



From the Jaws of Death

Sailing Vessel *Aurora Mist*,
Northwest Providence Channel,
thirteen nautical miles south-
southwest of Freeport, Bahamas
15:42 EDT, 29 September

Murray

Phillip Murray had just murdered his family.

Well, perhaps not murdered. They were still alive at the moment. But tied down in the sealed cabin of the rolling, pitching, and heaving

remnants of the once beautiful sailing yawl *Aurora Mist*, they were as good as dead. His lawyer's logic also objected technically—there had been no Malice Aforethought, not even the reckless negligence that would have qualified as Depraved Indifference Homicide back in New York. *Is that a thing in the Bahamas? What is the correct crime for a series of decisions that puts your wife and two little girls in the path of an intense hurricane with no hope of escape?*

A particularly violent combination of pitching and the roller-coaster heaving of the *Aurora Mist* wrenched his mind from these feeble professional distractions, and his stomach roiled again. Murray was breathing through his mouth now, in a desperate but vain attempt to remove one sense contributing to his nausea in the sealed, vomit-soaked cabin. He desperately wanted to open the cabin hatch or a window to at least get some fresh air in, but doing so would admit the angry sea and sink them in a heartbeat. Leaving the cabin for any reason would be certain death, as the loud thuds of wave impacts and the shrieking of the wind through the remaining deck fittings reminded him.

He directed his bleary gaze at the clock across the cabin—3:43 pm—seven and a half hours since the masts went by the board. He turned to Gemma, his wife of fourteen years strapped down four feet away. Dull, red-rimmed eyes gazed back, her face set in a gray mask of despair. Gemma was a sailor too, and she knew quite well the desperation of their situation. Her arms held their daughters tightly, faces buried in her chest. The girls had passed out from the exhaustion of vomiting and holding on against the boat's chaotic motion. It was a small blessing that he did not have to look them in the eyes anymore as they pleaded, in words unspoken,

Do something, Daddy!

It was not supposed to be this way. Murray had been an avid sailor since he was a child and had crewed for a contender for the America's Cup a decade and a half ago. He was not one of the lubberly imbeciles who thought reading Richard Henry Dana or watching a season of *Below Deck* made them expert seamen. He knew boats and respected the sea.

He could have continued sailing. But he had met, fallen hard for, and soon married Gemma Langton, a beautiful college classmate who shared his passion for the law and, to a lesser extent, sailing. The demands of school, the bar exam, and building a law practice in one of the most litigiously competitive locations in the world reduced their sailing time to summer day trips in rentals on the Long Island Sound. Then the kids came. When he held his newborn daughter Jamie in his arms, he knew he had too little time as it was to spend with his family. He would sacrifice none of it to indulge himself, regardless of how much he missed the challenge and exhilaration of bending the wind and sea to his will. Gemma appreciated this and promised that when the girls were old enough and he had a big case under his belt, he would take them all on a sailing sabbatical.

That day had come last March. He was the attorney of record for a class action that netted a nine-figure settlement. Now forty-five million dollars richer, Murray decided this was the time to live his and Gemma's dream of a sailing cruise around the Caribbean. Taking a few months to close out his remaining cases while Gemma put together a home school curriculum, the family traveled to Miami at the end of June. Everyone fell in love with the *Aurora Mist*, a beautiful fifty-three-foot yawl with a fully decked-out cabin and two bedrooms. Murray bought the boat, and the family set sail for the Yucatan Channel and Cozumel the next day.

The following three months were idyllic, with exotic ports, gorgeous beaches, lush tropical islands, and the wonders of the sea. The girls' excitement at seeing their first flying fish brought Murray the greatest joy he had experienced since Lydia was born. Like their parents, the girls took to the sea and were soon standing their own helm watches as Murray pretended to doze on the long sails between destinations.

Hurricanes were a genuine threat in the area throughout the trip. Murray was no fool—he knew what would happen if the *Aurora Mist* was caught at sea by one of those monsters. Thus, he gathered the National Hurricane Center's updates twice daily and tracked any systems that popped up with an almost religious fervor. He had even altered their voyage plan twice as a precaution when systems appeared to have a chance of reaching them.

