

FIGHTING SHADOWS

SWIFT SERIES: BOOK 6

ALEC MERRILL

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Scripture taken from the King James Version of the Bible

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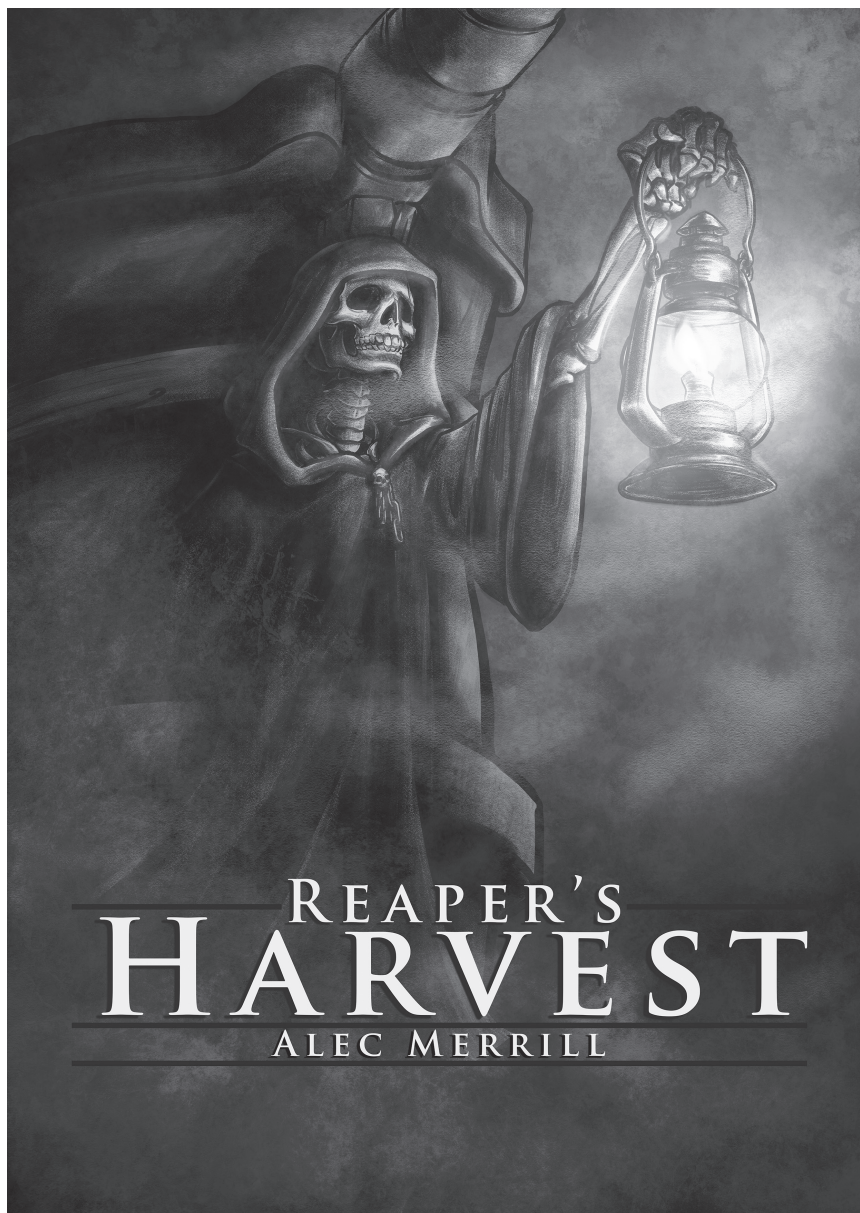
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CONTENTS

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	27
Chapter 5	33
Chapter 6	41
Chapter 7	57
Chapter 8	63
Chapter 9	69
Chapter 10	75
Chapter 11	85
Chapter 12	97
Chapter 13	105
Chapter 14	123
Chapter 15	131
Chapter 16	145
Chapter 17	153
Chapter 18	173
Chapter 19	183
Chapter 20	201
Chapter 21	213
Chapter 22	221
Chapter 23	231
Chapter 24	239
Chapter 25	249
Chapter 26	257
Chapter 27	267
Chapter 28	275
Chapter 29	285

Chapter 30 293

Chapter 31 303

Chapter 32 311

Chapter 33 323

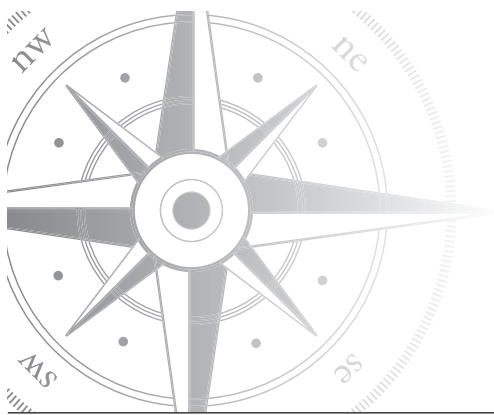
Chapter 34 329

Chapter 35 337

Chapter 36 347

Author’s Notes 351

About the Author 357



CHAPTER

1

Wise men act when opportunity knocks, and opportunity currently knocked with the force of a sledgehammer. The possibility of vast wealth beckoned; it was there for the taking.

