



1

JUNE 17, 1637
BOSTON HARBOR

Each slice of oar through water seemed more like a guillotine splitting flesh, vertebrae, and nerve bundles over and over—unceasing agony. This was the pain the Reverend John Wheelwright felt, or a close approximation of it, when he heard the news of his banishment from the state of Massachusetts. He'd come to the New World a year previous and was well received, quickly becoming pastor of the Eaxe Chapel at Mount Wollaston in Boston. He was happy for a time, leading his new flock, revealing a path to God in which free speech and opinions were welcome. The congregation blossomed, but along with his success came controversy.

Wheelwright's sister-in-law, Anne Hutchinson,

and the colony's governor, Harry Vane, clashed with local conservatives on the topic of grace versus works. Those in the grace camp, along with Vane, believed it was through God's grace and mercy that we are saved from sin and no number of good deeds can help. Those who believed that works mattered, the conservatives, felt just the opposite—good deeds earned salvation. To prove the other camp wrong was to condemn them to hell. The debate raged, and when Governor Vane lost his bid for reelection, he also lost support for his cause. Vane returned to England, leaving Hutchinson, and by familial association, Wheelwright, to handle the fallout. The conservative leadership acted swiftly and, while nonviolent, were savage in their efficiency.

Everyone associated with Vane or Hutchinson was banished from all of Massachusetts. Every friend, business associate, and, of course, the brother-in-law pastor who, without directly supporting the cause, supported the free speech that made the argument possible, were to take their leave via ocean voyage before the sun set.

This very night.

Wheelwright's muscles burned as he put the oars of the small rowboat to the water, pushing through the placid seas toward the waiting galleon anchored in the bay. After boarding the sixty-odd exiles in Boston, the ship was to head north along the coast, picking up wares and other passengers before returning to England. He looked back to the shore and saw a few lamps burning. He had pictured himself making a

permanent home there. It had become his dream, but it had been taken from him. Yet having no acquaintances in the New World outside of Massachusetts, he was forced to England. There was nothing he could do but pack up his belongings and leave with his second wife, Mary, their five children, and Mary's mother in tow. They had become vagabonds in a single day, their future uncertain, and he, a man of God, humiliated.

In a burst of frustration, Wheelwright drove the oar down hard. It connected with the water at an odd angle and broke free from his grasp. He lurched out for the oar, nearly capsizing the boat before catching his thighs on the gunwale and falling back inside as the oar slipped into the darkness.

His temper mounted as he lay on his back and fought the temptation to curse God. He held his tongue, but he could not silence his thoughts:

Where art thou, God, in this, my darkest hour? Why hast thou forsaken me? Was it not thee who planted the seed of desire in my heart to come to Boston? I have always been faithful, obeyed every command, attended every whisper of guidance. But this, this is a cruel thing thou doest! I pray thee, speak Lord, even a whisper; thy servant heareth.

At that moment he longed for God to do more than whisper. The beliefs for which he had been exiled were not his own. He had surely been misjudged and mistreated by man, but would his God abandon him while on a divine errand?

Staring up at the dazzling display of stars in the

night sky, his thoughts turned to prayer. But he had no more words for his Creator.

Bile and disbelief rose within Wheelwright's breast. He sat up, leaned over the side of the boat and retched into the ocean losing his supper and easing his emotions. He gagged three more times and wiped his mouth.

"Lord," Wheelwright spoke, his voice soft and wet, "hast thou no mercy to spare thy servant?"

The boat bobbed as small waves cascaded toward shore.

"Hast thou forgotten me?"

The waves grew in size. Wheelwright held on to the side, but gave the rising waters no heed.

"No more whispers, Lord. Before I turn from thee in earnest, speak thy will to me."

The waves receded, and the sea flattened. Wheelwright sat in the boat, still clutching the side, listening...and hearing nothing.

In that moment, his mind became like stone. "Then my mind is made up. England it is and the New World be damned," he cried in false heartiness. He'd always been in good favor with the people there. His reputation was established, and any number of churches would welcome him. Wheelwright's stomach soured. Did he even want to preach again? If God could so easily desert a loyal follower, was God really worth following?

A light *clunk* sounded from the side of the boat. Wheelwright thought it might be the oar. Perhaps it was God's response? Take the oar, return to England?

He peered over the side and into the water.

No oar.

But there was something there...a reflection of something above? There were two objects, like two halves of a circle separated by several feet. A reflection of the moon? But when Wheelwright scanned the heavens, he found the full moon hung near the horizon .

