
FATAL FORECAST

AN INCREDIBLE TRUE TALE OF DISASTER
AND SURVIVAL AT SEA

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TO THE CREWS OF THE
FAIR WIND, SEA FEVER, AND BROADBILL

Dave Berry
Brad Bowen
Gary Brown
Peter Brown
Billy Garnos
Ernie Hazard
Grant Moore
Richard Rowell
Rob Thayer

PROLOGUE

GEORGES BANK, LOCATED ONE HUNDRED MILES EAST of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, is one of the richest fishing grounds in the world. It is an oval-shaped plateau on the ocean's floor, roughly the size of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut combined. Sixteen thousand years ago, during the ice age, Georges Bank was land, not sea, a broad coastal plain connected to the rest of North America. Nearby Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard were the largest hills in the region. As the glaciers melted and retreated, water filled in the deeper channels around Georges Bank, making it an island. Trapped on this enormous island of pine, juniper, and oak were land animals such as woolly mammoths, mastodons, moose, and caribou, whose teeth are today sometimes brought up in fishing nets. As the sea rose, more of the island flooded, and roughly six thousand years ago all of it was submerged.

Water depths on Georges Bank are irregular; in some places canyons plunge thousands of feet deep, while in other sections shoals of sand rise to within ten feet of the ocean's surface. Such shallow waters have led to exaggerated tales of fishermen claiming to have played baseball in ankle-deep water during low tide. The shoals are the very reason fishermen venture onto the Bank. Rays of sunlight can reach the bottom, allowing plankton to grow. Small fish gather to feed on the plankton and larger fish in turn prey on them.

The Bank's tremendous currents also contribute to the fishery by creating a high-energy environment of cycling nutrients and oxygen, but these currents, a swirling combination of tidal and surface waves, produce a constant turbulence when they collide over the sandy shoals. Many of the first fishermen to visit the Bank never went back, fearing the currents were too strong for them to safely anchor their boats. One early fisherman recounted a grim story of what happens when an anchor cable snaps. He was on board an anchored vessel in a storm when another boat, whose anchor had broken loose, careened past his boat. "The drifting vessel was coming directly at us.... With the swiftness of a gull she passed by, so near that I could have leapt aboard. The hopeless, terror-stricken faces of the crew we saw but a moment." The doomed ship then struck another vessel and both went down. The Georges Bank fisherman closed his observation by writing, "We knew that many a poor fellow who had left Gloucester full of hope, would never more return."

Georges Bank is also dangerous because of its location in the Atlantic. On the eastern end of the Bank the warm waters of the Gulf Stream collide with the cold Labrador Current, creating swirling waves. Although the currents at Georges Bank are almost always rough, when strong winds are added chaotic seas occur, particularly in the shoal waters where vicious waves suddenly crest and break. Fishermen who venture out to Georges Bank need a boat large and sturdy enough to handle these seas. Here, help, should you need it, is hours away, an eternity if your vessel is going down. Captains fishing Georges Bank understand this, and the smart ones keep their boats in tip-top shape and always have one ear glued to the radio, listening to each and every updated weather report. If a big storm is coming, they get out of its way—fast.

The floor of the Bank is littered with rotted, rusting wrecks, and today's draggers must dodge them or risk snagging their nets. Some wrecks have been identified, but most are unknown. Year upon year, boats have a way of disappearing on Georges Bank. Even with radios, many vessels that sink give no indication of their coming doom. Something sudden and catastrophic happens, and the boat sinks within seconds, joining the hundreds of others on the bottom.

The deadly nature of Georges Bank is the trade-off fishermen must reckon with to get at catches richer than those found closer to shore. To fish the Bank one must accept the risk. This is not an environment for the fainthearted. The men who work the Bank are a rugged lot, who quickly develop

certain toughness that keeps fear in check. One of these men was thirty-three-year-old Ernie Hazard. What he endured on Georges Bank is nothing short of remarkable.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

The *Fair Wind* Crew

ERNIE HAZARD WAS IN HIS THIRD YEAR OF OFFSHORE lobster fishing, and although the work was brutally demanding, he felt fortunate. The *Fair Wind*, a 50-foot steel lobster boat on which Ernie worked, was a meticulously maintained vessel equipped with the most modern gear and electronics. Equally important, Ernie enjoyed the company of his fellow crewmembers and his captain—no one slacked off and everyone contributed to making the *Fair Wind* a very profitable boat.

On November 20, 1980, the crew was having dinner at the Backside Saloon in Hyannis, Massachusetts, enjoying a good meal before making the last trip of the season. The men had made close to thirty fishing trips to Georges Bank since the previous April, and they were all looking forward to having the next four months off. Ernie talked about going down to Florida to see his brother or possibly heading out to Carmel, California, to visit friends. Thirty-year-old captain Billy Garnos planned to focus on his new house and his fiancée. Rob Thayer, age twenty-two, hadn't made any definite plans, but he hoped to travel, having spent prior off-seasons in such far-flung places as Labrador and Newfoundland. Dave Berry, the youngest crewmember at just twenty years old, lived up in Marblehead, Massachusetts, and he'd likely take a little time off to be with friends before working at his father's wholesale fish business.

