

Chapter One



A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, I would be on my way to World War I. I'd have to lie about my age and say I was eighteen, as a lot of boys did. Then they'd give me a uniform, a rifle, and a gas mask. They'd ship me across the sea with thousands of other recruits, and we'd fight in the trenches of northern France, beside soldiers from other countries. Behind us would be horses, artillery, and ambulances. In front of us would be barbed wire, bullets, and poison gas. We'd huddle in the middle, and fight the best we could.

Probably I'd die, the war would end, and the enemies would become friends again. That's what happens: things go

back to how they were before the war began, mostly, until twenty-one years later, when they'd do it all over again in World War II.

Now I'm on my way to a different kind of war. It's complicated. I'm not sure who the enemy is. I'm not sure what the weapons are, or who my allies are, or even how to fight. I only know that I can learn.

This is the war of my time, the war to save the planet.



We were sailing across the Indian Ocean from South Africa to Australia, along one of the least travelled routes in the world. It was mid-afternoon. The sea was choppy but not swelling. The sun was out, and clouds were drifting across the sky from the north. We hadn't seen another vessel in almost a week. Neither had we seen a shark. But we had seen lots of jellyfish, in fact, thousands of them. On the radio I heard a scientist say that when everything else in the sea was dead and gone, there would still be jellyfish.

I had climbed out of the portal onto the hull while the sub was moving at fifteen knots. It wasn't something I normally did, but I wanted to watch the action of the rudder while the sub was sailing, because it seemed to me it was pulling us to starboard. When I examined the rudder at rest, it was fine. I needed to see it in motion.

I was wearing the harness tied to a ten-foot rope. It was an unbreakable rule to wear the harness when the sub was

moving, a rule I never disobeyed. The sub was twenty-five feet long, but the distance from the portal to the stern was just slightly more than ten feet. I could reach the stern, but couldn't look over the edge, so I went back inside, untied the harness, and retied it to the next-shortest piece of rope, which was thirty feet. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should cut the thirty-foot piece in two, but decided against it. If I fell into the sea, I'd have to pull myself only twenty feet back to the sub, which wasn't far. And chances were, if I fell, I'd grab the rope on my way down anyway, and just pull myself right back up. I was pretty sure of that.

When I reached the stern, I bent one knee to the hull, placed both hands down, and gripped the steel with my fingers—the position a runner takes at the starting line. I peered over the edge. The propeller was churning the water into invisible ribbons. It's funny how you can see movement in water like that, without lines or borders or colours or anything, like waves in the air over a hot road. It was so fascinating for me to watch because I almost never got to see that. To look more closely at the rudder, I shifted my position, putting more weight on my right hand. But as I moved, and took the weight off my left hand for just a second, my right hand slid across the steel on something slippery, like bird droppings, I lost my balance, and, with the movement of the sub, went headfirst into the water.

My immediate thought was to make sure my limbs were clear of the propeller. But that was not a problem because in the two seconds it took to fall, the sub left me five to ten feet

behind. Contrary to what I had believed, I did not manage to grab the rope on my way down. The sub was now dragging me behind it like a buoy. No need to panic, I thought, I was attached to the rope with the harness. All I had to do was pull myself back up. But the rope had jammed itself between the rudder and propeller. The moment I reached thirty feet, and the rope grew taut, it went down. In an instant the rope was severed by the propeller, and I was cut adrift.

The full impact of what had just happened didn't hit me right away. I simply assumed I would simply swim back to the hull and climb up. In fact, I didn't even start swimming immediately, but waited for a few seconds, just three or four, to catch my senses. Then, I sprang into action and began to swim. It was tricky, though, because I couldn't swim straight into a spinning propeller, I had to swim to the side of it, which I started to do.

Very quickly I realized I wasn't swimming fast enough—the sub was pulling away from me. So, I shut my eyes and threw everything I had into it. To my utter disbelief, I couldn't seem to gain any distance on the sub. In fact, she kept pulling further away from me.

I swam harder. I swam harder than I had ever swum in all my life. I swam until my lungs were bursting and I was seeing spots. It made no difference; I could not catch her. I stopped swimming because I had to catch my breath, and watched with horror as the sub sailed away.

A wave of emotion rushed up from my stomach into my

eyes, and I was about to burst into tears, but an inner voice interrupted. It was the voice of the sailor I had become over the past two years, the sailor who had sailed around the world, had many close calls, and had always come through. It was the voice of the boy who had learned not to panic, to push fears aside and concentrate on the problem at hand. Surviving a dangerous situation required all of your energy, all of your intelligence, and all of your concentration.

So, I began to analyze the situation. I was a strong swimmer, but was in the middle of the ocean; there was nowhere to swim. I was wearing jeans, a t-shirt, sneakers, and the harness, which was just two strips of wide polyester criss-crossing my torso and waist. I had no flotation devices. I could tread water for maybe a couple of hours—I wasn't really sure how long I could do it if my life depended on it. There were five hours of daylight left. Could I tread water for five hours? But what if I did, and then it turned dark? It would be dark for at least ten hours. Could I . . . no, of course I couldn't! I started to panic. "Stop!" I yelled at myself out loud. "Don't panic!" It was my inner voice again. If I panicked, I was finished. If I panicked, I was dead.

What were the chances I'd get spotted and rescued? Pretty much zero, I figured, though I didn't want to believe that. We hadn't seen a single aircraft since we left South Africa. I felt the ball of panic roll in my stomach again, but forced myself to breathe slowly, and move my arms and legs only as much as necessary to stay afloat. The water was cool, but not cold.