

CHAPTER ONE

The plane's shadow had just passed along the surface of the U-boat when there was a great detonation several yards to the submarine's port side. A watery plume rose thirty feet into the air and threw cold spray across the boat's deck. The captain was yelling and gesturing wildly with both arms, but the concussion had left such a ringing in his ears Ehren could barely understand him. Off their starboard side, Ehren could see the crew members of the other U-boat scrambling along the deck, feverishly working to disconnect the refueling lines which coupled the two submarines. Refueling during daylight hours was always risky, but the other boat had been running on fumes and their captain had seen no alternative but to chance it. The periscopes had shown heavy banks of rain clouds which should have made it difficult for the American anti-submarine aircraft to see them. It had seemed a reasonable gamble and Ehren didn't take time to second-guess his captain's decision. Now, everything was focussed on disconnecting and reeling in the fuel lines so both U-boats could escape beneath the waves before more planes arrived.

Ehren climbed toward the back of the boat to help unhook the fueling line, but the turbulent seas and his own sense of panic made him clumsy and slow. Despite his ears still ringing from the explosion, he could detect the insect-like buzz of an approaching airplane. He looked up and saw three specks against the grey clouds as the planes circled around the U-boats like sharks around whales.

He reached the refueling line where several crew-mates were desperately trying to release the clamps and free the boats. The explosions had made the ocean even choppier and had forced the two vessels further apart, stretching the tethers between them almost to the breaking point. Ehren's vessel was already at a disadvantage. It was larger, heavier and slower than the other submarine, a supply ship rather than a sleek warship bristling with weapons. Even to the enemy pilots circling overhead, it must have seemed like the more desirable target. Ehren pulled on the fueling line with all his strength, hoping to provide enough slack so the clamps would release.

"What're they doing?" one of his comrades yelled, cuffing him on the shoulder.

Ehren glanced up. The men on the other boat had abandoned their posts and were scrambling along the deck and down the ladders into the submarine. They'd managed to release the fueling line from their side but the hose flailed in the water, disgorging a thick stream of petrol between the two ships. Now only one man remained on deck, a giant with a small head and thick limbs. He balanced himself carefully, raising a heavy ax above his head. He swung savagely. The blade clanged against the side of his vessel like a church bell as his first attempt missed widely.

"He's insane! He's trying to cut the lines!" Ehren shouted. Then to his comrades: "Get those valves shut! We're dumping fuel into the water!"

Another plane passed overhead, followed swiftly by the hollow plunk of a depth-charge and the pop and sizzle of bullets hitting the water nearby. The ocean convulsed in a great bubble as the explosive detonated and frigid water surged across both vessels. The two men next to Ehren vanished into the foam, swept from the U-boat's deck and swallowed up by the dark sea. Ehren felt his feet sweep out from under him and he flopped painfully on his stomach. He immediately rolled and caught the fuel line with both hands. Another wall of water rolled across the deck and for an instant Ehren felt weightless as the ocean lifted him from the U-boat's metal hull, then slammed him down again with a wet thud. His body was so cold he barely felt the pain of the impact. He glanced up at the conning tower, but his captain was no longer there. One side of the tower had been shredded by gunfire. On the other boat, the man with the ax also teetered to his feet as both submarines rocked and their hulls clanged together. A bright stream of blood had erupted from his left calve where a bullet had passed clean through. Despite the injury, he lifted the ax again.

"We can't submerge if the fuel valve is open! Help me release the clamps!" Ehren yelled across to the man.

The giant paused for an instant, glaring at Ehren from under heavy black brows. His expression betrayed what he would not take the time to shout back. There was no affinity there, no loyalty for his countrymen and fellow submariners, only the panicked look of a desperate animal. If he could do

anything to help Ehren's boat, he'd chosen against it. Ehren knew immediately this was a race to see who secured his vessel first. Survival would be measured by the seconds he saved.

The ax began to clang against the metal hull again. The second strike severed one of the tethers which shot back toward Ehren like a bullwhip, missing him by inches. Ehren dropped to the deck and kicked at the fuel line, trying to knock the clamps loose with the heel of his boot. The pungent odor of spilled diesel almost overwhelmed him. He held his breath kicked again. The clamp moved, but it was already too little too late. From the corner of his eye, he saw the man on the other sub toss away the ax as he half-limped, half-ran to an open hatch. The hatch slammed shut and almost immediately the other U-boat began to pull away.

