

THE
VIRGIN
SMUGGLER

SWIFT SERIES: BOOK 4

ALEC MERRILL

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Scripture taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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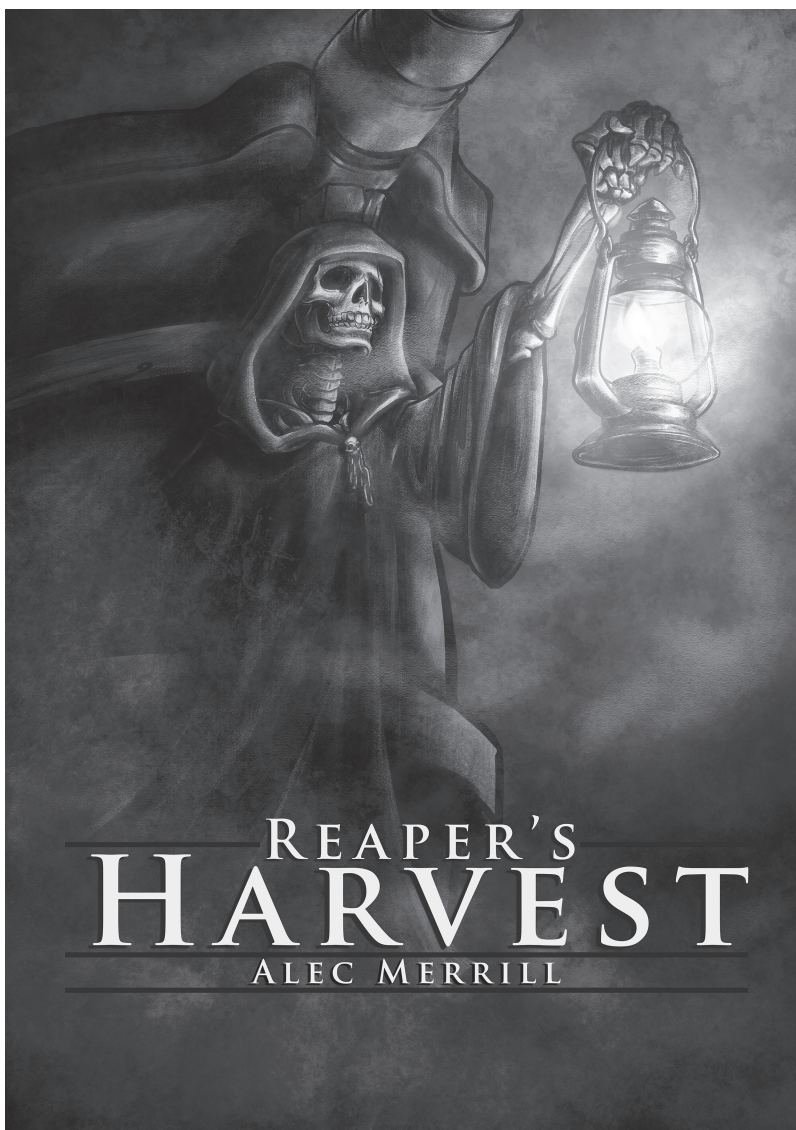
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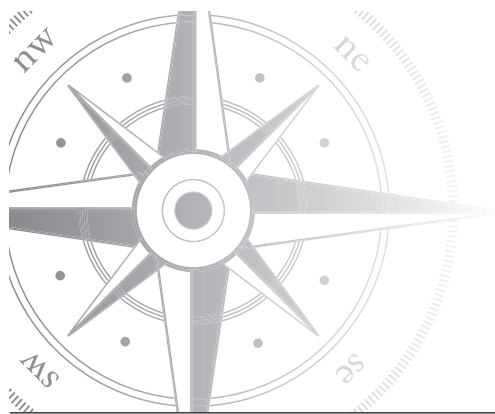
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CHAPTER

1

Sailing south into the Caribbean in the middle of summer is not for the faint hearted. Summer is hurricane season and few sailing vessels can outrun a hurricane. While you might evade a hurricane or tropical storm, you can't avoid the heat and humidity that saps the strength from your body. Hence, in the summer, sailors tend to avoid the Caribbean, and prudent merchants rarely schedule deliveries.