Obtaining that vast wealth was not without risk, and Jon Swift hesitated. The risk wasn't the only impediment. The reality was that Swift had no idea how to grasp the opportunity and break through any potential barriers. A primary reason was that Swift's business was the supply of contraband to willing buyers.

Chesapeake Bay was ripe for exploitation because a major competing contraband supplier operating in the region had suffered a huge setback. The head of the organization, a rich and powerful Virginia planter named Fothersby, had died recently. This unexpected death left the organization adrift. Two key lieutenants that might have stepped into Fothersby's shoes were unavailable. It was an opportune time to establish a new contraband operation in the region.

The loss of Fothersby and two key lieutenants was only one setback for the competition. A brig that transported contraband supplies from the West Indies to the Chesapeake was long overdue. Customers needing the load of contraband carried by that brig were angry. The organization was in turmoil for the brig had been the sole transporter of all contraband

loads from the West Indies. Replacing the ship would resolve that shortfall, although that would take time. Even more difficult to replace was the knowledge lost with the ship. Her captain was the only man in the organization having contacts with West Indies contraband suppliers. As a result, Fothersby's customers had little chance of receiving another contraband load for some time.

That is where the opportunity lay. If Jon could provide those customers with a reliable source of contraband rum, molasses, and sugar, the result would be a continuous flow of coin. When that coin flowed into Jon's purse instead of the competitions, it would speed the demise of other competitors by depriving them of money to pay for bribes, for transport, and for the contraband.

The risks were worrisome. There were the usual risks associated with any merchantman operation. Storms and weather disturbances were common, especially in the West Indies during hurricane season. England was at war with France, so French warships and privateers preyed upon unarmed English merchantmen.

The Royal Navy constantly stopped and inspected British-flagged vessels. Those inspections always resulted in the crew's inspection for deserters. A naval boarding party seized any deserter and clapped the man in irons. If the navy vessel was short of men, the boarding party often claimed other men as deserters or pressed them. While this was perfectly legal and did not hamper trade, it posed problems to the average merchantman and to the crew of the schooner *Providence* especially. There were three deserters on the *Providence*, including her captain. While the likelihood that the navy would seize the captain was remote, seizure of the other two men, Bell and McCleary, was very possible. Inspections by the Royal Navy while carrying contraband cargo also posed potential problems. If the officer commanding the boarding party didn't accept the forged paperwork provided, he could seize the *Providence* and escort her into an appropriate port for thorough examination. Surviving a thorough examination was challenging, bordering on unlikely. For these reasons,

the Providence feared a Royal Navy inspection and went out of her way to avoid one.

Additional risks arose as a contraband runner. A strange ship sailing repeatedly through Chesapeake Bay had a higher probability of being boarded and inspected than a ship from a local company. To mask contraband operations, it was common practice to conduct normal commerce. Competition for normal commerce in the Chesapeake was intense. The Hudson Trading Company, Jon's legitimate operation, was a new comer to the Chesapeake and unwelcome. The competition was against well-established companies with years of operation in the area. A previous attempt to establish a warehouse and presence in Norfolk at the bottom of the Chesapeake had been unsuccessful. Another similar attempt so shortly afterwards might receive a similar rebuke.

Revenue men posed a constant threat. Revenue officers were active in the Chesapeake and conducted constant vessel boarding and inspections. The greatest threat was being caught in the act of a contraband landing. There was no defence against that. Every man ran in such circumstances, for capture meant gaol or impressment into the Royal Navy. For the officers, a short trip to the gallows might result to encourage others not to trade in contraband.

There was always a possibility of a customer attempting to steal the load. Jon had not yet experienced such an attempt. Two customers had posed problems with deliveries. One customer had threatened to report the Providence to the authorities if not given the low price demanded. The customer's own men resolved that particular problem, since they wished to stay out of the revenue men's sights. In the second instance, the customer didn't have the coin to pay for the entire load and used cargo for full payment. Accepting that cargo was a costly mistake, which Jon vowed would never happen again.

