

CHAPTER TWO

THE LITTLE MURKA

Nobody had predicted it. No one had ever seen a season like this. Tropical storms were building to hurricane strength over colder waters, in the face of heavier wind shears, than anyone thought possible.

It was common knowledge that hurricanes needed heat for fuel and rarely gained momentum if the water was cooler than 26.5°C (80°F). But 2005 rewrote the books. It was the worst hurricane season in history.

Out on the Atlantic, hurricanes formed over waters below 24°C (75°F). Cold water was supposed to kill a hurricane. Instead, it gave birth to three of the most intense hurricanes ever recorded. At first, the National Hurricane Centre didn't even name some of them, because they defied belief.

People kept saying, "Yeah, it's been bad. But it's a fluke. It can't get any worse than this!" And then it did.

On a sunny day in August, before it all gets started, Titch and I stand overlooking the gleaming blue water of the harbour at St. Johns, Newfoundland. There's not an ominous cloud in the sky. Even with the best weather analyst in the business on our team, we have no idea what a nightmare I'm about to sail into.

Little Murka, my 14-foot dinghy with her bright-red kites and sunshine-yellow hull, waits eagerly at the dock. One-by-one the locals, who've been fishing the Grand Banks for the better part of their lives, gather round. They know the danger of this wicked stretch of sea. After close inspection, their verdict on the Murka is good.

"Well, she looks like she's up to it, young fella," an old seaman tells us. "But you must be mad."

Titch shakes his head, laughing. "Toughest bastard I know!"

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For a few days, we knock around onboard in our shorts and t-shirts, testing the kites, doing last minute checks. But with the winds still onshore, we have to wait for a window. So Titch and I head for the pubs. All we can do is jump into a bottle of rum.

I stay in touch with Mike Broughton, our weatherman, and keep a close eye on Murka. But in the end, it's the locals who know when the right moment arrives. If there's the slightest shift in the wind, these men feel it in their bones.

On the 18th of August, Titch and I are on deck, switching out the solar panels and cycling the batteries, when a navigator and fisherman from one of the bigger

trawlers come strolling down the dock. In the pubs, they've regaled us with sea stories that span back generations. They may think I'm crazy, but they're watching over us.

"Hi, young fella!" the navigator says. "What's that you're doing?"

"Making sure the batteries are fresh," I tell him, bending down to secure the cables.

"This'll be this morning, if you're going to go."

The long, slow drag he takes on his cigar makes it seem like a casual remark, but the words hang in the air. I stand up straight and look at him. Behind the haze of smoke, the pale seaman's eyes – that have gauged the weather across a thousand storms – look back at me with absolute conviction. If there's better authority than this, I don't know what it is.

When I look out to sea myself, I can tell he's right. Clear skies. A strong offshore breeze.

"What you reckon?" says Titch.

"Moment of truth," I shrug. "Let's go for it!"

After that, it happens very fast. We head back to the accommodations to pick up my bags. I change into my dry suit, then we hire a fishing boat to tow the Murka and I out past the heads.

Before he knows it, Titch is alone onshore, watching us disappear toward the horizon, till we're no more than a speck, and then we're gone. He's done it countless times before, but Titch says later, "This time, I had the most horrible feeling in my gut. I wondered if I'd ever see you again."

Aboard the Murka, I feel nothing but exhilaration. At the very moment the fisherman releases the tow ropes and sets us free, a magnificent grey whale breaches up ahead. An awesome sight. I take it as a good omen.

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When I first arrived at St. Johns, I told a reporter, "Eighteen months of planning and now I'm finally here, about to kite out onto one of the most fearsome stretches of water known to man." Then I winked at her and said, "It should be fun!"

After over a month at sea in horrendous conditions, my bravado is wearing thin. The electricals are flickering on and off. The sat phone antennae is malfunctioning. It's nasty out here.

For the past few days, we've been taking non-stop hits, pinned down in a northwest gale of 40 knots. These are the biggest seas we've had so far. The waves are hitting every 10 seconds. They're so vertical that they whack us straight up a wall of water, then straight back down. There's no time to get my bearings before it starts up again. I just keep thinking, surely, it's about to abate. Seas like this can't last.

