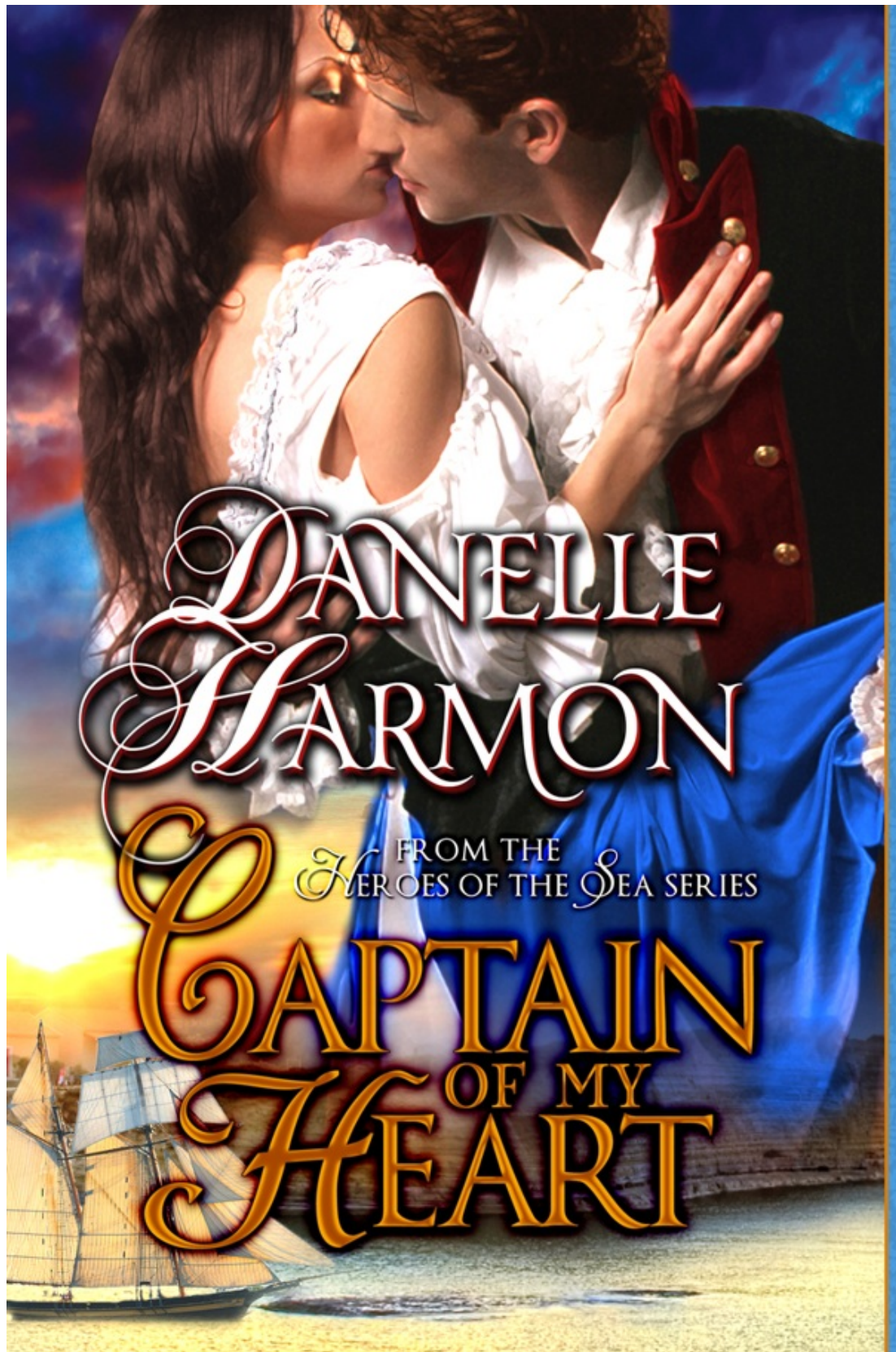


DANIELLE
HARMON

FROM THE
HEROES OF THE SEA SERIES

CAPTAIN
OF MY
HEART



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CAPTAIN OF MY HEART

**By
Danelle Harmon**

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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~~This version of CAPTAIN OF MY HEART is dedicated to the memory of the original *Pride Of Baltimore*, a ship I was fortunate enough to visit when she came to Newburyport, Massachusetts, many years ago. She and she alone was the inspiration for the schooner, *Kestrel*.~~

May this proud beauty and those who were lost with her, forever rest in peace.

###

# CAPTAIN OF MY HEART

By Danelle Harmon

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~~~~~

*That seat of Science, Athens, and Earth's proud mistress Rome;
Where now are all their glories? We scarce can find a tomb!
Then guard your rights, Americans, nor stoop to lawless sway;
Oppose, oppose, oppose, oppose, for North America.*

*We led fair Freedom hither, and lo, the desert smiled!
A paradise of pleasure was opened in the wild!
Your harvest, bold Americans, no power shall snatch away!
Preserve, preserve, preserve your rights, and free America!*

*Torn from a world of tyrants, beneath this western sky,
We formed a new dominion, a land of liberty:
The world shall own we're free men here and such we'll ever be;
Huzzah, huzzah, huzzah, huzzah, for Love and Liberty!*

*Lift up your hands ye heroes, and swear with proud disdain.
The wretch who would enslave you shall spread his snares in vain.
Should Europe empty all her force, we'll meet them in array,
And shout huzzah, huzzah, huzzah, for brave America!*

"Free America"

— Dr. Joseph Warren, 1774



an early map of Newburyport, Massachusetts, and the mouth of the Merrimack River

July 1775

Unwilling spectators to yet another whipping, a trio of pigtailed seamen in blue jackets and striped tattered trousers stood by the rail of His Majesty's Ship *Halcyon*. Their attention was not on poor Dalby, strung up to the gratings with his stooped back already blistering in the merciless sun. It was not on Captain Richard Crichton, tapping his foot in impatience as he waited for the boatswain's mate to begin the punishment.

It was on the barge that had set out from the big seventy-four-gun flagship *Dauntless*.

"He's coming," said one, in a low, reverent whisper. "I knew he would."

"We all knew. Our Brendan would never let us down."

"Aye, just because he's been promoted to flag captain doesn't mean he's forgotten us."

They stared at the barge, watching as it cut its way through gentle swells that danced and glittered in the summer sunlight. Then Crichton turned, saw it, and paled. Swearing, he barked out a string of commands. Marines were hastily mustered. Officers in blue and white coats scrambled to receive the esteemed visitor. Uniforms were straightened, pipes shrilled. And then the barge was alongside, bumping against the frigate's hull as its crew tossed their oars.

As usual, the flag captain had arrived unexpectedly—and with his usual disregard for the fanfare the Royal Navy insisted upon giving him.

Crichton was furious.

"Boat ahoy!"

"*Halcyon!*" roared the flag captain's coxswain, Liam Doherty, a strapping, blue-eyed Irishman with a beam-to-beam grin and a shock of spice-colored curls. "Stand by t' receive Cap'n Merrick!"