Not the moon.

Nervous claws tore at Wheelwright's innards. The hair on his arms rose. His instincts screamed of a danger that his mind could not comprehend.

Then it struck him. The half circles were not reflections from above; they were physical objects from below. He looked down into the black and saw the two orbs for what they really were. Eyes. Each the size of a man's head, they looked straight up at him. "Good Lord!" His reason fought for control while his emotions swirled.

Not eyes, thought Wheelwright. Something else. Some object loosed from a sunken vessel. Buoys perhaps? *Yes, buoys*.

Then the buoys blinked.

Wheelwright rose to his feet and filled his lungs, prepared to let loose a scream he hoped would attract the galleon's attention. But his voice never escaped his open mouth. Darkness enshrouded him and closed above him. Tepid, rank air greeted him as he realized that God, angry at his disrespect had sent the devil himself to eat him alive.

A quick jolt from beneath knocked him from the

boat, and he landed on a firm, yet soft surface. The beast suddenly lifted its head and drew Wheelwright deeper into its throat. Flesh wrapped around him, and he felt himself being pushed down...down toward the creature's gullet, where a slow and torturous death awaited.

TWO DAYS later, Wheelwright woke to a blinding light. Heaven or hell? As his senses returned, he became aware of a burning sensation beneath him and sweltering hot humid air stinging his skin. Hell, he thought. But the smell was not one would expect of hell, it was more like lilacs and ocean air.

He sat up and found himself on a beach. He was still dressed in his black doublet and breeches, though the cloth looked more like rags than proper attire. His skin was sickly pale and wrinkled, but otherwise he felt fine. He didn't recognize the shoreline, but it was most definitely the New World. The maple trees lining the beach told him that much.

Looking down, Wheelwright saw a single word etched in the sand.

Exeter.

A flash of thoughts and memories came to him. His entire ordeal, the last two days and nights, crowded his mind. Had it really happened? Another look at his puffy white flesh confirmed it. But no one must know what he'd endured. It was safer that way. And he had a mission to complete. God had revealed that much to him. He had no concept of the ends, but

his savings gave him the means.

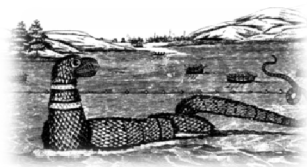
Positive he was once again in God's good graces, he took a deep breath and sighed, allowing the smell of salty sand, lilac and leaf laden earth to calm his frantic mind. He smiled as the scent of his new home filled him with hope. Though he longed to see God's plans laid out before him, he felt confident that his acts, conceived of and willed by God, would have positive results for all men. God's dramatic action over the past two days could only mean that the end result would be beyond the most vivid imaginings of Wheelwright's feeble mind.

AGREEMENT OF THE SETTLERS AT EXETER,
NEW HAMPSHIRE, 1639

Whereas it hath pleased the Lord to move the Heart of our dread Sovereign Charles, by the Grace of God King &c., to grant Licence and Libertye to sundry of his subjects to plant themselves in the Westerlle parts of America, we his loyal Subjects, Brethren of the Church in Exeter, situate and lying upon the River Pascataqua with other Inhabitants there, considering with ourselves the holy Will of God and our own Necessity that we should not live without wholesomne Lawes and Civil Government among us, of which we are altogether destitute, do in the name of Christ and in the sight of God combine ourselves together to erect and set up among us such Government as shall be to our best discerning agreeable to the Will of God, professing ourselves Subjects to our Sovereign Lord King Charles according to the Libertyes of our English Colony of Massachusetts, and binding of ourselves solemnly by the Grace and Help of Christ and in His Name and fear to submit ourselves to such Godly and Christian Lawes as are established in the realm of England to our best Knowledge, and to all other such Lawes which shall upon good grounds be made and enacted among us according to God that we may live quietly and peaceably together in all godliness and honesty. Mo. 8. D. 4. 1639 as attests our Hands.

Signed—John Wheelwright

DESCENT



2

RYE, NEW HAMPSHIRE, 2008

The sea can do many things. It is the womb of all life on the planet. Weather patterns and natural disasters are at the mercy of the mighty blue's ebb and flow. A food chain that supplies sustenance for most life-forms on the planet begins and ends in the deep. But what Atticus Young had learned in the last two years was that the ocean, for all its might and wonder, could not heal a broken man.

