

One

"Severe electrical storms approaching, Captain," reported First Mate Alex Reardon. He double-checked the reading on the computer-enhanced radar scanner. The monitor showed a digital image of the nearby coastline. Red blotches covered sections of the computer map, indicating thunderstorms.

Captain Stanley Briggs shot Reardon a look of disdain through his gold-rimmed glasses.

"I don't need that fancy piece of electronic genius to tell me that." He returned his attention to the windscreen. "Just look out there and you can see for yourself."

Black clouds roiled in the darkening, late afternoon sky. As Reardon watched, the clouds quickly consumed the South-East Queensland coastline some twelve kilometres away in a matter of minutes, almost obscuring it from view. Lightning shot down from the black mass in savage bolts, some of which would have certainly struck the ground. Low groans of thunder rumbled across the sea.

"She's a doozey," commented ship's navigator Jason Stone, having twisted in his swivel chair to eye the approaching tempest.

The cabin of the bridge was quickly becoming gloomy. Reardon hit a switch on the wall and several overhead fluorescent lights blinked on. The First Mate's balding pate gleamed under the artificial glow.

"Reardon," quipped the captain. "What's the exact direction in which the storm is headed?"

The First Mate smirked. "I thought you wouldn't need the computer to tell you that, Sir."

"Just get me the course," Briggs said curtly, still watching the horizon intently through the broad, three piece Perspex windscreen.

Reardon's smirk disappeared as quickly as the lightning flashes outside. "Yes, Sir. Right away." He studied the scanner's information readout on the right side of the computer screen. "It's headed on a north, north-easterly bearing at thirty-two degrees, Sir."

Briggs nodded grimly. "There's no chance of avoiding it. The beast is headed right this way. We'll just have to ride it out."

Reardon glanced through the windscreen at a small island seven kilometres off to starboard. He stared thoughtfully at the computer screen again, which informed him the island was called South Stradbroke. Behind the island, he noted, were relatively protected waters.

"May I suggest, Sir," he said, stepping over beside the captain, "that we move into the protected waters behind Stradbroke Island." He nodded toward the small green land mass.

Briggs thought about it. As he considered Reardon's suggestion the wind swung around to the south-west and increased in tempo to forty knots. He watched as it churned up the sea in front of the *Privateer*; a small seventy-five foot cargo ship. After what seemed like an eternity to Reardon, the captain nodded. "I'd say that's a sound idea." He radioed the pilot and ordered a twenty degree course change to starboard.

The cabin lights grew brighter as the outside world became darker. Angry bolts of lightning shot down from the clouds in an almost rhythmic pattern, branching off into several forks and striking the ocean surface. Blown way ahead of the storm, the first drops of rain hammered into the windscreen.

Reardon lit a cigarette. He'd always hated storms as a kid, and he realised he still did as he watched the nervous tremor in his hand that held the burning match. He puffed on the cigarette hungrily as Briggs radioed the pilot again with another course change.

Night had come early with the arrival of the storm. Briggs hit a switch on the console that activated two powerful spotlights mounted on the roof of the bridge. He rotated the right spotlight with a small joystick on the console until it was pointed in the direction of South Stradbroke Island. The island was not yet close enough to be reached by the powerful beam. Briggs kept the left spotlight aimed in front of the bow, illuminating the ship's path.

Reardon's cigarette had burned down to a length of smouldering ash. He stabbed it out in an ashtray and immediately lit another.

The captain glared at him with distaste. "Remind me to sue you for passive smoking when I develop diseases from your stinking habit."

Reardon was used to his captain's remarks now regarding his addiction and he easily shrugged them off. He staggered as the vessel rolled on a sharp swell. The cigarette dropped to the floor and rolled under a chair as his hand went out to steady himself. He'd retrieved it just as a squall of hail hit the windshield and roof with the sound of someone unloading a truck full of gravel on top of a tin shed.

