CHAPTER ONE

Stranded

Benjamin Tilton, the captain of the whaleship *Alexander* from San Francisco, was in the final month of a whaling trip. He and the captains of the *Orca,* the *Belvedere,* the *Jesse H. Freeman,* and the *Rosario* were convinced that they would have a few more weeks of fair weather to fill their holds before heading south.

The *Alexander* and the other vessels were hunting for bowhead whales. The weather had been excellent, enabling them to catch scores of the mammoth creatures, enough to provide tons of the bowheads' enormous bones, which were turned into profitable, commonly used items such as buggy whips, clothespins, carriage wheels, pie cutters, and, most important of all, the corset stays that helped women throughout the world enhance their figures. It was only the first of September, 1897, yet, without warning, the temperature plunged dramatically and heavy ice came sweeping in from far out at sea. So much ice formed in the north off Point Barrow, Alaska, that the ships were forced to lay anchor to wait for favorable winds to drive the ice away.

The winds that Captain Tilton had silently prayed for came, but they were hardly favorable. With them they brought a whole new unbroken pack of ice, a mile and a half long and a half a mile wide. Looking out at the ice, which now seemed to stretch on forever, and then over the first mate's shoulder, Tilton noticed what the officer had entered in his log. "We have to get out[;] the ice [is] bad this year."

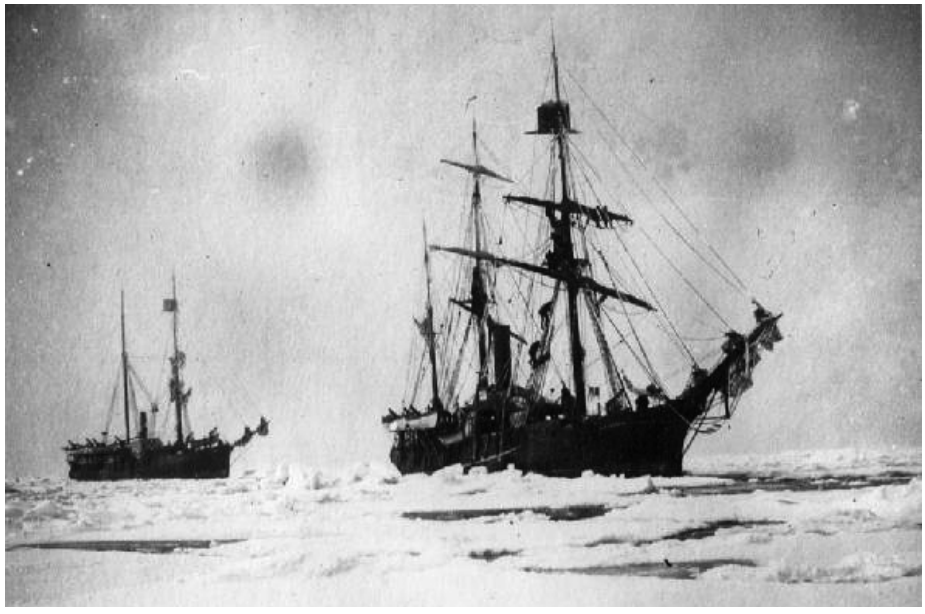
The whaler Belvedere *was one of the most well-traveled ships of its time. As author Richard Ellis stated, "In their search for [whales] the roving whalers opened the world, much as the explorers of the sixteenth century had done in their quest for the riches of the Indies."*

The weather was not the only thing troubling Tilton. He was outraged at the behavior of the other captains. From the moment they had become icebound, they had taken to gathering aboard the *Belvedere* for a continuous round of drinking parties. "This went on for several days," James Allen, one of the engineers aboard the *Freeman,* would later write. "The captains didn't pay much attention to the ice, or to anything else during their parties. . . . They didn't regard the situation as serious. They reckoned that when a nor'easter came it would drive the ice out again. . . . A few days later came the northeast wind, and oh boy, she blew, believe me! But the ice never moved. These partying captains now commenced to realize that their ships were in a dangerous position."

As Tilton knew, spending a winter in the ice meant surviving months of almost twenty-four-hour-a-day darkness and temperatures that plummeted to as far as sixty degrees below zero. It meant never knowing when the ice would suddenly move with a force that could splinter a ship beyond recognition. And that was far from all. The whaleships had expected to leave the Arctic by mid-November. None of them carried nearly enough food and other supplies to sustain the men through the winter.