Atticus stood barefoot on a barnacle-encrusted rock, one of many that formed a barrier between ocean and sand. Beyond the sand lay a man-made hump of sand and grass that guarded Route 1A and a row of homes built on the other side of the road, all facing the ocean, from storm waters. Atticus had often

wondered if the homes had been erected prior to the high water-blocking sand piles—the ocean view was blocked for all but the tallest homes. But the misfortune of those few Rye residents living with obscured views was not enough to ease his distress.

The barnacles that cut into his rough feet failed to gain his attention.

A flock of frenzied seagulls pecking and squawking over the remnants of a dead skate washed in with the tide couldn't pull Atticus from his thoughts.

Even the deep blue ocean, which sparkled like the most eloquently carved sapphire, failed to pull his mind from past to present.

“SHE'S DEAD,” the doctor said. “I'm sorry, but there was nothing we could do. The cancer was too much...too far...but you knew that already.”

Atticus nodded and looked out the Portsmouth Regional Hospital window, glimpsing the ocean on the horizon. “Are there any papers I need to sign?” His voice was as clinical as the doctor's.

“No...no, of course not.”

“I can leave then?”

“Well...yes, but...Yes, of course.”

Atticus nodded and left his Maria's bedside. A single thought echoed in his mind as he walked to the staircase, mindlessly descended two flights of stairs, and entered the main lobby.

My wife is dead.

My wife is dead.

Maria is...

Atticus burst into the men's room, closed and locked the door behind him, and fell to the floor. His sobs could be heard beyond the reception desk, down the hall, and clear into the cafeteria. Even people in the rooms on the floor above could hear his anguish. That day, seventy-five people heard what it felt like to have a portion of one's soul extinguished. Few of them could stop their own tears.

As the tears subsided, replaced by a blinding headache, Atticus's awareness of his surroundings returned. The linoleum floor, pale white and sparkling clean, was cold on his palms. The air freshener, working hard to penetrate his running nose, smelled strongly of apple. The fluorescent light above buzzed gently, casting the room in dull blue. The sterility of it all helped calm his nerves and focus his mind.

Atticus stood on shaky legs, rinsed his face, and blew his nose. He knew that no amount of cold water could erase the redness and swelling his crying had brought to the flesh around his eyes, but it helped clear his mind. As Atticus left the bathroom and avoided the sympathetic eyes of the group gathered in the reception area, he put all his efforts into staying calm and reaching home safely. He couldn't lose control again, because the hardest aftershock from Maria's death was yet to come, and it would be his shoulders that carried the burden.

THAT WAS two years ago, and ever since, every

morning when he woke up alone in bed, it was like being right back in that bathroom, cold and alone.

A sudden roar and a stab of frigidity on his feet finally returned him to the here and now. Atticus looked at his feet and found them covered to the ankles in water. The tide was coming in. As Atticus moved higher onto the rocky shore, he paused by a tide pool. His shadow fell over the ten-inch-deep puddle, shading it from the sun's glare and allowing him to see scads of tiny creatures—crabs, shrimp, and snails—retreat to the shadows. The empty, glassy surface of the water only left one thing to look at, and it was by far the motliest sight in the tide pool.

Atticus examined the reflection of his face. Crow's-feet had been carved into the skin around his eyes over the past ten years, but more severely in the last two. His hair, cut short, was simultaneously beginning to turn gray and recede. At only forty-one, he was beginning to look more like his father. His skin was still tanned dark brown, almost the same hue as his eyes, but the most distracting feature on his face was a long, scraggly beard that made him look more like a craggy sea captain than an oceanographer. He shook his beard and removed the few crumbs that had managed to cling since breakfast. They fell into the pool. A small, tan crab crawled out to inspect the sinking debris, snagged it, and retreated once more to the dark.

"Well," Atticus said, "*Hemigrapsus sanguineus*, fancy meeting you here."

Atticus thrust his hand into the pool like a diving

osprey and snagged the little crab. He pulled his lightly clenched fist out of the water, dripping and containing the small arthropod. Cupping his hands together, Atticus inspected the little creature to confirm its identity—the Asian shore crab—an invasive species that had made landfall in New Jersey in 1988. Now, almost twenty years later, it inhabited the coast from Maine to the Carolinas. It competed with local crab species but also threatened the famous North American lobster. Just one of many invasions most people are unaware of that threaten the ocean's ecosystem. True, the Asian shore crab might successfully replace the North American lobster in the food chain, substituting one animal for the other...but no one eats shore crab.