Jacob had vexed Murray as much as it had the NHC forecasters. The *Aurora Mist* was in the Northern Bahamas, ready to run to the East or West as needed to stay clear, but Jacob stubbornly refused to commit, and the track uncertainty "cone" remained broad. Finally, the track guidance firmed away from the Florida coast and through the Eastern Bahamas. Murray set the course to the southwest around Great Abaco Island, through the Northwest Providence Channel just south of Grand Bahama Island. They would have to use Jacob's winds to help run clear, but Murray expected no problems.

But Jacob had other ideas.

The track unexpectedly jogged back to the west and picked up speed as a low-pressure trough moving off the East Coast had reached down farther than expected and tugged at the storm. It was now a race between the powerful hurricane barreling northward and the sailboat carrying progressively more reefs in the mainsail as the wind velocity increased. The Murrays and the *Aurora Mist* were winning. With Grand Bahama Island limiting the fetch, the term for the distance over which the wind could push on and build up the waves, the seas were moderate, allowing the winds to sweep them along at close to eighteen knots. Then it happened.

The boat had been running and riding well with a thrice reefed mainsail in a steady wind of twenty-five knots when a sudden gust of twice that speed took down the mizzen mast. Absent the balancing force of the mizzen sail, the boat immediately fell off from close haul, exposing the full breadth of the mainsail. The resulting strain was too high: the windward mainstays and the mast snapped in quick succession. In seconds, the *Aurora Mist* transformed from a racing thing of beauty to a wallowing wreck. The only good news was that no one was hurt—Gemma and the girls were in the cabin, and the flailing booms and stay wires somehow missed Murray at the helm.

Murray was a careful man and had prepared for this, the worst eventuality. It took a few seconds to overcome the shock of the quick sequence of events, but then he launched into action. The first step was to cut away the wreckage of the masts held alongside by the leeward stays. Then to the bow to cast the sea anchor—essentially a parachute attached to three hundred feet of reinforced line. The drag would keep *Aurora Mist's* bow to the wind and seas and hopefully keep her from capsizing or pitch polling in the ever-building seas. As the gyrating boat swung into the wind, Murray crawled aft to the cabin, fastened the hatch cover, manually activated the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon or EPIRB, and then turned to help Gemma secure herself and the children in the cabin. The girls were already seasick before the mishap. Now that there was no alternative to continuous pitching and heaving, shut tight in the airless cabin, things would get much worse for all of them.

“Phil?” Gemma asked pleadingly over Jamie’s and Lydia’s quiet sobs.

“The EPIRB’s on, honey. It will just be a matter of time before they come for us.” He was lying, of course. The rescue capabilities of the Royal Bahamian Defense Force were rudimentary at best, and they were over sixty miles from any U.S. Coast Guard station. The chance that a ship large enough to attempt a rescue would be in these narrow waters with a hurricane bearing down was vanishingly slight. *But not zero.* Despite the dread he felt inside, he smiled to encourage his wife.

The following seven and a half hours were a descent into Hell. The boat was riding well to the sea anchor, all things considered. But the wave heights were progressively increasing along with the fetch as they were pulled toward Jacob’s center and away from the shelter of Grand Bahama Island. The constant strain of holding on against the motion and the throwing up from the seasickness exhausted everyone. Murray was becoming increasingly listless, no longer caring about what could be causing the lurches and what bumps and thuds could be heard over the howling wind.

There was a lurch, somehow different from what Murray had been feeling in the boat’s motion, followed almost immediately by a loud thud from the overhead. He

wondered what could have broken loose or collided with the *Aurora Mist* when the hatch suddenly opened with a roar of wind. Murray turned in panic and reached for the release on his strap—the hatch had somehow broken loose, and if not secured immediately, waves breaking over the boat would soon swamp the cabin. He had grabbed a secure handhold when a man wearing a white helmet, goggles, and an orange life vest appeared in the opening.

Shouting to be heard over the screeching of the wind, the man said, “Howdy, folks! Petty Officer Juan Lopez, U.S. Coast Guard! Would anybody like a ride in my boat?!”

Murray blinked at the apparition and, unable to reply, nodded vigorously.

“OK!” the young man said, ducking as a wave broke over the boat. “This is going to take careful timing! We have to take you off one at a time! Our boat can only hang alongside for a few seconds, so I will hand you off to my shipmate in the boat, understand?!”

Murray nodded again.

