

CHAPTER 1

170 miles West-Southwest of Durban, July 27, 1909

The SS *Waratab* plowed through the waves on a voyage from Durban to Cape Town, rolling noticeably with the growing swells. Dark smoke from coal-fired boilers spilled from her single funnel and was driven in the opposite direction by a contrary wind.

Sitting alone in the main lounge of the five-hundred-foot steamship, fifty-one-year-old Gavin Brèvard felt the vessel roll ponderously to starboard. He watched the cup and saucer in front of him slide toward the edge of the table, slowly at first, and then picking up speed as the angle of the ship's roll increased. At the last second, he grabbed for the cup, preventing it from sliding off the edge and clattering to the floor.

The *Waratab* remained at a sharp pitch, taking a full two minutes to right herself, and Brèvard began to worry about the vessel he'd booked passage on.

In a prior life, he'd spent ten years at sea aboard various steamers. On those ships the recoil was quicker, the keel more adept at righting itself. This ship felt top-heavy to him. It made him wonder if something was wrong.

"More tea, sir?"

Deep in thought, Brèvard barely noticed the waiter in the uniform of the Blue Anchor Line.

He held out the cup he'd saved from destruction. "*Merci.*"

The waiter topped it off and moved on. As he left, a new figure came into the room, a broad-shouldered man of perhaps thirty, with reddish hair and a ruddy face. He made a direct line for Brèvard, taking a seat in the chair opposite.

"Johannes," Brèvard said in greeting. "Glad to see you're not trapped in your cabin like the others."

Johannes looked a little green, but he seemed to be holding up. "Why have you called me here?"

Brèvard took a sip of the tea. "I've been thinking. And I've decided something important."

"And what might that be?"

"We're far from safe."

Johannes sighed and looked away. Brèvard understood. Johannes thought him to be a worrier. A fear-laden man. But Brèvard was just trying to be cautious. He'd spent years with people chasing him, years living under the threat of imprisonment or death. He had to think five steps ahead just to remain alive. It had tuned his mind to a hyperattentive state.

"Of course we're safe," Johannes replied. "We've assumed new identities. We left no trail. The others are all dead, and the barn has been burned to the ground. Only our family continues on."

Brèvard took another sip of tea. “What if we’ve missed something?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Johannes insisted. “We’re beyond the reach of the authorities here. This ship has no radio. We might as well be on an island somewhere.”

That was true. As long as the ship was at sea, they could rest and relax. But the journey would end soon enough.

“We’re only safe until we dock in Cape Town,” Brèvard pointed out. “If we haven’t covered our trail as perfectly as we think, we may arrive to a greeting of angry policemen or His Majesty’s troops.”

Johannes did not reply right away. He was thinking, soaking the information in. “What do you suggest?” he asked finally.

“We have to make this journey last forever.”

“And how do we do that?”

Brèvard was speaking metaphorically. He knew he had to be more concrete for Johannes. “How many guns do we have?”

“Four pistols and three rifles.”

“What about the explosives?”

“Two of the cases are still full,” Johannes said with a scowl. “Though I’m not sure it was wise to bring them aboard.”

“They’ll be fine,” Brèvard insisted. “Wake the others, I have a plan. It’s time we took destiny into our own hands.”

CAPTAIN JOSHUA ILBERY stood on the *Waratab*’s bridge despite it being time for the third watch to take over. The weather concerned him. The wind was gusting to fifty knots, and it was blowing opposite to the tide and the current. This odd combination was building the waves into sharp pyramids, un-

usually high and steep, like piles of sand pushed together from both directions.

“Steady on, now,” Ilbery said to the helmsman. “Adjust as needed, we don’t want to be broadsided.”

“Aye,” the helmsman said.

Ilbery lifted the binoculars. The light was fading as evening came on, and he hoped the wind would subside in the night.

Scanning the whitecaps ahead of him, Ilbery heard the bridge door open. To his surprise, a shot rang out. He dropped the binoculars and spun to see the helmsman slumping to the deck, clutching his stomach. Beyond him stood a group of passengers with weapons, one of whom walked over and took the helm.

Before Ilbery could utter a word or grab for a weapon, a ruddy-faced passenger slammed the butt of an Enfield rifle into his gut. He doubled over and fell back, landing against the bulkhead.

The man who’d attacked him aimed the barrel of the Enfield at his heart. Ilbery noticed it was held by rough hands, more fitting on a farmer or rancher than a first-class passenger. He looked into the man’s eyes and saw no mercy. He couldn’t be sure of course, but Ilbery had little doubt the man he was facing had shot and killed before.

“What is the meaning of this?” Ilbery growled.

One of the group stepped toward him. He was older than the others, with graying hair at the temples. He wore a finer suit and carried himself with the loose elegance of a leader. Ilbery recognized him as one of a group who’d come on board in Durban. Brèvard, was the name. Gavin Brèvard.