As Atticus looked the crab over, he knew he should crush the little thing before it could spawn and continue the invasion. But he didn't have the heart. Killing wasn't something of which he was capable, not anymore, even if it was an invasive species. He believed they should be wiped out and removed from the ecosystem, but not by his hands. He'd report the crab's presence, and a crew would be sent out to find and kill every Asian shore crab in the area. It was a noble effort, but ultimately would prove futile.

Kind of like my work, Atticus thought. Atticus was in the business of wildlife preservation, but focused on the New England's larger mammalian species, the humpback, minke, fin, and North Atlantic right whales, though he also worked with dolphins, seals,

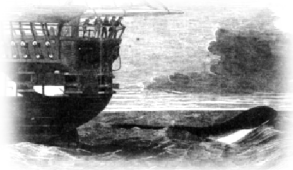
and, occasionally, sharks. He worked as an independent contractor for the New England Aquarium, the Whale Center of New England, and other independent scientific outfits, though most of his work and income went to the highest bidder, primarily the U.S. Navy, with which he still had close ties. His work could keep him at sea six months out of the year and often for weeks at a time, tracking, identifying, and tagging animals. His work for the military was often more discreet and required the signing of documents that guaranteed his silence, but it paid the bills and didn't conflict with his environmental efforts.

But none of it mattered anymore. In a week, Rye and his work on the ocean would be a memory.

After placing the crab back in the tide pool, Atticus worked his way back through the rocks, the incoming tide nipping at his heels. He trudged through the shell-filled sand and walked over the top of the water barrier. At the apex he gazed at the long strand of houses with no view, and then slid down the hill on his heels. He reached his old red Ford Explorer, climbed in, and closed the door.

Atticus turned the ignition, and the SUV started with a roar. The dashboard clock glowed blue at him, reminding him of the time. He was going to be late. With a slow sigh, Atticus pulled off the side of the road and onto Route 1A, the memories of the past fading as anxiety for the future set in. Where he was going next would be the hardest part of his day. He had to tell Giona that they were moving in a week, to

Ann Arbor. It was for the best, he knew, but he didn't look forward to breaking his daughter's heart...again.



3

PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE—THIRTY MILES OUT

The ocean lay flat and placid, calm in a way so rarely seen in the waters off Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine, collectively known as the Gulf of Maine. Jack Michaels leaned on the port rail of his fishing trawler, the *Ragnarok*, and wearily rested his chin on his hands. The herring season thus far had been abysmal, moving slower than the current four knots at which his ship was plodding along. It wasn't that the fish weren't there—other vessels were bringing in phenomenal hauls—but whether by some design of the sea or God's working against him, the herring were avoiding the *Ragnarok*.

His eyes trailed from the slowly undulating seas to the boat around him. The *Ragnarok* was ten years old,

new by some standards, and carried a fresh coat of obsidian paint, giving her the look of a modern ghost ship. The look was reinforced by the myriad of dark sinew-like cables that stretched from various points on the ship to the trawler cranes, which were capable of pulling in tons of fish. The thick net dragged through the water kept the cables taut, ready to haul in the big catch.

Thus far they'd proved useless. For all the ship's modern accoutrements, including a global positioning system and hydroacoustic fishfinders, the herring had remained elusive. If things didn't pick up soon, he'd have to take out a loan to make his house payments and carry the business into the next year. If he didn't pull in a great haul next year, he'd have to declare bankruptcy and go to work for one of the other fishing ventures...maybe head down to Essex, Massachusetts, where he grew up.

Jack considered the *Ragnarok* once again. Perhaps it was the ship's gloomy visage that kept the fish at bay? He knew it wasn't true, but this prime spot on the ocean, his personal secret, was devoid of fish, when it normally teemed with little silver bodies, swimming and swirling in unison. He sighed and removed a cigar from his jacket pocket. Usually reserved for the final successful haul, he felt there would be no use for it this year. Why not enjoy it now? After clipping the cigar and lighting up, he took a long drag, tasting the flavor, but quickly realized that without the success of a big haul, the cigar tasted more like burning dirt. He pulled the smoking cylinder from his

cracked lips and looked at it. Its smell was suddenly noxious, and he moved to fling the thing out to sea.

“Captain!” The voice was so shrill and sharp that he almost fell overboard. Jimmy, the excitable new kid on the boat, was prone to overreacting...though his eyes had never looked quite so wide before. Jimmy stopped, put his hands on his knees, and, in between gulps of air, said, “They’re...coming!”

Jack crinkled his nose. The boredom was getting to everyone. “Who’s coming?”

“The—the herring! The hydroacoustics just picked them up.”

Captain Jack Michaels felt hope return. He straightened his stance and firmed his voice. “How many?”

