

SWIFT
REVENGE

ALEC MERRILL

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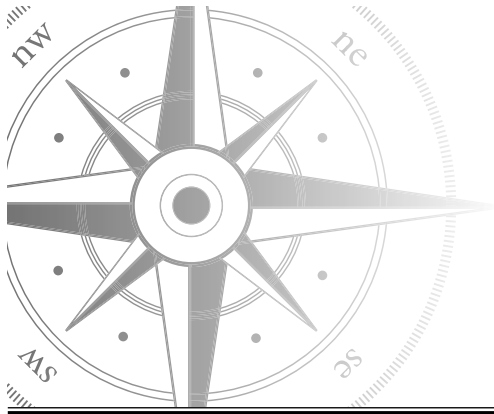
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CHAPTER

1

“Deck there, sail on the starboard quarter, over the horizon,” yelled the masthead lookout.

Lieutenant Bosworth, the first lieutenant of HMS Albany, glanced around the quarterdeck searching for an appropriate runner to inform the captain. Midshipman Knight, who should have been present looking after the signal flags, was absent. The only person seemingly available appeared to be Mr. Keenan, the master-at-arms, who for some reason was at that moment on the quarterdeck.

“Mr. Keenan, would you inform the captain, there is an unknown sail on the starboard quarter and ask him if it should be investigated,” ordered Bosworth.

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Bosworth, a lanky officer of nearly six feet, with long unfashionable black hair and a pitiful moustache paced uneasily back and forth awaiting the captain’s instructions. The quartermaster on the wheel glanced nervously at Bosworth and unconsciously shifted further away. All officers paced the quarterdeck at some point, but the first lieutenant’s uneasy pacing screamed caution. A further nervous glance by the quartermaster confirmed other men were just as cautious. Everyone looked fully employed, although the amount of work actually accomplished was anyone’s guess.

After some moments, Mr. Keenan returned to the deck, “Sir, the captain would like you to investigate the strange sail, and report when she is visible. Be prepared to lead a boarding party.”

Without acknowledging Mr. Keenan, Bosworth shouted to the masthead lookout, “Lookout, where away is the sail?”

“Deck there, she’s two points to starboard and turning west, heading toward land.”

“Helmsman, two points to starboard. Bosun, get those sails drawing properly.”

Both the quartermaster on the wheel and the bosun acknowledged near simultaneously. The bosun shouted and the crew launched into action.

HMS Albany eased slightly to starboard, on a converging course toward the strange sail, as yet unseen from the deck. Under the new course, the ship headed south southwest paralleling Long Island. Based on the course, it appeared as if the strange sail’s destination was the port of New York. Whether that was her original intended destination or a recent decision was debateable.

There wasn’t much ship traffic at this time of the year compared to the late summer and early fall when delivery of the harvest happened and the colonists gathered supplies for the upcoming winter. The strange sail was the first ship sighted in the last two days and a welcomed change in the monotony on board the Albany.

Lieutenant Bosworth was both newly promoted and new to HMS Albany. Four months ago he had been a midshipman on a ship-of-the-line in the Mediterranean. Months prior to that, Bosworth had barely scraped by the lieutenant’s examination with a standing so low on the promotion list that any prospects of promotion were a forlorn hope. That had all changed in November when to everyone’s surprise an order arrived to report to HMS Albany.

HMS Albany was a relatively new ship, having been launched the previous March. Although called a sloop-of-war, she had two masts and was in reality a small brig. She was ninety-one feet in length with a

twenty-six foot beam, displacing two hundred and seventy tonnes and carried fourteen 6-pounder guns. Unlike other vessels constructed for His Majesty's navy, the Albany began her life in the colonies in Virginia.

Neither Bosworth nor the captain, the only two commissioned officers currently on HMS Albany, had been on the ship for more than three weeks. Of the two previous officers, the former captain had been promoted and sent back to England for other duties more in line with his new rank. The previous first lieutenant was now the admiral's flag lieutenant, and could reasonably expect promotion when a new ship was commissioned. Aware that the Albany had provided a stepping stone to the previous lieutenant's career, Bosworth was keen to follow the same path. It was a safe bet to believe the captain held similar views.

The crew considered HMS Albany a happy and lucky ship, at least up to the arrival of the present owners. Now there were serious doubts. Since commissioning, under the previous owners, there had been the usual infractions, caused by the usual culprits, with the expected punishments. Those punishments averaged a flogging a month and the crew in general felt they were deserved. In the three weeks since the new owners had come aboard, there had been two floggings a week and it appeared that number was likely to increase. What was even more surprising was the crew had been on their best behaviour while they grew accustomed to the new owners. The bosun, bosun's mates and the master-at-arms had all placed fewer men on report in the previous three weeks since the new owners arrived, yet more men appeared before the captain. Every man on board knew the reason and that reason was Lieutenant Bosworth. If men were normally wary of the first lieutenant, they were far more wary of Bosworth. From the men's perspective, the new first lieutenant was a short fused prick, a bastard, or something far more sinister depending upon who you asked.