Another risk was from competitors in the Chesapeake. Those competitors were currently unknown, but given the size of the Chesapeake, there was probably more than one. Competitors who discovered the location and timing of a contraband landing were likely to whisper to the

revenue men. He needed very tight security to offset such an occurrence. Competitors might also try to steal the load. That had happened to the Providence in Baracoa. Fothersby's men boarded in the dead of night. The ensuing pitched battle resulted in the death of two men and one officer from the Providence, and the wounding of another four. Considering there were only eight men and two officers aboard at the time, that was a very heavy price. Those left standing on the Providence retaliated and took the brig, leaving no witnesses.

While fully cognisant of all these risks, any hesitation to act wasn't caused by them. A complete lack of knowledge about what deeds or actions needed to occur to move forward caused indecision. Jon was a reasonably new contraband runner whose current customers were former customers of Captain van Burgen, the previous captain of the Providence. Since commencing contraband operations, there had been no necessity to find new customers. Additionally, he had never setup a single contact for contraband landings. Establishing a contraband operation in the Chesapeake was a means to build up knowledge and expertise, as well as to grow the business.

If establishing a Chesapeake operation with these knowledge shortfalls wasn't difficult enough, there was a further one. The scope of the operation was far greater. Every current customer was a wealthy man who purchased a load of contraband and distributed that load to others, taking a healthy profit in the process. The new Chesapeake operation would cut out these wealthy men and sell directly to the end customer.

This new type of operation offered greater potential profit, but greatly increased the risks and complexity. Requirements, previously handled by the middleman, would fall on Jon's shoulders. These requirements included finding men to unload the ship, a place to temporarily hide the load, plus men and equipment to distribute the landed rum and other products to buyers. There was a need to establish customers, take orders and collect payment upon delivery. The Providence couldn't sit at anchor while all this activity took place. The man who ran the Chesapeake operation in Jon's absence must be loyal and honest, yet devious and

hard at the same time. Security was paramount if the operation was to survive. Revenue men were eager to stop any contraband runner. Others were eager to capture a contraband load to line their pockets. Confusing the second type for the first type could spell disaster.

These problems and risks associated with the establishment of a new operation in the Chesapeake required a full-time focus. Unfortunately, there were far more pressing problems requiring attention. Swift's company had five ships -- with a sixth currently under construction in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Only the schooner Providence actively engaged in contraband running.

The Providence was an older gaff-rigged schooner. When originally built, she was large for her type, able to carry one hundred tons of cargo compared to the typical seventy tons of a packet schooner. Like most schooners, she was fast and capable of running closer to the wind than most fully rigged ships were. With a draught of two fathoms when fully loaded, she could enter many places deeper draught vessels couldn't reach. Another benefit was the size of her crew. Only seven men and two officers were her total complement. She was currently under-manned with only her captain, Swift, and seven men: Scoffield, Bell, McCleary, Kneap, William, Richmond, and Armstrong. Finding a new first mate was an added concern.

The previous first mate, Ezekiel Robson had died during the boarding in Baracoa. All the first mate's duties fell on the captain because no other person on the Providence could read, write, or navigate. Simple tasks such as inventorying the provisions required writing capability. Certainly, to order anything for the ship's needs required that capability. The extra load on an overworked and ill captain was a major hindrance.

The Hudson Trading Company had two small luggers, the Emily and the Nicole, sitting idle at anchor in Gloucester harbour without crews. Before they could be employed, each would need a captain and six men. Their employment posed other problems besides the lack of crews. The luggers had a maximum cargo capacity of fifty tons. This limited cargo capacity made them uneconomical over longer distances when compared to larger ships. However, for short distances, especially

in shallow water, they were competitive. Fully loaded, their draughts were only a fathom. They could enter smaller settlements or rivers where larger ships feared to go. The luggers were ideally suited to work in the Chesapeake where shallow water was the norm and the distances from the plantations to Norfolk were reasonably short. Unfortunately, their employment in the Chesapeake wasn't possible until the Hudson Trading Company established a base there.

The fourth ship in the Hudson Trading Company fleet was the brig Margaret. She was a merchantman converted into a privateer carrying twenty 6-pounder cannons. She was working as a merchantman once more, but still carried the cannons. Those cannons reduced the weight of cargo the Margaret could transport. Offloading them was not possible until a safe and secure location existed to store the guns. Captain Harry Short, the former first mate of the Providence, commanded her with a twenty-three-man crew. The Margaret was profitably employed. She sailed from Kingston Jamaica to ports north of Philadelphia carrying high value cargos of rum, molasses and sugar.