Ehren watched as the dark cylindrical shape slipped beneath the waves and in that instant his fear was replaced with despair. Strangely, his thoughts weren't for himself. They were for his parents back home in Germany. They'd never know what happened to him, he grieved. His name would just become another entry on a list of those whose burial at sea was without ceremony or witnesses. The drone of the war planes echoed in his ears. More depth charges erupted around him. Again the ocean lifted him, but this time there was nothing to grab and the water crushed him in its icy hand as his mouth filled with the taste of salt.

He had no idea of how long he was underwater. The liquid universe around him echoed with pings and pops. Then there was another detonation, closer this time, which bounced him back to the surface. He gasped and choked, throwing up brine only to inhale scalding steam. The current was pulling him away from the U-boat, but he could still see it well enough to know it was foundering, slowly rolling over on its starboard side as thick smoke belched from the conning tower. Some of his crew-mates had made it onto deck and were tossing themselves into the sea.

It wouldn't matter, Ehren thought. The frigid Atlantic will kill them almost as quickly as a sinking submarine.

Another blast — but this time Ehren was washed with a blinding heat rather than icy ocean spray. Bright orange flames skipped along the water's surface, as though the water had transformed into fire. He didn't try to swim. His waterlogged clothes, heavy boots and the unbelievable cold all conspired to pull his body under the waves. The heat subsided. The booms and pings and hisses faded. The normal sounds of the ocean returned and when Ehren looked again, there was no sign of the submarine except for some fading tendrils of smoke and steam.

He and a handful of crew-mates bobbed in the water, transfixed on the shimmering waves where their boat had been just a few seconds before. Then the insect-like hum returned. Against the clouds, Ehren could see the war-planes circling again.

He asked himself: Is this where I end? Will it be by bombs or bullets? Or will the planes just leave me and the others to die in the freezing Atlantic?

One of the planes turned toward them and came in low over the water's surface. It was dark blue with a large white star painted on the fuselage. Its wings were tipped with cannon muzzles and two unused bombs still hung from its belly. Ehren closed his eyes. The plane passed overhead. He felt its shadow on his face. There was a splash, but no detonation.

A dark bundle floated on the waves nearby. The other men were swimming toward it. A life boat.



Tyler was seated behind a row of boxwood shrubs waiting for the new kid to arrive. He liked to believe he and the family cat were the only members of the household who knew that if you squeezed down near the end of the porch and then wiggled in on your belly, there was a gap between the shrubs and the house spacious enough to accommodate an unusually tall 13-year-old boy, his flashlight and a box of crackers he'd stolen from the pantry. The cat, Phineas, had found the spot first. It was where he retreated on those rare occasions when someone forgot to close a window or a door and he was able to stretch his long, thin legs in the wilderness of the front yard. Tonight Phineas was safely contained inside, sitting on the window ledge above the hiding spot and mewing his displeasure at Tyler.

Although she allowed Tyler to believe his secret was intact, his foster mother Karen had known about the hiding place behind the boxwood shrubs for nearly a year. She figured it out the first time Tyler had disappeared. The cat had told her where he was just by sitting on the window ledge and making his deep, irritated meows. But Karen said nothing because she understood every boy wanted his own secret place, and for Tyler it was almost a necessity. Sometimes he hid there when the bad memories returned. Sometimes he hid there when he'd been in trouble at school again. Sometimes he hid there when a new child was being dropped off by a caseworker. Whatever the reason, Tyler only went behind the boxwoods when he was feeling overwhelmed.

Tyler was half finished with the crackers when a car bounced up the driveway. He squished down low and snapped off his flashlight. The caseworker got out first. She was a skinny lady with frizzy hair, dressed in a dark blue pantsuit and a colorful vest. She'd been to the house before, dropping off or picking up other children. And every time Tyler encountered her, she was wearing a vest. Sometimes the vests were very fancy, other times as plain as a bed sheet, but there was always a vest. Tyler couldn't remember her name but he'd never been very good at names anyway. Karen told him it was impolite for him to refer to everybody else in the world as "what's-his-name" or "that lady," so he began inventing new names for the people he couldn't remember. The first time this caseworker had come to the house, she had worn a vest covered with fringe and turquoise-colored beads and looked like she'd stepped out of a Hollywood Western. Ever since, Tyler remembered her as "The Cowgirl."