Wiping my sleeve across the glass of the hatch, I peer out into the storm. Where there used to be peaks, endlessly swelling and falling, now the waves are starting to break. This isn't good. A set of breaking waves can easily capsize a boat. The first one knocks you off course, the second sends you reeling and the third rolls you over. The second one hasn't hit us yet, but it's coming. I need help.

With my coms down, all I have is text messaging – and maybe not for long. I might only have one chance. I try to think. Who can help me most?

Mike Broughton. One of the best tactical navigators alive and a good friend. If he can't help me, no one can.

At 17 years old, Mike was the youngest sailor in the disastrous Fastnet Race of 1979, where 15 of the most experienced sailors in the world died in brutal, 60 knot winds. Since then, he's built a reputation among yachtsmen as a weather guru. Nobody knows how to manoeuvre around nasty weather better than Mike does.

I send him an urgent text, then try to steel myself while I wait for his reply. It would be good to hear a friendly voice, but without my coms, that's going to have to wait.

In all the years I have fought as a Royal Marine commando in the war zones of Belfast and Iraq, trapped by polar bears on a glacier in the remotest regions of the Arctic, rowing the Pacific during violent tropical storms, nothing has been terrifying as this.

This time, I'm scared.

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At home in the British countryside, tactical weatherman, Mike Broughton is preparing weather charts for another expedition, when he gets my text on his mobile.

**SEA STATE UNMANAGEABLE.
FIND ME A WAY OUT!
I'M CRYING BLOOD, MATE.**

Mike can hardly believe it. "Dom is the last person I'd ever expect to send a message like that. He's a hugely determined guy with great courage. We first sailed together in the Sydney-Hobart race in 1996. Since then, we've been through hell and back – all kinds of races, hideous sea states, monster waves. I've never once seen him scared.

"If you tell him, 'Follow these coordinates. It'll be horrendous for the next 18 hours, but then you'll be out of it,' you never have to think of it again. There's no question he'll do it. If you need it, Dom can always crank it up 3 or 4 more gears. This guy grinds like 10 men."

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"In international yachting, there's a Grinders' Union of the strong, macho guys who do the winching. It takes immense strength and endurance. Nothing happens on a yacht if the grinders don't supply the horsepower.

"But none of these guys would attempt do the things Dom does. It's rare to find a man who's such a big, fun, crazy guy to have a beer with, who also sets himself challenges as lonely and single-minded as this. I don't know anybody who's doing what he's doing," Mike says. "Even among the Royal Marine Commandos, he's extremely tough – physically and mentally."

The Royal Marines go through one of the most grueling training programs in the world to win the honor of wearing the green beret. Fear, uncertainty and lack of sleep are constant elements in their lives. Their ability to thrive in the most extreme conditions on the planet – from minus 30 degrees in the Arctic to the blazing summer

heat of Central Asia – is legendary. As if ferocious courage and determination weren't enough, "cheerfulness in adversity" is part of their code.

Mike knows the ethos well. He's a former Royal Navy seaman and helicopter pilot for search-and-rescue missions in several war zones. After serving with Marine Commandos for years, he's learned that a Marine always understates the danger he's in.

"For Dom to say he's crying blood..." Mike shakes his head, letting the sentence trail off. "I've never seen it. Whatever's happening, it must be horrendous."

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Dropping what he's doing, he moves quickly to his computer to check the charts, telling himself, "I've got to give the best advice I've ever given. My friend's life is at stake."

But when Mike looks at the weather systems, a chill runs through him. What he sees is a death sentence. Hurricane Rita is roaring through the Atlantic. Days ago, she started as a tropical storm over the Turks and Caicos Islands. As she moved steadily toward the Florida Keys, she managed to harness 150 kilometre-an-hour winds, putting her at Category 2. But then, she amped things up considerably.

Not three weeks earlier, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast and laid waste to New Orleans, she was listed as the fourth most powerful hurricane on record. But now Katrina has been bumped to fifth, because Hurricane Rita is stronger. Both are ranked at Category 5, with winds in excess of 250 kilometres-an-hour.

Category 5 is the most extreme hurricane force known to man. There is no Category 6.