The sky was overcast and menacing as the schooner Providence knifed through the water. Just two days out of Charles Towne, she raced south with a load of trade goods. The barometer slowly dropped all morning indicating possible trouble ahead. To the south of her present course, a small patch of sky opened and sunlight beamed down. The Providence entered the sunlight like an actor walking into the spotlight on stage. For hours she maintained the same course, the patch of sunlight continuing to track her progress. If the sunlight was an omen, and the superstitious sailors on the Providence assumed it was, it foretold good fortune for the ship and her new captain despite the menacing sea and skies.

The weather was not the only hazard the Providence might encounter. The war with France still raged, so French men-o'-war and privateers prowled these waters, always searching for easy pickings. To some, the Providence might seem like easy pickings, for she didn't carry so much as a swivel gun with which to defend her honour. With one hundred tons of

cargo, she would provide a nice profit if any Frenchman scooped her up. Unarmed didn't mean easy to capture; first the Frenchman had to catch her, and the Providence was fast. She was a gaff-rigged schooner that could run closer to the wind than most square-rigged vessels. When other brigs and square-rigged vessels sometimes struggled to make six knots an hour in light winds, the Providence could easily do ten. In strong winds, with a clean bottom, she had even hit twelve knots. Unfortunately, her bottom was no longer clean, so early warning was important.

The Providence had a crew of eight, in addition to the captain. Two watches of four men evenly split the sailing duties. At all times during daylight hours at least one man remained at the masthead as a lookout. Caution was a priority on the Providence.

In the Providence's line of business, even so called 'friends' might be considered enemies. The Royal Navy patrolled these waters, and had the legal right to stop any British flagged vessels for inspection. If a navy vessel stopped the Providence, at the very least, a check of the manifest and cargo would occur. The current cargo posed no worries for the captain and crew of the Providence. That wasn't always the case, as His Majesty's revenue service took a dim view of some of the cargos the Providence carried. Navy boarding parties also had a nasty habit of lining up a merchantman's crew to check for deserters. The Providence's crew roster carried men fitting that description. Even if those specific men were not recognized, the Royal Navy often pressed crew members. For these reasons, the Providence's captain and crew preferred to sail in a lonely sea.

The larboard watch was currently standing duty with Harry Short, the first mate, in charge. Sam Kneap was at the helm. Abraham, a Negro with no sea experience, stood deck duty and Charles Richmond was at the masthead as lookout.

"Deck there, strange sail on the larboard quarter," shouted Richmond from the masthead.

"What do you make of her?" shouted the captain, Jon Swift.

"Looks square-rigged. Only the topsails are visible. No royals on her. Looks like two masts," replied Richmond.

“Harry, take the wheel. Kneap, run that glass up to Richmond.”

Kneap grabbed the glass and raced up the larboard ratlines of the mainmast. Richmond reached down and carefully took the glass once Kneap was within reaching distance. Balancing and focusing a glass on a swaying mast is an art even in calm waters, and the seas were lively at the moment. It took a bit of time to get another report. While Richmond checked on the distant vessel, Kneap returned to the deck and resumed station at the wheel.

“Deck there, definitely a brig, sail configuration looks British,” shouted Richmond.

There was always concern when sighting a strange sail. Was the strange ship an enemy? Was it a Royal Navy vessel? These were important questions, but of secondary consideration to Jon. The circumstances now were considerably different than on any previous occasion. As the captain of the Providence, it was his responsibility to make all decisions related to the safety of the ship and crew. In addition to the weight of that responsibility was the additional pressure as the owner of both ship and cargo. All previous experience had been as a member of the crew, waiting for the officers to make decisions. Now the shoe was on the other foot. Everyone waited on him. Jon’s previous experience as a crewman had been split between a man-o’-war and merchantmen. A man-o’-war was a hunter. Merchantmen were always the prey. Being the prey was a totally different feeling, now that he was a captain. Hopefully, over time, he’d get accustomed to it. In the meantime, the men waited for orders.