“Sweet! OK, sir and ma’am, this is important! When I push you off, the only thing you grab is the man in the boat! You grab at anything else, and it won’t go well, clear?! I need a thumbs up from each of you!”

Murray gave a thumbs up with his free hand and turned to see Gemma wearily doing the same.

“Alright! Ma’am, can you pass the first child to the gentleman here while I call over the boat?!”

Gemma nodded and unhooked Jamie’s strap, then released her once Murray had a firm grip and pulled her over. The child was listless with fatigue, mumbling something Murray couldn’t hear over the wind. He leaned over to speak in her ear. “I know it’s hard, honey, but it will be over soon. Go with the Coast Guard man now.”

Jamie looked fearful and then nodded, turning to Lopez and reaching out. Lopez quickly pulled the child into the crook of his arm, and then they disappeared from the hatch. After what seemed an eternity to Murray but couldn’t have been more than half a minute, there was another perceptible lurch in the boat and several thuds on the deck. After a few more seconds, Lopez reappeared in the hatch opening.

“OK, folks! She’s safe on board the boat!” Murray stifled a cry of relief while Lopez continued, “Let’s take the second child, please!”

Murray and Gemma repeated the transfer process, but Lydia was frantic. “No, Daddy! No!”

Murray held her close and spoke in her ear. “I know it’s scary, sweet pea, but you have to go with the Coast Guard man to be with Jamie. Mommy and I will be there with you before you know it.”

Lydia was still sobbing, but released her grip on Murray as Lopez took her under his arm. As the two disappeared through the hatch, Murray reached over and drew Gemma over to him, hugging her tightly. Lopez soon reappeared at the hatch.

“Both girls are safe and secure in the boat! Let’s take you now, ma’am!”

Gemma looked into Murray’s eyes and gave him a quick kiss and hug, then followed the young petty officer out of the hatch. After they were clear, Murray

grasped the handhold and released his strap, then squatted in the hatchway. Before long, Lopez reappeared.

“OK, sir, just you and me now! We’ll be going over together! What we’re going to do is hang out right outside the hatch! You’ll see the boat coming, but don’t move until I pull your arm! When I do, you jump for the boat with everything you’ve got, copy?!”

Murray nodded exaggeratedly and shouted, “Yes! Let’s do it!”

Lopez nodded and then pulled Murray through the hatch. He could barely hold on as the roaring wind gripped him, immensely strong even in the partial lee of the cockpit. The scene on deck was surreal. In all directions, from what he could see in the limited visibility, was a gray sea and waves at least twelve feet high with spray blowing from the tops. A solid overcast of clouds whipped overhead at unbelievable speed. A white vessel with a Coast Guard red racing stripe gyrated a hundred yards off the starboard side, dipping and slamming into the on-coming waves each ten to twelve seconds. He turned aft to see a small orange boat approaching, disappearing from sight as the *Aurora Mist* crested a wave and dipped, reappearing a couple of seconds later. The boat approached slowly, briefly held in position about ten yards away while another wave passed, then shot forward. Lopez leaned over, shouted, “Let’s go!” and yanked his arm.

Murray leaped with every ounce of strength he had. As soon as he cleared the lee of the cockpit, the wind seemed to slap him in midair. He was falling and turning as he collided with a soft object, the crewman in the boat, then slammed onto the hard deck. A large hand gripped and dragged him to the side, where Gemma and the girls were already lashed in.

The big crewman placed his hand on a grab handle and shouted, “Hold this, stay down, and keep your arms inside the boat!” Once Murray had a firm grip, the crewman pulled a strap across his lap, fastened it to a ring fitting on the deck, and cinched it. The small orange boat pitched up as it climbed another high wave, and the strap across Murray’s lap bit into him as they seemed to come near to vertical. Then the bow abruptly pitched down for yet another sickening drop to a tremendous splash.

“*That’s it! We’re done for!*” Murray thought as wind and water tugged at his body. But the boat came up again, the deck cleared, and from what he could see with his spray-fogged eyes, everyone was still there. He looked toward Gemma, sitting beside him with her free arm stretched across Jamie’s and Lydia’s chests, and placed his free hand over hers on the grab handle. They rode out two more monstrous wave events before reaching the cutter, which provided little shelter from the gale for the tossing boat.