As the Albany cruised toward the strange sail, the course on the foremast flapped once as the wind gusted. Bosworth was immediately critical and shouted, "Bosun get those sails properly adjusted." Under

his breath, but still loud enough for the quartermaster to hear, a further comment escaped.

“God this crew is lax. If this is the best they can do, it’s a wonder the previous officers weren’t cashiered.”

It was unclear how the captain viewed the first lieutenant’s performance. Regardless, there was no reason to provide any opportunity to criticize that performance, like a sail that wasn’t drawing properly. Discipline was the answer. Since the previous owners hadn’t apparently enforced things up to the appropriate standards, it was up to Bosworth, who would have the crew toeing the line in short order. Either the crew would respond instantly when ordered; or they would pay the price.

The chase was long and uneventful. The strange sail, showing a British flag, slowly slid over the horizon into cannon range after three hours. It was a tub of a brig, built for cargo capacity and not for speed. Once she was fully hull up, Bosworth sent a runner to the captain’s cabin to report as ordered. There was no answer for a period of time before the runner reappeared, saying nothing. Bosworth was about to berate the runner when the captain appeared on deck.

Commander Tomlin was in his early thirties. Well dressed and stylish, he cut a fine figure. Although only a tad over five and a half feet, his presence was immediately felt on the quarterdeck. Soundlessly, he took a glass and scanned the target brig.

“Mr. Bosworth, you will prepare a boarding party and examine the brig’s cargo. Take sufficient men to escort three men back here, preferably able seamen.”

Bosworth smiled, “Aye, sir,” then called the master-at-arms. “Mr. Keenan, prepare a boarding party and add a few extra men, we will press some of the brig’s crew.”

“Aye, sir,” said Keenan, who set about complying with those orders.

“Mr. Knight, signal the brig that we wish to board her for inspection,” ordered Tomlin.

With little fanfare, signal flags rose and were reluctantly acknowledged by the brig. Both ships slowed and coasted to a stop parallel to each other

at a distance of three hundred yards. The Albany lowered sails and rigged the yardarms for hoisting the cutter. Minutes later the cutter dropped into the water with the boarding party rapidly scrambling into rowing positions.

“Boarding party away,” ordered Tomlin.

Bosworth saluted and backed down over the side. Seconds later, the Albany’s cutter shot out from the side and headed directly to the brig. Beside Lieutenant Bosworth, there was the master-at-arms and twenty well armed men. No one expected much resistance from the brig, but if there was any, they were well prepared for it.

Tomlin watched with a glass as the boarding party scrambled up the brig’s side. Tomlin noted that a few men preceded Lieutenant Bosworth up the side. A man, who appeared to be the brig’s captain, greeted Bosworth upon reaching the deck, and handed over a parcel of papers. There was little else to see for the next few minutes as the boarding party completed the inspection. Captain Tomlin paced slowly on the windward side of the deck, head down and seemingly barely conscious of the crew.

After about twenty minutes the boarding party started descending into the cutter. Three additional men accompanied them. These sour-looking men dropped bags into the cutter, so it was reasonably easy to distinguish those pressed men from the Albany’s men.

Almost the instant the cutter cast off, the brig dropped sail and scurried away. It was as if she wished to run in case the Albany’s captain had further thoughts of pressing additional men.

A smiling Bosworth rose over the Albany’s side and saluted Tomlin. “Three prime seamen, all qualified able and supposedly good topmen, sir.”

Tomlin smiled. The additional three men would put them one man over the Albany’s complement, but that was not the end. After seeing so many men on report before him, if they continued to press men from these colonial merchantmen, he could rid the ship’s company of the malcontents and malingerers. Those men could be transferred to other ships, via the Admiral. In that manner, two objectives would be reached. The Albany would have a top-notch crew and Tomlin would become the

Admiral's favourite. Both would have beneficial consequences for one's career.

While hoisting the cutter and lowering it back into position on deck, snowflakes started to descend. Tomlin looked up at the sky in annoyance.

"Mr. Bosworth, resume our previous course and get us back on our patrol station. I'll be in my cabin should you need me." With that Tomlin retreated to the dryness and shelter of the cabin.

The crew of the Albany jumped to action upon orders from the quarterdeck to get underway. The snow just added one more aggravation to their lot. The three new additions to their company had far more to grumble about. They had just lost their freedom and taken a drop in pay to one third of what they received per month.

It did not make for a happy crew.