Captain Tilton was determined to get himself out of this icy trap. Fortunately, his ship was imprisoned in a spot where the ice was not yet quite as thick as that surrounding the other vessels. Like most of the other ships, the *Alexander* was part of a whole new breed of whaling vessels, powered by steam as well as sail. On September 4, Tilton ordered the men in charge of the engine room to give him as much steam as possible. Then, for the next eighteen hours, he stood watch as the *Alexander* continually rammed the ice with as much speed as it could gather. "Back and forth we went," chief engineer Michael McKinnon later recalled, "and every succeeding crash seemed to us down [below] as though it would be our last. It did not seem possible that wood and iron could stand the strain much longer."

The ship not only survived the eighteen-hour ordeal but also managed to forge a channel through the ice pack and out to the open sea. "I can tell you," McKinnon later exclaimed, "when we . . . saw open water before us we were a happy set of men."



With four whaleships already stuck fast in the surprisingly early September ice, the Alexander *approaches a small strip of open water hoping to escape from icy entrapment.*

Captain Tilton was, of course, relieved as well. But he hardly felt like celebrating. For he was leaving behind four ships and four full crews that were hopelessly stranded in the most hostile environment possible—not only stranded but also facing starvation. Tilton was aware that three other ships—the *Fearless,* the *Jeannie,* and the *Newport*—had been steaming toward Point Barrow as well. And there was yet another member of the fleet, the *Wanderer,* that had been whaling some distance apart from the other vessels. Although he couldn't see these four other ships, he suspected that they were now locked somewhere in the ice as well. He had to get the *Alexander* back to its home port of San Francisco as quickly as possible to let people know what had taken place at Point Barrow.

The Jeannie *would be just one of eight whaleships hopelessly trapped in the ice, seriously threatening the lives of all those aboard them.*

In total there were eight whaleships and about three hundred men stranded in the farthest northern point in America. With the Arctic waters freezing over more solidly every day, no ship could possibly get to Point Barrow to rescue them. And, as every whaler and every explorer knew, no overland rescue expedition had ever been sent to the Arctic in the dead of winter.

As the ships had become trapped in the ice, two eyewitnesses onshore had watched the drama unfold. One of them was a man named

When Charlie Brower opened his whaling station at Point Barrow he had no idea that it would become the setting for momentous events that would have nothing to do with whaling itself.

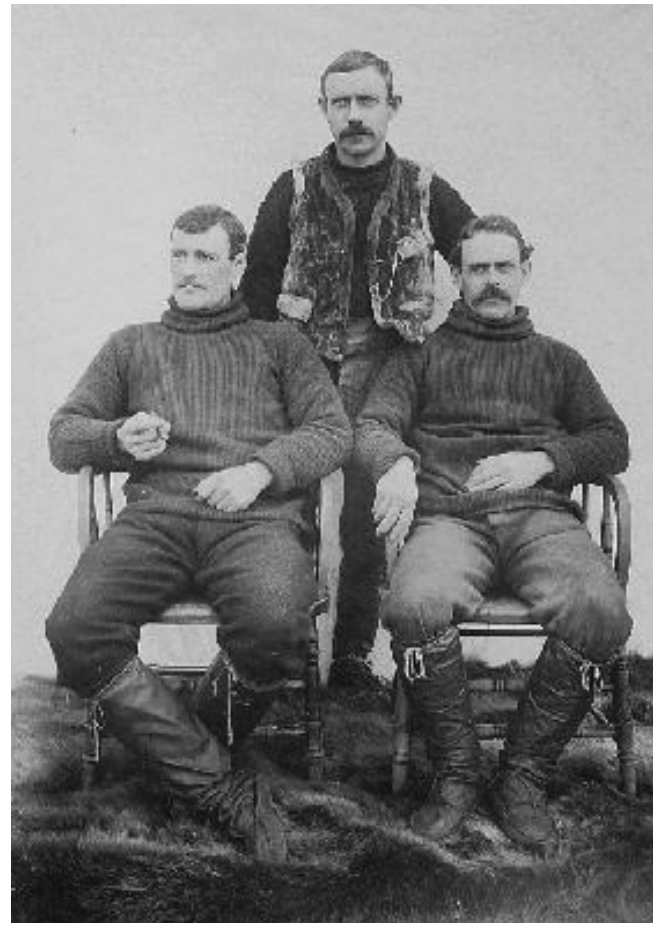
When, in July, 1897, Ned McIlhenny, headed toward Point Barrow he wrote in his diary that "For me the real interest in this trip began . . . when we crossed the [Arctic] Circle, for then we entered a sea that is but little known . . . bordering a land that is absolutely unknown."