The Cowgirl went to the passenger's side of the car and opened it for the boy sitting inside. He was small with a thick dome of curly blond hair and large blue eyes. He was carrying a wooden train. The Cowgirl reached around him and pulled out the signature luggage of the foster child: large black garbage bags. Tyler remembered that he'd arrived at Karen's two years earlier with a similar bag slung over his shoulder. He didn't know which had made him sadder at the time: the fact that his entire world fit into a garbage bag or everything he owned was packaged like so much trash. He felt a moment of intense sympathy for the child standing there holding his train, but he quickly shook it off. He didn't like those kind of feelings. They made his heart ache.

The little boy gazed up at the house. "Why does it have a tower?" he asked.

The Cowgirl replied, "A hundred years ago, this used to be a working lighthouse. Inside that tower is a huge light ships could see far out in the ocean. When they saw the light, they knew there were rocks ahead and they should steer clear."

She took him by the hand and led him up to the porch. Karen had already opened the front door and greeted them in her best singsong voice. The child looked uncomfortable and for a moment glanced over at the boxwoods where Tyler was hidden. The look on his face was a combination of amusement and curiosity. Can he see me, Tyler wondered? It seemed like their eyes met, if only for an instant. Tyler hunched even lower and reassured himself that he was completely invisible. After all, only the cat knew about the secret spot.

The screen door on the porch banged shut and the voices receded inside. After a moment or two, Karen reappeared and yelled, "Tyler, time to come in!" She never looked over at the boxwoods.

Tyler knew he had a reputation for being difficult. His therapist called it "oppositional defiant disorder." He didn't understand what that meant exactly, but it seem to be the grownup way of saying he didn't like following instructions, especially if the instructions were coming from an adult. Tyler would argue that all eighth grade boys had a touch of oppositional defiant disorder, and that he was just particularly good at it. Sometimes his defiance would be small, like refusing to eat his Brussels sprouts at dinner time. Other times it was large, like when he crawled under the auditorium stage at school and refused to come out for forty-five minutes. The assistant principal and the janitor finally had to crawl in after him and pull him out by his ankles. Now that Karen had called him inside, Tyler automatically went into defiant-mode. As a matter of routine, he was careful to never respond too quickly to Karen's requests, but he had the added pleasure of making The Cowgirl and the new child wait on him too. Even Phineas, who was probably the second-most defiant member of the household just because he was a cat, had run off to meet the new arrival. But Tyler decided to wait, slowly licking the salt off of each remaining cracker, then sneaking around to the back of the house and walking in with his best "Oh-I-forgot-you-were-coming" look on his face.

The child was seated on the floor petting Phineas, ignoring the adult conversation around him. His garbage bags and toy train were thrown into a heap near the front door. He was introduced as Sawyer,

but Tyler immediately forgot the name and would spend the rest of the night referring to the 8-year-old as “the new kid” or “that kid” or sometimes just as “him.”

“Isn’t this a nice house, Sawyer?” The Cowgirl asked, trying to draw the child’s attention away from the purring feline.

Sawyer didn’t answer. The cat was much more interesting than the old, creaky building.

“Tyler, why don’t you take Sawyer upstairs and show him his new bedroom?” Karen suggested.

“Don’t wanna,” Tyler replied. Those words had come out of his mouth so smoothly he hadn’t even realized it. Actually, he did want to take “the new kid” upstairs. It was the perfect time to check out what he had in those big garbage bags. But now he was stuck. One of Tyler’s rules for being difficult was never agree to something once you have refused to do it... even if you really wanted to.

“I’ll do it, Mom,” Griffin said.

Griffin was Karen’s son, her only child from a bad marriage which ended years ago. He was eighteen (“practically nineteen” as he was quick to remind everyone) and was constructed like a Manga comic book character with a plume of spiked black hair and large, bright green eyes. He was short for his age, and his arms and legs seemed unusually long. He moved with a strange fluidity which reminded Tyler of a monkey swinging between limbs on a tree.