Ernie felt relaxed that night, quietly listening as the rest of the crew discussed their plans. Every now and then he made a joke or a wry comment. The others had come to enjoy his self-deprecating humor and quick, dry wit. They also appreciated the muscle and stamina packed into his burly six-foot frame. He had arms as big as most men's thighs, and he put those arms to good use hauling and setting lobster traps. He looked tough and perhaps a bit menacing with his muscular arms, piercing black eyes, and wild black beard, but his crewmates knew that behind the gruff exterior was an intelligent and thoughtful man.

But Ernie was no saint, and occasionally he and Billy Garnos would pound down a few rounds of beers after a week at sea and raise a little hell. This was especially true after they'd managed to harpoon a swordfish in addition to catching lobster, when each had a wad of cash in his pocket. Neither man went looking for trouble, but some situations called for Ernie to throw a punch or two. After most trips, however, all Ernie really wanted to do was rest for a couple of days before heading back out to Georges Bank and the bone-numbing work of lobstering.

Although Ernie, at age thirty-three, was the oldest of the crew, the others had been fishing just as long or longer. Ernie got his position on board the *Fair Wind* by simply answering a help wanted advertisement he'd seen in the newspaper three years earlier. He was single and living in Peabody, Massachusetts, bouncing from one factory job to another, making lightbulbs at the General Electric plant in Lynn and working for a concrete manufacturer. When Ernie saw the advertisement for a crewman, he was between jobs, so he figured, What the heck, that's something I've never done.

The boat's owner, Charlie Raymond, worked alongside Billy Garnos and another crew member, so Ernie became the fourth crewman. Ernie had never been offshore, and on his first trip out he couldn't help but think that he had entered another world as he gazed at the gray ocean stretching endlessly in all directions. Some newcomers to commercial fishing get spooked and disoriented on their initial voyage when they realize how insignificant their boat is compared to the enormous seas. But Ernie was fascinated by the new experience, and Charlie Raymond and Billy Garnos kept him

But Ernie was fascinated by the new experience, and Charlie Raymond and Billy Garnos kept him busy from the moment he set foot on the *Fair Wind*, teaching him everything they could. “They had me driving the boat,” says Ernie, “which was a big deal for me. I’d never driven a fifty-foot boat, and I loved every minute of it. Plowing through that vast open space was a thrill, and I remember thinking this is absolutely incredible—it was all so new and different.”

Ernie’s initial trip on the *Fair Wind* was also the boat’s first of the season. When they reached the fishing grounds after a twenty-hour ride, Ernie learned what it took to make a living from the sea. “I wondered how long these people were going to work without taking a rest,” says Ernie. “They seemed tireless.” The boat was loaded with dozens of traps, and they had to bait each one and then drop it down. There were twenty-two traps to a trawl (a set or string of traps), and on that trip they dropped three trawls, working throughout the day and well into the night.

As backbreaking as the work seemed, the next trip was even tougher. The crew had to haul in the previously set traps, rebait them, then drop them over again. Ernie’s hands had not yet developed calluses, and his tender flesh was in constant pain from pulling so much rope. He found he had muscles in his hands and forearms that he’d never felt before, and they ached incessantly. But he didn’t complain. He already knew that this work was more rewarding than his manufacturing jobs. It paid better too, but that didn’t matter to him; the satisfaction was in the work itself, the ocean setting and the guys who worked beside him.

The trips fell into a pattern of five days out at sea, and then a day or two back in port. Ernie’s skin quickly developed thick calluses, and the muscles in his hands became so large he could barely touch his thumb to his smallest finger. Charlie and Billy continued to teach him about the boat and lobstering, and Ernie soaked up as much as he could, enthralled by this new ocean world. Each trip was different; sometimes the North Atlantic unleashed an angry series of pounding waves, but other times the water remained as smooth as glass, and the crew could tell the difference between a swordfish and a shark from the surface almost a mile away.

Ernie’s pay depended on the catch, and his cut of the boat’s profits was slightly lower than those of the more senior men. When the catch was poor, all the crew suffered. “If we weren’t catching lobster,” says Ernie, “the work just seemed like ball-busting labor. But when we had good days, there was no feeling quite like it. It wasn’t just that we would make more money, but more a feeling that ‘we did it.’ And we never knew how many lobster we would haul up or what else would be in the trap.” On one trip the only thing caught in the trap was a lobster claw, but what a claw it was. It measured seventeen inches long and contained fifteen pounds of meat. Ernie kept the claw, removed the meat, lacquered the shell, and mounted it at his mother’s home to show friends who couldn’t believe its size. The lobster from which the claw had come likely measured five feet from the tail to the outstretched claw.