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Appalled, Mike drops into his chair and stares at the satellite images. He's looking at chaos – winds from every direction, completely unpredictable seas. He can only imagine the waves.

"Dom is out there in his little dinghy-with-a-lid-on, riding seas far worse than ones we faced at Fastnet," Mike says. "I don't see how he can survive. If the violence of the waves doesn't tear the boat apart first, he'll be hit with winds 10 knots greater than what he's in now."

On any ship, when the anemometer climbs 10 knots, it can mean the difference between life and death. When the wind blows the waves higher, the force of the water magnifies the wind speed to the fourth power. This means, waves created by a 60 knot wind are not 2 times as violent as waves from a 30 knot wind. They're 25 times as violent.

To make things worse, the harder winds also increase the pace of the waves. As they move faster, the distance between crests is shortened and the faces of waves grow steep. Instead of long, symmetrical sine waves, the waves snap and fall in sharp peaks, high above sea level. The weight of a 20-ton trawler can help offset the motion, but big, choppy waves are disastrous for a tiny dinghy.

"At his current position, Dom hasn't even seen the worst of it yet," Mike shudders. "He must already be facing absolutely horrifying conditions – huge seas with 60 knot winds gusting up to 70 knots."

No seaman would risk these seas, if he had any other choice. In the Sydney-Hobart Race Mike knows so well, the racing lore warns that yachts are doomed to face 30 knot winds at least once in the race. Every man in the fleet cringes at the thought of them. They're so impossible to navigate that these accomplished sailors refer to them as "brick walls."

For the sake of the sailors' lives, there is a 19 knot limit for the America's Cup. In 2002, the officials cancelled the race when the wind gusts reached 26 knots.

Facing 70 knot winds is catastrophic.

Mike has to tell Dom, but the news is so grim. After a decade advising world-class yachtsmen and adventurers, he has never had to send such a foreboding message.

After he types out the email, he hovers over the key before he hits SEND. Later, Mike says, "Quite frankly, I thought he was a dead man."

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This storm is giving it to Murka, but she's a tough little boat, shifting and bobbing like a lassoed calf, while the parachute anchor strains under water to keep her bow pointed into the waves.

For me, the mental battle is the worst of it. If I can't get a grip on my thoughts, I won't be ready to act, when Mike comes back with a solution. I'm going to need the presence of mind to pull up the sea anchor quickly and launch the kites. There may not be moments to spare.

Meanwhile, I have to distract myself, restore some frail sense of normalcy. If I let myself freak out, I could miss my window. Beneath the light of my head torch, I prop open a book and try to pretend it's just another storm.

*"My dear fellow," said Sherlock Holmes, as we sat on
either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker Street,
"Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the
mind of man could invent...."*

Howling winds roar against us in the dark, shoving great, huge swells beneath us on the starboard side. As the Murka falls forward, the book nearly flies from my hand. The light on deck goes off, ominously, then flickers back on again. My stomach muscles tighten, bracing me, as if I'm about to be slugged in the gut. Long moments pass before I realize I'm holding my breath.

What's that noise? A deep groan. Then another. The ropes of the sea anchor creaking?

*If we could fly out of that window hand-in-hand, hover
over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep
in at the strange things going on ...*

Another groan from the deck. I don't like the sound of it.

Tossing the book aside, I squint through the hatch. So much spray is washing over the boat, it's hard to see, but it looks like that sound is coming from the trip line. The sea is pulling it so tight, it's delaminating the cleat! If the trip line gets fouled around the parachute anchor, it will collapse the parachute. I can't let that happen.

Alarmed, I pull on the head torch and stagger out into the swirling, pitch-black storm. I can see the cleat won't last much longer. Once it rips out of the deck, the trip line will tangle in the parachute, for sure. If we lose that, there will be nothing to hold us in place. We'll be at the mercy of the waves.

The thing is, if I cut the lines and there's a break in the weather, I'll have to pull metres and metres of anchor out of the water by hand, while the waves try to yank it back. It'll be a vicious tug-of-war. It could take hours. We could miss our window and be stuck in this hell.