Charlie Brower, Point Barrow's most important resident. Brower was the owner of a profitable offshore whaling station and employed almost all the indigenous men who lived at Point Barrow to help him in his operations.

The other person who witnessed the ice-locked whaleships was a twenty-four-year-old man from New Iberia, Louisiana, named Edward Avery McIlhenny, called Ned. McIlhenny's family manufactured a highly popular food-seasoning product called Tabasco sauce. He had spent time working in the family business, but early on he had discovered that his two biggest loves were collecting biological specimens and seeking adventure.

McIlhenny had addressed these two passions by obtaining a commission from the University of Pennsylvania's Natural History Museum to travel to Point Barrow to gather natural and man-made objects for the museum's collections. Accompanied by two assistants, McIlhenny had arrived at Point Barrow in 1897 and had rented an abandoned building that had previously served as a refuge station for men whose vessels had run into trouble while whaling in the region. When he had left for Point Barrow, McIlhenny had declared that "we expect to obtain some interesting specimens of fossils, fishes, birds, animals, and insects. I intend that science shall receive any and all benefit that may result from our explorations."

Just as Brower and McIlhenny were beginning to discuss the probability of having to house shipwrecked whalers, three weary-looking men suddenly appeared at Brower's whaling station. The second mate of the *Belvedere* and the fourth and fifth mates of the *Freeman* had walked sixty-five miles across the ice, a frigid journey that had taken them three nights and two days to complete. During the harrowing trip, the temperatures had dropped as low as thirty degrees below zero, forcing them to spend part of two of the nights camped out on the ice. There they faced the danger of falling into the frigid water as the ice drifted and broke apart.



Charlie Brower (seated right) poses with his two assistants Tom Gordon (left) and Fred Hopson (center). Gordon, an Englishman, and Hopson from Scotland would be instrumental in bringing scores of the stranded whalers ashore.

The mates had been sent by their captains to report that those aboard the whaleships that had not been seriously damaged were prepared to spend the winter aboard their vessels. There was, however, not enough room aboard these ships to accommodate the more than one hundred men they had taken aboard after their ships had either sunk or been badly damaged.

The vessels that had taken in the shipwrecked whalers were terribly overcrowded, and all those aboard were already complaining about the lack of sleeping space and room to move about. There was only one solution. The whalers whose ships had been destroyed had to find refuge ashore. The big question on everyone's mind was, Would there be enough food to sustain the some 125 men who remained on the ships and the more than one hundred others who came ashore through the long winter? There was no hope of outside help reaching them for the better part of a year, if in fact anyone outside of Point Barrow was even aware of what had happened to them.

Although Brower knew that supplying the stranded whalers with enough food was bound to be an ongoing major problem, he realized that he had a

more immediate challenge. Where was he going to house the whalers who would be seeking refuge ashore?

There were only two possible places. One was another abandoned building, in addition to the refuge station, near Brower's own whaling station that had been owned by another whaling company. It was in terrible condition and was missing much of its wooden floor and ceiling. But it would have to do.

Because he did not have enough lumber on hand to repair the building as it stood, Brower had his workmen shorten the sixty-five-foot-long structure by some fifteen feet. Then he had them use the wood they had torn away to construct forty-eight bunks in three tiers along the walls. It was far from enough sleeping space to accommodate all those who would be living there, and it meant that the whalemen would have to sleep in shifts. Brower also had his men install a stove in the building.

Even with its renovations completed, Brower knew that the old whaling station, which he and his men now began referring to as the "bunkhouse," was not adequate to house all the stranded sailors. The only other building available was the old refuge building, which, along with being structurally sound, had its own stove. But McIlhenny had interrupted his life and had traveled thousands of miles to take up residence there in order to carry out his scientific project. Would he be willing to share the refuge station with stranded strangers? McIlhenny, as Brower would write, "was here to collect birds and mammals. How, I wondered, would he take to collecting shipwrecked sailors?" To Brower's great relief, McIlhenny agreed, although, in keeping with his aristocratic background, he stated that he preferred to share the refuge station with officers rather than crewmen.