“Harry, go fetch the charts.”

Harry retrieved the charts and they spread them out on the deck. All the time the Providence closed with the strange sail. The charts confirmed that the options for running were limited. If the Providence turned slightly to larboard, she would close with the strange vessel even faster. If she went wide to larboard, the strange vessel could cut the corner and continue to close. If the Providence retreated north, she would lose a day or two in transit. If she continued south, the strange ship could intercept her. In reality, that only left starboard. To head west posed other challenges. The

Bahamas were to the west. If the Providence headed west, she would head directly toward a series of poorly charted reefs and shallows. That was not a course to take lightly. There was no clear indication that this strange ship was a threat. Was she a threat or just another merchantman?

“Kneap, ease the helm to larboard and head directly at that strange sail. I want to see if she turns or not.”

“Richmond, we are going to turn toward that strange sail. Watch her closely, and let me know what she does once she sees we’re closing,” shouted Jon.

A faint “Aye, aye, sir,” drifted down from the masthead.

The Providence eased to larboard and steered directly at the strange sail. Harry and Abraham adjusted the trim of the sails without the need to issue any orders.

“On a converging course,” shouted Richmond. Because the strange ship was over the horizon, the sails were only visible from the masthead. Kneap had eased the Providence over slowly until that shout from Richmond alerted everyone that the Providence was on an intersecting course. This was something that you never heard on a King’s ship. If the lookout at the masthead had shouted those words in a King’s ship, the man could expect at least a tongue lashing, if not an actual flogging.

The entire crew waited apprehensively for Richmond’s response. It took some time in coming; all the while, the tension in the ship increased.

“Deck there, the strange sail is turning, heading east, heading further out into the ocean. She’s decided to give us a wide berth,” shouted Richmond.

The effect of that announcement, heard by every member of the crew on deck, was immediate. A collective sigh of relief issued forth.

“Keep an eye on her Richmond, and when you get a chance bring the glass back down,” shouted Jon.

“Harry stow those charts. Kneap, resume our previous course.”

“Resume previous course, course due south, aye, sir,” replied Kneap automatically.

The new captain had successfully passed the first test. He hoped they would all be this easily resolved, but instinctively knew it was wishful thinking. One of the things he already noticed about being a captain was the loneliness of command. Everyone on board had waited for his decision, as this little incident had thoroughly demonstrated. No one else on board could make those decisions. This was what he wanted, why he'd expended so much effort and risk. Now that he had command, it wasn't quite the prize he had imagined. It was different, but the experience of finally being in control of one's destiny was a powerful magnet. Since that fateful day when he'd been pressed on a trip to Rye to sell produce from his father's farm, someone else had controlled virtually every aspect of his life. That would happen no longer; from now on, the only decisions that would shape his life were his alone.

As the Providence surged southwards, Jon stood on the quarterdeck with the wind blowing through wavy dark hair. The overcast, menacing sky wasn't a concern. Instead, all he saw were opportunities -- enormous opportunities-- and enormous risks. They went hand in hand. A month previously, he'd been a pauper attempting to reach New York and praying his investments were safe. He'd gambled when opportunity came knocking. Now he owned a ship loaded with cargo. Opportunity still knocked, only in a different fashion. He would follow the path to that opportunity and expand his wealth, even if it meant bending or breaking the rules.

Plenty of times in the past, rich men had bent the rules to their advantage. He had suffered because of it. If it required bending or breaking the rules to attain the same advantages achieved by these rich men, then so be it. There would undoubtedly be tests along the way. Some tests would come with plenty of warning; others would not.

As it was, the next test already stared him in the face.