Just like with wild animals, there was always a pecking order among the children in the lighthouse based on age and longevity. Griffin was the first and oldest child, and therefore lived comfortably at the top of the pecking order, dispensing his wisdom and receiving the admiring looks of all the younger boys who passed through Karen’s house. Accordingly, he lived in the loftiest place available: a split-level bedroom which had originally been the lighthouse’s top two floors. Tyler placed himself second in the pecking order. He’d come to Karen’s house two years earlier and was still there. He couldn’t remember how many other kids had called the lighthouse their temporary home in that time. Maybe twenty? Some had moved onto other foster homes. Some were adopted. A few lucky ones returned home to their real parents, whom the caseworkers referred to as “bio mom” or “bio dad.” But month after month, Tyler stayed put. It used to bother him that so many other kids had come and gone and he was still there. He finally decided it was due to his reputation for being difficult. Foster and adoptive parents didn’t want difficult children any more than “bio parents” did. He finally decided it would be okay if he spent the rest of his childhood at Karen’s lighthouse. After all, it put him higher in the pecking order and he was able to get a bigger bedroom.

Now that Griffin had trumped Tyler by volunteering to take “the new kid” for a tour, Tyler felt obligated to mope around behind them, looking uninterested as he tried to overhear every word they said.

The lower floors of the lighthouse smelled of wood and old paint, the faintly bitter aroma of great age and generations of use. The rooms were small and, by modern standards, impractical. Karen told Tyler how, when she first bought the historic structure, she had to get rid of half of her furniture because it was too big to fit through the narrow doorways. But the building’s design, with its small interconnected chambers and low ceilings, had been very practical for its nineteenth century residents. After all, if you lived on the tip of a rocky headland, battered constantly by wind and rainstorms, keeping warm would’ve been one of your first concerns. At that time, the entire building was heated by fireplaces and coal-burning stoves. A modern furnace system hadn’t be added until the 1960s, but still the lighthouse could be drafty and cold when the Atlantic turned stormy. Over time, Tyler had come to love the building’s unique qualities, even if it meant being a little chilly from time to time. He loved how the smooth floorboards creaked under his feet, making sure he could never sneak down to the bathroom in the middle of the night without everyone hearing him. He loved sitting in front of the fireplace on rainy nights when Phineas would curl up in his lap. He loved opening all his bedroom windows on a muggy summer’s day and letting the ocean breeze waft across him. And sometimes, when he was all alone, he’d just stand in the hallway and listen to the building, as though he might hear the voices of its former residents.

But for the new kid, the lighthouse was just weird.

Sawyer followed Griffin up to the second floor and down the hall to an immense room cleverly arranged with bunk beds, couches and desks. Originally two separate rooms, Karen had removed a wall and created a huge space suitable for housing up to four boys. There was a connecting bathroom, three closets and a carpeted space lined with overstuffed pillows and plastic crates filled with toys. Karen called this area “the rumpus room.” When Tyler had first arrived, this had been the room where he’d slept. It had taken him months to work up the nerve to ask Karen where the “rumpus” was and if he could play with it.

She had to explain it was just a silly name for a play area for children. Tyler was annoyed the new kid understood what a “rumpus room” was immediately.

Sawyer kicked off his shoes and rubbed his dirty socks against the hardwood floor.

“Can we slide on this?” he asked Griffin.

The older boy shrugged and replied, “Just as long as mom doesn’t catch you or you don’t bash in your head on the furniture.”

“I won’t. I’m very good at sliding. Watch me.”

Sawyer started to run across the floor and then slid about two feet. He skidded in a straight line over to the bedroom windows which looked east, down onto the cove and across the ocean. Along the horizon, dark twists of clouds were beginning to form.

He looked at Griffin and said, “A storm.”

“Yup.”

“I don’t like storms, do you?”

Griffin shrugged. “They don’t bother me. You have to get used to them when you live right next to the ocean.”

Sawyer slid around several times in a big circle, making sure he had Griffin’s full attention each time. Griffin was laughing, which also irritated Tyler. So the new kid could slide around in a circle, he fumed. What’s so hilarious?

