

# ***Stormstruck!***

John Macfarlane

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Summary: Believing his parents are going to euthanize Pogo, a beloved yellow Labrador that had belonged to his deceased brother, twelve-year-old Sam sets sail with the dog and gets caught in a terrible storm along with Magnus, a hermit, and his pet tern, Fuego, whom they meet on an island.

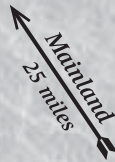
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To Salty



*Fog Island Sound*



*tide rips*

*tide rips*



*rocks*

*breakers*

*tide rips*

## MALABAR ISLAND

Tern Nesting Area

Abandoned Lighthouse

Gunpowder Cove

Magnus's Camp

*tide rips*

*rocks*

*breakers*

Outer Point

*tide rips*

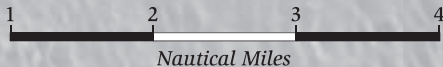
## THRUMCAP ISLAND



*rocks*

*tide rips*

# ATLANTIC OCEAN



Nautical Miles



## Chapter One

“Come on, boy. You can do it.”

My dog Pogo stands with his toes spread wide in the sand, smiling at me. He looks from me to the boat. His tail gives a halfhearted wag.

“Come on, now,” I say, trying to steady my voice so he won’t detect just how desperate I am to get going. “Want a treat? I’ll give you a treat when you get in. Come on.”

His tail makes a more enthusiastic wag, but he still doesn’t budge.

Daylight is spreading from the east, the fog parting to show the fading stars between wisps. The blurry forms of boats appear—ones that were invisible when I rowed out to the mooring to sail the boat back for Pogo. Wavelets splash on the shore at my feet. The water is silky and cool around my ankles. We have to get going before full daylight arrives or we’ll be spotted.

“Come on.” I try to make my voice sound firm without being threatening. “Let’s stop with the games.” I sigh and toss the mainsheet into the cockpit of *Scallop*, our catboat. The sail slaps in the slack air.

“Okay, boy. I want you to cooperate.”

I step across the sand to him. Still smiling, he tips up his grizzled chin as I grip his harness. The moment I pull, he digs his paws into the sand. I lean harder toward the boat. The harness slides around his head. “Don’t do this to me, boy,” I say. “We have to get going. C’mon, you *like* to sail.”

I dig into my shorts pocket and pull out one of the soft treats he loves. I hold it out over the cockpit. “Pogo,” I say. “Come.”

A gull coasts overhead, taking its sweet time, and I see it peer down at the treat as if marking it for later.

I wave the treat back and forth. Pogo doesn’t know what’s going on, doesn’t know we have to get away, doesn’t know what my parents have planned for him.

I walk back up and offer him the treat. “I forgot, boy. You can’t see it very well, can you?”

He lifts his snout and I hold the treat just away from him. He moves down the beach, following my hand. Drool loops out of his mouth.

“In you go.” I grip his harness and haul him over the side into the boat, his toenails clattering on the deck. “Good boy. Now sit.”

He doesn’t sit. I have to push down on his hindquarters. He sniffs the duffel bag, then the backpack, scenting the food inside.

“Okay. Now we can shove off.”

I hold out the treat and he presses his muzzle against my hand. He vacuums up the treat. “Good boy.” I wipe my hand on my shorts.

I shove off and climb in. “Right.” I sit down and pat his head. “We’re off.”

He turns, his smile making me smile, and his tail thumps once on the deck.



## *Chapter Two*

The clear sky of dawn gives way to haze as the sun climbs. The breeze gets us out beyond Thrumcap Island, the small island midway between Fog Island and Malabar, before it quits and we lose headway and bob on water as smooth as sheet metal a mile from Malabar.

“Don’t worry, boy. We’ll get there.”

I glance behind us. The low biscuit-colored dunes of Fog Island lie along the horizon. The morning has worn on and I can see two white flecks—the bow wakes of boats coming out of Fog Island Harbor and moving off on their courses.

Pogo is flaked out on the deck, snoring like a distant fog-horn. I see his paws twitching as I let my arm dangle over the tiller, my legs stretched out in front of me.

I’m not worried—that we’ll make it to Malabar, that is. Really, I’m not worried.

The sail droops back and forth, sliding a shadow over us one minute, letting the sun pour down on us the next.

“We need to get moving,” I whisper. “Come on, breeze, before someone sees us.”

Pogo lifts his head and peers at me.

“You okay, boy?”

He begins panting, his pink tongue curling, and puts his head back down on the deck. I pull the duffel bag to me and take out Pogo’s canteen—a plastic water bowl with a screw-on lid.

“Thirsty, Pogo? I don’t want you to get parched.” But he

starts snoring again, probably lulled by the easy motion of the boat. I put the canteen away.

I'm not lulled.

I look across the water, its surface glaring in the brassy sunshine, and a flare of heat rises in my chest when I think back to what I heard last night.

I didn't mean to be eavesdropping. They didn't mean to be overheard. My parents were out on the screened-in porch. I was up in my room above them, the windows wide open to catch the air.

The foghorn mooing kept me up—that and my sweat. Then a great horned owl started *hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo-hooing* in the big pine behind the house as if it were answering the foghorn. Standing at the window, at least, I was cooler thanks to the fog coming through the screen. Below, I heard my parents murmuring. I listened to the owl, and then the foghorn, and then I strained harder to catch what my father was saying.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that Pogo has reached the end of the trail."

I felt as though if I moved a hole would open up below me and I would drop into it. I didn't breathe.

"Do you really think it's time?" my mom said.

I didn't want to hear the answer.