Over the course of the season, as Ernie got to know Charlie and Billy, he began to view them as family and he understood how each man relied on the other. A crewmate’s energy and natural disposition become apparent within a couple days, and he either gels with the rest of the crew or he doesn’t. Everything becomes magnified in this self-contained world, and if someone isn’t pulling his weight or can’t fit in with the men already on board, he doesn’t stay long. This kind of crewmember can poison a boat and its productivity.

For the three years Ernie fished on the *Fair Wind* he was lucky to work with great crewmembers, and because the boat was successful, there was very little turnover. During Ernie’s second year, owner Charlie Raymond made Billy Garnos the captain so that Charlie could concentrate on the construction of a bigger boat and focus on the business needs of his growing fleet. Billy, an unusually generous young man who had bought a home and invited his parents and grandmother to live with him and who was now saving for a second home for himself and his fiancée, proved an able skipper. Charlie promised Billy that when the bigger boat was ready it would be his to captain.

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Billy came by his interest in the sea from the surf-casting he used to do with his father growing up. Billy and neighborhood pal Frank Sholds would climb into Mr. Garnos's ancient truck and the three of them would drive from their hometown of Beverly, Massachusetts, up to Plum Island near the New Hampshire border for some striper fishing. Years later, it was Frank who first tried his hand at commercial fishing for offshore lobsters. Billy, fresh from a tour of duty in Vietnam and working at a local supermarket, was impressed with Frank's big paychecks and soon followed in his friend's footsteps. Through Frank, Billy met Charlie Raymond and became a deckhand on the *Fair Wind*. Billy made up for his inexperience with his strong back, quick mind, and good work ethic, and he labored on the boat in whatever capacity was needed, from cook to engineer. Unlike some commercial fishermen who blew half their weekly checks the first day they were back in port, Billy saved a good portion of his. It was this maturity and sense of loyalty that caught the eye of Charlie Raymond, and Charlie knew he had just the kind of man he wanted to captain his boat.

Rob Thayer and Dave Berry rounded out the rest of the crew, and all of them had great respect and confidence in Billy as their captain. The four men had formed a tight bond, and they often chose to have dinner together before setting back out to sea. For Rob Thayer, this was his first season aboard the *Fair Wind*, but after the steep learning curve of the first few weeks, he was now pulling his weight just like the others. Rob and Dave Berry, both in their early twenties, formed a quick friendship. Dave was an experienced deckhand, having worked on the ocean since he was fifteen. He too saved a good deal of his fishing pay and had just bought a new pickup truck, which he paid off in no time. A little of Billy Garnos's sense of responsibility and maturity may have rubbed off on Dave because just before the year-end trip to Georges Bank he treated his mother to lunch and talked with her about investing his money. He also visited his father and indicated that after the trip he'd like to try working in his dad's wholesale fish business with an eye toward becoming a partner someday.

Young, confident, and hardworking, the crew seemingly had their whole lives in front of them.

* * *

Now, as the four men ate and talked at the Backside Saloon, they knew the upcoming week at Georges Bank would be a cold one. Late-November temperatures could be expected to hover in the 40s and 50s during the day and drop lower at night. Still, the more important factors were the wind, and whether or not storms were forecast for the region. Whenever Billy learned of an approaching storm before a late season trip, he'd delay departure until the storm passed. Georges Bank in November could be a very nasty place, and it was not the time of year to take chances.

The next morning, the men met at sunrise and prepared the boat for the final trip, stowing food, bait, and gear. The old fisherman's superstition that it's bad luck to leave on a Friday did not deter the crew and never had. Men like Ernie and Billy felt that if you put stock in superstitions you'd never get any fishing done. The crew of the *Fair Wind* felt no sense of foreboding that day, no ominous premonitions.

As he'd done the night before, Billy listened to the National Weather Service forecast for Georges Bank. The forecast called for southeast winds of 15 to 25 knots, shifting to northwest at 20 to 30 knots at night, followed by similar conditions for Saturday with some rain and fog. Seas would be three to six feet Friday and five to ten feet on Saturday. The report was quite typical for Georges Bank and the crew of the *Fair Wind* had no reason to doubt its accuracy.

One of the key components of forecasting weather at sea is the information obtained from

weather buoys. The weather buoys transmit hourly reports on sea-level pressure, air temperature, sea surface temperature, wave height, and the all-important wind speed and direction. On that day, however, the Georges Bank buoy was malfunctioning. And just to the north, the Gulf of Maine buoy was not even afloat but was on land being repaired. Thus the weather report was based on incomplete

was not even about, but was on land being repaired. Thus, the weather report was based on incomplete data. The management at the National Weather Service, which is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), had known about the situation for months, but they had elected not to alert mariners of the problem.