“Do you pee the bed?” Tyler asked the boy suddenly.

“Dude,” Griffin frowned, “shut up.”

“I don’t pee the bed,” Sawyer replied, continuing his sliding exercises without interruption.

Tyler went to the bunk beds and climbed onto the top mattress. “If you pee the bed you’re not allowed to lie about it,” he said sternly. “You don’t get in trouble unless you try to hide it or lie about it. And you have to help clean it up, that’s the rule.”

“I don’t pee the bed,” Sawyer repeated.

“All foster kids pee the bed.”

“Not me.”

“Were you in the group home before here?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you totally pee the bed. Everyone pees the bed in group homes. I peed the bed when I was in the group home.”

“You’ve peed the bed here, too,” Griffin added.

“Not anymore. I got over it.”

“Well, good,” Griffin said. “And if Sawyer pees the bed, I’m sure he’ll get over it too. Either way, it’s none of your biz.”

“Yes it is. I sleep next door. I don’t want to smell his pee all night.”

“Tyler, there have been other kids in this house who’ve peed the bed. We’ll deal with it. You don’t have to be such a jerk.”

“I don’t pee the bed,” Sawyer repeated, just in case no one had heard him the first two times.

“Don’t worry about it,” Griffin said. “Do you wanna see my room?”

Sawyer eagerly followed Griffin up the narrow staircase at the back of the house. It had lots of twists and turns and their footsteps echoed hollowly throughout the house. The boy already understood what an honor it was to be invited up to the teenager’s room. Tyler lingered behind them, pausing on the landing which overlooked the living room to eavesdrop on Karen and The Cowgirl. As he expected, they were whispering about Sawyer. There was the usual stuff the adults always spoke about. There was the exchange of medications and paperwork and signatures. Then The Cowgirl began to speak about Sawyer’s past and Tyler crouched down in the shadows to listen.

“I know you spoke to the therapist about his phobias,” The Cowgirl said, “so I hope you’re feeling comfortable with all this.”

Tyler frowned. Phobias, huh? Foster children could have all kinds of strange fears. Once, a boy named Keith had lived with them for two weeks. He had a phobia about loud banging noises. Tyler had tried to drive him crazy by bouncing a tennis ball in the hallway outside his room in the middle of the night. Keith left the following day. Tyler was grounded for a month but he still thought it was pretty funny.

“I think we’ll be fine,” Karen answered. “I read over his entire packet, so I have a pretty clear understanding of his challenges.”

Tyler chuckled. After years of living in the foster care system, he had learned the adults had a special language when it came to discussing children. For example, foster kids didn’t have problems, they had “challenges.” Sometimes, if things got really bad, they had “issues.” If their problems got better, then they had “challenges” again. Griffin told him that all the foster parents, caseworkers and therapists attended classes where they learned to speak like this because it’s not polite to say a child is nuts. Tyler didn’t agree with Griffin. Over the years, he’d felt many things, but he never felt crazy. He just felt like he had, well, issues. But he excused Griffin’s opinion. After all, the older boy had never been abandoned by a parent, never lived in a group home or bounced from placement to placement because his behavior was so awful no one could stand living with him for longer than a few months at a time. Griffin couldn’t really understand the concept of “issues,” even though he tried.

“So we don’t really know what sets him off, right?” Karen asked.

“In my experience, it’s been pretty random,” The Cowgirl said. “Or maybe no one’s just figured out the trigger yet. When he goes off you’ll know it, believe me. Hopefully, in time, he’ll be able to talk to you about it. But so far, he just loses control and it’s hard for him to settle back down. Have you talked to your boys about this yet?”

“No, not yet. I didn’t want them to have some bias toward Sawyer before they met him. You remember what Tyler did to that boy Keith?”

“Oh, yes. The ball bouncing incident.”

“Yeah. We don’t need anything like that again. I need to approach it very carefully. I’ll probably discuss it with them tomorrow.”

“Good.” The Cowgirl looked at her watch. “I better go. Give me a call if there’s anything you need. You have the emergency number, right?”

“Yeah, I’m all set. Thanks for all your help,” Karen said, walking her to the front door.