Orders were passed. The bosuns' pipes pierced the air.

"Imagine," whispered one of the seamen, "troublin' himself with the likes of us. Ye don't really think that's why he's here, do ye, John? 'Cause of us?"

"Oh, aye. No doubt about that," the first seaman said. He gazed at the purple hills that rimmed Boston Harbor. "We all signed that appeal to Sir Geoffrey to do something about Crichton, didn't we? The vice-admiral's got a good heart, and a wise head on his shoulders, picking our own Brendan Merrick to be the new flag captain. Just think of how easy things were when Captain Merrick commanded *this* ship—he never once had a man punished, not once, mind ye! And he's not going to let us know how bad things've gotten here."

"Bad? By the saints, poor ol' Dalby's the second man Crichton's strung up to the gratin's for punishment this mornin' alone, and that ain't countin' the three from yesterday!"

"There were four from yesterday, Zach, not three. . ."

At the rail, smart, red-coated marines snapped to attention. A final drum rolled on the wind. The pipes quieted, the seamen held their breaths, the tension built. They heard him coming up the ladder. They saw his gold-laced hat appear in the entry port. And then *he* was there, resplendent and handsome, the sunlight glinting with blinding intensity off his epaulets and picking out every gold button on a coat as blue as the sea that rolled behind him. Doffing his hat to the quarterdeck with solemnity befitting the gesture, he turned, met their gazes—and grinned, for he had last walked among them as *their* captain, and he knew every one of the 150-man crew by name.

"Mr. Burke! *Ce'n chaoi bhfuil tú?* You're looking a wee bit on the sorry side this morn! Been i

your cups again, laddie?" They all had the same thought. Promotion to flag rank hadn't changed him a bit; he was still their same old captain, not above using the old *Gaeilge* when addressing an Irishman, not above caring about the welfare of everyone on the ship. "And Mr. Howes! You keeping your hands off my little sister? Where is the lassie, anyhow? Faith! A half mile through spray and wave in the damnable barge and the least that Eveleen could do is come topside to greet me, eh?"

Still grinning, he winked at one of the drummers, a pale, scrawny little tyke who blushed and bobbed and dropped his drumstick under the attention. Captain Brendan Jay Merrick merely laughed, picked it up, and handed it back to him, oblivious to the way the boy clutched it to his chest as though it had been blessed. He was nothing like Crichton, the men thought with a mixture of pride and bittersweet relief, nor those who'd held the coveted post of flag captain before him—dour-faced, cautious men who'd reeked of protocol and the stuffiness so inherent in those of their station.

No, their Brendan had always been carefree and gallant, with a face to turn a lady's head and the charm to win her heart. Elegance lay in the span of his shoulders, the shape of his hands; mirth danced in his eyes, and laughter in the swiftness of his grin. But beneath his jocular manner, he was strong and capable and a clever tactician, and no one in the King's Navy knew ships as well as he. No one before or since had been able to make the frigate *Halcyon* dance through sea and spray as he had done; no one had had the deck a-hopping to Irish jigs as they'd gone into battle; and certainly, no one had stood on the quarterdeck sketching the enemy's ships while iron flew overhead and the deck thundered beneath the might of *Halcyon's* thirty-two guns.

Someday he'd be an admiral as his English father had been before him. No wonder his dash and derring-do had caught the attention of his superiors back in London. No wonder Sir Geoffrey Lloy had promoted him to flag rank. No wonder the seamen were all ready to mutiny under Richard Crichton's iron rule, whereas they looked upon their "Captain from Connaught" as a god.

No wonder they looked upon him now as their savior.

As Crichton came forward to greet him, the marines stepped back and Captain Merrick got a clear unhampered view of Dalby O'Hara at the gratings, his head hanging between his frail shoulders, the rope that bound him leaving bracelets of angry red flesh at his swollen wrists.

Instantly the mirth faded from his eyes.

"Captain Merrick, how nice it is to have you grace my humble command," Crichton said tightly with a quick salute that was more mocking than respectful. Sarcasm stained his words, and any sincerity he thought to convey was belied by hard, naturally red-rimmed eyes whose irises were the color of milk allowed to go bad. Obviously Crichton was still furious that Sir Geoffrey had put the young half-Irishman in command of his flagship and not him, a fact he tried, unsuccessfully, to hide beneath the veil of hospitality. "Perhaps you'd care for some tea in my cabin? 'Tis dreadfully hot out here on deck."

Brendan, staring at Dalby, didn't give a damn about Crichton's sarcasm, his hatred, or, for that matter, his tea. It was hot, all right; brutally so. The sun beat down upon Dalby's sunburnt back and pulled blisters from the angry flesh. It baked the planking beneath his shoes, melted the tar between the deck seams, and made the sweat run down Crichton's pale face.

And Crichton was offering him tea?

Furious, he tore his gaze from Dalby and swung around, his jaw clenched, his fingernails biting into his palms. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the flagship, anchored in shimmering haze a half mile distant, where Sir Geoffrey's flag floated on the wind and tickled the pale clouds above. He would not let his admiral down. He would not let that flag down.

He would not let his *men* down!

“Captain Crichton—”

“If not tea, sir, then how about some coffee?” Crichton sputtered, sensing his superior’s rage and nervously fingering the hilt of his dress sword. “I’m sure Miss Eveleen has it all poured for you. She really is a most unusual young woman, and thoughtful, too! Doesn’t matter how hot it is, every morning she hauls her paints and canvas topside and sits out on deck painting the men’s portraits. Why, she even gives them away afterward! Must run in your family, this talent for the fine arts. I needn’t tell you how popular she is with *Halcyon*’s people—” Sweat ran from Crichton’s temple and Brendan’s gaze went once more to Dalby. “—and how we all consider it a blessing that she’s chosen to accompany you here to Boston. And while I’m not accustomed to having a woman traveling aboard my ship, I daresay her presence has been a most enjoyable one—”

“Captain Crichton, I did not come here to discuss my sister.”

“But of course not, sir, though she *did* see your barge coming across and is probably expecting you—”

“I came here to address complaints made to me and our admiral regarding your unnecessary brutality!”

A hush fell over the ship, the slap of waves against the hull breaking the sudden, strained silence. Somewhere overhead, a gull cried.

“My—my *brutality*?” Dark, angry color suffused Crichton’s face. “Why, that’s preposterous! Who would dare lodge such a ridiculous complaint?”

“Your crew. And *I*, after observing your actions over the past several moments.”

Crichton followed the young flag officer’s gaze and waved his hand in a dismissive motion. “What, are you talking about Dalby O’Hara? Why, he deserves everything that’s coming to him. Lieutenant Myles caught him stealing bread just this morning from the purser’s stores. Surely you don’t think I’m going to let such atrocities go unpunished—”

“Captain Crichton, the only atrocities I see here are those committed by *you*. Do you think a man can subsist on moldy bread and watered-down rations and not be hungry? Cut him down now and send him to sick bay until he is well enough to return to his duties. And after you’ve done so, I would like to have a word with you.”

“A word, sir?”