Billy Garnos, Ernie Hazard, Rob Thayer, and Dave Berry headed out to sea based on what they believed to be the same reliable forecasts they had grown to trust over the years. They looked forward to a smooth trip.

But on that November day, the *Fair Wind* was on a collision course with a storm that produced waves more monstrous than anything the crew had ever seen.

CHAPTER 2

Heading Out

ERNIE HAZARD GREW UP IN COCHITUATE, MASSACHUSETTS, located about twenty miles west of Boston. Although he didn't spend much time near the ocean, he loved the water, particularly Dudley Pond and nearby swamps. He and his brothers would spend hours on end fishing for horned pout and pickerel, catching frogs and turtles, but mostly just wandering around the woods and wetlands the way kids did back in the time before computers, PlayStation, and cable TV.

Ernie's father died when he was fifteen, and Ernie, who was already independent-minded and stubborn, spent more time in the swamps and less time at school. At the beginning of his senior year his mother remarried and she and her husband relocated to Peabody, but Ernie refused to go. Instead he got a job at a gas station near Cochituate, and continued at school during the day and pumped gas in the evening. At night he slept inside the garage of the gas station. When school officials discovered this, they forced him out of school because he didn't have a parent living in the town, and Ernie reluctantly joined his mother in Peabody.

Just before graduation from high school, he was drafted and entered the army in November. He was trained in mechanics and within a few months found himself serving in Korea. One would think that a freewheeling teenager would rebel against army life, but Ernie didn't mind the rigors of the service, and he loved the experience of traveling overseas. When his hitch was up he returned to Peabody and landed a job at the nearby General Electric plant. Most of the money he made went into his passions—motorcycles and good times. Like many young men, he drifted around, hungry for new experiences, feeling as if he could do anything. The difference between Ernie and most other young men was that Ernie didn't just talk about adventure, he went out and found it. He once took a year off from working to tour the West Coast. Determined not to be a passive tourist, he decided to travel the back roads, under his own power, and alone. He hitchhiked to Washington State, bought a bicycle, and pedaled south on a three-month odyssey. He didn't stop until he reached Mexico.

When Ernie joined the crew of the *Fair Wind*, he bonded quickly with his crewmates because in many ways they were a lot like him: tough, independent, and willing to try new adventures. While his friends were settling down in nine-to-five jobs, these men were out on the ocean from April through November, working eighteen-hour days. In those eight months at sea the goal was simple: make as much money as possible so that during the winter months they could do whatever they pleased.

This freedom was made possible by a bottom-dwelling crustacean with a greenish-brown shell, the lobster. These ancient, armored creatures have two huge specialized claws. The right one acts as a pincher, and the slightly larger left claw is used as a crusher. With these powerful tools lobsters catch and crush both living and dead organisms, including fish, sea worms, mollusks, and small crustaceans. They are also cannibalistic, attacking smaller members of their own species. As a lobster ages, it outgrows the limits of its shell and must molt, or "shed," by splitting its shell and wriggling free. For the next several days the lobster is soft and vulnerable, and when predators approach, the lobster's only defense is to hide among rocks until its new shell hardens.

Lobster habitat is often found in shallow, craggy coastal areas, but these creatures can also live at depths of up to four hundred fathoms and are particularly abundant in the submarine canyons of Georges Bank. These offshore lobsters travel more extensively than their coastal cousins, often

covering as many as 180 miles during spring migrations.

—Prior to the 1950s, offshore lobsters were usually incidental catches in nets intended for other fish. Fishermen knew there were plenty of lobsters in the canyons and in the holes of the canyon walls but conventional traps and nets were inefficient at capturing them. In the late 1950s, however, technological advances in trap design and hauling allowed fishermen to work the deep waters of Georges Bank, and the harvest of lobsters there increased fourfold between 1960 and 1969. Georges Bank lobsters were also considerably larger than those found inshore, with some reaching twenty pounds or more. But word spread quickly, attracting more boats to the Bank, and by the mid-1970s most of the big lobsters had been harvested, and the overall population had been significantly reduced. Despite the decline in catches, offshore lobstering still brought better yields than inshore, and boats like the *Fair Wind* found less competition from other lobstermen when they were out as far as Georges Bank. The bigger paydays, however, were not without a commensurate risk: should trouble strike, a boat could be a long way off.

