

# **SURFMEN**

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BY

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## Chapter 1

*November 1848*

*Diamond Shoals, off the coast of North Carolina*

The fierce wind howled its fury and drowned out the screams of the dead and dying. The sea, the wind's mistress, lashed and rolled over the stranded ship's rails, crashed through timber and charged across the deck to disappear into the foam below. Her bow rode low in the water, waterlogged in this pounding rain and of the rains in days past. She wore a cloak of striped fog and spray and mist, her matted sails long since having been taken by the sea. Her keel was wedged, twisted and broken in the strong grip of sea and sand. Mangled lines mingled with crushed timbers in the swirling torrent that swept her decks.

Amid the wrecked spars and crumpled torn sails, a young boy and his mother clung to the precarious protection offered in the lee of the companionway bulkhead. Both were soaked through and through, their flesh puffy and wrinkled from long exposure to the water and the salt that washed over them from all sides. The cold had long since sent icy fingers through their skin and penetrated deep into their bones. Their clothes of broadcloth, fine wool and silk were shredded before the storm exposing bare flesh to the beast.

The mother's long brown hair was knotted and unkempt; it hung limply around a once beautiful oval face that had been mashed into a horrific mask. Splinters from the miz'n mast had shredded her right cheek when it had exploded in the first few minutes of storm's onslaught, and had ripped a dozen finger size furrows from nose to ear. The white of her cheekbone shone through the peeled alabaster skin.

"It's alright....alright....alright....shhhhh." Her mouth was pressed tightly against her son's ear. She had draped herself across his shoulder and back trying to protect him from the ravages of sun and sky.

The boy's knees were drawn tight under his chin, and his bony arms were wrapped tightly around them. His heavy breeches were torn from knee to hip on his left

side and his left leg was black and swollen. At some point he'd lost a shoe, and his big toe stuck from the stocking. His other heavy brogan was a stone at the end of his leg. It was so soaked and the leather so swollen that it was immovable beneath him.

*No more blood*, he thought absently gazing up at his mother. His mind had already faced the panic, and would process no more. The bleeding of her torn face had slowed and pulsed unevenly, but even that was quickly washed away in the rain.

He had seen his first man die. The bindings which secured a large stack of heavy lumber had let go in the beginning. Mr. Whittle, the first mate, had been rushing about. It was before the main mast had toppled. As the bindings let go, Mr. Whittle yelled. It wasn't a long yell; it stopped right in the middle as the stack shifted and buried him right on the deck. For hours Mr. Whittle's bare feet poked at out from under the stack and twitched in the rain.

He turned his eyes again to his mother. Her ragged dress was once grand. It was the dress that she had worn at the farewell party in Charleston before their journey. It was torn from shoulder to bodice. It alternately opened and closed, playing peek-a-boo with her right breast and the tip of her right nipple. She clutched it closed, modest even in the end.

The boy stared into his mother's eyes. "Where's father?" he shouted against the scream of the wind.

His mother stared bleakly across the deck; she refused to meet his gaze. The storm raged on. It could've been midday or midnight; the dark grey that cloaked the ship was unforgiving. Only the brief snatches of lightning exposed the wreck in sharp relief.

"Where's father?" He whispered. She hadn't answered.

His mother met his eyes. Hers were dull flat and gray. "He went to...to...to get help," she mouthed against the wind.

She couldn't say the lie aloud. And he knew it to be a lie. At eight, he was old enough to know that. He had watched his father battle the sea. He had seen him among the other men, and he had seen them all flung over the rail one by one. His father hadn't bravely jumped to seek help. He had tumbled over when a giant wave had pounded across the deck. The boy knew that there was no help to be found there. There the sea stalked the ship with bared fangs and foam flecked lips.

His mother stared about, bleak and hopeless. "I'm going to try and find..." The wind and sea choked her words as a fresh wave washed the deck.

She turned her head slightly to the boy. "...Try to find Father."

The boy shuddered at the thought. His only comfort was in her presence, but he knew better than to disagree. His nurse had taught him that when he was little. He swallowed hard and clenched his teeth in an effort to clamp down on the uncontrollable chatter. He glanced furtively at his mother and tried to be brave.

She hadn't moved. Her eyes still cast about the deck. She turned and stared deeply into her son's eyes. Shuddering at her own reflection, she summoned the last of her courage.

"Be brave, my love." She kissed him on the cheek and stood.

The deck heaved and tossed, and his mother staggered across the deck and into the rail. She clung for a moment, and started to work her way hand over hand toward the forecabin.

The boy clenched his knees more tightly; his knuckles were white from the grip on his own calves. He watched. She weaved her way toward the looming shadow of the forecabin, inch by inch. The boy glared at the roiling water commanding the sea to stop rolling the boat, willing his mother forward.