Brendan drew his admiral’s orders from his pocket and said tightly, “I am taking over command of *Halcyon* until Sir Geoffrey’s faith in your competence as a captain can be reestablished.”

Crichton stood as if stunned. His upper lip quivered, his nostrils flared, and the trickle of sweat that ran from his temple seemed to freeze in place.

“I said, *cut him down*,” Brendan snapped.

“But that man is guilty of numerous crimes, and by thunder, he’ll get the punishment he deserves.”

“*That man* will be cut down *now* or so help me God, ’twill be a court of inquiry you find yourself facing, not just Sir Geoffrey’s wrath! Now, *do it!*”

The seamen, the officers, and even the marines gaped, for never had they seen their former captain show anything but blithe good spirits. Even the wind, humming through tarred shrouds and luffing salt-streaked canvas, held its breath. Crichton remained unmoving, blatantly defying the order; the moment passed. Two. Then Brendan shoved the dispatches back into his pocket and strode toward Dalby himself, his shoulders rigid with fury, his stride purposeful, his mouth tight and hard.

Crichton, they all knew, had just sealed his fate.

Hearing his approach, Dalby dragged his head up. “Oh, sir, I *knew* you’d come! You’d never have let anyone treat us like this! Crichton’s a demon, sir, a demon! ’Twas just some biscuit I took, I didn’t

do anything bad, sir, honest, I didn't—"

"I know, Dalby. Rest easy."

"He barely feeds us enough for a rat to live on and then expects us to work like dogs! Just yesterday little Billy fell from the rigging and drowned because he was so weak from lack of food. Oh, there's good grog and plenty of fresh meat, but it all goes to Crichton and his officers. And all I took was a piece of moldy biscuit, sir, just one little piece. . . ."

"I know, Dalby. And we can't have you eating biscuit when everyone knows the salt beef's far better, now, can we?" he joked, for it was a well-known fact that the beef was far worse than the biscuit could ever be. "Faith, at least there are no worms in it!"

But Dalby didn't notice that Brendan's words came through tightened lips, nor that his grin didn't quite light his eyes. All he knew was that his captain had come to save him. All he heard was the musical lilt of his voice, its Connemaran cadences still wonderfully vibrant despite an English father and fifteen years in the Royal Navy. Dalby sobbed in relief, unwittingly setting the spark that inflamed the crew to mutiny.

"No worms, but he doesn't feed us enough to live on!" someone shouted.

"And half the time the meat's rotten!"

"Cut him down, Captain!"

"Aye, cut him down! Cut him down!" It became a chant, gathering force and momentum and rolling like thunder, rolling through the ranks like a comber in stormy seas. "*Cut him down!*"

"Sir, I will not tolerate this!" Crichton roared, above the din. "Do you hear me? *I will not tolerate this!*"

Brendan began cutting.

Crichton stepped forward, and all hell broke loose.

A seaman broke from the crowd with an unholy yell, his eyes maniacal, his knife raised as he charged toward Crichton. Someone screamed. Someone else cheered.

The reports would say that it had been an accident, and that the shot had been fired in self-defense for with officers and marines trying frantically to regain control over the mutinous crew, no one knew exactly what happened. But Dalby, turning his head, saw it all: a lieutenant knocking the knife-wielding seaman aside; men storming the quarterdeck; and in the confusion Crichton, calmly drawing his pistol and taking careful aim—not at the seaman, not into empty space, but at Brendan, the man who'd come to save him, to save all of them—

Dalby screamed.

The explosion rent the air and stunned the decks into silence. And when the echoes died and Dalby opened his eyes, he saw that the flag captain was down, lying on his back and blinking up at the white sails and hazy sky, his mouth tight with pain, his rich chestnut curls bared to the sun. His tricorne lay upside down beside his shoulder. A dark rose bloomed on his chest, spreading over his fine new coat. He coughed, once, twice, and a bubble of blood broke from his mouth and ran down his jaw. And then his eyes began to close. . . .

"*Brendan!*" A woman charged through the stunned crowd, her paint-smudged skirts and petticoats flying, her golden hair streaming behind her. "Brendan! Oh God, Brendan, *noooooo!*"

The young flag captain opened his eyes. Weakly, he turned his head, trying to muster a grin. And then Dalby saw those pain-glazed eyes widen in alarm, for Crichton had reloaded, was bringing the pistol up once again, and Eveleen was running directly into its path. . . .

Brendan staggered to his feet. "*Eveleen!*"

The pistol barked; the girl cried out, clutching her hand as she fell. And there was Crichton

smiling now, as he narrowed those pale, red-rimmed eyes and raised a second pistol to finish a task left undone.

The ball hit the flag captain, spinning him around and flinging him backward. Through the blur of tears, Dalby saw him flounder, saw the brief flash of sunlight against his epaulets and gold buttons. Then the back of his legs hit the rail, and staggering, he tumbled over it, falling down, down into the sea below.

Silence.

The wind sighed through the shrouds above. A mast creaked. On deck, the crew stood frozen in shock, horror, and fear.

And Crichton, in command once more and hopeful candidate for the now vacant position of flag captain, smiled, tucked his pistol in his belt, and met the gazes of his faithful lieutenants. Their expressions were carefully veiled, their drawn pistols holding the stunned and horrified crew at bay once more. His officers would not disappoint him. They'd allow no more reports to get to Sir Geoffrey, and they would support his official statement that Captain Merrick had incited a mutiny.

What they'd seen today would go no further than the wardroom.

He'd make sure of it.

The girl lay in a crumpled heap, her shattered hand clutched to her breast, her frilly white petticoats sopping up the young flag captain's blood. Ignoring her sobs, Crichton picked up the whip and handed it to the boatswain's mate. Dalby was still lashed to the gratings, his face paler than death. Smiling, Crichton nodded to his officer.

"You may proceed," he said coldly.

The mate smiled back and the whip slashed down, again and again and again.

And this time, there was no one to come to Dalby's aid.

No one at all.

Newburyport, Massachusetts, 1778

Three years had elapsed since Captain Brendan Jay Merrick had fallen from the frigate *Halcyon* and, subsequently, out of the Royal Navy. The American colonies had made good use of those years: they'd declared their independence from Britain, they'd won many fine fighting men and sea officers to the American cause, and they'd been busy infecting themselves with healthy patriotic fever.

The town of Newburyport had no trouble taking up the fight for liberty, for its people had been independent even in the days *before* the struggle for independence. Situated at the mouth of the mighty Merrimack River some forty miles north of Boston, the town depended only on the sea for its survival. Salmon, herring, striped bass, and bluefish migrated up the river. The ocean provided cod, mackerel, and other fish, as well as oysters, lobsters, and scallops. Clams grew fat in the tidal flats near Plum Island; ducks were plentiful. A few wooden fish flakes dotted the riverbanks to dry the great catches of cod, but Newburyport, unlike Gloucester and Marblehead to the south, had never relied on the fishing industry to support itself to the extent that they had. Commerce was its lifeblood.

