

OCTOBER 21, 1944

The storm would not let up. Gale force winds, twenty-foot swells breaking over the ship's decks, hail ricocheting off every surface. The HMCS Baccaro was ordered to seek shelter. The crew could resume their sweep for German submarines once the storm passed.

The ship dropped anchor halfway between the rocky shore of Iceland's Snæfellsnes Peninsula and a reef that barely buffeted the wind. The Commanding Officer remained on the bridge to ensure the anchor would hold. The Officer of the Watch checked the bearings every five minutes using a light on the coastline as a marker.

The winds remained fierce. Rain and hail made the shore light, and soon the shore, nearly impossible to see. The rock and volcanic ash of the sea floor provided no purchase for the anchor. Despite the crews' best efforts, the bow swung north, then south, then north again. Waves pounded the huge vessel, tossing it side to side. The ship slammed into the reef once, twice—the Officer of the Watch looked on, helpless—and then repeatedly. The jagged rock hammered the hull, tearing through the nearly one-inch-thick steel as if through a tin can.

Water poured into the engine room. Electrical connections hissed and sparked. The water turned slick with oil.

Many of the sailors, unbothered by rough seas, were asleep below deck, their hammocks swinging wildly. John Hanson, 19 years old but already a seasoned sailor, did not even stir until a siren sounded and an officer shouted for the men to get dressed and get their life jackets on.

Head for your Carley floats. NOW!

Above the wail of the siren and the shouts of the crew, John heard another, more alarming sound—metal twisting and grinding against rock. He shoved his ID card, pocket knife, notebook and pen, and an empty glass vial into the pockets of his rain slicker. He took a moment to button his pockets and secure the clasps on his life jacket. Then using his arms to brace himself, he slogged his way along the passageway to the ladder.

Oily water sprayed his face as he climbed to the deck. Above—chaos: the blare of the siren, the lash of rain, hail, wind, men barely able to stand trying to run in every direction. Someone grabbed John's arm and screamed into his face: *Get to your Carley! The boilers are going to blow! Abandon ship!*

John staggered starboard and clinging to the ship's rail, squinted through the spray. A spotlight swept the water. His Carley, number 18, was already down there. The men on board clung to the lashings, fighting to hold on.

John felt a hand on his back, someone shouted in his ear.

Go. Go. Go.

He climbed over the railing and onto a rope ladder. His hands and fingers, already numb, barely able grasp the icy rungs. Nearly six feet from the bottom, John fell and landed in a heap on the Carley. Several hands reached out and righted him. One of the men untied the rope that tethered the Carley to the ship.

Within seconds a wave crashed over them, then another. John tied a short length of rope around his waist and secured himself to the side of the Carley. The sailor seated next to John suggested that they should secure two Carleys together, and he reached out for the other nearest one. A wave smashed into the side of the Carley and sent the man overboard. Before anyone could react, a wave tossed the other Carley on top of them, knocking almost every other man off the float.

John's eyes filled with more salt water and oil. When he rubbed them clean with his wet sleeve, he saw just one other sailor on the Carley. Across from him, at the bow, Lyle Ingram was trying to calm them both down.

Don't worry, Hanson. Just hold on. Didja know that the first Viking to come to this godforsaken place brought with him three ravens? He used the birds to find land. I read that in a book. Wish we had a raven with us now. With my luck, it'd probably peck my eyes out!

Ingram paused.

Say, Hanson, do you have any of those seasickness pills left? I feel a little—

John looked up as Lyle Ingram slumped down in his seat, unconscious. A second later, a wave tossed Lyle Ingram into the sea. It happened so suddenly that it took John a second to comprehend that it was real. He untied the rope from around his waist, crawled to the bow, and reached out his hand into the darkness. He waited for the spotlight to sweep across the water. But Lyle Ingram was gone. And the other sailors who were sitting there before him seconds earlier, all gone.

John heard men shouting. He spun around, held firmly to the side of the Carley and blindly reached his free hand out to the side. Nothing. He turned again, searching for the ship, for another Carley. He saw waves; his eyes were burning. He looked the other way and saw a Carley heading away from him. He rubbed at his eyes, called out: *Here! Here!*

Nothing.

