

A
SMUGGLER'S
NIGHTMARE

SWIFT SERIES: BOOK 5

ALEC MERRILL

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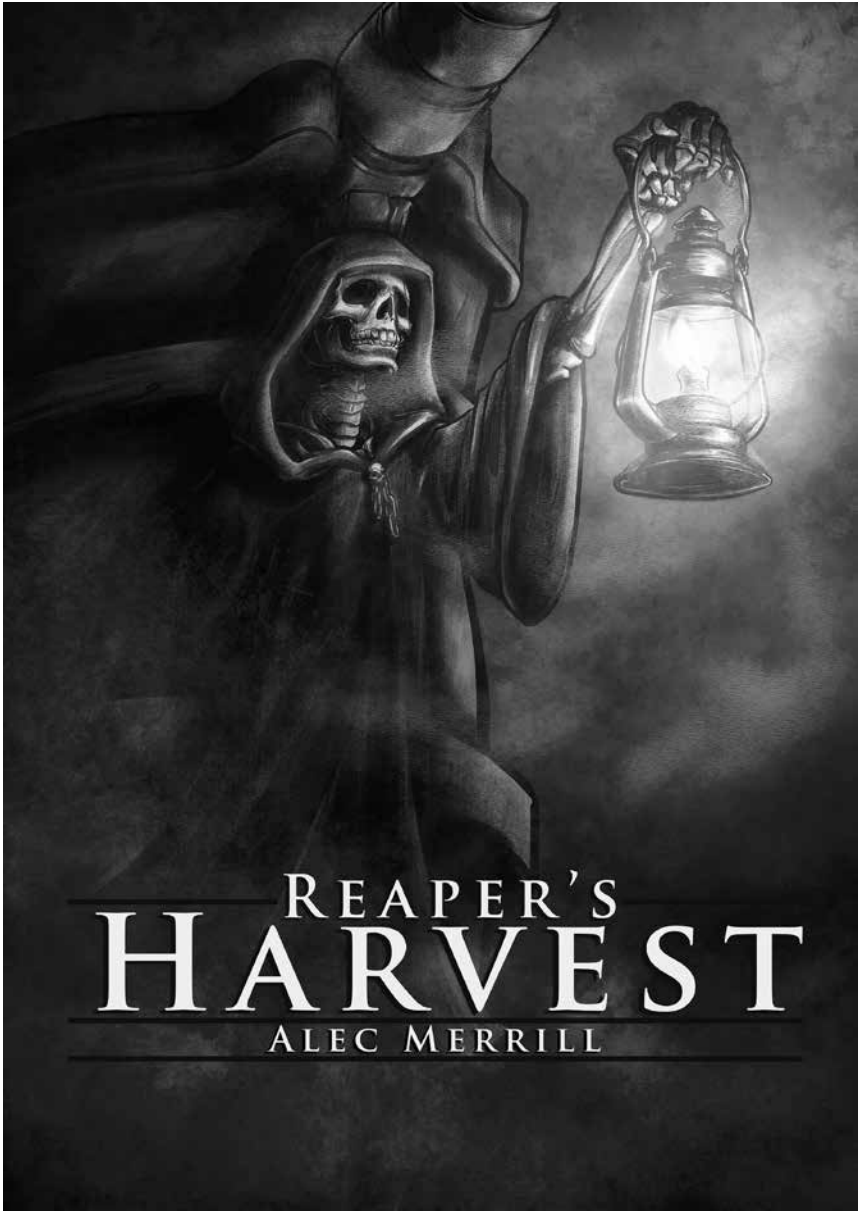
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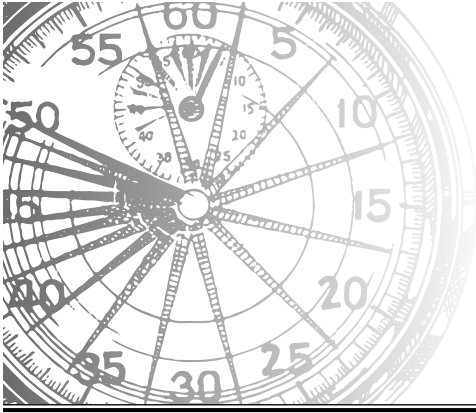
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CHAPTER

1

Any business has exposure to risk on a daily basis. This risk might be mundane, such as the loss of opportunity, or more serious such as the loss of a sale. When smuggling is your livelihood, risk takes on a whole new meaning where risks can be life threatening.