With the housing issue solved, Brower then turned his attention to the whalers. He sent one of his assistants along with Ned McIlhenny by dogsled to the ships with men on board to assure them that they would be cared for. Then he sent six dog teams under the direction of another of his assistants and more than twenty native people to the *Belvedere* to deliver a message telling the men that all were welcome at the whaling station and that he would divide his food with them to the last pound. At this point, forty of the

whalemen were brought to Point Barrow in what turned out to be an excruciating sixty-five-mile trip, most of it on foot, through snow at least two feet deep and with the temperatures standing at well below zero.

Among those being taken ashore was James Allen, the engineer from the *Freeman,* who would later write, "A sorry-looking bunch they were. Most of these men were past middle age, and a couple were past 65. They had been cooped up in ships for a long time . . . and the [journey to Point Barrow] was quite a contest for them.

Among those who witnessed the whale ship disaster were many of the indigenous people who lived at Point Barrow. In the coming months, a number of them would become involved in trying to help the whalers survive.

"Mr. Denny, the chief engineer of the *Freeman,* had the hardest time of all," Allen would recall. "He wanted to ride [in one of the sleds] all the time, but we couldn't let him do that. He had to take his turn with the rest of the men who were in just as bad shape as he was. When it was not his turn to ride, we would make a rope fast around his waist and attach it to the stern of a sled. We would half drag him along. On one of these occasions, I looked around and saw that the rope was undone and he was lying down on the ice about a quarter of a mile behind. I had to go back after him—we couldn't leave him there. I told him to get up and come along.

"'I can't go any farther,' he said. 'Leave me alone. I want to die.' I tried to coax him to get up, but he refused. 'If you don't get up right now,' I told him, 'I will have to make you!' I got hold of him by the arm and pulled him up to a sitting position. Then I gave him three or four hard slaps across his face. 'Come on now! Get up or I'll give you more!'

"That man got so mad at me that he actually did get up. 'Damn you!' he shouted. 'Don't you dare strike me again!' I told him I would unless he came along right away. I put my arm under his and helped him as much as I could. We got back to the sled, but it was slow work."

A week after this first contingent of whalers arrived at the whaling station, a second group came ashore. Their arrival at Point Barrow was observed by

From the moment Charlie Brower had the whalemen brought ashore, he began to send some of the most skilled whalemen in his employ across the ice down to the shoreline in the hope of their capturing small whales traveling in the shallow waters. The whales they brought back provided badly needed food for the newly-arrived whalemen.

Ned McIlhenny: "At nine o'clock this morning we sighted the first sleds about four miles to the south. . . . They came at a snail's pace and not until eleven-thirty did the first sleds reach the house. Some of the sleds had men stretched on them, and all of them had as many hanging to the side rails as could get a hold. . . . There were sixty-five of the wrecked men in this lot and strung out as they were in a line a mile long, made quite a procession. They finally reached the house and none too soon, for many of them could hardly put one foot before the other, they were so stiff. Several were . . . unable to walk and at least 20 of them were frozen about the face and hands."

As horrendous as the two journeys from ship to shore had been, at least all of the men had survived. And to their credit, Brower and McIlhenny did all they could to provide for the stranded sailors. They knew that there was

enough coal on the ships that had not been destroyed to keep the men aboard them warm enough even during the frigid months that lay ahead. But feeding the stoves in the bunkhouse and the refuge station was another matter. Almost as soon as the first whalemen had arrived ashore, Brower had begun sending those who were willing and able out along the beaches to collect as much driftwood as they could.

Food was a much bigger concern. Once Brower realized the full scope of the disaster, he had dispatched parties of the local folks he employed to hunt for geese, ducks, small whales, seals, caribou, and whatever other game they could find. He then began storing these provisions in the ice cellars beneath his whaling station. Brower was hopeful that for perhaps the next three months the hunting would continue. But it would, he knew, come to a halt when the dead of winter set in. Provisions were bound to run very short the longer the men were stranded at Point Barrow.