She was gone before she made it.

A towering wave had swept the deck. There was no scream. One minute she had been staggering along the rail, the next minute she was gone. And he was alone.

"Mother???" the boy questioned the wind. There was no response.

He would've wept, but no tears came. The wind, sky and sea had long since drained his tears. He blinked hard. Once. Twice. But each time he opened his eyes, he was still alone. He hurt.

He felt the change before he heard it. With a low groan, the ship tilted toward the water, and he slid sideways into the rail. He scrambled to grab a large wooden cleat. The groaning continued, rising in pitch and volume, adding a new element to the symphony of sound produced by the storm. A large jellyfish slid across the deck. Its tentacles slapped his exposed thigh, and a long angry red welt magically appeared. He regarded this new

injury with cold detachment. It was like looking at a picture in a book; his pain was spent. He clung to the cleat and squeezed his eyes closed.

Captain Daniels had let him steer the ship the first day. Atop the quarterdeck, he was king of the world. The three masts had born snow white sails, and the ship had responded eagerly under the wheel. The Captain had treated him like a man grown. He had shown him the compass and the charts. Mr. Whittle, the first mate, had been a wealth of information as well. He had drawn their course with his finger for him in the Captain's cabin.

"Here's where we're headed, Tiger," Mr. Whittle had said, placing his right forefinger on a point labeled Baltimore, Maryland. He called him Tiger, and the boy thought it to be an exceptional nickname. He had seen a picture of a tiger in school. Tigers were tough and sleek with big teeth and a mean growl.

Mr. Whittle had then placed his left middle finger on Charleston, SC. "And hears where we're coming from."

The boy concentrated on his fingers. "That does not seem very far?," he questioned glancing up at Mr. Whittle.

Mr. Whittle stifled a laugh. "Further than you think, lad." He slowly traced the route up the coast from Charleston and stopped midway.

"What's that say, Tiger?"

"Ocracoke," the boy answered eagerly. He was an exceptional reader.

"Well done!" Mr. Whittle traced out a semi circle with his finger and continued north.

The boy frowned in concentration, "Wait...Mr. Whittle? Why don't we go straight along the coast there?" The boy touched the edge of Ocracoke.

"Don't miss a trick, do you lad?" Mr. Whittle grinned. "What's that say?"

"Diamond Shoals," The boy responded quickly.

"Right again, Tiger!" Mr. Whittle ruffed his hair.

The boy's father had entered the cabin unnoticed, and spoke from behind the two bent over the chart. "What's a shoal, son?"

The boy turned quickly to his father, and snapped up straight. "Shallow water, sir," he answered.

Mr. Whittle had also turned to the boy's father. He swept off his cap and stood twisting it in his hands. "Beg your pardon, Sir. I was showing the lad our course."

"It's quite alright, Mr. Whittle. I'm pleased that he's showing an interest. He's not keeping you from your duties?," the boy's father questioned frowning.

The boy glanced at Mr. Whittle. His father commanded respect. He was an important man.

"No, Sir, " Mr. Whittle responded, "He's no trouble at all. He's an excellent reader. Probably reads better than me."

"Well...he's attended school and been tutored extensively, Mr. Whittle," the boy's father said disdainfully, adjusting his immaculate topcoat. He turned on his heel, and spoke over his shoulder, "You may proceed, Mr. Whittle." He strode from the cabin.

The boy glanced at Mr. Whittle. "Sorry...Mr. Whittle...I...uh...didn't want to get you in trouble...Father...he's...uhh..."

Mr. Whittle laughed aloud and set his cap back on his head at a jaunty angle.

"'Tis alright, lad." He drew a pipe from his breast pocket and began to stuff it with tobacco from a small leather pouch that he kept tucked behind his expansive waistband. Taking a wooden box of matches from a wall shelf, he struck one on the table.

"Your father is a wealthy man, lad," he spoke around the stem of the pipe as he carefully stoked it to life. "He owns more ships than I've ever crewed...and that's sayin' something."

Mr. Whittle exhaled a perfect smoke ring and looked down at the boy. "Including this one." His face broke into a grin. "Where were we?"

"Diamond Shoals," the boy answered quickly smiling back.

"Right. Why do you think we'd go around a shoal, Tiger?"

The boy looked back at the map. "The water's not deep enough for our boat?," he guessed.

Mr. Whittle's head was wreathed in smoke. It smelled good, spicier than a wood fire. The boy breathed deeply.

"Right again. Well done." Mr. Whittle clapped him on the shoulder. "Shoals and reefs have undone many a ship, lad. Especially in this stretch a water. Mostly during the storm season though...not this time of year."