The crew of the *Fair Wind* used large wooden traps, each weighing about 125 pounds. Each of the twenty-two traps in a trawl were connected together with a polypropylene ground line, and the traps were spaced so that the entire trawl stretched for about a mile. The traps were then set with the prevailing current so there would be no slack in the line and they didn't get snarled, or "balled up." The first and the last traps on the trawl were weighted down with "end weights" to keep them anchored in place. These end traps were also connected to two large floating balls and a triangular radar reflector known as a high-flyer, which bobbed upright on the ocean's surface so that a boat's radar could home in on it. When the traps were lifted, the crewmen removed the lobsters, keeping the legal ones and throwing those that were undersized back into the sea. The crewmen took turns banding the lobsters and either rebaiting and lowering the traps or stacking them for placement in another area. Each man was lifting, sliding, and slinging tons of gear in a single day, and stacking the traps in rough seas was perhaps the most difficult of all the duties.

Working with heavy, cumbersome gear on a moving deck takes strength and athleticism, but endurance was, and still is, the primary attribute needed in a lobster fisherman. Every offshore boat aims to maximize its catch in as little time as possible. The goal of the *Fair Wind's* crew was to get on and off the fishing grounds as quickly as possible, so the men put in seventeen to twenty hours each day.

* * *

As the *Fair Wind* left Hyannis around noon on Friday, November 21, the crew took two-hour shifts at the wheel. Driving the boat to the fishing grounds was the least demanding part of the trip, consisting of looking out the window for other boats and watching the radar. Dave Berry manned the wheel for the first couple of hours, glancing at the green glowing screen of the radar. The central point on the screen was the *Fair Wind's* position, and from that center an electronic line ran clockwise around the screen, highlighting any objects that fell within the radar's range. Usually the screen was blank, but every now and then a dot would appear, indicating another fishing boat, tanker, or freighter. The *Fair Wind's* course had already been plotted with an electronic navigation aid called LORAN, so piloting the boat was just a matter of staying on course and leaving a wide berth between their boat and other vessels. Because the work was monotonous, shifts at the wheel were short. With the motion of the long swells of the open ocean and the droning of the *Fair Wind's* 265-horsepower diesel engine, it was easy to get lulled to sleep.



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The dotted line indicates the approximate path the *Fair Wind* took on Friday, November 21, 1980, from Hyannis, Massachusetts, the fishing grounds on Georges Bank.

Occasionally Dave raised another fishing vessel on the radio, both to keep himself alert and to check on the other boat's progress. On this trip, the nearest vessel was the *Sea Fever*, another commercial lobster boat also heading to Georges Bank for a season-ending trip. The two vessels floated five miles apart. Because they had worked in close proximity all summer, the crews were familiar with one another and glad to have a friendly boat nearby should any trouble arise. Both crews had a healthy respect for the ocean and knew that an unforeseen accident could pay a visit at any moment. Just four weeks earlier six crewmen aboard the 77-foot New Bedford trawler *Irene and Hilda* had been lost at sea when a storm capsized their boat.

Captained by William Rebello Sr., the *Irene and Hilda* had a deck crew of five men, one of whom was the captain's son John. On Saturday, October 25, the steel-hulled trawler was fifteen miles east of Nantucket heading to Georges Bank when it encountered twenty-foot waves and 60-knot winds. Although the boat was handling well and in no immediate trouble, Captain Rebello, who had twenty-five years of commercial fishing experience, decided to play it safe and return to port in New Bedford. Son John Rebello radioed his mother and told her they were aborting their trip because of the stormy conditions. Mrs. Rebello reminded her son to be careful coming in, and John replied it would be slow going in the heavy seas. She asked what time they could be expected back in port, and John replied about 5 or 6 a.m. the next morning. She closed their conversation with a simple "God bless." That would be the last time Mrs. Rebello ever heard from her son or husband.

When the *Irene and Hilda* did not return on Sunday morning, Mrs. Rebello alerted the Coast Guard and a massive search was launched, using six aircraft and two cutters that began scouring an 11,000-square-mile area east of Nantucket. At the Coast Guard's rescue coordination center in Boston a computer operator punched in the tide, sea, and wind conditions to determine where the vessel, a life raft, or men in the water may have drifted. They assured Mrs. Rebello that if anything was still afloat they had a 90 percent chance of finding it.

On Monday a Coast Guard aircraft spotted barrels bobbing in the water, and on Tuesday it was determined that they were the same type as the ones on board the lost vessel. Finding the barrels gave hope to family members that the search was zeroing in on the correct drift line of the vessel or crew. The Coast Guard, however, knew that finding floating debris from the ship was not a good sign; it probably meant the ship had capsized and sunk. On Wednesday, approximately thirty miles east of Nantucket, a fishing boat found a life ring from the *Irene and Hilda*, adding to the evidence that something catastrophic had happened to the missing vessel. Three more days went by with no additional finds, and a week after the vessel was first reported missing the Coast Guard ended the search.

* * *

The crew of the *Fair Wind* was well aware that late-season trips to Georges Bank could be dangerous but they also had great confidence in their boat. The six-year-old, twenty-seven-ton, green and white *Fair Wind* had proven itself in heavy seas on numerous trips and Billy Garnos remained calm and steady at the wheel when the ocean grew angry. But a solid boat and captain meant nothing in the face of the great storm that was about to hit them.

