Tami Oldham
The woman who sailed into a hurricane
(Pacific Ocean, 1983)

Keen and experienced mariners twenty-three-year-old Tami Oldham and her fiancé Richard Sharp were sailing a luxury yacht from Tahiti in the South Pacific to the American port of San Diego. The voyage should have taken a month, and with good weather forecast the pair were looking forward to enjoying some excellent sailing and a great adventure. Before long, however, the trip of a lifetime turned in to a fight for survival when their boat was hit by a deadly category-4 hurricane.

In 160-mile-per-hour winds the forty-four-foot *Hazana* was soon being battered by giant rolling waves, while a solid wall of salt-laden spray reduced visibility almost to zero. On her way down to the cabin Oldham was knocked unconscious by the impact of an especially violent wave, while on deck Sharp struggled to stay in control of the boat. Eventually it capsized, and when she came to there was no sign of her companion. *Hazana* had righted itself but was now adrift and badly damaged. The main mast had gone and quick inspection revealed that the electrical circuits and engine had been disabled by three feet of water flooding the hull.

Oldham estimated that she was at least fifteen hundred miles from Hawaii, the nearest land mass. She was badly injured, losing blood from a head wound, and in shock at the discovery that the love of her life had apparently been washed overboard. She knew he would have been tethered to the boat by a safety line, but in the buffeting of the storm the line must have snapped.

Looking at her watch she thought she must have been unconscious for nearly three hours. In fact she was a whole day out. After sustaining the painful blow to her head she'd spent almost twenty-seven hours lying motionless down below.

Considering her situation, the temptation to give in was overwhelming, and initially Oldham came close to surrendering in the face of what looked like an insurmountable challenge. For a couple of days, stunned by the death of her fiancé, she did nothing and ate nothing. Only slowly did she realise that she had to snap out of it. She couldn't just give up and wait to die.

Calling for help was not an option. The yacht's radio, sophisticated electronic navigation system and the emergency position-indicating equipment had all been fatally damaged in the storm. On the plus side, the *Hazana* still had plenty of food and water on board, and Oldham was a talented and knowledgeable sailor. She and Sharp had logged more than fifty thousand miles on the water - equivalent to sailing twice around the equator - and so she knew she had the skills needed to reach dry land.

She also knew how to plot a course from the positions of the sun and stars, which she could do using her watch and a traditional navigational device called a sextant. Somehow the rudder had survived the impact of the hurricane, which meant the boat could still be steered and Oldham was confident she could improvise a mast and a new sail using bits and pieces salvaged from the wreckage. However, this proved difficult because of the extensive damage to the post: as well as capsizing, the *Hazana* had at one point flipped end over end.

The greatest danger was that she was adrift somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, by far the largest

ocean on Earth. Over sixty million square miles and covering approximately one third of the planet's entire surface, the sheer size of the Pacific meant simply drifting was too risky. There was no hope that someone would find her. Instead she would have to sail to safety.

She knew that her most urgent task was to pump out the water form the hull before getting rid of everything that had been smashed during the storm. To move around the boat safely it was important to clear the deck of the broken spars and wrecked sails, and to tidy away the ropes. These included the remains of Sharp's lifeline, torn loose by the force of the hurricane.

The sensible thing was to tackle these jobs one at a time, to have a plan and to remain focused on working through that plan. Keeping going can seem impossible when facing huge struggles alone, but like other people in life-threatening situations Oldham tuned into a voice in her head - a sort of inner spirit, perhaps - which was encouraging her to persevere. Listening to the voice, she knew that to have any chance of surviving she first had to decide to be a survivor.

She managed to rig up a makeshift mainsail using one of the smaller sails, which had been safely stowed below during the storm. A coupe of days' practice with the sextant enabled her to figure out where she was. From the yacht's charts and using the ocean currents, Oldham was reasonably sure she could plot a course that would take her towards Hawaii.

The small temporary sail meant the *Hazana* would be much slower than before. Without Sharp, and sailing solo, she would also have to work round the clock just to keep the boat travelling in the right direction - it had to be kept on course at night as well as during the day. Realising that

the voyage to safety would probably take many weeks, she knew she faced a punishing routine: without anyone to share the burden there were no opportunities for her to take time off to sleep properly or to regain her strength.

Deeply depressed and suffering from the monotony of this routine, the highlight of her day was using the sextant to figure out her location, the mental exercise being a relief from the physical grind. By marking the time when the sun is at its highest point, and then again as it dips down to the horizon, a good sailor can work out their position very precisely. Using these calculators Oldham was able to reassure herself that she was indeed heading for Hawaii, and also measure how far she had travelled since the previous day.

Weather conditions fluctuate wildly in mid-ocean, but luckily there was no repeat of the hurricane. On good days Oldham reckoned she could travel as much as sixty miles; at other times the *Hazana* was becalmed and barely moved at all. With only the small sail to catch the wind, the boat's progress was fairly slow, and with such a huge distance to cover it was nearly six weeks before Oldham came in sight of dry land and saw another vessel.

It was on the forty-first day that her luck finally changed. Exhausted and emaciated, she was at last spotted by a Japanese research vessel called the *Hokusei Maru*, which took the *Hazana* in tow. Shortly afterwards the two boats were met by US Coastguard personnel, who escorted them into Hilo harbour on Hawaii's Big Island.

Oldham was safe, but by this time she had lost nearly a third of her bodyweight. She was also suffering from severe shock as a result of her ordeal, but having battled heartbreak, fear and depression, she knew she had conquered the mighty Pacific. Managing to cross a

daunting 1,500 miles of open ocean, she had shown an incredible combination of skill, knowledge and sheer determination - and done it by listening to a voice that told her she had to choose to stay alive.