“I demand an explanation,” Ilbery said.

Brèvard smirked at him. “I should have thought it quite obvious. We’re commandeering this ship. You’re going to set a new course away from the coast and then back to the east. We’re not going to Cape Town.”

“You can’t be serious,” Ilbery said. “We’re in the middle of a bad stretch. The ship is barely responding as it is. To make a turn now would—”

Gavin aimed the pistol at a spot halfway between the captain’s eyes. “I’ve worked on steamers before, Captain. Enough to know that this ship is top-heavy and performing poorly. But she’s not going to go over, so stop lying to me.”

“This ship will surely go to the bottom,” Ilbery said.

“Give the order,” Brèvard demanded, “or I’ll blow a hole in your skull and pilot this ship myself.”

Ilbery’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Perhaps you can navigate, but what about the rest of the duties? Do you and this lot intend to man the ship yourselves?”

Brèvard smiled wryly. He’d known from the start that this was his weakness, the chink in his armor. He had eight others with him, three of them children. Even if they’d been adults, nine people couldn’t even keep the fires stoked for long, let alone guard the passengers and crew, and pilot the ship at the same time.

But Brèvard was used to playing the angles. His whole life was a study in getting others to do as he wished, either against their wills or without them knowing they were doing his bidding. He’d known he needed leverage, and the explosives in the two cases enabled him to turn the odds in his favor.

“Bring in the prisoner,” he said.

Ilbery watched as the bridge door was opened and an unkempt teenager appeared. This one brought in a man covered in coal dust. Blood flowed from a broken nose and a gash across his forehead.

“Chief?”

“I’m sorry, Cap’n,” the chief said. “They tricked us. They used children to distract us. And then they overpowered us. Three of the lads are shot. But it’s so loud down there no one heard until it was too late.”

“What have they done?” the captain asked, his eyes growing wide.

“Dynamite,” the chief said. “A dozen sticks attached to boilers three and four.”

Ilbery turned to Brèvard. “Are you insane? You can’t put explosives in an environment like that. The heat, the embers. One spark and—”

“And we’ll all be blown to kingdom come,” Brèvard said, finishing the thought for him. “Yes, I’m well aware of the consequences. The thing is, a rope waits for me onshore, the kind that stretches one’s neck. If I’m going to die, I’d rather it be quick and glorious than slow and painful. So don’t test me. I have three of my people down there with rifles like these to make sure no one removes those explosives, at least not until I leave this ship at a port of my choosing. Now, do as I say and turn this vessel away from the coast.”

“And then what?” Ilbery asked.

“When we’ve reached our destination, we’ll take a few of your boats, a heap of supplies, and everyone’s cash and jewelry, and we’ll leave your ship and disappear. You and your crew will

be free to sail back to Cape Town with a fantastic story to tell the world.”

Using the bulkhead behind him for support, Captain Ilbery forced himself up and stood. He stared at Brèvard with contempt. The man had him and both knew it.

“Chief,” he said without taking his eyes off the hijacker. “Take the helm and turn us about.”

The chief staggered to the wheel and pushed the hijacker aside and did as ordered. The rudder answered the helm, and the SS *Waratab* began to turn.

“Good decision,” Brèvard said.

Ilbery wondered about that, but knew he had no choice.

For his part, Brèvard was pleased. He sat down in a chair, laid the rifle across his lap, and studied the captain closely. Having spent his lifetime misleading others, from policemen to powder-wigged judges, Brèvard had learned that some men were easier to read than others. The honest ones were more obvious than the rest.

As Brèvard stared at this captain, he pegged him as one of those. A man with pride and smarts and a great sense of duty for his passengers and crew. That sense of duty compelled him to comply with Brèvard’s demands in order to protect the lives of those on board. But it also made him dangerous.

Even as he acquiesced, Ilbery stood tall and ramrod straight. Though he clutched his stomach from the blow he’d taken, he kept a fire burning in his eyes that beaten men didn’t have. All of which suggested the captain was not ready to relinquish his ship just yet. A countermove would come, sooner rather than later.

Brèvard didn't blame the captain. Quite frankly, he respected him. All the same, he made a mental note to be ready.

SS Harlow—10 miles ahead of the Waratab

Like the captain of the *Waratab*, the captain of the *Harlow* was on the bridge. Thirty-foot waves and fifty-knot winds required it. He and his crew were making constant corrections, working hard to keep the *Harlow* from going off course. They'd even pumped in some extra water as ballast to help reduce the roll.

As the first officer reentered the bridge following an inspection run, the captain looked his way. "How are we faring, number one?"

"Shipshape from stem to stern, sir."

"Excellent," the captain said. He stepped to the bridge wing and glanced out behind them. The lights of another vessel could be seen on the horizon. She was several miles astern, and making a great deal of smoke.