Not so many years ago, it had been common to see great oceangoing ships tied up at the wharves unloading cargoes from distant lands. Farmers had come from the inland towns of Haverhill, Amesbury, and Bradford to trade vegetables, corn, barreled pork, beef, and flour for staples—run coffee, sugar, and molasses—as well as extravagances: silk from the Orient, and grapes and oranges from Spain. The docks had bustled with activity, and the shops in Market Square had boasted linens, wool, and porcelain from England, wine from Madeira, broadcloth and satins, iron, paper and glass, nails and gloves, and just about anything anyone could want that Newburyport didn't make or supply itself.

The farmers still came. The docks still bustled with activity. But the ships that were now tied up at those wharves were of a very different breed from the ponderous, wallowing vessels that had come before. This new breed was leaner. Battle-scarred. Sharp-toothed, toughened, and hungry—and more independent as the town that spawned them.

These vessels were the privateers.

And Newburyport couldn't turn them out fast enough to meet the demand.

For if commerce was the town's lifeblood, then shipbuilding was its livelihood.

Along the Merrimack's banks, new shipyards sprang up seemingly overnight, and existing ones grew in size. Each was as self-sufficient as Newburyport herself. Each had its own smithy, sawpits, mast pond, and mast houses. Each had its own sail loft, where bolts of heavy linen were destined to hold the wind as foresails, mainsails, topsails, and jibs. And each had access to the town's rope walk, where hemp fibers were combed out, spun into yarn, and formed into rope that would see service in rigging in those predatory vessels that called Newburyport their home.

Prosperous merchants and shipowners who'd gained their fortunes through commerce, rum, manufacturing, and the blatant ignorance of England's Navigation Acts now invested in the privateering boom. On High Street, handsome three-story Georgian houses surrounded by elegant gardens and furnished with fine Chippendale and Hepplewhite furniture reflected the affluence of those who were successful at it. In the spirit of liberty, the men abandoned their silks, velvets, and fancy powdered wigs for clothes of native wool and homespun; the ladies burned their English tea and brewed their own from ribwort and other plants instead.

Newburyport was as independent as ever. And its patriotism was reflected in every citizen, young and old, male and female, in its militia, in its naval men, and in its privateers.

Enclosed by woods and a haphazard fence, Miss Mira Ashton's School of Fine Horsemanship was nothing more than a field that smelled of clover and wet grasses and the fresh pungency of newly churned mud. It had rained the night before, and now moisture dripped from the many oaks, maples, and pines, pitter-pattering down through branches and shimmering leaves that quivered beneath the extra weight. Drip, drip, pitter, patter, on and on until all the woods surrounding the field were alive with the soft sounds of falling rain. Yet the sky above the treetops was cloudless and pale, and sunlight stabbed through the branches, glowing pink and gold through the mists and sending vivid rainbow colors twinkling off the bent grasses like stardust on a fairy's crown.

It promised to be another scorcher of a day.

Sounds broke the tranquility of the new morning: the steady beat of a horse's trot; the snap of a whip licking the air; the snort of a dappled colt whose chiseled head and short back spoke of desert blood and whose color was so pure a gray as to appear almost blue; and from the slight figure in the middle of the field, around whom that colt trotted in a doughnut of deepening mud, an exuberant voice belting out the tune of "Yankee Doodle."

"Fath'r and I went down to camp, along with Captain Good-ing! And there we saw the men and boys, as thick as hasty pud-ding!"

A quarter mile away, Ephraim Ashton, shipbuilder, sat down to breakfast and the *Essex Gazette*, a pot of strong black coffee at his right elbow, a basket of hot buttered corn muffins at his left, and a jug of New England rum before him, blissfully unaware that his daughter stood ankle-deep in mud with her head thrown back, her chest puffed up, and her voice belting out a song with all the lusty fervor she might've lent her favorite fo'c'sle chanty:

"Yankee Doodle keep it up! Yankee Doodle, dan-dy—"

Rigel flicked an ear but knew better than to slow his stride.

"Mind the music and the step, and with the girls be han-dy!"

But then, there were a lot of things Father was unaware of; he didn't know about Rescue Effort Number Thirty-One, he didn't know that she was going to ride Rigel for the first time tomorrow, and he didn't know that she had a bet going with her brother, Matt, that she could sneak aboard Matt's privateer, *Proud Mistress*, at least two more times before Father caught her at it and flew off into one of his rages. No, Father would be reaching for one of those muffins just about—Mira squinted up to look at the sun's angle—*now*, dipping it in maple syrup, and shoving the whole sticky mess into his mouth as he thumbed to the newspaper's Marine News section, where he would scrutinize each and every word until he found mention of an Ashton ship. He might get a smudge of syrup on the top right corner of the page—but not on the Marine News section. Heaven forbid. And it would take him exactly one third of the hour he allotted to the paper to study that section, snowy brows curling over his nose like fishhooks and throwing shadows across the page, and his fist slapping the table with a good hard wallop when he found what he was looking for. And then he would hoot and holler, and heaven help the neighbors if they were still abed, for they'd be asleep no longer.

"And there we see a thousand men, as rich as Squire Da-vid, and what they wasted ev'ry day, wish it could be sa-ved! Yankee Doodle, keep it up, Yankee Doodle dan-dy . . ." She sucked in a great gulp of air and shouted to the treetops, "Mind the music and the step, and with the girls be han-dy!"

Hers—like her father's, her brother Matt's, and Newburyport's itself—was red-hot rebel's blood. Yet Mira's patriotism didn't end with a mere song, nor the limitations of her sex, though she shunned English tea, donned native homespun, and worn her dark hair in thirteen braids, one

represent each colony, as the other women had. As she was a sea captain's daughter who'd come into the world some one hundred forty leagues east of Newfoundland in the middle of a raging gale, with pitching, yawing ship her cradle and a piece of sailcloth her first blanket, the role she took in the defense of liberty was a bit more . . . active. But it was damned hard to man a cannon—and win the wager—if Matt kept sneaking off on *Proud Mistress* without her, which was the only reason she was standing here in the muddy field this morning and not beside him on the brig's stout decks.

"And there we see a whopping gun, as big as a log of ma-ple, mounted on a little cart, a load of my father's cattle! Yankee Doodle, keep it up . . ."

She bawled out the rest of the verse, then hummed the next one through her nose, pacing the sonnet to Rigel's hoofbeats and plotting, as she'd been doing all morning, the best way to sneak the latest cargo—Rescue Effort Number Thirty-One until further named—into the house without Father's knowledge.

She could hide him in the stable and wait till Father left for his shipyards, which he would do precisely one o'clock. She could smuggle him in through the back door. Or she could simply put him in the front hall and hope he mingled well enough with the other Rescue Efforts that Father wouldn't notice him.

But whatever she did, she'd have to be careful, because Father was in one of his moods this morning, and with good cause.

The client—not just another client, but *the* client, whose drafts for a fine new schooner would've pulled the Ashton Shipyards out of their slump and made Ephraim's name famous—had never shown up last night. And it was no wonder he hadn't shown up, because the gallant captain of the American privateer *Annabel*, who'd outfoxed a British frigate at the mouth of the river last night, had been swept overboard during the ensuing sea fight and was, by all reliable accounts, presumed dead.