The high-speed rotating windshield wipers were at full power. They did little, however, to clear the field of vision. The rain and hail was far too dense and the wipers were rendered virtually useless.

Briggs radioed the pilot with more course adjustments as the ship swayed like a drunken sailor. The wind howled through the air vents, driving rain through any minute opening in the boat's structure it could find.

Reardon returned to the weather radar screen and searched out the pulsing blue light that indicated the position of their ship. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he noted they were only just entering the storm's front. The worst was yet to come.

As if on cue, a bolt of lightning shot down from the heavens and struck the sea not two hundred metres in front of the *Privateer's* bow.

"Shit that was close!" Stone exclaimed, his eyes wide with excitement.

Reardon eyed the dark sky ahead with anticipation and foreboding. He sensed what was coming a moment before it happened and he tensed.

There was a blinding flash, followed instantly by a deafening crack of thunder. The *Privateer* shuddered and convulsed under the impact of the lightning strike. She yawed to starboard, temporarily out of control. The lights dimmed and flickered, then went out, plunging the ship into total darkness.

A large swell hit the boat broadside. Everyone on the bridge was thrown to the floor. Reardon skidded along the linoleum on his back, his progress halted when his legs crashed into a wall. Before he had a chance to get to his feet, the *Privateer* was struck by another wave. This one crashed into the stern, twisting the ship back the other way until its bow was once again pointing into the teeth of the storm. The boat steadied and rolled comfortably over the next swell. Reardon gripped the edge of the console and hauled himself to his feet.

Rain and hail continued to bombard the windscreen relentlessly, only now they couldn't see a thing with the lights out and the wipers not functioning. A gust of wind hit the windshield with such force that Reardon automatically ducked, fearing the perspex was going to implode. But the windshield stubbornly held firm against the onslaught of nature.

Reardon searched a cupboard beneath the console and quickly found what he knew were there. He removed two waterproof flashlights and switched one on. Flashing it around the cabin in a sweeping arc, he located Captain Briggs leaning over the now-lifeless console, staring calmly out at the storm. Briggs didn't glance his way as Reardon thrust a flashlight into his captain's hand.

"We need to radio for help, Sir," Reardon pleaded. The boat shuddered under the impact of another wave but maintained its course, the twin diesel engines still humming away steadily. "We may not make it through this."

Now the Captain looked at him. "Nonsense. I've ridden out worse storms than this one."

Another finger of lightning shot down from the sky and struck the sea near the stern of the *Privateer*. The vessel lurched forward and dipped into a trough. Both Reardon and Briggs were slammed against the console.

Stone, standing somewhere in the darkness, noticed it first. "The engine's have died."

Reardon and Briggs listened intently above the howl of the wind and rain for the comforting and familiar hum that was no longer there.

Reardon shone his light on the captain. "We have to radio for assistance now. Without engines we lose all control. We'll be at the mercy of the storm."

Briggs shook his head. "We can't. Without power the radios are down."

"They have emergency battery backup!" Reardon insisted.

The captain shook his head adamantly. "The storm will pass. Then we'll fix the engines, restore power and move on."

"But--"

"I won't radio for help!" Briggs hissed in Reardon's face. "No one can know what we carry down in the hold. No one but us and those who are supposed to know. Is that clear?"

Reardon stared hard at his captain. Eventually he sighed and nodded in assent. "I just pray we don't go down...Sir."

"Instead of praying, try doing something useful. Go down to the hold and check on our cargo."

Reardon nodded and started walking off in silence. Stone unrolled a nautical chart of the area and studied it under the Captain's flashlight. As Reardon opened the door and stepped from the bridge, he heard Stone say to Briggs, "There looks to be a shallow line of coral reef several kilometres off that island, Sir." Reardon put that thought, and the possibilities it conjured up, out of his mind as he made his way down to the cargo hold.

He swayed and staggered and stumbled with each swell that struck the ship. The *Privateer* was adrift, floating aimlessly, waiting to be drowned by nature's fury.