It's an agonizing choice, but I can't risk the lines getting tangled in the anchor or ripping off the cleat. I have to jettison the line. I'll deal with the consequences later.

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Standing ready, I wait till we drop to the bottom of a 60 foot trough, where the pressure is lowest, but there's still so much load on the line that, as soon as I release it, the boat starts to spin – around and around, knocking me left and right as it turns. I grab the gunwales to steady myself, but it's too late.

Up behind me comes the surly growl of a monster wave, rising over us. And then a massive BOOM! as it smashes down onto the Murka and catapults me through the locked hatch. I crash against the cabin floor with such force, I wonder if my shoulder's broken.

My thoughts are reeling. How could that wave come up from behind? It's so chaotic out there, it's hard to work out what's happening. The waves all over the place.

Picking myself up off the floor, I force the hatch closed again and check my aching shoulder, cursing. It's like being beaten by a gang of thugs in the dark, when you can't see who they are! At least, with the trip line free, I think we should sit better in the storm, but ...

That's when I feel something I've never felt before. I can't quite place it at first. And then I realize, we're listing starboard! It feels like we're side-on to the waves. Impossible. Not with the sea anchor.

Grabbing the head torch, I rush back onto the deck. The waves have been spinning the Murka around 360 degrees. To my horror, I see that the spin has wrapped the sea anchor around the keel.

The parachute is fighting the waves on a short, tight leash. It can't manoeuvre, so it's actually holding us beam on to the waves – the worst position imaginable. Any moment now, the torque alone could rip the keel off and put a great huge hole in the boat. If that happens, we'll sink like a rock.

With the waves pounding across the bow, I brace myself on the deck and pump the rudder, battling the sea with all my might. But no matter what I do, the sea strikes back harder, pummeling the deck with enormous volumes of water.

It's a merciless fight. Again and again, I'm forced to abandon the rudder to bail out water from the deck, before I can go back to pumping the rudder. It's hopeless. I'm getting nowhere. I'm going to die.

And then the unthinkable happens. The sea anchor snaps.

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Stunned, I watch the line break and disappear into the dark. Black waves suck it down into oblivion, as if it never existed. A fraction of a second that feels like eternity. And we move quickly into a new phase.

The waves, glowering over us, have new meaning now. Moments ago, they were our enemy. Now they are our death. With the sea anchor gone, we have no defence.

This is getting ridiculous. A part of my mind won't face it. You can't lose the sea anchor. That never happens. It's a fluke – like the engine falling out of a trawler. "A ship without an anchor." That's what people say when someone's ... lost ... without hope....

I can feel myself sliding into shock. Time for fast talking. Losing the sea anchor... Well, OK, that's serious. But it could be worse. It's not as bad as, say ... ripping off the keel.

But we're full on in crazy seas. Without an anchor to hold her back, what will happen to the Murka? Will she slowly point up wind by herself? Or will she just roll and roll and roll?

I have no idea. I've never been in a situation like this before. I've never even heard of it.

All I know for sure is, the two worst disasters in modern sailing history were the result of the boats without drogues or anchors. The first was the 1979 Fastnet disaster Mike was in as a boy. The second was in June of 1994, when 22 crewmen were rescued from the sea, after a storm hit them on the way from New Zealand to Tonga. Three crewmen completely disappeared. The rescue boats found nothing but an empty life raft with an activated EPIRB.

Since those disasters, every sailing manual warns: When you're faced with gale winds at Beaufort Force 10, there are only 3 viable survival tactics: running under the stabilizing control of a single drogue, running under control with a series drogue, or riding out the storm with a sea anchor. Without that, your chances of survival are next to nil.

We are at Beaufort Force 11. We don't have a drogue. And we've just lost the anchor.

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That's when I get the text from Mike. I'm at such a low moment that I nearly cry with relief when I hear it coming in. Rummaging through the fallen debris, I scramble around the cabin to find the laptop. When I pry it open and read Mike's email, the blood drains from my face.

**BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES.
THE WORST IS COMING, MATE.**

No strategies. No plans. No way out. The message is a death knell.

Fuck. How can it get any worse?

