

# Prologue

York, Maine—March 22, 1949

Twenty lobster traps remained in the string to be retrieved as ice began to form on the rails of the *Sandra J.* Eric was averaging a lobster per pot and wanted to get the last pots hauled and re-baited before the wind, already a stiff thirty knots, kicked up any more. A lobster per trap was good fishing in the winter, and with a northeast blow building, he wasn't sure when he'd be able to make the ten-mile steam out to Boon Island to tend his gear again.

Eric's wife, Sandra, was pregnant with their first child and he really needed the money those remaining lobsters would bring. His mind started to wonder about the baby not quite here, but expected any day. A boy, please let it be a boy, he thought. A son to take fishing. I'll teach him everything about the water. To share his greatest love with, a son was his most precious desire.

Eric never shared these thoughts with Sandra. He would never let her have any doubts that if the child turned out to be a girl he would not love her with all his heart. Eric knew he would treat a daughter like a princess; but still, please let the baby be a boy. My first-born. He grinned foolishly at the thought.

He turned the bow into the wind, bringing the starboard right side of the boat along the first buoy of his last remaining string. As he leaned over the rail to gaff the buoy aboard, a wave crashed into the hull of his wooden boat, blasting a wall of icy water into his face and soaking him despite the oil gear he wore. God, it was cold. Ice formed on contact with the rails in the twenty-degree temperature. He missed the buoy. Damn. He'd have to make another pass. I should just leave these last pots and head in he thought angrily, knowing he'd finish up the string.

Swinging the old boat in a tight circle, he lined up for another pass at the buoy. Steadily increasing winds built the seas to over six feet and it was starting to get nasty out. He knew he had to hurry if he was going to haul those last few pots. His temper began to flare for the time wasted on the first failed attempt.

Eric successfully snags the buoy on the second pass and grunts his satisfaction as he places the warp in the davit and takes a couple wraps around the cathead, starting the pot to the surface. As the wooden pot breaks the surface, Eric grabs the bridle and swings the pot onto the rail. Opening the door, his pulse kicks up a few rpms as he sees four nice two-pound males in the parlor inside the lobster pot. Quickly, he pegs the claws, pushing a small wooden peg in the joint of the pincers, and places the lobsters in his holding tank. He re-baits the pot with a bait bag of herring, closes the door, and sends the pot back to the bottom.

He slams the boat into gear and pushes the throttle forward, sending it launching ahead in the heavy seas towards the next buoy in the string. The rough weather causes his boat to pitch and roll more than usual, and the neat coil of thirty fathoms of pot warp at Eric's feet becomes a loose pile of line. As the boat picks up speed, the warp begins flying off the deck.

The boat hits a wave hard, causing Eric to lose his balance. He stumbles into the dash, losing his grip on the wheel. In his struggle to keep balance, his right foot lands in the coil of warp and it immediately begins wrapping tightly around his leg. The boat, at damn near full throttle, is doing seven knots into the swells. Dropping like an anchor, the sixty-pound oak trap attached to the warp heads straight for the ocean floor. Caught in the warp, Eric is slammed hard into the stern transom.

A lobsterman's worst nightmare is getting caught in a warp and dragged overboard. Eric is well aware of what is happening. He keeps a sharp knife in a sheath tied to the stern quarter for just such an emergency. As his lower body starts to be pulled overboard by the extreme pressure of the warp, his strong cotton-gloved hands desperately hold onto the rail. He stares at the bone-handled knife a mere three feet from his head and knows he must reach that knife if he is going to survive. He has precious

few seconds to act.

Time slows and each second becomes a still frame during his struggle to reach the knife, like a page turned slowly in a book. With the knife less than a foot from his left hand and with a strength born of desperation, he releases his left hand from the rail and makes an attempt at the knife. The fingers of his right hand are torn free and his body is quickly engulfed by the North Atlantic like a flash of lightning.

The shock of the freezing water steals the breath from his lungs, as he feels himself being pulled down. Eric's last thought is he has failed Sandra and his unborn child. He knows he will never see his baby. Mercifully, darkness comes overtakes him, like a candle blown out by the wind.

The next day the Coast Guard finds the *Sandra J* piled up on the rocks of Boon Island. The same day Eric's son, Benjamin, is born during the worst nor'easter in years.

# Chapter 1

“Goddamn wharf rats,” Old Man Perkins shouts, shattering the peacefulness of the early summer dawn. “Those little shits stole my punt again,” he bellows to no one in particular, and at the same time everyone within earshot.

Hearing the old man, Billy and Ben stop dead in their tracks at the top of the gangway, quickly ducking behind a bait barrel. “I thought you said you returned the punt last night,” Ben whispers.

“I lied. It started getting dark and the tide was running strong, so I left it on the other side of the river and walked home,” Billy confesses.

“So what did you think, the old man’s punt would row itself back to the dock this morning?” asks Ben, holding his head in his hands. “Jeez, we’re in deep shit now.”

“You’re not kidding,” a deep booming voice explodes like thunder, as strong massive hands close on the base of the two terrified boys’ necks, lifting the ten-year-olds clean into the air.

“Now where’s my skiff, goddamn it,” the pissed-off old man screams at the boys, his spittle misting their faces like fine rain. His breath smells like old pipe tobacco.

“It’s across the river, Mr. Perkins. The tide was running hard and it was getting too dark to make it back last night,” Ben said, his voice shaking. We were going to fetch it just now and have it tied up before you noticed it was missing,” said Billy, lying as usual.

“We just had to grab an oar from Billy’s dad’s punt so we each had one. We didn’t think you’d be heading out so early,” Ben adds quickly, thinking he has to come up with something believable to justify why they were not already busy returning the skiff from across the river.

Old Man Perkins releases his painful grip on the boys’ necks and the pair falls in a heap at his feet. He stares at the two boys in silence for what seems like forever. Finally, sighing deeply, his hardened features soften. “Okay, let’s go. I have a spare oar in the truck. I’ll drop you two off across the river, and you two water rats best paddle your asses off and beat me back here, you hear?”

“Yes sir,” they say in unison, as unspoken “boy are we lucky” looks pass between the two. They follow the old man to his battered Ford pickup. The old man looks out and sees Billy’s dad’s boat is missing from its mooring.

“Missed your dad this morning, I see. I think I’ll make you two boys go with me today for the rightful payment of stealing my skiff.”

“Tuna fishing or lobstering?” Ben asked.

The old man stops and looks up into the morning sky to the west. “No wind or clouds. Maybe it’ll be a day to iron a fish or two. Now hop in the back. I don’t want you two jawing me to death on the way over.”

The boys run around the back of the truck and pile into the front cab, ignoring the old man. Old Man Perkins climbs into the truck, trying not to grin. Youth. Ah, to be young again, he thinks. These two must have saltwater running through their veins. And look at me, nothing but a soft old man. Here they go and steal my skiff and I reward them for it. He shakes his head, knowing he will enjoy the day as much as the two young boys.

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The alarm jolts Ben from his sleep. He rolls over and searches for the off switch in the darkness as the dream of that day seven years ago fades back into the place in his mind where memories are stored. Time to go lobstering—4:45 a.m. His sleep-filled mind brings a yawn that starts deep in his chest. Maybe, just maybe, it’ll be a tuna day he thinks with a smile as his eyes snap wide open.