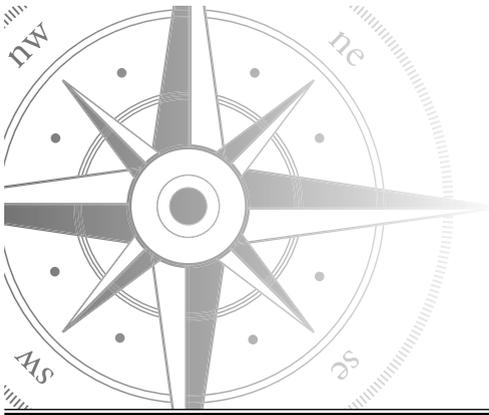


SWIFT PRIDE

ALEC MERRILL



CHAPTER

1

CRACK!

He was unsure which registered first, the sound from the crack of the starter, or the stinging sensation felt in his buttocks.

It was the changing of the watch. Lieutenant Rylett, the third lieutenant and incoming officer of the watch, disliked the sail configuration. This was a common occurrence with Rylett. A course or topsail was not drawing properly unless it was set to Rylett's exacting standard. It mattered not whether the men on watch were inconvenienced, or whether the outgoing officer of the watch viewed the current sail configuration as satisfactory. It didn't matter that most adjustment could be completed from the deck. It didn't even matter if the outgoing officer of the watch was senior to Rylett. As officer of the watch, Rylett would have his way. Despite the fact that no one else could find any fault with the set of the sails, Rylett shouted, "Call the watch, topmen aloft". The watch responded accordingly. That response was not fast enough for Rylett, who expected men to launch into action at this command. To spur on the watch, Rylett ordered the bosun's mates to use starters.

Jon Swift, an able seaman and the senior rating for the mizzen, collected the mizzen team and headed to the ratlines. As the last man, he

was already across the deck reaching for the ratlines on the larboard side when the starter struck. As a reflex action, the right hand immediately dropped and covered the source of pain, the right buttock. Consequently, he nearly missed grabbing the ratlines and barely avoided falling overboard.

Jon swung outboard over frothy water, controlling the swing with a massive effort of arm and shoulder muscles. As both feet and the other hand contacted the ratlines, he regained physical control of his movement. Mentally, it was more difficult. Despite knowing it might be a mistake, Jon looked through narrowed eyes at the man who had ‘started’ him -- Mr. Pearson, the bosun’s mate. There was no mercy in the man’s face -- just a hard, dispassionate return stare. Although neither of them said a word, anyone who saw their faces would have said the communication between the two men was clear and decidedly hostile.

After reaching his post in the tops, Jon cursed himself for letting Rylett and Pearson get to him. Just pausing and staring at ‘Prick’ Pearson could be grounds for insubordination should the bosun’s mate make anything of it. The result would be a striped back, but that wasn’t the half of it.

He was caught between a rock and a hard place and knew it. If Pearson decided to make an issue out of this, or Rylett coerced Pearson, and that wouldn’t take much, all the efforts expended to keep the position as senior rating on the mizzen would be forfeited. Since being pressed, Jon was proud of the hard work completed to improve and elevate himself above a landsman. As the senior rating for the mizzenmast, he was responsible for all men working the mizzen. He received no extra pay, or any other benefit; yet was expected to train and lead these men up in the tops in any conditions. Everyone knew the most dangerous work on board one of His Majesty’s warships was in the tops. In the months he’d been on this ship, he’d never seen a commissioned officer, or any petty officer for that matter, in the tops.

The rash of deaths from yellow jack over the previous few months had decimated the midshipmen and topman ranks alike. There were only two midshipmen left on board. Mr. Elkhorne, who had far more experience, was the acting signals officer. The other, Mr. Farley, was the captain of the tops and Jon's direct superior, but in reality so young and inexperienced, he barely knew what was happening. That left the real load on the shoulders of the senior ratings of each mast. Using a starter on one of them was a breach of lower deck unwritten rules.

A reckoning was coming.

The mizzen topmen were silent and appeared oblivious to the events below. They were waiting for orders to fix a non-existent problem.

Dangling one hundred feet over the deck, Jon wondered for the hundredth time why in hell he was even there. There was no real reason any topmen had to be up in the tops at this time. Any adjustment to the trim of the sails could easily be done from the deck. It was just the dammed officer of the watch, Lieutenant Rylett, exerting his authority. He always had to rub in his superiority.

Jon shuffled out along the yardarm, maintaining a neutral face to mask a seething bitterness. He occasionally rubbed his buttocks with his one free hand to ease the stinging.

"It looks like someone has a sore arse, or maybe something didn't come out right when he was on the jakes," said Mannion jokingly.

"You'd have a sore arse if you had a bruise the size of a fist on it," replied Hale.

"That'll be enough of that. The next time someone opens his mouth, there'd better be a good reason, or you'll regret it," growled Jon.

No one on the yardarm dared say another word, but that didn't stop the snide looks and smirks. It didn't matter whether the men liked it or

not, Jon could not afford the risk another run in with Rylett, especially for something as trivial as speaking in the tops.

Jon made an effort to stop rubbing his sore ass.