My mind falls into a kind of limbo. Nothing seems real. As my brain starts shutting down, my Royal Marine training kicks in. I don't need to think. I know what to

do. As Mike will point out to me later, every single thing I do in those moments comes straight out of the Commando Survival Training book. Survival tactics have been drilled into me so hard, for so long, they're second nature.

All I know is that my best chance for survival is to get it right – exactly right. I don't think at all. I assemble my emergency gear, my flares, my grab bag. Maybe I'm not in "imminent danger" of dying, but this is a very dangerous situation. If the worse is coming, all I can do is prepare. So I get ready. I shove my sleeping bag out of the way, put on my Gul thermals and drag the dry suit over them. Then I crouch down in the cabin, poised for action, wondering what's going to happen next.

I don't have to wait long. The sea settles it. Grabbing the Murka by force, she flips us over. And we roll.

As the Murka goes under, I fall hard against the cabin roof. I'm ready to keep rolling, as we bob back up, but there's an eerie pause – long enough for me to glance out the hatch. We're completely underwater. Air bubbles glug up to the surface, but we're not coming back up. Something's gone wrong. It's probably 30 seconds, but it feels like 30 years.

Then the Murka shakes it off. With a sudden splash, we're right-side up again, bobbing on the water, back to normal. But now I'm spooked. She's supposed to be self-righting. The designer put 80 kilos in the keel to make sure she'd flip back up, but she didn't. I don't understand.

I have no time to think before the next wave hits and we go down again. With no sea anchor to hold us back, the wind has free reign. It can just keep driving us up the side of the waves to crash into the break and tumble back – over and over and over – till we can't take it any more. Or even longer.

Now we've been shoved underneath the surface and the Murka lays there, face down, dead in the water. It's longer this time.

Every moment we're upside down, there's a greater risk of water seeping in. If that happens, I'll drown. I have to do something, while I have the chance. Standing inside the roof, I ram my body against the walls as hard as I can, like a bull in a pen, hoping it will nudge her to roll back up again. It does get her rocking, but it's not enough.

Just before I panic, she comes back up. I feel a kind of desperate glee, but my nerves are shattered. Getting to my feet, shaken, I try to talk myself down. No worries, mate. We're all right. Just bail the water out and then...

The very next wave flips us over. This time, it feels cruel – like a schoolyard bully, shoving a screaming kid's face back under the water again. On the third roll, we stay under even longer.

What if she doesn't come back up?

Instinctively, I reach for the EPIRB. Once it's activated, the Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) will send out a distress signal to be picked up by satellites that will triangulate my position to within 100 metres anywhere in the world. Using the serial number registered to the owner, the nearest government authority will notify the next-of-kin within four minutes and mount a rescue.

But I don't hit the EPIRB.

According to the Maritime Codes of Practice, you are not technically supposed to activate the EPIRB until you're "grave and imminent danger of bodily harm or death." I know perfectly well that 70% of fatalities on the water occur when a seaman falls overboard or his boat capsizes. We've just capsized for the third time. There's no

question I should activate the EPIRB. Yet as I kneel on the ceiling of the cabin, being swallowed alive by the waves, I start having this stupid dilemma in my head: I'm a marine. I can't hit the EPIRB. This isn't imminent danger-- I can breathe, can't I? Before I can start arguing with myself, the Murka rights herself again.

Immediately, the cabin starts flooding. With every roll, things are getting worse. I struggle to keep the electricals dry, in off-chance I'm alive to use them later, but even the marine inside me has to admit that things are looking grim. I'm in a fucking nightmare.

Out the window, the sky is black. It's probably daylight by now, but the clouds are fierce and menacing, a prelude to something even worse. Mike was right. There's no way out of this.

Looks like my epitaph will be: Dom Mee, Lost at Sea.

It was always the risk, I suppose. I decide it's some consolation that I'm in good company. Had I known it was the worst hurricane season in history, that might have cheered me up a bit. At least I could've said I went down fighting off the worst of them.

Even if I do set off the EPIRB now, no ship can reach me in 70 knot winds. They can send a plane to track my location. But a pilot can do fuck all for me. He can watch me die.

Facing facts, I pick up the camcorder to record a farewell message. If the Murka survives, maybe somebody will find the tape and get it to Angela.

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