That captain was the client.

So much for all their efforts to make a favorable impression on this naval architect whom one of Matt's brothers had met, several months ago off Portsmouth. But these drafts of his had so impressed her brother that Ephraim, stopping to listen to him for once, had finally posted a letter to this unknown captain and invited him to Newburyport in the hopes of snaring his business.

The preparations they'd gone through to make sure they got it! Abigail had cooked up a supper that could've fed the entire town. The rugs had been beaten, the table rubbed with beeswax, the silver polished till it shone. Mira had even donned a gown and put her hair up under a little lace mobcap, managing to look demure and ladylike enough to please even Father, who'd been just coming up from the cellar with several bottles of his finest Madeira when he'd spotted her uncharacteristic appearance and almost dropped them on his toe.

But it had all been for naught. Just like Matt's dire warnings to mind her behavior, now dancing through her head like singsong verses from a nursery rhyme, shaping themselves to the tune "Yankee Doodle" and filling the morning with sound:

"Don't race El Nath down High Street, the client mi-ight see you! Stay at home and mind yourself and please try to be go-od!" Laughing, she threw her head back, let the sun splash across her face, and belted out, *"Mira Ashton, you're a brat! Mira, you're naught but trou-ble! All boldness and a brazenness, and don't feed Luff beneath the table!"*

Hmm. That last phrase didn't quite fit within the confines of the tune; she'd have to work on it a bit, then bawl it out on the fo'c'sle the next time Matt took *Proud Mistress* to sea. Nice and loud, loud enough to send the company into a fit of guffaws and Matt into teeth-gritting anger. She could already envision him going as red as his hair, his spectacles steaming up, his lips thinning out the way they always did when he was particularly annoyed about something. . . .

Her laughter, fresh as the sea wind that drove across the marshlands and dunes of nearby Plum Island, soared up to the hazy blue sky above, for the rest of his silly warnings didn't have a prayer fitting within the confines of "Yankee Doodle."

No climbing Mistress's masts just to prove you can do it faster than anyone else!

Watch your language, and don't show up at the supper table wearing those trousers and smelling like horses!

And for God's sake, please find a place to hide that cat you snuck home off the docks! When Father finds out, he's going to have a damned fit!

Well, it wasn't as though she *kept* all of the Rescue Efforts. She *did* place them in good homes after getting them back on their feet. So what if the number was up to thirty? It was a cumulative count, anyhow; there were actually only nine cats presently living at, in, and around the Ephraim Ashton household.

Well, ten. She'd forgotten Rescue Effort Number Thirty-One, a scruffy ball of orange fur watching her from atop a fence post and wondering, no doubt, just how she intended to get him into the house and past Ephraim without all hell breaking loose. She'd planned it for yesterday; having this esteemed Captain Merrick around would certainly have diverted Father's attention long enough for her to get the cat in and placed safely among the others roaming the house.

She sighed and squinted up at the sun, just beginning to burn through the haze. Right about now Father'd be reaching for his third muffin and hollering for his second pot of coffee, laced with a generous dose of rum to "wake him up." And any time now, she predicted with that strange intuition that binds sibling to sibling, Matt would come home with another brave deed under his belt to make the ladies sigh, the young boys idolize him, and the other privateers go green with envy. His name would make the *Essex Gazette*, of course; Ephraim would have something more to brag about when he met with his cronies down at Davenport's Wolfe Tavern on Saturday night; and perhaps he'd cool off about the loss of the client whose business he'd been so eager to land, a client whose loss had not been because of *her* this time. . . .

Just then she heard the distant, dull thump of a cannon down in the harbor as a ship was welcomed in from the ocean and into the Merrimack River. The report was followed by a steady succession of twelve more—thirteen in all, one for each colony. It was a jubilant salute, repeated by every vessel in the harbor and the great field battery guarding Newburyport at the tip of Plum Island. Finally the reverberations faded, leaving in its wake only the distant screams of gulls and wild cheering from the wharves and shipyards lining the riverfront.

Matt was back, all right.

She pictured him standing tall and proud on *Mistress's* quarterdeck as the brig glided past the smoking field battery and up the river, his spectacles hazed with dried spray, his coattails flapping in the wind, his red hair whipping about his freckled face as he considered which woman to choose from among the throng waiting to pounce on him at the wharf. It would probably take about an hour for him to drop anchor, make that decision, claw through that throng, and find his way up High Street and back to the house in time for breakfast.

Mira would be waiting for him, of course—but the greeting she planned for him would not be as sweet as the one he'd get down on the wharf.

She continued working the horse. A mosquito bit through her trousers, and she reached down and slapped her leg, swore in a way that would've made Father proud had she been his son and not his daughter, and wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her sleeve. Then she heard a commotion coming from the house. Was Matt home? *Already?*

Mira could hear Luff's insane barking, mingling with the frightened whinny of a horse. Above all came the sound of male voices raised in greeting, or, as one of them was Father's, more like battle.

Already.

By the time Mira had cooled Rigel down and led him back to the stable, the argument was loud enough to be heard clear across the street, across the town, and across the river in Salisbury. Entering the house, she traced its progress as it moved at what sounded like dizzying speed, from the upstairs to the hall, the parlor, the dining room; Matt shouting at the top of his lungs; Father bellowing ferociously; Matt again, his voice suddenly muffled as he no doubt shoved one of Abigail's muffins down his craw. Counting the seconds, Mira waited for the hollering to fade toward the back of the house before tearing the front door open. With Number Thirty-One tucked in the crook of her arm, she kicked off her muddy boots and darted across the thick carpet.

"I'm telling you, Father, he's *not* a Brit! How many blasted times do I have to repeat myself? He's not a Brit! *Not a Brit!*" Something crashed violently against a wall. "For Christ's sake, he was wearing an American privateer's coat!"

The argument was approaching the parlor now, fading behind wainscoted walls, rounding the entranceways, and bouncing off high ceilings as Mira listened with amused curiosity.

"That don't make him American!" Ephraim bawled.

"What about the missing client, huh? What about the *drafts*?"

"*What drafts?* I ain't seen no bloody drafts!"

"That's because they were destroyed by seawater, damn you!"

Father's gale-force roar made the walls shake. "Don't gimme any of yer lip, Matt! I know a damned Englishman when I see one! Ye come to me with some cockamamie story about this captain surviving a sea fight with that British frigate, and then a night alone on the open ocean? Whaddye talk to me fer, a damned idiot? That rascal upstairs ain't my client! Why, I'll bet ye my eyeteeth he's a British deserter off that same bleedin' frigate! *Christ!* Now, get him outta here, damn you! Cart him down to Davenport's tavern, let them take care of him! I want no part of him, ye hear?"

"Damn you, he's *our* responsibility, *our* client!"

"*My* client died a gallant death aboard that sloop!"

"*Your* client'll die upstairs unless you show him some proper American compassion!"

"He ain't my client, and I ain't showin' nothing to no goddamned Brit!"