“Tell Sawyer I said goodbye. I don’t know where he went off to.”

“They must be in the tower. I just heard them banging up the stairs. Drive carefully. It looks like there’s a storm coming.”

As Tyler snuck off to join the others in Griffin’s room, he felt proud of this newfound knowledge. The new kid must be the mother of all bed-wetters, he told himself. He made a mental note to check Sawyer’s sheets in the morning. He’d enjoy ratting him out to Karen.

Griffin’s bedroom was tall, narrow and had a twisted iron staircase which led from one floor to the next. The ceiling and walls were covered in hundred-year-old wood paneling that had been painted and repainted so many times it had a smooth, rubbery look. The area seemed much larger during the day thanks to the abundance of windows. Windows everywhere, on every wall facing in every direction. The people who used to operate the lighthouse needed all the windows so they had a clear a view of the entire coastline. Directly above Griffin’s room was the platform where the old spinning light still sat. Karen kept that part of the tower locked, but Griffin and Tyler had discovered the padlock was defective. If you yanked down on it hard enough, it would snap right open. Sometimes the two of them would sneak up there at night and it felt like you were floating among the stars.

When Griffin had first approached Karen about moving into the tower permanently, she agreed only if he first sound-proofed the area. Eighteen-year-olds made too much noise to be overhead from everyone else, she told him. So Griffin and his friends came up with a plan to carpet and insulate the tower. When they were done, the area was more livable, less drafty, and considerably quieter. To brighten the space during the nighttime hours, Griffin strung rows of large decorative lights along the rafters. Because he was short for his age, these hanging light bulbs presented no problem. But every time someone of height entered the tower — someone like Tyler — they were constantly bumping their heads against the lights, which would cause the whole room to flicker.

Griffin’s bed didn’t fit in the space, so he’d improvised by slinging a hammock from rafter to rafter. Sleeping that way had taken some getting use to. When the storms blew in, the tower would sway and the hammock would rock. Griffin described it like sleeping on-board a ship at sea. Sawyer climbed up in it and was swinging happily.

“Your room smells funny,” he said to no one in particular.

“You’re smelling the light,” Griffin replied, gesturing toward the ceiling. “When they still used this place as a lighthouse, they used oil in the light. Sometimes you can still smell it.”

“It smells like a boat,” Sawyer said, wrinkling his nose as he rocked in the hammock.

“How does it smell like a boat?”

“You know, like a submarine? Submarines smell like this inside ’cause of all the engines and stuff.”

“That’s not true,” Tyler said. “I’ve been on a submarine and it didn’t smell.”

Sawyer laughed and said, “When were you on a submarine?”

“Uh, there happens to be one at a museum we went to on vacation. It was when we went to California. Right, Griff?”

Griffin nodded. “That’s true. But I don’t remember what it smelled like.”

“Well some submarines smelled like oil,” Sawyer said. “Old ones.”

“How old was the submarine we went on, Griff?” Tyler asked.

“I don’t know. It was a Russian submarine. It must have been about thirty or forty years old, I guess.”

“Well, I’m talking about older subs,” Sawyer said. “The insides would get filled up with smells and exhaust and then they’d have to go up to the surface of the water and open all the hatches to let fresh air in. Or sometimes they’d have these things called snorkels on them which they could raise up out of the water and that would let fresh air in, too.”

“Snorkels? That’s stupid. Submarines weren’t invented before forty years ago and they didn’t have snorkels on them,” Tyler said. He didn’t know any of this for certain and was trusting the new kid didn’t either.

“Yes, they did,” Sawyer insisted. “They’ve been around for a long, long time. Some had snorkels so the crews could get fresh air without having to surface.”

Griffin chuckled. “You’re like a walking encyclopedia, Sawyer,” he said.

Sawyer shrugged. “I know a lot about submarines.”

“Whatever,” Tyler answered. “Your caseworker left.”

Sawyer was about to respond, but a clap of thunder and the sound of rain hitting the tower windows distracted him.

“Storm’s here,” he said, jumping off the hammock. “Let’s go downstairs.”

“Why?” Tyler asked. “It’s just thunder.”

Sawyer walked quickly to the attic door. “I told you,” he said, “I don’t like storms.”