“We’ll be alright going around then?” the boy asked.

Mr. Whittle burst out laughing. He laughed a lot. “Course we will Tiger. I’ve served with Capn’ Daniels for seven years, lad. He’s never been wrong yet.”

The boy opened his eyes. The deck was still heaved over. He was still alone. Captain Daniels was wrong. Mr. Whittle was wrong. Sometimes the storms come early.

The wind had calmed a little. He was sure that either he had finally gone deaf or the roaring had lessened. The sea still crashed over the deck though and every few minutes he had to tighten his grip against the rail to keep his position as the sea swirled around him. The faint popping had been going on for several minutes before he heard it. It sounded kind of like the fireworks that he had seen in Charleston, but it was getting louder. A distinct creaking added emphasis. He watched dully as the boards across the main deck began to flip into the air. First one side would stick up with a pop, then there was a shrieking creak, and several feet of board would flip into the air. The boy watched as the deck let go in growing sections and was replaced by swirling seas and then the sea reached his feet.

The boy’s stocking foot was wet, and his big toe was underwater. The water had him by his ankle...his knee. He glanced up to see the forecastle swept away. Then he too was gone.

The sea pressed his chest with an iron grip, and there was no air. His eyes were open, but he couldn’t see. It was a world of green. A piece of lumber swirled by and raked him across the cheek, taking a bite out of his skin and turning the green to red before his eyes. He could feel the sea pulling him down. He glanced down. Maybe mother and father had a hold of his feet. He was so tired.

A yank on his hair snapped his eyes back open. He felt a large clump torn from his head, and fingers adjust their grip. He was out of the water, but he couldn’t cough. His battered leg dragged against something hard, and made him cry out in pain. He screwed up his eyes and tried to focus. Something pushed his mouth open and jammed down his throat. He felt the bile rise in his gut, and wretched violently. Seawater spat out and covered the sleeve of his torn tunic. He drew a ragged breath, and began to cry. Through the tears, he saw a shirtless man. He was soot black and only his yellow teeth were plainly visible in the dim light. The man reached forward and jammed him into a

corner of a small skiff. He struggled to speak, but only coughed again. The yellow teeth grinned.

The man fought to steady the pitching skiff. The waves battled to turn it across the sea, but the black man had years of practice. The muscles of his broad chest and forearms stretched taught as he leaned into the oars and deftly steered the small craft away from the wreckage. The boy watched numbly as a body spiraled past, and looked again to the man.

“Are you the.....devil?” the boy managed weakly, his vision blurred.

The black man grunted a short laugh. “No, sir! Got you afore he could come.” The man continued, “I’m Jacob, but who might you be is the question?” The man called Jacob pulled the oars and forced the small skiff toward shore.

“T...Thom...Thomas,” sputtered the boy and squeezed his eyes shut.

## Chapter 2

*November 1848*

*Ocracoke Island, North Carolina*

“Thomas, Capn’...” Jacob took a swallow of tea, his voice nearly drowned out by the hammering rain on the shake roof above. “Said his name was Thomas afore he went out...” Jacob finished, and glanced at the boy.

Thomas was nestled under a heavy woolen shift, his head buried in a large woman’s bosom. Rose was rocking him gently next to the heavy cast iron cook stove. The stove glowed a dull red, and the falling hiss could still be heard from the kettle on its top. The kitchen was small, warm and snug. Its two windows black against the storm and the howling wind screamed its frustration around the eaves. The only yellowish light cast from a small hurricane lantern in the center of the table. The remaining lanterns remained unlit on their wall hooks, forgotten as Jacob had appeared from the belly of the storm.

The man that Jacob had addressed sat across the scarred hand hewn table on the opposite bench. Thoughtfully, he leaned forward, lit a wooden match from the lamp, and lit his pipe. The flare of the match set his features in stark relief. The coarse hair of his heavy grey flecked whiskers hid his mouth, matching the heavy brow and shock of thick black hair above. His eyes were alive in the glow of the match, sea blue and thoughtful.

“Could you see the name of the boat?” Captain McGuire asked Jacob. His voice deep and resonate. A voice accustomed to command.

Jacob shook his head and frowned in the dim light. “No suh. Lucky I got in and out as it was.”

Captain McGuire nodded. He’d thought as much. He shared a long look with Jacob. Very few men would have attempted such a rescue in this weather. On the best of days Diamond Shoals and the near shore waters of Ocracoke Island were fierce and against the storm and sea of a storm it was terrifying. The Captain drew on his pipe, and turned his eyes to the boy. Rose was still rocking him gently. His small body folded into

Rose's ample bosom, held tight against her round belly heavy with child. Rose had been a beautiful girl and had grown into a beautiful woman. She'd married Jacob two years before; Captain McGuire had made the introduction. Though she didn't share Jacob's pitch black skin, the Lumbee had different thoughts as to race. They'd intermarried with white and black since the first colonization of the Outer Banks. She felt Captain McGuire's eyes and raised her own from the nest of Thomas' tangled hair. She flashed a brief nervous smile.