"Damn you, get it through your thick skull he's *not—a—Brit!*"

Mira ducked behind the staircase, flattening herself against the fine paneling of Santo Domingo mahogany. She held her breath as the two stormed into view, Matt with so much steam on his spectacles, she wondered how he could see. Behind them the housekeeper, Abigail, trailed like bubbles in a warship's wake, flour breezing from her skirts.

"Christian charity, Ephraim!" she pleaded. "What if Matthew's right and he *is* the captain of that American ship *Annabel*? And if not, what difference does it make? So what if he's British? You can't just abandon the poor fellow like so much garbage!"

"All Brits are garbage!"

"Dammit, Father!" Something else crashed against a wall.

"Ephraim, *please* listen to your son—"

"Abigail, you stay outta this! And, Matt, you throw one more thing and I'm gonna take a stick to yer hide! Don't think I'm too old to do it! I'm still yer father, and what I say goes. Now, git that block outta here by the time I count to ten or you can damn well fergit ever making another cruise in the

brig again, is that clear?”

“You can’t threaten me, damn you!”

“I’ll threaten all I like!”

“Over my dead body!”

Something else shattered.

They were storming into the dining room now, Father’s silver-buckled shoes just disappearing behind the doorway. Thanking God for the argument, for it was the perfect chance to get Number Thirty-One safely inside, Mira darted out from behind the staircase.

Matt turned—and saw her.

She leaped for the stairs.

“Mira! You stay out of the east bedroom, you hear me? *Mira!*”

He couldn’t have issued a better invitation. Taking the stairs three at a time, she careened around the landing, took the rest of the steps in two bounds, charged down the hall, and lunged for the close-paneled door. Downstairs she heard Ephraim lighting into Matt once more.

Her hand hit the latch. Without a second thought, she burst into the room.

Behind her, the door swung shut with a click she never heard.

A man lay asleep in the big four-poster tester bed—a handsome, nearly naked man with damp knicker breeches pasted to his well-muscled thighs, long legs sprinkled with auburn hair, and bare feet thrust out over the foot rail by a good ten inches. There was sensitivity in the shape of his face, elegance in the slant of his brows, artistry in the way his cheekbones stood above the faint hollows beneath them. It was a handsome face, even in sleep; the jaw firm, the lips sensual, the mouth and eyes framed by laugh lines that appeared to get much use. His hair, dark against the white pillowcase, tumbled rakishly over his brow and was the color of September chestnuts, rich and glossy and curling at the ends where it had begun to dry. He was by far the best-looking specimen of his gender Mira had ever seen.

And, looking at his hands lying atop the counterpane, she knew immediately that Matt had spoken the truth.

His weren't the blunt, stubby, work-roughened fingers of a seafarer. They were the strong, graceful hands of an artist . . . a naval architect.

The client.

Good God. She stepped closer, staring. Beneath swollen lids rimmed with long lashes, his eyes were moving slowly, as though he was caught in the throes of a dream. She saw his fingers twitch, heard his soft intake of breath, watched his head move slightly on the pillow.

But he never knew she was there.

###

For Brendan, time had rolled back to the night before, and he was once again commanding *Annabel's* desperate flight from the sea, the rebel town of Newburyport approaching off their bow, HMS *Dismal* in hot pursuit, and the schooner's drafts spread out over his knee and fluttering in the breeze.

"Brendan!"

Liam's voice, desperate and wild.

"Bren-daaaaan!"

Faith, where was their confidence in him?

Sure enough, there was Liam, all two hundred strapping pounds of him, shoving his telescope in a seaman's hand and hurtling toward him at breakneck speed. Blue eyes bulging, he slid into the deckhouse where Brendan was sitting, nearly tripping over a ringbolt as he grabbed desperately for his arm.

Brendan barely glanced up. "Honestly, Liam, as an officer, you really *should* try to set a better example. Racing across the deck like that—"

"God Almighty, Cap'n, it's *Crichton* commandin' that frigate!" Liam had his arm now, nearly ripping it from its socket; the drafts jumped in the wind, and Brendan grabbed them just in time. "D'ye hear me, Brendan? *Crichton!*"

Astern, the British frigate drew closer, determined to prevent them from reaching the Merrimack River and the safety of Newburyport. Water thundered and creamed from her bows. Drums rolled ominously upon the wind. Pipes shrilled. Gunports were yawning open. . . .

While forward in *Annabel's* bows, Dalby O'Hara crouched miserably, a gnarled hand clamped over his belly, and his face the color of oatmeal as he remembered his own treatment at the hands of the frigate's captain, three years earlier.

At his elbow, Fergus McDermott, an atheist who'd adopted religion thirty seconds earlier, recited the Twenty-third Psalm over and over in a mindless chant.

Brendan held up the schooner's drafts so that Liam could see them better. "Y'know, Liam, I've been thinking . . . Maybe I ought to give the bowsprit a bit more steeve. Other than that, I think she's going to be perfect. Sharp in the topsides around the bow, lean in the stern, and lots of rake in both. Not only will our new privateer be as swift as the wind, she'll sit so low in the water that her profile will be all but invisible from a distance! And with this hull shape, she'll be *perfect* for windward sailing, and we'll be able to carry a greater press of sail, even flying topsails and topgallants if we've the mind to—"

"Brendan—"

"Too little beam and she'd be fast but unstable. Too much and she'd be a laggard. Too fine at bow and stern and we'd sacrifice weight-carrying ability fore and aft. That means *guns*, Liam! And in a privateer, that won't do, now, will it?" Beyond *Annabel's* desperate bowsprit the sunset smeared the sky in brilliant tones of red and purple, reflecting against the water as it changed from sea-chop to rippling cat's paws of current. In the distance, Newburyport was coming into view. "Ah, Liam, if we had this schooner right now, we'd leave that beast back there lumbering in her own bow-wake. If we had the schooner—"

"Dammit, Brendan, we're not goin' t' have a schooner if ye don't *put down those bloody drafts and listen t' me!* It's *Crichton!*"

Brendan glanced up, his eyes alight with mirth, and his mouth set in that same quirky grin that was as reckless now as it had been when he and Liam had spent their childhoods exploring the rocky shores of Connaught. It was a grin that was sure to drive poor Liam mad. "So anyhow, I've decided that if I have this Ashton fellow build her exactly to my specifications, ninety feet on deck, with a beam of twenty-three feet—"

Dead astern, the frigate's sails shook and boomed as she leaned over onto a new tack, the guns then stabbed from her forecastle glinting blood-red in the setting sun.

"—and with a draught of just under ten feet—Faith, Liam, will you *please* let go of my sleeve?"