“I have no idea...”

Jack sighed. The boy had been well trained to estimate the number of fish based on the information displayed by the fishfinder. Schools of herring often showed up as large masses of red, green, and blue speckles, and an astute mind could peg the number to within a hundred by gauging the width and length of the signature. But there was little time to scold the boy. He looked to the sky and found the telltale sign that the fish were coming. A flock of seagulls flew over the ocean, watching the waters below. Normally, the gulls would dive and pull fish from the sea, but this group looked as though they were having trouble keeping up. The herring were running. From what, Jack didn’t care. They were headed straight for the *Ragnarok*.

Bounding into the bridge, Jack took a look at the hydroacoustic display screen. At the bottom were two corresponding lines, one red, and one green. They marked the ocean floor. But it was the large cloud of colored specks that sucked the air from his lungs. The school of fish stretched almost all the way across the screen, with no end in sight. "Holy..." Jack snapped to his senses, issuing loud commands before he had given them any thought. "Drop the second net! Do it now!"

Not every trawler had a second net, but Jack had designed his boat to maximize efficiency. The secondary net was smaller than the first. It would catch a great number, but those that got around it were caught by the much larger secondary net. It was a secret that only he and his crew knew about, and it had greatly increased their catches in the past. Jack's mouth spread in a wide smile. That day they would exceed the previous year's catch...in mere minutes. It might take all day to pull the enormous catch from the nets, but the work would be worth it.

Jack could hear the shouts of his crew as they frantically dropped the second net. It spread in the water not a moment too soon. The front wave of herring, the truly fast specimens, hit the net and were scooped up. Then the front end of the mass of fish entered, and Jack actually felt the impact as tons of fish filled both nets. The *Ragnarok* slowed almost to a stop. Jack slammed the throttle forward. If the boat lost momentum, the fish might escape. The engines chugged loudly in response, groaning against the extra tons of

weight, but eventually the boat picked up speed. Jack watched the hydroacoustic display as the cloud of herring thinned out and ended, the majority of the fish secure in the nets.

He was about to look away, let out a whooping cheer, and slap young Jimmy on the back, when a second object entered the display, hot on the heels of the remaining herring. But this wasn't some speckled cloud of fish; it was solid. The object undulated into view, and as Jack estimated its size, he ruled out one creature after another.

Fifty feet...not the pilot, minke, or ray...

Sixty feet. He ruled out the humpbacks.

Seventy feet. Not a sperm whale, which had been his guess.

As the object continued to enter the viewfinder, he knew it was a blue whale. They grew to a maximum size of 110 feet. They were the largest living creature ever to grace the planet earth throughout its entire history. Nothing was bigger.

And yet, as this creature passed the 110-foot mark, then the 120-foot...140...150...he knew that the blue whale had been usurped as the ocean's king. Jack suddenly realized the creature was coming for the herring and wasn't slowing down. The *Ragnarok* would be obliterated. For a millisecond, Jack thought of ordering the nets cut loose, but it was too late. The behemoth had reached the nets, but at the last possible moment dived deep. It was amazingly agile for something so massive, and quicker than it had arrived, it disappeared from the hydrosonic display, as though it

had never been.

Jack glanced to his side and saw Jimmy's wide eyes and slack jaw. "Hell of a thing ain't it, kid."

Jimmy nodded. "Should...shouldn't we tell someone?"

"Who would believe us?"

Cheers rose up from around the boat. Jack looked out the window and saw the ocean frothing with fish as the first net was brought up. The winches creaked under the strain, but were holding. It was the largest catch Jack had ever seen and that was only the first of two nets. Jack placed the cigar, which he'd been holding tightly the whole time, back in his mouth and took a puff. It tasted delightful.

He turned back to Jimmy. "The sea giveth and the sea taketh away. Just be thankful she was in a giving mood today and move on. Questioning things just invites trouble." Jack nodded to the hydroacoustic screen. "And that kind of trouble is something we don't want. Understand?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Good. Consider yourself promoted." Jack opened the bridge door to a blast of fresh ocean air and the hoots and hollers of his gleeful crew, who, except for young Jimmy, would never know just how close they'd all come to being Hollywood's next exploited sea tragedy. "All right," Jack shouted, "get these fish on board double time! We're heading home!"

The men cheered. They'd been at sea for weeks and missed their families. But a joyful homecoming

wasn't what spurred Jack's urgency to get home. Rather, for the first time in his life, he wanted to get off the water and onto solid ground.