

An excerpt from *Hidden Depths*

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

Zero hour.

I stand in chest-deep water on a narrow, gently-shelving beach of bone-white sand, staring out at the great ocean. My stomach churns at the towering prospect of the challenge I have set myself. The cold seeps into my wetsuit as I take a few gulps of an energy drink and press #1 on my GPS navigation device.

I'm ready. Or as ready as I could ever be. The countless hours of training, of relentless lengths of Satan's Pool, have built my mental as well as physical resilience.

I take a deep breath and start swimming, heading away from the Isles of Scilly, away from my old life. The first stroke is completed in a second. It carries me almost two metres. It's followed by another. And another. And another. I search for a strong, steady rhythm, focusing on each phase of the stroke.

Reach. Catch. Pull. Push.

The early minutes drag. I shrug and shake my right shoulder in the hope of clearing a persistent twinge. On the horizon, a band of grey provides the first hint of dawn. But when I stare down into the depths of the ocean all I can see is blackness, total and complete. An LED display in my goggles, linked to the GPS, provides a reassuring green light. Green is good. It means I'm on course.

I slide past the final headland to head northeast out into the open ocean through ripples summoned by a gentle breeze, pausing to drop three mobile phones into the depths – mine, Derek's and Ingram's. The wind is coming from behind. I like to think that it's pushing me forward, helping me on my way, that the hand of fate is guiding me, but it's merely the prevailing wind and so to be expected. Also expected is the tide which will be against me for the first few hours but then turn in my favour.

My body warms to the task. The ache in my shoulder fades, the stroke becomes easier, more fluid. As I push on ever further into the immensity of the open ocean, the pale grey to my right brightens until replaced by the first blinding shards of daylight. Sunlight brings a growing optimism. The impossible seems possible.

I take a break, treading water while drinking sparingly from a container of energy drink. Dehydration is only one of the

enemies I'll face over the coming hours. I have three litres, held in a belt and a swim buoy tethered to me by a short line. It's barely enough.

Usually, I'd expect to drink more than twice as much.

I can't resist looking back the way I have come. The Isles of Scilly have shrunk to a series of flat rocks on the horizon. If there was a time to turn around, it would be now. I could freestyle my way back to the isles and slip ashore on the beach where I started with nobody noticing my absence.

But there can be no going back.

A few days ago, a foggy moor felt like the loneliest place on earth, but it is as nothing compared with being out here, with so far to go and so much fatigue to come. There is nobody to shout encouragement, no welcoming hands to reach down and pluck me to safety.

I press on. Beyond the point of no return. I will reach Cornwall or I will die. Nothing could be simpler or more clear-cut. If I fail, my remains will become part of the great cycle of sea life, absorbed in the guts of sleek creatures riding the waves. For me, a child of the ocean, such an end is not so terrible.

I learned long ago to focus on each small step rather than the total task, the enormity of which will invite despair. How do you climb a mountain? One step at a time. How do I conquer this enormous churning expanse? One stroke at a time.

The directional light in my goggles winks amber. I'm off course. A correction is needed.

A miniscule adjustment in my bearing is rewarded by a green light.

At last, the tide turns to help me. My adrenaline-fuelled body is strong. As the sun rises, the colour of the ocean below changes from pure black to emerald green. I gaze down to see shafts of sunlight lancing down into its crystal-clear depths. It's astoundingly beautiful. And yet sinister. It is here that the lost kingdom of Lyonesse was swallowed by the ocean in a single night. Far below me in the chill void, grotesque creatures gobble, writhe and squirm. I imagine the huge maw of a shark, filled with razor sharp teeth, rising from the depths.

Legends and fears of sea monsters are for children — and ancient mariners. I banish them and immerse myself in the mechanics of swimming, making my stroke as efficient as possible. If I can complete enough strokes, I will succeed,

will survive. During those long, lonely hours, my roaming mind plays with the arithmetic of the swim, the humbling distances and the superhuman effort needed. Twenty-eight miles. At least fifteen hours. About twelve thousand turns of each arm and as many life-giving breaths. More than 100,000 thumping heartbeats.

Reach. Catch. Pull. Push. One more completed. Another tiny piece in the jigsaw slotted into place. I breathe to my left, only switching to my right when my neck aches in protest at the repetition. My focus is on getting to the hourly feed stop. The sweet energy drink and jelly babies are a small reward I can look forward to. But I keep each stop to no more than two or three minutes. If I halt for too long my muscles will chill and it will be hard to get going again.

One swimming hour slides into the next and then the next. My mind wanders. I lose myself in the surge and swell of my environment. The Isles of Scilly have long since sunk below the horizon. There is only endless ocean ahead and behind, impenetrable depths below and a pale sky with wispy cloud above. I am lost in the immensity of it all, feeling minute and inconsequential, a speck in the great cosmos.

And then, in the far-off haze, the first smudge of land. When I catch sight of the cliffs at Land's End my adrenaline surges and I raise my stroke rate. The finish is in sight.

But it's a cruel deception. I'm barely halfway. As time grinds onwards, the mainland seems as distant as ever. My pace slows again. I force myself to stop looking ahead, instead concentrating on the little things – the swirl of the cool water through my hands, the sparkling bubbles which burst from my mouth and trail from my fingertips, the beauty of the stroke.

Clutching the swim buoy, I stop for another feed and make the mistake of casting a longing stare at those jagged cliffs. So small. So far.

The breeze behind me is strengthening, the ocean developing a petulant swell, which disturbs my rhythm. It holds me back and then pushes me forward. The sun is past its zenith and has begun its decline to the western horizon as the light house at craggy Wolf Rock slips past on my right.

My right shoulder begins to hurt again. A grumbling twinge becomes a burning, searing agony. I ease the suffering by holding my right arm against my side and using only my left arm. But it can only be a brief reprieve. The pace is too slow and staying on course becomes more difficult. The amber light of the GPS blinks on several times. After a few minutes of respite, I'm forced to begin using my right arm again. The short rest has helped and for a while the pain is less intrusive.

On.

On.

On.

Desperation is gathering. My lips have become cracked and chapped by the sun, salt and wind. Every movement hurts. Weariness and agony suck at my life force. I always knew I would reach a point where I would have to dig deeper than ever before. A moment of truth. How far am I from that moment now? Not far. The most dangerous part of the journey will come near the end, in the final few miles, when I'm at my lowest ebb. It's vital I complete that final stage during a brief window of slack water. If I get it wrong, the tide will sweep me south past Land's End. Into oblivion.

Every turn of my right arm fans the fire in my shoulder. It's gone beyond pain. A red-hot knife is being thrust into raw muscle and bone and then jerked back and forth. I grit my teeth and mentally lock away the suffering in a small, dark cupboard. The sun has subsided to halfway below the horizon. The green depths into which I stare have lost their lustre, turning from emerald to a drab olive.

I stretch the tendons of my burning shoulder by pulling my right arm across my chest.

The cliffs are close. Cruelly close. The Runnel Stone marker buoy, swaying in the swell off Gwennap Head, seems within touching distance. The sounds of the open ocean – the lap of water, the rush of the wind – are being replaced by the distant crash of waves breaking against rocks.