"But it's *Crichton!*"

"I *know* it's *Crichton*, and I imagine I've known so for a sight longer than you have, given the fact you were boozing it up belowdecks for the better part of the afternoon. I also know there's a squadron behind him and Sir Geoffrey Lloyd's flag on the seventy-four. Three years ago that was *my* ship, remember? And Sir Geoffrey *my* admiral?" He grinned, as though the memories brought him no pain, and glanced around Liam's brawny shoulder. "A point more a-larboard, Mr. Keefe! Aim her right toward that big tree sticking up above the others." Dropping his gaze to the drafts once more, he added conversationally, "They call that the Beacon Oak, Liam, because it's a landmark to guide mariners from the sea. In his letter, Ashton said to watch for it—"

"If ye don't get yer head out o' the clouds and stop thinkin' of that bloody schooner, none of us'll live long enough t' see her built, let alone sail her!"

"Now, Liam." Brendan elevated one eyebrow and gave his friend a patient look. "My head is *not* in the clouds, but set properly atop my shoulders, just where it should be and just where I intend it remain. Faith and troth, I do wish you would all stop pestering me so."

"But yer leadin' him straight into the river!"

“Precisely.” He grinned. “Now, stop worrying, would you? Do you see me worrying? Faith, Newburyport’s a rebel town, Liam; they simply despise the British. Not only did they stage their own tea party four years ago, they’ve even sunk a pier and some old hulks across the mouth of this river just to keep them out. Hidden, of course, but combined with the currents and shifting sandbars just beneath this placid-looking surface, I do believe one of them will stop Crichton.”

“One o’ them’ll stop *us*! Ye haven’t the foggiest idea where yer goin’! Ye’ve never been up this damned river in yer life!”

“First time for everything, eh?” Still grinning, Brendan returned his attention to the drafts.

The frigate was so close now, they were almost riding her bow-wake. Carriages squealed as the mighty guns were rolled into position. Musket fire cracked from her tops, and a ball whizzed past Liam’s ear, parting a stay. Another holed the speaking trumpet beside Brendan’s hip and flung it to the deck. Forward, *Annabel*’s men began to shout an alarm, while Fergus’s chanting rose to a desperate pitch: “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want—*”

Shots pinged against a nearby cannon, tore another chunk from the deckhouse, drove into the mast.

“*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters—*”

Another shot ripped the tricorne from Brendan’s head.

“*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil—*”

Brendan looked up, his expression puzzled. “How odd, all this time and I never knew Fergus to be a religious man . . . Oh, Liam, would you fetch my hat, please? I seem to have lost it. Faith, what would Ashton think if I showed up for dinner half dressed?”

“—*for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me—*”

“I *do* hope I can find this place, Liam. Ashton says I’m supposed to look for a big, handsome Georgian house when I get into town, white with green shutters and an anchor out front. Newburyport’s a sea town. I’ll bet everyone has white Georgian houses with green shutters and anchors out front. Think I’ll have any trouble finding it?”

Pop. Crack. More musket fire. Pieces of wood exploded from the boom above their heads. Liam buried his face in his huge hands.

“And do you think Ashton’ll have the table all set?”

Liam’s head jerked up. “What?!”

Brendan folded the drafts with precise care, slipped them into his pocket, and grinned. “Why, could just kill for a nice, savory neck of mutton, a wedge of fine cheese, hot boiled potatoes, and Indian pudding, drenched in maple syrup. . . .”

“Dammit, Brendan, how can ye even think o’ supper at a time like this?!”

“And why not? ’Tis seven o’clock, precisely the time I *should* be thinking about supper, as it is when I usually dine. Oh, Mr. Keefe! You might let her fall off another point; we don’t want the broadside staring us in the face . . . Liam? Liam, are you listening to me?”

“Jay-sus, Brendan, *Jay-sus—*”

“Well, please do, because if I should fall today—which I’ve no intention of doing, of course—you will remember your promise to get these drafts to Ashton, won’t you? Have him build the schooner and use her as the privateer I’ve designed her to be. And as for the steeve in the bowsprit, I’ve decided that more is better, after all . . .”

But Liam wasn’t listening; he was staring, transfixed, at *Dismal*, his mouth opening and shutting like a gasping fish as he caught sight of the haughty, triumphant figure on her quarterdeck. “I . . . Brendan,” he choked out.

“And if Crichton should take us—again, I vow he shall not—then, and only then, rip the drafts u

Toss the pieces over the side. Destroy them, burn them, swallow them if you have to, but do not, repeat, *do not* allow them to fall into British hands. If the Admiralty manages to get hold of them 'twill be a terrible thing indeed. . . . Why, Dalby!" Brendan glanced up to find the terrified little sailmaker standing before him, his Adam's apple bouncing up and down amid the cords of his birdlike neck. "'Tis kind of you to join us, but I really would like a good eye up in the bows—"

"Those sunken piers are beneath us, sir, I just know it! And I can't see a thing with all this glare of the water. We're going to hit one of them, and it'll be my fault!"

"Calm yourself, Dalby. I have things well under control."

"But, Captain, I'm going to be sick, *sick*—"

"Please don't get sick now, Dalby; wait till we reach port."

"But, Capt—"

"Liam!" Brendan grasped his lieutenant's arm, jerking him from his terrified reverie. Newburyport was approaching fast; Brendan could hear the church bells ringing now, guns firing, dogs barking and the alarm was raised. "Please take Dalby forward and watch for those piers, would you?"

"Aye, Cap'n!" he shouted. "'Bout *time* ye got serious!"

Liam was already hauling Dalby forward at a dead run, his shirttails billowing behind him. Brendan grinned, and in his best quarterdeck voice, called, "And glazed almonds and mince pie, and pear tarts smothered in sweet, fresh cream. ..."

He heard Dalby's wheedling voice: "Liam? Liam, why's the captain talking about food at a time like this?"

But Liam only ran faster, hauling Dalby over debris and deck furnishings alike.

"Haven't had fresh cream in ages! Faith, must be at least three, four years now! How 'bout you, Liam? Getting sick of pork souse and hardtack?"

Over his shoulder Liam shouted, "If I ever get t' see pork souse and hardtack again, I swear, I'll get down on me knees an' kiss yer goddamned feet!"

Brendan, grinning, glanced over his shoulder at *Dismal's* bloated spritsail. "And custards and jellies, apple cider, cold glasses of milk—run out the starboard guns now, would you, Mr. Saunders—sauces and gravies and piping hot bread, fresh from the oven and just oozing butter. ..."

"And your bloody toes, too!" Liam bawled.

Brendan laughed. "Double-shotted, Mr. Saunders!"

"In the bread, sir?"

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Saunders, in the *guns*. What in God's name d'you think I'm talking about, eh?"

"Aye, sir! Right away!"

"And lively, Mr. Saunders!"

They were well into the mouth of the river now. Close abeam, marshlands and riverbanks slid past. Ahead, Newburyport was growing larger; fine homes of brick and white-painted wood looking over the riverfront, their windows glinting with orange sunset. Wharves stretched into the harbor, and a church thrust a spire toward the sky.

Dismal, just beginning to overtake them, maneuvered her mighty broadside into position.

"Stuffed mutton and Indian pudding. ..." Retrieving his speaking trumpet, Brendan dusted it off with his elbow, heedless of the fresh musket hole like an eyeless socket in the metal. "Though I could pass on the green beans, if Ashton's serving them!"