The boy stirred in her arms and burrowed more deeply into the protection offered by Rose. They'd peeled off his wet clothes and bandaged his cuts and abrasions as soon as Jacob had arrived. Under the heavy wool of the blanket he was naked as a newborn.

"How old you figure, Jako?" The Captain asked quietly, his eyes never leaving the boy and Rose.

"Seven...Eight maybe, Capn'," Jacob answered in the same low voice. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Captain McGuire turned his eyes to Jacob. He drew his pipe from between his teeth and blew a stream of smoke at the low ceiling.

Jacob held the Captain's gaze. "No other survivors, though, James."

Captain James McGuire nodded thoughtfully. Both men knew what that meant. At seven or eight, the boy was too young to be a cabin boy, and though she was carrying cargo chances were that the youngster hadn't been traveling alone.

Thomas opened his eyes, and blinked hard in the dim light. He didn't know the room or the two men across the table. His eyes widened as he recognized Jacob from the sea, and he bit down hard on his lip to avoid crying. Even so, his body racked with the effort, and he drew a ragged breath. His lungs still burned with salt.

"He's awake," murmured Rose.

Captain McGuire leaned forward and smiled at the boy. "I hear your name's Thomas, lad?" he asked gently.

The man's deep voice reminded him of Captain Daniels, and he nodded warily.

"Well...I'm James McGuire," he pointed at the woman holding him, "and that's Rose."

The boy looked up and met Rose's eyes. They were soft and kind. She smelled faintly of wood smoke and he felt her arms tightly around him. He looked at the black man suspiciously.

The Captain's eyes wrinkled in mirth. "Don't worry lad, that's Jacob. He's the one that.." The Captain's voice trailed off for once at a loss. "That helped you," he finished weakly.

Thomas sniffed, but kept his eyes on the black man. "I thought," he started and coughed. He drew another ragged breath. "I thought," his voice growing stronger, "he was the devil."

James leaned back with a chuckle. "No Thomas. He's a friend. A friend of mine." The Captain leaned in once more, "We'd all like to be friends of yours. Would that be OK?"

Jacob smiled and nodded encouragement. Thomas felt Rose's hug tighten.

Thomas nodded slowly. "I guess so, Mr. McGuire."

"Good, Thomas, good. Now, I've got to ask you some questions. Some questions to help you. OK?"

The boy nodded again.

James leaned back and relit his pipe, rolling the stem into the corner of his mouth. "Do you have a second name, Thomas? Like I have a second name, James McGuire., but some people don't like Jacob. How about you?"

Thomas nodded, "I have three names, Mr. McGuire, Thomas Charles Hooper."

James smiled back, "That's great. How old might you be, Thomas?"

Thomas nodded, "I'm seven."

"Boy, seven, you're much bigger than we thought," Captain McGuire smiled through the half truth. "And, where are you from?"

Thomas glanced up at Rose, "I'm from Charleston, South Carolina."

"Boy, that's great, Thomas. I've been to Charleston a half a hundred times. It's a beautiful town. You see, I've got a ship. I'm a sea captain, and I travel all over. Right now, you're in a town called Ocracoke on an island in North Carolina. That's where we live."

James took a long breath and glanced at Rose. Rose's eyes told her concern.

“Do you remember, Jacob helping you earlier this evening?”

The boy nodded and glanced again at Jacob.

“Do you remember anything else about this evening?”

The boy nodded again and held his breath.

“What ship were you on, Thomas?”

Thomas blinked hard, the memories a jumble. “I think it’s called the Innesvale, Mr. McGuire.”

James glanced at Jacob, and the two shook heads as one. Neither one knew her. James turned his eyes again to Thomas, “Good, Thomas, good job remembering. Were there other passengers, Thomas?”

Thomas started to cry slow tears, but his voice remained strong. “No sir. Just me, my mother, and my father. Have you seen them, Captain McGuire?”

James stoked his pipe and ran his hand through his hair. “No, lad, I can’t say that I have.” He forced a smile. “But, we’re going to see if we can’t help you find them...What’s your father’s name?”

Thomas swallowed hard. “Charles Hooper.”

“OK, Thomas. That’s all the questions for now. Rose will fix you up a bed in the house, and we’ll see if we can’t help you. Is that alright?”

Thomas nodded and shut his eyes to the memories.