CHAPTER 3

The Forecast

ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON ERNIE TOOK HIS TURN AT the wheel and was again swept up by the sense of freedom and contentment he always felt when piloting the *Fair Wind* southeast toward the vast open space of the fishing grounds. Visibility was good, and the *Fair Wind* easily rose up and over the gentle five-foot swells as its bow smoothly parted the seas, a white wake trailing astern. With the sun low in the southwestern sky behind him, Ernie looked out over the platinum sea and felt that he was exactly where he should be, at the right place and the right time. After living in Cochituate, Peabody, South Korea, Salem, and California, Ernie knew that the *Fair Wind* and the wild, seemingly boundless world of the North Atlantic was just where he belonged at this stage in his life. He was healthy, single, and happy, with the personal freedom to do whatever he wanted with his young life.

At 4 p.m. Rob Thayer took the wheel as the *Fair Wind* passed through an area known as the Green Round Shoal, putting the island of Nantucket behind its stern. Rob paid close attention to the radar screen, as he would soon be crossing the shipping lanes that run north-northwest for inbound traffic to Boston Harbor and south-southeast for outgoing vessels. These lanes keep ships on course and off the nearby shoals. Between these two lanes is a mile-wide separation zone to allow a margin of error. Just four years earlier the giant oil tanker *Argo Merchant* strayed outside of the lanes and paid the price, sinking when it hit a shoal.

Crossing the lanes could be dangerous because of the amount of traffic that used them. A small boat like the *Fair Wind* wouldn't stand a chance against a tanker or a freighter, and many of the fishing vessels that have simply disappeared probably met their ends this way. Often the crew of the larger boat doesn't even realize that they've run over a smaller vessel, or worse, the ship's skipper pretends not to notice and continues onward. The only clue that later links the ship to the accident is a streak of paint from the smaller boat running along the ship's hull. (A ship's radar may not pick up a small boat at all, and even if it does, it's often too late to avoid the collision, as it can take more than a quarter mile for a large ship to make a turn and a full mile and a half to stop.)

On this day, the *Fair Wind* crossed the shipping lanes without incident and continued east toward Georges Bank. Though collisions were rare on Georges Bank, conflicts between vessels using different types of gear were not. Fixed gear such as long lines, gill nets, and lobster trap trawls were often fouled by draggers such as scallopers. These incidents raised the tempers of crews on both types of boats, as accidents wasted precious time while gear was untangled and repaired. But such a conflict was unlikely to happen so late in the season, when many fishing boats had already made their last trips. On this day in November, the *Fair Wind* would be one of only a handful of boats working an area larger than southern New England—all the more reason for the *Fair Wind* to maintain radio communication with the other boat headed out for lobster, the *Sea Fever*.

* * *

As Rob steered the boat he periodically checked the VHF radio for weather forecasts, and the reports continued to call for fair conditions. Later, as the *Fair Wind* traveled out of range of the VHF signals, the powerful single sideband radio would be used to monitor the weather. These reports were announced on a fixed schedule every six hours, with the next report due at 11 p.m.

While Rob manned the helm, Billy stayed below with the others sleeping or reading. Once on the

While Rob manned the helm, Billy stayed below with the charts, sleeping or reading. Once on the Bank, Billy would be as busy as the rest of the crew, although he'd be at the wheel much of the time while Ernie, Rob, and Dave worked on deck retrieving traps dropped a week earlier. Because this was their last trip of the season, they'd be spending considerable time stacking traps and coiling line once the gear was hauled up and the lobsters were dropped in the saltwater tanks below. Little motion would be wasted, as each crewman knew exactly what was expected of him. By this time in the season they could anticipate their fellow crewmen's each and every movement.

By working as a group they would push one another to work far harder than if they were working alone. Billy would join them on deck whenever he could leave the wheelhouse, and he would keep the pace up by moving constantly, helping wherever there was a need. After the second or third day, the grueling labor would catch up with their endurance. Lifting gear, which one man might have done alone on the first day, may now require assistance, and the crew would increasingly depend on one another. This would also be the time crewmen needed to be a bit more deliberate to avoid slipping on deck or getting a leg or arm caught in a line. It's an unwritten rule that the whole crew remain on deck until the job at hand is completed. If a crewman on deck got hurt or caught in a dangerous situation, his very life might depend on immediate assistance from a fellow crewman. Without help a man entangled in a trapline could be yanked overboard in the blink of an eye. It would be a long way down to a watery grave before his crewmates even noticed he was missing.