He peered over the side, staring down into the swirling depths, not thinking at all about the supper he was determined not to miss, but about those sunken piers that Dalby and Liam would probab

never see, the sunken piers that were probably approaching just . . . about . . . now—

“*Hard alee, Mr. Keefe!*”

The helmsman shoved the tiller over so violently that men lost their footing, shot spilled across the deck, and the topsail yard stabbed down like a harpoon. Striated bars of sand swept beneath their feet, broken here and there by the fuzzy, ominous hulk of the sunken pier just beneath the river’s surface. As one, the crew held their breaths, cringing. But their captain knew what he was about. A sigh, a whisper, and they were safely through the channel. Another sigh and they looked up to see brigs and sloops, schooners and cutters, some anchored, some docked, and some already moving toward them.

Brendan leapt onto the deckhouse, waving his speaking trumpet and jumping up and down with excitement. “Steady, Mr. Keefe, steady, steady, *steady!*”

Crichton wasn’t as clever. With an agonized shriek of grinding timbers, *Dismal* struck the sunken pier, her broadside lighting up her entire side in fiery tongues of orange against black. Thunder split the air with an unholy, deafening roar. Iron slammed against *Annabel*’s sides and whined overhead. There was an awesome crack, like a lightning bolt hitting too close, and the mast teetered wildly. Men screamed, stays and shrouds split with a noise like gunfire, and the deckhouse fell out from beneath Brendan’s feet.

Air whooshed past him. A cannon belted him across the shoulders, sky flashed beneath his shoes, a piece of railing shot by his face. He hit the deck on his back, careened across it on his coattails, and slammed into the truck of a gun so hard that his sword split in two. He lay there for a moment, stunned, the fact that he was too dazed to even wonder if he was dead assuring him that he was not. Smoke burned his throat, seared his lungs—and through it he saw the ghostly shapes of Crichton’s guns, running out once more.

He lurched to his knees, raised his half-sword, and choked out, “*Fire!*”

And then the deck itself seemed to open up and fall away. Grabbing frantically for a line, he was aware of someone yelling his name, and then nothing but weightlessness, space, and the dizzying rush of air against his face, his arms, his legs, before he hit the sea with a stunning slap.

Not again.

He clawed toward the surface, grabbing a piece of flotsam and fighting to stay afloat as the river’s mighty current swept him past the smoke-wreathed frigate, the point of Plum Island, and eventually into the cold, open Atlantic. Powerless, he watched the thick black cloud that hung over the two ships diminish in size as he was carried further from his ship, saw a few stabs of orange as fire was exchanged. And then there was nothing but vast, empty space beneath his feet and a sea bottom that lay countless fathoms beneath him. And still the current, drawing him farther and farther out to sea.

Sunset came and went. Gloom snuffed out the smudge of land that was Plum Island, distant now and growing more so, until even the lights that marked it sank below the horizon. The flotsam was cold and slimy beneath his cheek, the constant slap of the waves filling his nose and mouth and sinuses with every rise and fall of the sea beneath him. Up and down . . . up and down. . . . The stars came out. The moon rose to stand guard over him, sheeting the ocean in silver and picking him out as a speck of life in a vast and starlit emptiness. He locked his arms around his float, laid his cheek against the wet wood, and despite the biting chill of the ocean, fell asleep.

His Irish luck held. Dawn found him still alive, paralyzed with cold and barely able to open his swollen eyes when the first rays of sunlight poked over the horizon and nudged him out of his stupor. His waking thoughts were of neck of mutton and Indian pudding dripping with sweet maple syrup. Groaning, he dug at his eyes with a white and wrinkled fist. Sunlight lanced his pupils and sent a shaft of pain straight into the back of his skull. Spitting out seawater and squinting against the glare, he

managed to focus on that blinding ribbon of sea that marked the eastern horizon.

~~He blinked, squinted, blinked again. For there, etched as dark squares against the white glare, were the sails of a fine and lovely ship, a ship that saluted the morning and heralded its arrival upon her proud pennants and the highest reaches of her sun-gilded masts. A curl of pink light sparkled at her bows, along her sides. Her canvas and shrouds sang in the wind.~~

She was glorious. She was beautiful.

And she was coming for him.

He wondered if he was dead and this was his just reward, for there was no feeling left in his limbs, no reasoning left in his brain. Just fogginess and a thick, swirling haze, pierced here and there by sounds; the protests of spars and canvas as the brig hove to, the keen of water dying beneath her bows. Frantic shouts above him, splashes nearby, the *thunk* of oars against a hollow hull. Gentle hands worked around and beneath him. Rope, swathed in sailcloth to lessen its bite, was passed beneath his arms and chest, tightening until the pressure between his shoulders and against his ribs became a blinding pain. The sea sucked at his legs in a last desperate attempt to hold him as he was hauled from it, and through the salt-swollen slits that were his eyes, he saw blue water, slowly revolving beneath him, sparkling, blinding, as he was hoisted higher and higher.

A rail brushed his knees. Hands supported and guided him as his feet touched a solid deck, his legs crumpled beneath him, and he was eased down to warm, dry planking that smelled pleasantly of sunlight and vinegar beneath his cheek. Dimly, he was aware of someone tugging at his stock, loosening it and tearing it free.

“Easy, now, careful with him. The poor fellow’s been through enough. Joey, fetch the surgeon—would ye? And Jake, stop gawking and go get me a bucket of fresh water from below. Blankets, too, while you’re at it, lots of ’em. Hurry, now!”

Brendan coughed, and tried to sit up.

“Easy, there, fellow,” came that Yankee drawl again. Firm hands pressed against his chest, pinning him against the sickeningly solid deck. Brendan saw a pair of boots three inches from his face, smelled their worn leather, and felt shadows cooling his cheeks as someone leaned over him. “Malvern’s on his way to see you now. Some hot gruel and a few warm blankets and you’ll be on your feet in no time, guaranteed.”

He tried to open his eyes, for there was something familiar about that voice . . . something very familiar. Something connected to the drafts.

It hit him with choking horror. *The drafts*. He’d never given them to Liam! They were still in his pocket, and he’d just spent the night in the open Atlantic—

He clawed upward into the blinding brightness. His fingers brushed a hat, knocked it awry. A rough cheek, someone’s nose, a light object of wire and glass.

“*The drafts!*” His eyelids parted like ripping cloth. Through a wall of pain he saw a reedy man in a slapdash, half-buttoned coat bending over him and blocking the sunlight, the proud pyramid of his hair rising high above his head. Hair so red, it hurt his eyes to look at it. Dense patches of freckles sprinkled like cinnamon over a narrow nose down which a pair of spectacles was slowly sliding. The man raised his head, presenting the underside of his red-stubbled jaw, but Brendan had seen enough to know who he was.

“Ashton!” he gasped, lapsing into a fit of choking.

“That water, Jake, give it here!” the man yelled, reaching impatiently for the wooden pail.

Moisture trickled between Brendan’s teeth and across his swollen tongue, dragging pain down his throat and into his writhing stomach. The world tilted and swam. The water was coming too fast for

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