He now felt the cold; his clothes were soaked, his head ached from the frigid water and wind. He picked up a paddle from the floor of the Carley and stabbed it into the water behind him, a makeshift rudder. But he didn't know in which direction to head. Hail pelted his face and hands. He heard shouting voices again, and he turned in time to see a Carley just before another wave overtook him, pushed him further away and out of sight. The waves kept coming.

John's Carley crested yet another wave and rose out of the water. He could see the ship, and as the light swept past, he saw that men were climbing back up the ropes and onto the deck. No more Carleys were being lowered.

He turned and looked out at the sea before him. There was no paddling back. His only hope was that the waves might return him to the mainland; even toward the damaged ship would be better than heading out into the sea and deeper into the storm. But the wind and waves and tide carried him back into the heart of the storm, to where the ship had been sweeping for submarines earlier that day.

John's face and eyelids were thick with oil. He wiped at his eyes with his sleeve again, and scanned the sea for land, for anything. He saw only waves and falling snow, and a darkness that seemed to swallow everything else. He reached down to the floor of the Carley for the rope that he used to tether himself to the boat. But his hands and fingers were now so numb that tying the rope became almost impossible. Then it was too late. John Hanson was pitched out of the Carley and into the frigid Atlantic.

JULY 18, 2009

CHAPTER 1

A TALL MAN IN A FEDORA

A crow called out from the tree across the backyard. I watched it spring from a branch and fly up onto a power line. It hopped back and forth, and then circled the yard, squawking the whole time. Something was bothering it. I looked around for Goldie, the most likely culprit. Our cat Goldie is black and white, but I named him Goldie because that was the name of the goldfish I had when I was little—and I just liked the name.

I could see the whole backyard from my second-floor bedroom window. Goldie was nowhere to be seen. But something else caught my eye.

A tall man in a fedora.

He was creeping around the lane on the other side of our back fence. My grandfather told me that in the old days it was where the garbage was picked up—so everyone on the block had a back gate. Now it's mostly overgrown with trees and weeds, home to squirrels and raccoons and skunks. I guess city workers might go back there to check the power lines or . . . something. But I didn't think city workers wore fedoras.

Our fence is almost two metres tall and made of pine boards, so I could only see the top of the guy's head. He walked right up to the fence and began to take off his hat. The crow took this opportunity to dive bomb the guy. The crow did not seem to like this guy one bit.

The fedora guy covered his head and made a run for it down the lane with the crow in fast pursuit.

Crow: 1. Fedora Guy: 0.

Now I could get back to work.

I practiced a trick my mom taught me: I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths, and tried to clear my mind by thinking about a cloudless blue sky. I squinted one eye open to look out the window: yep, cloudless—and crowless—blue sky.

I closed both eyes tightly and tried again.

Okay. Deep breath. Blue sky.

Next word.

I hit play on the tape deck on my desk and listened to my grandfather's voice.

"Pachyderm. A very large mammal with thick skin."

Easy.

P-A-C-H-Y-D-E-R-M. Pachyderm.

"Gargantuan. Really, really big."

Duh.

G-A-R-G-A-N-T-U-A-N. Gargantuan.

I found the nerdiest possible way to procrastinate: spelling bee practice, for a pretend spelling bee. In a weird way, it actually relaxed me to go through my old list of words. At my last school, Wright Elementary School, I won the spelling bee three years in a row. But then I discovered cross-country running and dropped the spelling bees overnight.

"Inconspicuous. Not readily noticeable."

I-N-C-O-N-S-P-I-C-U-O-U-S. Inconspicuous.

While I was unpacking—which is what I should actually have been doing—I found my grandfather's old tape deck on the top shelf of my closet. My mom and I just moved from Ottawa to live in my grandparents' house outside of Halifax: the same house my mom grew up in. The same house where I'd spent part of every summer since I was born. The same house where my grandfather lived until he died just over a month ago. My grandmother died two years ago. So, for the last while, it was just him here. And us, when we'd visit.

Being here in the house now feels so weird without him. We were pretty close. Which brings me to the tape deck.

My grandfather had written my name on the cassette that I found inside the tape deck. OLIVE on side A and HANSON on side B.