On a dark night, with the moon hidden by an ominous overcast sky, the schooner Providence slowly worked her way upstream. Only the chant from the man using a lead to sound the water's depth interrupted the quiet of the night. Everyone on the ship strained to hear that chant for there were serious implications for any change in the numbers spoken.

The Providence when fully loaded drew nearly two fathoms. The river channel was normally deeper than that, but little rain had fallen during the previous three months. It took but a glance at the river banks to confirm a lower than usual water depth in the river. The width of the Raritan River ranged between five hundred to seven hundred yards with the navigable channel at most two hundred yards wide. The narrowness of that channel made turning to head back downriver impossible without some form of aid. Since the Providence was over one hundred feet in length, she could barely tack going upstream. Luckily, the light wind came from the aft quarter, eliminating the need to tack. Once unloaded the wind would provide little impetus for the voyage back downstream.

It would take the current combined with whatever wind caught in the sails to provide sufficient momentum to travel back down river to the sea.

The tension felt by both captain and crew was palatable. Any pretext the cargo they carried was legal had evaporated once they passed Perth-Amboy. Anything could happen if anyone other than their intended customers spotted them now.

They had all made this journey before, on other rivers, and on the Raritan, but there had been problems on the Raritan the previous trip. The customer's man attempted to cheat Swift and indirectly threatened to sic the revenue men on the Providence and her crew. Greed apparently trumped caution or common sense, for the man assumed all the accompanying men would naturally provide any required backup. That failed to happen, for his men worked for wages and the thought of the revenue men slapping them in irons scared them more than it did the crew of the Providence. Not only did the required backup fail to materialize, but those men supported the actions taken by the captain of the Providence. The tactics used to resolve the matter were despicable, but highly effective. Best of all, these tactics required no application of force at the time.

Tonight's load was the first delivery to the customer since that incident. How the activities this night unfolded would provide an indication of whether the customer wished to forget the previous incident as well. The order was a sign that everything was all right, unless the customer had an ambush in mind. You could never be sure. The location for the contraband landing was perfectly suited for an ambush. The river was narrow and the channel even narrower. It was impossible to turn the ship around and run without using boats to tow the bow around. If the customer used sharpshooters, they might easily take the ship after inflicting casualties on the exposed boat crews. The Providence was a rich prize worth the risk, for her hold contained over three hundred barrels of rum with an extra few barrels of sugar and molasses.

The captain of the Providence had taken measures to combat such treachery. At strategic locations around the deck, the crew had installed brackets for weapons. Those brackets now contained primed pistols,

cutlasses, boarding axes which most of the crew called tomahawks, and boarding pikes for each member of the Providence's complement. Canvas drop cloths covered these weapons to make them invisible to an unsuspecting visitor to the vessel. Each crew member always carried a knife and belying pins were handy.

The preparations didn't stop there. Each day the ship was at sea, the crew practised boarding drills for the better part of four hours. There was a set schedule for practice to ensure each man became an expert with each weapon. There were also swivel cannons and loaded Kentucky long rifles hidden aft. If an ambush did occur, the ambushers would pay dearly.

An ambush was just one risk. Revenue men waiting at the rendezvous point was another risk. It was possible to fight the revenue men, but stupid. Firing on the revenue men was ill advised, as the situation could turn very nasty. If one of the revenue men died or was seriously wounded, everyone would likely dangle in the wind at the end of a rope.

If revenue men were present, it meant someone passed information to them about the ship and the incoming contraband load. The revenue men would seize the Providence, and incarcerate the crew. The men would likely end up pressed into His Majesty's navy. Every merchant sailor lived with the risk of impressment into the Royal Navy while at sea, so although regrettable, the seizure of the ship wouldn't affect the men that greatly. For the Providence's officers, a harsher sentence might occur. Prison was a given. Hanging might also occur to discourage others from smuggling. A wise smuggler caught in the act could always orchestrate a reduced sentence if one knew in whose pocket to place money.