"What do you make of her?" the captain asked. "She's changed course, out away from the coast."

"Could be a turn to get more clearance from the shoals," the first officer said. "Or perhaps the wind and current are forcing her off. Any idea who it is?"

"Not sure," the captain said. "She might be the *Waratab*."

Moments later, a pair of flashes only seconds apart lit out from the vessel's approximate position. They were bright white and then orange, but at this range there was no sound, like watching distant fireworks. When they faded, the horizon was dark.

Both the captain and first officer blinked and stared into that darkness.

“What was that?” the first officer asked. “An explosion?”

The captain wasn’t sure. He grabbed for the binoculars and took a moment to train them on the spot. There was no sign of fire, but a cold chill gripped his spine as he realized the lights of the mystery ship had vanished as well.

“Could have been flares from a brushfire on the shore behind them,” the first officer suggested. “Or heat lightning.”

The captain didn’t respond and continued to stare through the binoculars, sweeping the field of view. He hoped the first officer was right, but if the flashes of light had come from the shore or the sky, then what had happened to the ship’s lights visible only moments before?

UPON DOCKING, both men would learn that the *Waratab* was overdue and missing. She’d never made port in Cape Town, nor had she returned to Durban or made landfall anywhere else.

In quick succession both the Royal Navy and the Blue Anchor Line would dispatch ships in search of the *Waratab*, but they would return empty-handed. No lifeboats were found. No wreckage. No debris. No bodies floating in the water.

Over the years, nautical groups, government organizations, and treasure seekers would search for the wreck of the missing ship. They would use sonar, magnetometers, and satellite imaging. They would dispatch divers and submarines and ROVs to scour various wrecks along the coast. But it was all in vain. More than a century after her disappearance, not a single trace of the *Waratab* had ever been found.

CHAPTER 2

Maputo Bay, Mozambique, September 1987

The sun was falling toward the horizon as an aging fifty-foot trawler sailed into the bay from the open waters of the Mozambique Channel. For Cuoto Zumbana, it had been a good day. The hold of his boat was filled with fresh fish, no nets had been torn or lost, and the old motor had survived yet another journey—though it continued to belch gray smoke.

Satisfied with life, Zumbana closed his eyes and turned toward the sun, letting it bathe the weathered folds of his face. There was little he enjoyed more than that glorious feeling. Such peace it brought him that the excited shouts of his crew did not break him from it at first.

“Mashua,” one shouted.

Zumbana opened his eyes, squinting in the glare as the sunlight blazed off the sea like liquid fire. Blocking the light with his hand, he saw what the men were pointing at, a small wood-

en dinghy bobbing in the chop of the late afternoon. It seemed to be adrift, and there didn't appear to be anyone on board.

"Take us to it," he ordered. To find a small boat he could sell would only make the day better. He would even share some of the money with the crew.

The trawler changed course, and the old engine chugged a little harder. Soon, they were closing the gap.

Zumbana's face wrinkled. The small boat was badly weathered and looked hastily patched. Even from fifty feet away he could see that much of it was rotted.

"Someone must have dumped it just to be rid of it," one of his crewmen said.

"There might be something of value on board," Zumbana said. "Take us alongside."

The helmsman did as ordered, and the trawler eased to a stop beside the dilapidated craft. As they bumped it, another crewman hopped aboard. Zumbana threw him a rope, and the two boats were quickly tied off and drifting together.

From his position, Zumbana saw empty cooking pots and piles of rags, certainly nothing of value, but as the crewman pulled a moth-eaten blanket aside all thoughts of money were chased from his mind.

A young woman and two boys lay beneath the old blanket. They were clearly dead. Their faces were covered with sores from the sun and their bodies stiff. Their clothing was tattered, and a bloodstained rag was tied to the woman's shoulder. A closer look revealed scabbed wrists and ankles as if the three of them had once been held in cuffs and restraints.

Zumbana crossed himself.

"We should leave it," one of the crewmen said.

“It’s a bad omen,” another added.

“No. We must respect the dead,” Zumbana replied. “Especially those who have been taken so young.”

The men looked at him suspiciously but did as they were ordered. With a rope secured for towing, they turned once again for shore with the old double-ended boat trailing out behind them.

Zumbana moved to the stern, where he could keep an eye on the small craft. His gaze went from the boat to the horizon beyond. He wondered about the occupants of the small boat. Who were they? Where had they come from? What danger had they escaped only to die on the open sea? So young, he thought, considering the three bodies. So fragile.

The boat itself was another mystery. The top plank in the boat’s side seemed as if it might have once been painted with a name, but it was unreadable now. He worried if the boat would make it into port. Unlike its dead passengers, it seemed ancient. Certainly it was older than the three occupants. In fact, it looked to him like it might belong to another era all together.