There was no point taking it out on the men. They weren't responsible, but in a way, they were. If they had hurried to the ratlines, none of this might have happened. None of the men, Jon included, could see any reason why they had to rush aloft. If there was any need to hurry, all Jon had to do was shout. Looking at it from that perspective, it was Jon's fault. Just the same, even with the rush, Rylett hadn't issued any orders yet.

Jon should have seen trouble coming. He knew Lieutenant Rylett was the officer of the watch when the head count occurred, and that bastard had it in for him.

What could anyone do about it? Complaints were about as popular on this ship as rats; about as numerous, and had about the same likelihood of being resolved as eradicating all the rats on the ship. Just at the moment, however, Jon would settle for getting rid of a few rats off the quarterdeck and one rat in particular. Jon vowed not to let Rylett get to him.

Looking to his left, Jon regarded the other men working on the yardarm. Bare feet gripped the rough hemp ropes of the horse, providing some measure of balance, but limited security. The upper chest rested against the yardarm with one arm gripping the sail canvas over the top of the yardarm, and the other hand under the yardarm. This was his world, where one moment's neglect would put more than a crimp in your day -- it would probably result in an abrupt halt to it.

Up the mast, three things ruled -- the sea, the wind, and the damned officers -- in that order. Each of them was potentially lethal. The sea always caused the masts to sway, sometimes dramatically, making balance critical at all times. Spray could coat the rigging making it slick; or frozen in the northern latitudes. The wind continuously plucked at a man, the sails and the rigging. Wind-chill could freeze hands and feet so much that it

was difficult to grip the ropes or sail. All of this he could live with; they were just the normal hazards of the job. It was the damned officers that you had to watch.

The damned officers would order you aloft in the worst weather or at night just to adjust a sail that didn't need adjusting. Most of the time it was just to prove they had the power to do so or that they were better at watch duties than the officer they relieved. If their actions caused problems, loss or injury of a man, then they would conveniently dump all the blame on the senior rating for the respective mast.

Jon focused on Beck, the man next to him, and examined his actions carefully. Six months ago, Beck had fallen from the yardarm. They had been learning how to strike the royals on the mainmast, when Lieutenant Rylett ordered them to hurry up. Rylett was hungry, hung-over, in a vile mood and wished to get below out of the hot sun. Rushing to comply with the order, Beck had failed to maintain a grip. Jon could still vividly remember Beck slowly starting to slide. He had screamed a warning, but it was too late. Beck's slide accelerated into a fall. He dropped a few feet and hammered backwards into the topgallant yard, breaking a few ribs in the process. He was lucky. By hitting and bouncing off the topgallant yard, he was redirected over the side and dropped into the water feet first. Without that re-direction, he would have splattered over the deck. When he hit the water, he broke both of his legs. Again, he was lucky. If he had hit at any other angle, he probably would have had all the air knocked out of his lungs and kept going straight down to the bottom. As it was, there was enough air still in his body to keep him afloat, because Beck couldn't swim.

Despite those injuries, Jon considered Beck luckier than he was. After six months, Beck was back working in the tops and was rapidly approaching the same level of dexterity he had prior to the accident. Jon, on the other hand, had still not fully recovered. Even though Lieutenant Rylett had been detailed as the safety officer for the training, and Midshipman Farley

the direct supervisor, all the blame had been dumped on Jon. Facing possible punishment at the inquiry, Jon had stood his ground, thereby incurring the wrath of Lieutenant Rylett. Rylett, as safety officer had been seen as ineffective. A deficiency in his abilities had been exposed, and that was something Rylett couldn't bear. Although Jon was unaware of any repercussions against Rylett, it was enough to set Rylett off. Jon was still paying a price at every opportunity Lieutenant Rylett could find. On top of that, any trust he had with any of the men in the mess had instantly vanished, and it still hadn't fully returned.

Jon generally took position at the extreme end of the yardarm. When initially trained as a topman, it was explained that a good leader never asked another man to do any job he was not prepared to do himself. In other words, you have to be prepared to do the risky jobs before sending someone else to do them. Like a fool, he bought into this hogwash, and now was paying the penalty for it, rather than being safer near the mast, or even better on deck. He sure as hell never saw any commissioned officer do a dirty job before ordering a man to do it.

Directly below him was the side of the ship and water. If he slipped or fell for any reason, he hoped that at least he would clear the side of the ship. Hitting the water from this height was bad enough, but at least the water had more give than the side of the ship. During previous engagements, he had seen small cannon balls bounce off those thick oaken hull walls. If he hit the bulwark or deck, they would probably have to use a shovel to scrape him up and throw the remains overboard. He could just imagine the curses from the poor bastards that would have to holystone the residue, but then he would probably be laughing about it from up on high.

Shuffling further over, he rigorously applied the tried and true maxim 'one hand for His Majesty and one hand for yourself.' This had been repeatedly hammered into his skull during training, and he had just as

stringently emphasized it to his team members. After Beck's fall, no one needed to be reminded.

He shook his head, trying to focus on the present and not dwell on the past and things that he couldn't change. It was easier said than done. He had just returned to the ship after a couple of weeks of shore duty with the army where he had been treated with respect by those army officers with whom he had dealt. He had a greater degree of freedom with them than he had ever had in His Majesty's navy. He had never been struck once, and his body had managed to recover from the mass of bruises he always seemed to carry since running afoul of Rylett.

Now that same torment was commencing again if the 'starting' this morning was any indication.