Sometimes when he was helping me practice for a bee and I was stumbling on a word, he'd pretend he was a football coach and he'd say: *Come on, Hanson! Get your head in the game.* And

I'd always respond by saying: *Sorry, Hanson. I don't know where my head is today.*

Every time.

We thought it was funny.

Anyway.

My grandfather bought me an old tape deck like the one he had so that I could listen to the tapes at home or even make them myself. I don't know where he found the tape deck; it's not like anyone uses them anymore. My mom would sometimes help me make tapes. But I don't think she really liked doing it; she said she didn't like hearing the sound of her own voice. She'd occasionally mispronounce words on purpose to prank me. It once took me five minutes to figure out that the word she was saying was *elocution*. She thought that was hilarious.

After I figured it out, she asked: "Isn't it eer-roan-ic?"

The crow returned sounding even more annoyed than it did earlier.

I went to the window and looked outside. The crow was easy to find. It was hopping around on the same branch as before.

The guy in the fedora was back, too. This time he was holding a big black umbrella above his head. The umbrella was tipped back a little, so I could tell that he was looking up at our house, even though I couldn't see his face. However, I could now see that he was wearing a dark grey suit. Definitely not a city worker. A suit and a fedora. Weird and old-timey. Not exactly the typical uniform of a burglar.

So that he wouldn't see me, I moved a little to the side and kept watch. The crow was still cawing now and then. At one point, the man shushed the crow and waved his umbrella around to try to make it go away. But the crow did not go away. The man turned his attention back to our house. A tall man in a suit and hat with an umbrella on a cloudless summer day sneaking around a back lane. Not exactly *inconspicuous*.

He shushed the crow again and then he started fidgeting with the latch on our back gate.

At that exact same moment, there was a knock at the front door.

My mom once told me that when armadillos get startled, they jump straight up into the air. Which is how they end up getting hit by cars all the time. Let's just say it's a good thing I wasn't standing in the middle of the road.

I ran downstairs to the front door and peaked through the blinds.

Con.

Con and I have known each other since we were babies. Con's full name is Constantine Weatherbie, but that's too long, so I've always called him Con. When I'd come visit my grandparents in the summer, Con and I were forced to play together because we were the only two kids on the street. We didn't exactly get along back then. My mom says we were always bickering over every little thing.

But then something happened. When Con and I were nine, he got leukemia. Actually, it was *acute lymphoblastic leukemia*. Which sounds even worse. You could wake me up in the middle of the night, hold a flashlight to my face and ask me to spell that, and I still could to this day.

After his diagnosis, all of Con's friends from school got weird about his cancer and stopped hanging out with him. It was like they thought it was contagious. Jerks.

My mom let me stay with my grandparents the whole summer so I could hang out with Con. We'd watch movies together and when he got tired of keeping his eyes open but couldn't sleep, I'd read to him. We must have read almost 100 books that summer.

When school started, and Con was still going through chemotherapy, his parents paid for me to visit whenever I wanted. Con's dad is an airline pilot, so sometimes it would be him flying the plane. My mom said I really earned my wings back then. Whatever that means.

After he finished chemo, Con got better. He just had his three-year check-up a week ago and got the 'all clear.' His parents

invited me out for ice cream to celebrate.

My mom says that experience, for both Con and me, *imprinted* on us, and made us inseparable. I'm not exactly sure what she means by *imprinted*, but Con and I are now as much like brother and sister as we are friends.

Still, I don't like thinking about that time. Especially these days.

I opened the door and pushed past Con to look up and down the street.

Con is a little shorter than me. Anytime someone mentions that I'm taller than him, Con will point out that when he was born the pediatrician told his mom that Con would grow to be nearly two metres tall. When I express my skepticism, which I always do, all Con says is, "You'll see."

"Come in. Quick."

He gave me one of his looks and stepped inside.

Con does this thing where he tilts his head to the side a little, purses his lips, and kind of drops his shoulders. If you know Con, you know that means he thinks you're being weird or something.

"Listen," I said, "there's a strange guy at the back gate. He was trying to get into the yard but this crow kept—"

Con was looking over my shoulder and sort of jutting out his chin to point at something behind me.

"Is that him?" he whispered.

I spun around.

The guy with the fedora was standing in the middle of our kitchen.