okay." He took the strobe light, unattached it, flicked the switch on and off. Nothing happened. Then he unscrewed the bottom and took out the battery. "No wonder it doesn't work," he said. "The battery's in upside down."

Sam looked to Agee, but Agee was watching Max, whose expression—angry, determined, and deadly serious—said it all: *Someone did this to me.*

* * *

You lie on your back looking up at the bunk above you. Small indentations perforate an area five inches wide in the solid wood. What are they? You touch your fingers to them, realize you made them, every night adding more with your SOG Recon Bowie knife.

The knife's point is getting dull. You try to sharpen it with the portable diamond knife sharpener you have. It works well enough, gets it sharp enough, never back to the original shape though, never quite back, because you use the knife too much, play with it too much, touch it to places it should never touch, fondle it, finally manage to put it back in its sheath before anyone comes in.

When the voices come back from the deck, excited, much happier than you'd imagined, you realize they've somehow managed to save him, pull him from the water alive. You curse under your breath and hammer your fist once into the bunk's railing, and again, grab an ear and pull so hard you think it's going to come off.

It is like your first rat, the one you'd caught in that Havahart trap. The name of the trap always makes you smile. You'd only used it so the rat wouldn't die, so you could play with it first.

You remember holding the rat by its tail, watching it twitch as you dipped it like candy into the scoured tub, half-filled with water. It splashes, tries to swim, to keep its head above water, but you move it around, raise it quickly up and down so that gravity pulls it under, keeps its head submerged.

The rat makes this horrible squeaking noise every time it comes up, every time its nose breaks the surface. Your mother hears it out in the kitchen.

What are you doing? she screams. You

pervert. You jacking off or something? Open this goddamn door. Stop that!

She pounds on the door. You keep dipping your rat candy, wondering why it's taking so long, wondering how this rat can still be alive, still be twitching so much.

I'm getting the tool. I'm opening the damn door, you little pervert. I'm opening the goddamn door. You better zip up!

You have no idea what she's talking about, or even what a pervert is. You've heard the word many times, but no one's bothered to explain it to you. Your mom and her various boyfriends say all kinds of words you don't know. And when you ask what they mean, they say more of the words, but never explain them. You're too young, they say. You shouldn't learn these words. They laugh.

So you learn to get along, to not ask so many questions, because it can get you the back side of a hard hand if you're too nosy.

You're only six.

You hear your mom fidgeting with the door; she's got the skewer she uses to open the lock. She'll be in here any second. Maybe. She's drunk and never good with her hands, so you really have no idea how long it's going to take her.

Anyway, you lift the rat out of the water and run to the window. You open it. But the rat is still moving, still alive. How can that be? You grab it by the back of the neck, squeeze as hard as you can, wring its neck. And then at the last possible moment, you toss it out the window

and turn to face your mom.

She screams at you, her stringy, mouse-colored hair waving around her shoulders. She's a small woman, especially next to her boyfriends: thin and bony, with wiry muscles. Still, she can hit hard. She hits you across the head, but has no idea what you've been up to. You say you were just playing with some toys in the tub. You didn't hear her, don't know why the door was locked. It will never happen again, you say. At least not while she's home.

When she finally leaves, you run to the window and look down at the ground three floors below. There's nothing there. No rat. Nothing but the trash from the apartment building that never gets picked up. You squeeze your eyes tightly shut, as if you're dreaming and you want to wake up. You look again. Still no rat. It's gone. Words come out of your mouth whose meaning you don't even know, but you know they fit. You slam your hand down onto the metal tracks of the window over and over until the side of your fist begins to bleed. It survived. That damn rat survived.

Just like the goddamn fisherman.

Damn, you have bad luck.

But you remember carrying the trap back downstairs, after your mom's gone out. You put it back near the trash pile and wait. A week later, that same stupid rat climbs in and is caught. And this time you don't let it survive.

You think of the fishermen outside, and you smile.

But then he comes through the door,

breaking the dream, erasing the smile. He's not smiling. Not at all.

What the hell, he says in a fierce whisper.

He stands above your bunk, eyes on fire, his big shoulders shaking.

He's not even hurt. He's not going home. He's still on this boat.

He looks at you hard, watching your every move. He sees something.

You dumb shit. That was our perfect chance. And you screwed it up. The rest aren't in until he's off. So fix it. Fix it.

You don't like it when he gets mad at you. It's like your mom's boyfriends. You cower in your bunk, almost curled into a ball.

But then he's gone.

You uncurl, stretch, reach under the mattress, pull out the knife, cradle it in your hand.

Yeah, you'll do what he says, follow his orders, figure out a way to send Max home. The goddamn Coast Guard. Used to be a special agent. Same as a cop. On your boat. Dumb bad luck. You jam the knife into the plywood above you, pull it out, jab it in again and again.

End of Chapter One – Sample Chapter