Back on the bridge, Briggs said to Stone, "Get on the radio and send a coded message to Control, stating our position." The ship's navigator eyed him quizzically. "Just in case," Briggs added.

Stone nodded obediently and snatched up the radio, flicking a switch on the unit to engage battery backup power.

Reardon entered the tomb-like blackness of the hold, guiding his way with the flashlight beam. The cargo bay was empty bar a large metal container. He swept the beam of his light along the container's seven metre length. The top was made of two hinged doors secured in the middle with a hefty padlock. Taking some keys from his belt, Reardon held them under the light and selected the correct one. He fumbled with the lock for almost a minute. Every time he inserted the key, the yawing vessel would throw him off balance. Finally he got it open and strained to lift one of the heavy, cold doors.

Inside lay the monstrosity they'd traveled halfway around the world to deliver. It hadn't moved an inch, still resting snugly in its bed of straw and foam padding. There was a small metal box nestled beside it. Reardon removed the box. It wasn't locked, just held shut with a latch. He set it on top of the container and opened it. Inside was a remote control handset. He removed it from its foam padding and shone the light on it. Reardon dared not touch any of the many buttons, fearing what he might awaken.

The rumble of thunder was nowhere near as loud and ferocious way down in the hold. But the hiss of the outraged sea sounded far more savage. As Reardon shone the flashlight beam into the large container once more, the *Privateer* suddenly shuddered violently.

There was the piercing sound of screeching metal. The vessel lurched upwards. Reardon was thrown backwards onto the steel floor, where he slid into a wall for the second time that night. There he sat up, the remote control still in his grasp but the flashlight gone. He sensed, rather than saw, the water flooding in through a gaping tear in the ship's hull.

A wave forced the stricken vessel further up onto the reef. The *Privateer* screamed in protest again. As the swell abated, the boat slid back into the sea with a tremendous howl, the action peeling the hull clean off the bottom of the ship.

The heavy container with its mysterious cargo was first to disappear to the sea floor, the doors unlocked and swinging freely as it descended to the sand.

Water rushed into the hold with the force of a tidal wave, crushing Reardon to a lifeless pulp against the stern wall. As he died, his hand twitched in a reflex reaction, the thumb pressing a button on the remote control handset.

The container settled to the bottom, its contents still intact. As it hit the sand, two red lights blinked on inside the metal box. The *Privateer* landed on the sea bed eighty metres away, where it quickly settled into its lonely, watery grave.

Two

THE NEXT DAY:

It only knew one thing, and that was to kill.

Hanging buoyant twenty feet above the sea bed, it sensed some slight vibrations off to the left. Swimming fluently through the sun-filtered water, the thing homed in on the source of the disturbance.

The dolphin kicked lazily a metre below the surface, her powerful tail propelling her along with graceful ease. Its sleek body glistened in the sparkling clear water. Sensing something approaching from below, the mammal paused to look. Then, in a sudden flurry of panic, the dolphin scooted out to sea with several hard kicks of its tail.

Responding to its internal programming to hunt and kill, it set off in pursuit of its fleeing prey. Possessing superior underwater speed, it caught up with the dolphin in a matter of seconds. Extending a supple but mechanical arm, it rose toward the tiring mammal, a razor-sharp blade glinting in the sunlight.

With nothing left in reserve, the dolphin could do little to evade the rising monster from the sea. The twelve inch blade penetrated the dolphin's soft underbelly and twisted. Viscous fluid oozed from the wound as the blade withdrew, followed by a worm-like string of entrails. The blood was green, sea water having filtered red from the colour spectrum a few feet below the surface.

The mammal convulsed as the blade was plunged in again, this time near the tail. It sliced a neat gash clean right up to the snout. The dolphin literally peeled away in two halves like a filleted fish.

Sensing that all life had left its prey, the thing swam down into deeper water in search of another kill.