The appearance of revenue men would require an instant decision. If the Providence's crew could take the revenue men without killing them, there was a chance to turn the Providence and run. If the numbers of revenue men were too great, everyone on board could dive over the side and swim to shore after setting the ship on fire. Burning the ship would get rid of the evidence. The revenue men might still catch some of the crew, but the worst that might happen was impressment into one of His Majesty's ships.

All of these thoughts ran through the captain's mind as the ship slowly eased upstream. The Providence progressed upriver at two knots using only the main sail. A man could walk on the river's bank faster than the Providence travelled. There were two reasons for maintaining the slow speed. McCleary, the man on the lead, couldn't toss the lead much faster, and if the ship strayed from the channel, grounding was likely. Running aground would end any chance of successfully delivering the load, and might result in the loss of the entire load and ship.

The load of rum was worth considerable money. If purchasing the rum, sugar or molasses anywhere within King George's domains, there was no import tax and no problem landing the load in any British port. If purchased outside King George's domains, the revenue men levied a tax of nine pence on each gallon of rum, five pence per hundredweight of sugar, and six pence per gallon of molasses if landing the product at any British port. The plantation owners in the West Indies were well aware of these restrictions, as they were the ones that managed to get the laws enacted. They jacked up their prices to wring the maximum amount of profit from each barrel. Landing a load of product purchased in Jamaica or Barbados resulted in half the profits compared to those potentially made from French or Spanish products. That was before the revenue men applied the taxes. After the taxes, the profits weren't nearly as attractive. Many loads therefore bypassed the revenue man. It was from this demand that the captain and crew of the Providence made their living.

Since they acquired the product from the French in the middle of a war between the French and English, it was illegal to land any French products on British soil. Handling any product purchased from the French was the same as conspiring with the enemy, with the same penalty. Meeting any revenue men at this point would ruin the evening.

As the Providence rounded a bend in the river, a lantern flashed three times from the larboard riverbank ahead. Either the customer's men waited for them or the revenue men knew the signal.

It took another ten minutes to close to the landing point. In this case, the landing point was something of a misnomer. The waters near

the shore were far too shallow for the Providence. It was necessary for the Providence to anchor in the channel.

“Let go,” shouted the captain. The anchor dropped with a splash. Shortly thereafter, it was possible to feel the Providence tug on the anchor cable as the hook set.

“Rig for hoisting. Prepare to accept guests. Open the entry port.”

The captain, Jon Swift, moved forward to the entry port to await the men coming from shore in multiple boats. Swift was a young captain, just shy of twenty. Nearly six feet tall, with brown wavy hair, Swift had a powerful chest from working in the tops at an earlier stage of sea life. Dressed as a common sailor, many men assumed Swift was just another member of the crew. It wasn't a ruse, for Swift preferred relaxed dress, but it had a number of beneficial aspects. Many men equated the lack of stylish clothes with a lack of business sense -- a mistake on their part. Swift had a sharp mind and good business instincts which were carefully hidden from view. The Royal Navy had taught Swift to mask any feelings or pay a hefty consequence. Since leaving His Majesty's service Jon had retained this skill. The mask slipped into place.

The first man up the battens was a rugged looking fellow. He wasn't the same man that attempted to cheat Jon the previous time. Just the same, the face seemed familiar. The man had been aboard that last time, but in a different capacity.

“Evening Captain, good to see you again,” said the rugged looking man. A second and third man followed closely behind. Both of these men turned and leaned over the bulwark. Ropes from below sailed up. The two men caught these two ropes and began lifting something. Jon took all of this in before turning to face the rugged-looking man.

“Good evening to you, sir. How would you like to be addressed?”

“Call me Fred, Captain. You and I both know that's not my name, but it makes things a bit friendlier.”

“Well Fred, we have your order, and it's going to take some time to unload, so shall we get down to business. The first order of that business

is to determine a price for the rum, sugar, and molasses. Then I'd like to check to see that you have adequate funds to pay. Is that acceptable?"

"Naturally, Captain. The boys are hoisting the cash aboard as we speak."

Fred and Jon dickered rapidly until reaching a price acceptable to both. After that, Fred opened the cash box. Jon stuck one of the two knives carried, the larger and heavier fighting knife, into the midst of the coins and stirred. The check was to ensure there wasn't a false bottom in the chest and that adequate coin was present.