In spite of the intensity of the work, complaining would be rare. The whole crew knew that the difference between a successful trip and an unsuccessful one had often been the simple determination to keep going, to ignore fatigue and pain. They also knew that four men was exactly the right number of hands for this size vessel: any more and their share of the profit would decrease, while any less would mean hauling fewer traps.

Now, however, the heavy work was still twelve hours away, and the crew was relaxed and rested. Billy Garnos took over for Rob on the wheel, and Rob went below and settled into his bunk as the *Fair Wind* cut through the seas on its southeastward course.

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As the *Fair Wind* approached the halfway mark to Billy Garnos's preferred fishing grounds on the southeastern edge of Georges Bank, a sinister force was collecting itself to the south. A low-pressure system was taking shape, silently gathering strength off the Carolina coast. The weather service knew about this low-pressure system, and they predicted a northeastward trajectory that would take the storm toward Nova Scotia, well east of Georges Bank. The only effect of the storm forecast for Georges Bank was for a few showers and windy conditions on Saturday. But the storm had other plans.

Forecasting weather at sea in 1980 was more challenging than it is today and far more difficult than forecasting land-based weather. A land storm passes over several dozen monitoring stations manned by meteorologists with the latest technology, making it virtually impossible to surprise a region totally. An ocean storm, on the other hand, has far fewer monitors. A meteorologist must rely on satellite images, high-altitude atmosphere balloons, weather buoys, and reports from passing ships. Two of these four monitoring tools were not available on that November night; not only were two weather buoys broken, no ships crossed directly through the low-pressure system's path. At the time the third tool, satellite imagery, was not reliable, still unable to penetrate clearly the high atmospheric cloud cover.

The meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service office in Boston, Rodney Winslow, was not comfortable predicting ocean weather with one arm tied behind his back. He had repeatedly warned his superiors about the broken buoy at Georges Bank, writing in one memo that "this buoy is extremely important to us.... It serves as one of the few reliable observation points in an area where a tremendous number of fishing vessels operate daily. I urge every effort be made to bring and

immense number of fishing vessels operate daily... . Large every effort be made to bring and maintain these buoys on continuous operational status. Must we once again open ourselves to political repercussion because of the failure of an important piece of equipment?"

The weather buoy in question had begun to malfunction as early as the spring of 1980, when it simply stopped reporting. In early August, it was hit by a ship, causing further damage. At-sea repairs were made on August 11, but on September 6 the wind sensor failed. Winslow's request to have it repaired again was denied by managers at the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, which oversees both the National Weather Service and the marine weather buoys. NOAA was wrestling with budget limitations, and it decided to wait to repair the buoy until January, when a new, improved type of wind sensor would be ready to install.

Of course, Ernie, Billy, Rob, and Dave knew nothing about this. So far the trip out to the Bank had been smooth going, and when Billy listened to the 11 p.m. weather forecast he heard nothing new.

The *Fair Wind* steamed eastward, as long, gentle swells rolled beneath her hull.

CHAPTER 4

In the Monster's Grip

ERNIE WOKE FROM HIS SLEEP AT 6 A.M. AND KNEW immediately that something was wrong. The *Fair Wind* pitched violently and he could feel the boat shudder with each breaking wave. As he threw on a pair of pants and slid into his work boots, he wondered what the hell had happened to the predicted five-to ten-foot seas. In the wheelhouse he found Dave on the wheel and Billy and Rob standing beside him. Outside, clouds of white spray slammed the windshield as the *Fair Wind* lurched through heavy swells.

Billy looked at Ernie and said, "Can you believe this shit?"

Ernie glanced out the pilothouse windows and saw a twenty-foot wave advancing toward them. "It sure doesn't look like five-to ten-foot seas," said Ernie sarcastically. "What did the five a.m. report say?"

"The forecast changed. It called for a gale warning with wind of thirty to forty knots and seas eight to fourteen feet. Dave was on the wheel and he woke me when he heard that. When I got up here the wind was already pushing fifty knots and the seas were easily running fifteen to twenty feet. And it's getting worse by the minute."

The crew knew they were too far out to sea to do anything other than keep the *Fair Wind's* bow pointed into the seas, maintain position, and take the beating. They wanted to avoid breaking seas on the stern, which could damage gear and bury the boat under tons of churning water. If the weather forecast was even remotely credible, they were now facing the worst that the storm had to give, and things would soon improve. The *Fair Wind* was on Georges Bank at its southeastern end, near Munson Canyon, just a few miles from the edge of the continental shelf.

Outside the wind roared and rain flew almost horizontally, the drops splattering the boat like shotgun pellets. Visibility shrank to just twenty-five to fifty feet and a low cloud cover hovered just above the ocean. The angry, breaking seas filled the air with churning, frothing foam, making it difficult to determine where the sea ended and the sky began. They would haul no traps today, but the crew hoped that if the storm quickly subsided they might be able to work on Sunday.