Although profitably employed and able to defend herself, the Margaret still worried Jon. That worry stemmed from 'acquisition' of the Margaret. The Governor of Massachusetts had commandeered the Providence and sent her into Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia running supplies to the British garrison through a French blockade. Coming out of Annapolis Royal, the Margaret, then a French privateer attempted to capture the Providence. After a vicious night battle in the Bay of Fundy, the Margaret was in Jon's hands. Having literally risked everything, Jon felt entitled to a suitable reward and failed to submit the Margaret to a prize court. The Margaret desperately required proper legal registration papers. Jon had made some progress in that area, but not enough. He still needed to finalize things.

The fifth ship in the Hudson Trading Company fleet was the schooner Susan, commanded by Captain James Jones with an eight-man-crew. The Susan was a small packet schooner able to carry seventy tons of cargo. The Susan's 'acquisition' was also questionable. The Margaret had captured her off the eastern coast of Nova Scotia and had not submitted her to the

prize courts. Instead, she transported molasses, sugar and some rum from the Indies to larger colonial ports south of the Chesapeake. With her small cargo, she had few difficulties selling the loads. The Susan needed proper legal registration papers before someone got too inquisitive.

Solving each of these problems didn't resolve all Jon's problems, for there was one over-riding concern. A merchantman sitting at anchor made no money. Income came from transporting cargo from one point to its destination. The longer it took for a captain to sell the cargo load, or to acquire a new cargo, the longer a ship rested at anchor in some harbour. That reduced time at sea and the profit from transporting goods. To minimize the amount of time a ship spent in harbour, the company needed a location to land the cargo and an agent to complete the sale of cargo. The same agent could acquire a new cargo and have it ready to load when the ship arrived. The reality was that the Hudson Trading Company didn't have any facilities or agents in any ports.

It was unclear which of these risks and problems required the highest priority. They weren't the only problems. One didn't need to move further than outside the captain's cabin to run into additional problems. If a replacement first mate signed-on, there was no place to berth him. The first mate's cabin was currently jammed with stores. Cases of wine and other goodies removed from the brig taken in Baracoa hid seven cases of contraband Cuban snuff. Getting rid of incriminating snuff was high on Jon's list of things to do. That was unlikely to happen soon, for the Chesapeake was the worst place in the colonies to sell contraband snuff. Locally produced snuff satisfied virtually all demand.

Another concern was Armstrong, a replacement for the men that fell at Baracoa. Armstrong was approximately thirty, although those were hard years, as his face and body showed a lot of wear. A braided two-foot queue of brown hair generally swung forward over the right shoulder. He was muscled like a topman, with a stronger upper body and weaker legs. There were crude anchor tattoos on each inner forearm. As a sailor, Armstrong was competent. As a member of the Providence's crew, he fell a bit short of expectations. Armstrong was a drinker. So was McCleary

for that matter, but McCleary had earned Jon's trust multiple times over. Armstrong had not.

Armstrong seemed to resent many of the things that others in the crew took in stride. An example was the boarding drills practised most days at sea. The skills developed in that training saved most of the crew's lives at Baracoa, and every man knew it. Armstrong still put forth only minimal effort during the training. Jon couldn't put a finger on the exact problem, but it nagged at him just the same.

For some reason, Armstrong's arrival coincided with the onset of friction among the crew. That was troubling. More troubling was the impact it seemed to have on Scoffield. Scoffield was a man of medium height and build with long brown hair braided in a long queue. Quiet in nature, he was a loyal, dependable and capable sailor. As the bosun and perhaps the man most trusted on board, Scoffield had been a rock in command of the starboard watch. Since Armstrong's arrival, he had slipped several times in those duties. Something ate at him, but a quick rebuff occurred at any attempt to talk about it. The crew saw the change and it worried everyone. Every man on board knew the stakes involved, for if Scoffield slipped at the wrong moment, it was the end for all of them.

A look in the mirror identified another temporary problem. Jon was injured and feeling that injury. A massive bruise covered his front torso from just below the waistline to two-thirds of the way up the chest including the pectoral muscles. Bending or twisting the torso caused considerable pain, which was impossible to disguise. It would take two to three weeks before healing. Luckily, there weren't any immediate contraband runs to look after, but any movement from the Providence was ill advised.

Jon sat motionless at the cabin desk considering all these problems, risks and concerns. They required prioritization and then appropriate action. His immediate solution was to pour and drink more rum to combat the pain radiating from the abdomen. As the level of the rum in the glass continued to fall, the answer seemed to swim away.

Rum was all that came to mind.