Murray had turned to look at the nearby cutter when a gunshot rang out, followed by the thump of a line on the bow. Murray surmised the winds were too high for a standard heaving line, so the Coast Guardsman used a rifle to pass a line to the boat. The big boat crewman was hauling in a thin line that Murray knew was attached to the hook used to crane the boat aboard. This was the time of maximum risk—with the cutter and boat writhing in the wind and seas, attaching the hook would be a nightmare. He leaned over to cover Gemma’s head with his body and closed his eyes.

And then he prayed.

The boat suddenly jolted upward after two clangs, audible even over the shrieking wind. Murray opened his eyes to see the big crewman kneeling on the deck, gripping handles on either side of a metal block attached to the boat frame. He looked over his shoulder to see they were even with the cutter's deck, which receded as they rolled to the left, then came on with a bone-jarring crash.

"Heave in, goddammit!" the big crewman shouted at several men on the cutter's deck. The small boat drifted out again with another roll, but far less than before. The boat stayed snug on the cutter's side on the next roll. The big crewman shouted, "Get ready!" The crewmen on the deck moved to the side of the boat, squatted, and seized grab handles. The cutter pitched upward, then down with a tremendous splash that inundated the scene with rushing water. It had not yet cleared when the big crewman yelled, "Take them!" Four pairs of hands released the Murray family's straps and hauled them onto the deck, moving briskly to and through an open door in the superstructure.

The room they entered seemed to be some sort of dining area. There were two tables with chairs bolted to the floor in the center and what appeared to be a stove with two large refrigerators in the corner. The oven and refrigerator doors were secured with straps, and perforated mats covered the entire deck. The crewmen who had escorted them inside were busily seating Gemma and the children against the wall and connecting them with new safety straps, while Murray's crewmen did the same for him. Even inside, the wind's howling was very loud, but conversation was possible, at least. The motion of the cutter was still quite violent—the crewmen were essentially climbing from one location to the next. Finally, one of the crew pulled off his goggles and spoke into what looked like a thin headset, "Conn, Deck Party secure and ready for maneuvers."

Murray looked up as a voice came over the loudspeakers in the room. "Attention, everybody. The good news is the ride is about to get a lot smoother; the bad news is we will have to turn beam-on. Stand by."

The crewmen all kneeled and seized railings on the wall with both hands, and the one with the headset looked at Murray and said, "Hang on tight, folks. We will run with the wind and seas to tamp down this motion, but we have to turn broadside to get there."

Murray nodded, then turned to gaze at his family across the room and locked eyes with Gemma. The cutter pitched down, plunging into the wave trough with a thundering crash, followed by the muffled roar of running water. Then, after a few seconds, the cutter began another rapid pitch up and climb up the next wave. At the crest, instead of plunging downward, the cutter rapidly yawed to the right, accompanied by a brief roll to the left so deep he felt like he was hanging off the side in his harness. The cutter then rolled back to vertical and plunged forward, the engines below the deck on which he sat roaring above the sound of the wind. He could feel the difference in the motion as the cutter picked up speed—instead of colliding with the water in the next wave, she rode through the trough, then pitched more slowly as the wave slid by. Murray released the breath he was holding. The danger

was not past by any means, but running with the wind and seas now, they were hurrying away from the storm's center.

In minutes, the motion steadied to a slow roll of twenty degrees to each side, with a pitch of about ten degrees. The voice came over the loudspeakers again. "Alright, guys, the worst is behind us, and we are making thirty knots over the ground in the best direction. Normal movement is OK, but a big one can come along at any time, so remember, one hand for the boat at all times. All weather decks remain secured until further notice. Well done, everybody!"

The crewmen kneeling around the messdeck stood and removed their helmets. Crewmembers, Murray corrected himself—the shortest among them was an African American woman. Murray was astonished as they started chatting and laughing, as if this heart-stopping experience was just another day at the office. A tall, youthful crewman with the single silver bar on his uniform that marked him as an officer came over and released his harness. Murray took his proffered hand and stood unsteadily.

"Sir, were you the Master of the *Aurora Mist*?" he asked.

Murray had never thought of himself in those terms, but supposed that was the correct formal usage. "Yes, I am, or was, I guess. I'm Phillip Murray."

"How do you do, Mr. Murray? I'm Lieutenant Junior Grade Ben Wyporek, Executive Officer. Welcome to the Coast Guard Cutter *Kauai*. Are these people your family?"