Despite Brower's and McIlhenny's efforts, conditions at Point Barrow steadily deteriorated. The bunkhouse had no ventilation, and the heat from the bodies of so many men crammed together, combined with the constant steam given off by cooking on the room's stove, created what to most would be an unlivable situation. "The house would sweat," James Allen wrote. "This steam would freeze, so that around the walls, inside the house near the floor, there would be a foot of ice, which in no way helped keep the place warm. . . .

"Much of the men's clothing was in bad shape. It seemed to me that they did not care how they looked, with their hair unkempt, faces and hands unwashed. . . . Just one visit to the bunkhouse would make you wonder how men could live in such filth without sickness and death."

Worst of all, within a short time of the whalers' arrival, all discipline had broken down, even the smallest modicum of morale had disappeared, and most of the men had given up hope. "As soon as their ships were wrecked, the Captains gave up all control of their men," Brower would write. "I thought it funny [that they] would [not] try to help manage their crews. All they seemed to want was to get shut of all responsibility, which they shifted to me."

Although Brower was successful in running his whaling station with the help of the community around him, he had little authority over the whalemen.

Charlie Brower employed some two hundred indigenous people at his whaling station. Here, two of these men pose with game they had hunted to help keep the stranded whalers alive.

This lack of authority, combined with ships' captains' relinquished command of their men, created a serious situation. On October 21, McIlhenny wrote in his diary, "This morning I tried to get a gang of twelve of the wrecked men to go into camp twelve miles south of here for the purpose of hauling wood. . . . The men refused to go, saying it was too cold. . . . Every evening I go over with my book and call out twelve names in order and tell them where to get wood the next day. Generally about half of those called complain of being sick or lame or something to prevent their going. They take it as if it was a special favor I was asking. They little realize what is coming. If they don't get fuel now while the thermometer shows only a few degrees below zero, what will they do when we have fifty and sixty below?"

By November, both Brower and McIlhenny had become accustomed to the whalers' refusal to work, even for their own benefit. But they were totally

unprepared for what happened next. "Last night," McIlhenny complained to his diary, "the back of my ice house was broken and a number of ducks stolen. It is rather early for the men to begin this sort of thing. They have been warned that the first one to be caught stealing food would be shot and we mean to stand by this decision."

In the book he would later write, Brower told about one of the women who lived in Point Barrow who had reported that some of the whalemen had broken into her dead husband's grave and had stolen mittens from it. "I told her," Brower would write, "I did not think they would do that. . . . To have her satisfied I had her go look at the corpse. Sure enough, the coffin had been opened. Not only were the mittens gone but all the clothes had been stripped from the body. . . . Of course the men denied everything, and while I knew they were lying, I had no proof."

As if to put an exclamation point on what was increasingly becoming a desperate situation at Point Barrow, the Arctic itself stepped in. On November 19, 1897, the sun totally disappeared beyond the horizon, not to be seen again until almost February. One of McIlhenny's assistants could not help but openly wonder if this natural phenomenon of the frozen North was a dire omen. Even the ever-optimistic Charlie Brower was having serious doubts. Somehow, he thought, he might be able to keep supplying the whalemen with at least a minimum amount of food to fend off starvation. But the whalers' refusal to help themselves, along with their dishonest behavior, was a huge concern, especially with the end of winter so far away.

Captain Francis Tuttle (front row center) of the Revenue Cutter Service ship Bear *poses with the officers under his command, men destined to take part in one of the greatest of all Arctic adventures.*

NOTE: Sources sometimes vary as to the spelling of some of the names of places and people in this book. Where this occurs, the author has chosen to use the spelling contained in the diaries, journals, and official reports of those who participated in the Arctic rescue.

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First edition 2012

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sandler, Martin W.
The impossible rescue / Martin Sandler. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-7636-5080-3
1. Overland Relief Expedition (1897–1898) 2. Whaling ships — Accidents — Alaska — Barrow, Point — History — 19th century. 3. Whaling — Alaska — Barrow, Point — History — 19th century. 4. Reindeer — Alaska — History — 19th century. 5. Rescues — Alaska — History — 19th century. 6. Barrow, Point (Alaska) — History — 19th century. 7. Bear (Ship) I. Title.
F912.B2S26 2012
979.803 — dc22 2011018618

12 13 14 15 16 17 SCP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Humen, Dongguan, China

This book was typeset in Dante.

Candlewick Press
99 Dover Street
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

visit us at www.candlewick.com