Dad sighed. "I hate to say it, but I'm afraid so. We've tried everything."

I waited. Mom said nothing. I heard the owl, then the foghorn.

Then she said, "But look at him. Lying there so content."

"He's fifteen years old, hon," said Dad. "That's ancient for a dog his size. We don't want to wait till he's in pain—too much pain. How much longer can we put it off? He hobbles. He has trouble lying down. And every morning, another present. Every night, another—"

"Don't remind me." She paused, then said, "I suppose you're right."

“It’s about his quality of life,” Dad went on. “We’ve been over this again and again. We don’t want him to suffer, do we? Ever. The vet said it was inoperable.”

Mom was silent a long time. The owl must have flown away because now I heard only the foghorn.

Then she said just loud enough to hear, “We don’t have any choice, I guess.” She sighed. “But what about Sam? Pogo’s his . . .” Her voice sounded squeezed. “How much more can we . . .” On the last word her voice broke so it creaked like an old door hinge.

She went silent. I felt my windpipe swell. I didn’t want her to say it.

“We can’t think about that,” said Dad. “This is different.” The foghorn moaned. “We have to think about Pogo. Just about Pogo.”

I listened. I heard a rocking chair shift. The foghorn sounded.

“In the morning,” said Dad finally, his voice low. “In the morning I’ll call the vet.”

“No,” I whispered to myself. “I am not going to let this happen.”

I went back to bed. I waited, listening to the foghorn, until I heard their rocking chairs scrape on the wood planks of the porch and the front door close. I heard them squeak up the stairs and go into their room. The whole time, my heart whirled around in my chest like it was looking for a way to get out. Then I got up.

I found my duffel bag and my waterproof backpack in my closet. I stuffed a couple of shirts and shorts and a pair of khakis and a sweatshirt into the duffel and my watch and phone and handheld GPS into the backpack.

Then I sat beside the window, waiting, counting out the moans of the foghorn.

I heard no sound in the house. I stretched out on my back on the floor, and I thought about Pogo, sleeping downstairs on his bed, unknowing.

I thought of all our years together—how he was always

there, my brother's dog but like another older brother to me. I thought of when I was little, building sand castles, and Pogo getting his head stuck in a plastic bucket. I thought of us exploring the marshes and thickets and woods. I thought of him sailing with Steve and me, building snow forts and biting snowballs, always smiling, smiling, never having a bad day. I thought of him getting the scampers when he was excited and crouching down and pinning his ears back and running around the house, my mom yelling at him to stop but laughing, too. I thought of Steve teaching him to balance a treat on the end of his nose and how Pogo would look cross-eyed at it before he flipped it up and ate it. I thought of Dad chanting "What a vicious yellow Lab, looking for a sock to nab" when Pogo used to tear apart our socks. I thought of Steve right before he left, telling me to take care of Pogo, saying that he was my dog now.

And then I fell asleep.

I dreamed of running over the water, Pogo bounding ahead of me, Steve running out ahead faster and faster till he was a speck on the horizon. I dreamed of trying to wake up. I dreamed that I was dreaming of waking up. And then I did wake up.

I heard the foghorn. Crickets chirped.

Gray light was in the window.

I had to get moving. Fast. But I couldn't run. I pulled on my hat and picked my way down the stairs, duffel slung over my shoulder, backpack in hand. The stairs creaked. I paused each time to listen. No other sound came from the house but the *tock* of the clock downstairs.

I moved faster once I got downstairs. Pogo lifted his head as I passed him on my way into the kitchen. "Good boy," I whispered. "I'll be right back."

In the pantry I grabbed his bag of dry food and shoved it into the backpack along with his arthritis pills. I found his canteen and filled it with water, took a gallon jug of water for

myself and put those in the duffel. Then I jammed in a box of cereal, a jar of peanut butter, a loaf of bread and a box of granola bars for me. I started out and then ducked back to grab a bag of his treats and a couple of oranges from the basket on the kitchen table. I knew we'd need more food, but that was what the handline on the boat was for—fishing.

Already the sky was lighter.

“Let's go, boy,” I whispered to Pogo. “No time to waste.”

He lifted his head and smiled, and I bent down to haul him up. He scabbled off his bed and wobbled upright.

“Good boy,” I whispered as I led him toward the front door. I glanced over my shoulder, back at the fireplace. The folded flag on the mantel was only a dim triangle in the faint light.

Malabar Island lies a mile across the water, tantalizing me, its dunes and scrub-covered hills beckoning but out of reach.

If only I had an outboard. But not on *Scallop*. She has never has an outboard, and she never will, not if Dad has his way. Looks like I'll have to paddle.

I sit back in the cockpit. Ahead, the lumpy dunes of the island are the last landform before the open ocean. Behind us, Thrumcap Island is a bristly hump. Fog Island is only a smudge in the growing haze.

The sail hangs lazy and listless. I squint up at the sun. The boom swings one way, then the other, as if sniffing the air for a breeze. The shadow of the sail slips over me, then slides away so sunshine bakes down. The rigging rattles.

I hear the spearing call of a tern—and Pogo's snoring. I see the knife-winged bird fly past, peering down onto the slick surface of the water as if at its own reflection.

“Come on, breeze.” My words are swallowed in the openness. “We're so close.”

When I look behind us again, I have to blink. Clouds I hadn't seen because of the haze are spreading toward us fast.

Above the smudge of Fog Island, the horizon is dark. The water has taken on an oily sheen.

“Okay, boy.” I reach under the foredeck. “Time to move.”

I grab the paddle and Pogo raises his head and cocks his ears. I jab the paddle into the water just as I hear the first growl of thunder in the distance.