"Hoist away," ordered Jon once satisfied with the amount of coin.

The process was smooth. William, Abraham, and Richmond worked the hold, as there was insufficient space for more men until some of the cargo was off-loaded. McCleary and Kneap worked the hoist in relays with Bell and Scoffield. Mr. Robson, the first mate, supervised the unloading and assisted where necessary. Abraham manoeuvred several barrels into a cargo net and signalled. McCleary and Kneap hoisted the net and held it suspended for a few seconds while Jon and Fred counted the barrels. A nod from Jon saw the net lowered into a waiting boat. One of the men waiting in the boat unhooked the net. The cargo net remained around the barrels for the trip to shore. Once at shore, a shore party hooked the net to a hoist, swung the load inland, and lowered it into waiting carts. More men manoeuvred the barrels out of the net before the cart departed. The empty net returned to the Providence via the next boat. With several cargo nets and four boats, the unloading proceeded smoothly.

Jon and Fred sat aft on the quarterdeck at a table with a shaded lantern. For each net load, they counted and agreed on the number of barrels and product in the barrels. Each rum barrel contained thirty-six gallons and each sugar case contained four hundredweight. They multiplied each container by the agreed upon price. Fred counted and passed the resulting amount of coin to Jon across the table. Jon recounted and deposited the coin in the Providence's chest. The entire process was smooth, and as amicable as possible in the present circumstances.

Despite the cold December night air and stripping down to light

shirts, the Providence's crew sweated at the effort of manoeuvring the barrels and hoisting them in rapid succession. Everyone in the hold was bare-chested and still sweated.

As the unloading neared completion, Fred remarked about the crew. "That's a good crew you've got there Captain. They've kept my men busy and not a complaint from them, or a request for a break."

"Every one of us wants to be clear of the Raritan, both river and bay, before first light. If that takes extra effort, everyone is willing to put in that effort. You sound knowledgeable about things. Are you looking for a position?"

"Not me, Captain. I've had my fill of the sea. Some of the boys might be, though. You got any spots?"

"Not right now. Winter is the slow season for us. I might need some more men in the spring. If you have men interested, have your boss let me know in the next message."

Fred rubbed his nose and thought about that for a few minutes without responding. Jon figured there were a number of reasons Fred was hesitant. Perhaps Fred didn't know the customer's real name. Jon knew it, but was not about to mention it. Another possibility was that the customer might not like his men defecting to another group. Possibly Fred was reluctant to put something in writing because of an inability to read or write.

"Captain, perhaps the next time you come in the spring, if some men are willing you can take them with you. That would make it easier."

"I'll only take them if I can use them at the time."

"I understand. Thank you, Captain."

Jon poured a drink for each of them to consummate the evening's deals. They toasted the success of each other's transactions while Fred's men lowered the customer's empty cash box over the side. After a quick handshake, Fred followed.

"Weigh anchor."

Turning the Providence around was the last step before sailing. Fred positioned all four boats near the Providence's bow. Scoffield ensured the

appropriate towlines snaked out to each of those boats. With four boats pulling, it took little time to swing the bow. Once the Providence pointed down river, the boats dropped the lines in the water and headed for shore. The current gently pushed the Providence downstream.

“Scofield, Abraham, raise the mainsail. McCleary, get on the lead. William, stow the capstan bars. Bell, Richmond, raise the jib and fore staysail.”

McCleary rushed to the bow and started heaving the lead. Scofield and Abraham hoisted the main sail before recovering the towlines dragging alongside. Bell and Richmond recovered the remaining towlines after raising the jib and fore staysail. Kneap, as usual, was at the helm.

The Providence headed downstream at nearly four knots pushed by the current. The ship’s speed was too fast for the river, but the Providence drew a full fathom less than she had when heading upstream. No one anticipated any difficulties until the ship reached Raritan Bay. There was a tricky section close to Perth-Amboy where shoals were present. Once the ship managed to pass those shoals, she needed to stick to the marked channel closer to Staten Island. A turn toward Sandy Hook put her in deeper water until clear of Raritan Bay. It was a straight run until a narrow channel close to Sandy Hook. Once through that channel, the Providence would turn to larboard and head to New York for a new load of cargo.

Cargo wasn’t the only thing that waited for them in New York.