"Yes, sir. My wife, Gemma, and daughters Jamie and Lydia. Thank you for coming for us."

"We're glad to have you aboard. Right now, we are going to move you to one of our berthing areas where you can rest, and our Health Services Technician can check you out."

"Thank you, sir." It was entirely inadequate for the emotion he felt for the deliverance of his family from what he believed was certain death, but it was all his exhausted mind could muster. He smiled at Gemma as she and the girls were released from their harnesses and helped to their feet. The young officer led them forward through a passageway to a tiny room almost filled with two pairs of bunk beds and four narrow lockers. A corridor barely two feet wide between the bunk pairs provided the only floor space in the room. "I'm sorry it's so cramped in here, but it's the best we can offer you right now," the officer said.

"Lieutenant, considering where we just came from, this is heaven."

"Good. I think putting the children in the top bunks is best, and there is no risk of their falling out—as you can see, we have retention rails installed."

"Yes, I agree," Murray said as he looked closely at the bunks.

"Right then," Wyporek said and knelt to speak to Jamie. "Miss Jamie, my name is Ben, and I'm going to help you into the top bunk. Is that OK?"

"Yes. Ben, I feel sick."

"I know, honey. My friend Mike will be here in a minute to get something to help you with that."

"Thanks," Jamie said as Wyporek lifted her so she could climb into the bunk.

He then turned and kneeled by the other child. “Miss Lydia, I’m Ben. I’m going to help you into the other top bunk, OK?”

“Yes, Ben,” Lydia said as she put her arms around Wyporek’s neck. He lifted her to the bunk and then turned to Murray after the child climbed in.

“OK, sir. Do you or your wife need help?”

Murray turned to Gemma and got an exhausted smile and a head shake. He turned to Wyporek. “No, Lieutenant, we’ll be fine.”

“Right. This is our Health Services Technician, Petty Officer Mike Bryant,” Wyporek said, gesturing to a shorter crewman with close-cropped blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses. “He needs to do a health check on you and the children.”

“We’d be grateful,” Murray said. “I’m glad to meet you, Mr. Bryant.”

“Likewise, sir,” Bryant replied. “XO, I’ve got this.”

“Roger that,” the officer said. Then he left the room.

Bryant closed the door and said, “I’d like to start with the children. Could you and your wife get into the lower bunks, please? I need room to work here.”

“Yes, certainly,” Murray said. After helping Gemma into her bunk, he climbed into his own. Under normal circumstances, he would have been mildly claustrophobic in the tight space, but he was too tired and worried at present. After a few minutes, Bryant kneeled.

“Folks, both your children are OK. They have mild dehydration and are still experiencing motion sickness. With your permission, I would like to give them an oral solution. It is Pedialyte with a small dose of ondansetron to knock out nausea and help them rest.”

Murray nodded to Gemma, and she said, “Yes, please. Go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

Bryant finished with the children within a few minutes and kneeled again for the adults. “Ma’am, your turn.” Five minutes later, Bryant had completed his examination on both adults. “Folks, same diagnosis for you two. I want you each to drink a bottle of Pedialyte, and I have a dimenhydrinate pill for you if you’re still nauseous, but it might make you sleepy.”

“Dimenhydrinate?” Murray asked.

“The trade name is Dramamine.”

“That sounds like an excellent prescription to me,” Murray said.

When Bryant turned to Gemma, she said, “Yes, I would like both, please.”

“Coming right up.”

The drink was not as unpleasant as Murray expected, and the pill soon eliminated his remaining nausea. Gemma was also returning from the dead, and she gave a grateful smile to the young medic. Bryant excused himself, saying he would be just a shout away if they needed anything. After he had left, Murray got up from his bunk to check on Jamie and Lydia—both were sleeping peacefully and securely in their bunks. He then kneeled beside Gemma’s bunk, cupped her cheek gently with his right hand, and kissed her warmly. He then pulled back and smiled. “My dearest, I think we’ll stick with daysailers on the Sound from here on out.”

Gemma smiled in return. “An eminently sound legal strategy, counselor.”

Murray returned to his bunk, then reached across the space between the bunks to lay his hand on Gemma's arm. Between the cutter's gradually moderating motion, the ordeal's exhaustion, and the Dramamine's narcotic effects, both were asleep within fifteen minutes.