Billy had Dave position the boat so that it was headed directly into the wind with the waves striking a couple degrees to port, which was the side of the pilothouse made of welded steel. The doors to the pilothouse were on the starboard side and Billy didn't want them to take a beating. He was playing it safe, although he knew the *Fair Wind* was a rugged boat and could easily take the punishment the seas were throwing at her. Billy wasn't worried about the weather as much as he was angry about the forecast. Just seven hours earlier, the 11 p.m. forecast had called for favorable weather. Had he known the day before that a storm would hit the Bank today, he would have turned back and waited for the weather to clear. Now it was too late.

Billy raised the *Sea Fever* on the radio to see how they were making out. The captain of the *Sea Fever*, Peter Brown, had taken the same action as Billy, pointing their bow into the sea, taking wave after wave, waiting it out. Brown made it clear that he too was fuming mad that the weather forecast had been dead wrong. By the time the 5 a.m. forecast predicted a gale, his boat was already in its grip. He wondered how the weather service could have made such a dire mistake.

By 7 a.m. the seas had grown to twenty-five feet, and some barrels of bait had come loose on the *Fair Wind's* deck rolling from side to side and banging the rail. The barrels could damage the boat or

the *Fair Wind*'s deck, rolling from side to side and banging the rail. The barrels could damage the boat or be swept overboard, where a loose line could become tangled in the propeller. If a propeller stops spinning, a boat can no longer be steered, and in high seas the results can be fatal. Without propeller power the boat will soon be sideways, or "beam to," the waves, and rough seas can quickly roll the boat.

Ernie and Billy had no choice but to risk going out on deck to secure the barrels in spite of the danger. At any moment an ill-timed breaking wave might sweep them overboard. When they left the safety of the pilothouse, the force of the wind staggered them as if they'd been punched by an unseen fist. The wind was so strong it tore the tops off the waves. Yellow spin-drift, with the consistency of shaving cream, raced through the air, blurring and stinging their eyes. The two men found it difficult to breathe, so thick was the air with foam and water, and they turned their heads away from the wind. Spray cascaded over the deck and streamed out from the scuppers, making for slippery footing. The cold rain pelted them like tiny stones stinging their skin as the two fought to keep their balance on the heaving deck. Through the roar of the wind and water they could hear the mast wires howling as the wind blasted past. Beyond the boat's railing there was an absence of color: all that was visible was the white and gray churning sea.

Fighting their way toward the stern, Ernie and Billy had the disconcerting view of the seas converging on the boat. They faced the stern, and when the *Fair Wind* climbed up a wave they were looking down into the trough, then as the boat crested the wave they were looking up, hearing the whine of the propeller, wondering if it was grabbing water or just whirling around in the foam. They worked hunched over and low to the deck, wrestling with the barrels being buffeted by the 50-mile-per-hour gusts. Slowly, working together, they shoved the barrels back into position and lashed them down. Then they began securing the other equipment, desperate to get all the work done now so they wouldn't have to come back out later.

At 8 a.m. Ernie took over the wheel, and an exhausted Dave Berry retreated below to try to get some rest. The seas had grown to thirty feet. Ernie had to give a little throttle to maintain headway up and over the waves. The *Fair Wind* responded but occasionally took green water—not merely spray, but the sea itself—over her bow before asserting herself. Neither Ernie nor Billy, who had ten years of experience fishing on the Bank, had ever seen waves build so rapidly. It seemed that each advancing wave was a bit bigger than the last.

By 9 a.m. the seas were thirty-five to forty feet, and the wind had increased yet again, to sustained speeds of 50 to 60 knots. Every now and then a gust would roar in at 70 knots, and those savage blasts seemed to probe the boat for weaknesses. Each time a particularly vicious wave slammed the bow, Ernie felt thankful the *Fair Wind*'s hull was made of steel. He kept telling himself it couldn't get any worse, but Billy wasn't taking any chances, and he decided to flood one of the lobster tanks to give the boat more weight for greater stability. The *Fair Wind* had three covered tanks on board, each running from side to side, and Billy flooded the central tank with seawater using the diesel pump. The tanks were perfect for stabilization, because each had a small free surface area and diameter that progressively widened farther down toward the hull. Very little water could slosh around the top, but the water in the deeper part of the tank lowered the vessel's center of gravity, causing the *Fair Wind* to have less freeboard, or surface area, to be buffeted by the wind and waves. The flooded central tank extended the full breadth and depth of the vessel and had a volume of 193 cubic feet, approximately six tons of seawater.

Ernie felt the propeller bite a little better with the extra weight, but he couldn't allow himself to relax even the slightest bit, not with the height of the waves beginning to equal the length of the boat. He steered and powered the *Fair Wind* more by feel than sight, and did his best to keep the boat's bow facing into the oncoming waves to reduce the incredible pounding they hurled at him.

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