

Chapter 1

Shipwreck

Jack Roggies was a twelve-year-old ship's boy. Young for the position, being two to four years prior to the normal, but he was hard working even if lacking the strength needed to haul water to the men on deck. Nevertheless, he was spry and agile as someone his age should be, able to avoid getting in the way of the men working the lines and sheets. Also, quick to respond to anyone's call, and not just Captain Meyers or Midshipman Simmons, he had earned his nickname, Jack Quick, by being the fastest to reach the Fore Royal Mast, and was best suited for the job of ship's lookout.

Jack was in awe of the enormous size of the Rummy Gale, the biggest ship in Portsmouth, and had to learn all the stores quickly, going up and down the four lower decks, running the 220-feet bow to aft and being reminded constantly, in his first week at sea, that all things must be done on the double.

The Rummy Gale was a Dutch-built Indiaman, large and heavy, made for hauling cargo. She had seen better days at sea but she was still steady in her timbers, and had recently gone through a careening for a thorough cleaning and tarring. She was a solid 1,422-ton beast of the sea empty but on this voyage, she was hauling two hundred tons of lumber. As a result, she was riding a little low, as noted by the Captain.

Jack called down from his perch 187-feet above the deck, "dark clouds on the horizon dead ahead. I see God's anger."

"Give a heading to steer clear," called the Midshipman.

"No clearing, Mr. Simmons, solid wall from end to end. Lots of heaven's fire too."

"Come down, boy. A storm can be upon us quicker than even you can climb," yelled the Captain.

"Aye, aye, Captain." Jack started down the shroud. Descending to the foremast, he spotted something off starboard, and hooking his arm through the ropes, he pulled the spyglass from his trousers, scanned the waves alongside the ship, and noticed a bloody red body appear and sink below the waves. He yelled, "man overboard, off starboard!"

Jeremy Simmons raced to the gunwale, several sailors taking up position along the side also, all searching for a man in the water.

The Captain called up. "Give a bearing, boy!"

Jack pointed towards the bow, "it was there, Sir! A league distance, streaked with blood and tossed in the waves."

The Captain scanned from where the boy pointed backwards. "Do any of you men see it, or any debris in the water?"

A chorus of, "nay," rumbled down the length of the ship.

The Captain looked across the horizon through his spyglass and ordered the boy back up the shroud to his perch with instructions to be on watch for a ship's mast. Then he called Jeremy Simmons over. "Don't keep him aloft too long, and keep a lookout for any sign of a shipwreck on the horizon."

"What's your thinking, Captain?"

"I'm thinking that a boy his age should not be on my ship, Mr. Simmons. It is a fine age for the navy, who can afford to train a boy to be an officer and a gentleman. But this is a commercial ship, I cannot afford to pay a boy who can't earn his keep."

"Yes, Sir. But as I explained before we embarked, his father died and he is the eldest of his mother's sons. He needs to earn a crossing wage, if the family is to survive, so he will be my responsibility." Then wanting to veer the conversation in another direction, Jeremy asked. "What about the body in the water?"

"I saw no body," stated Captain Meyers, "what's more, I see no wreckage that would accompany a body this far out. Did you?"

"No, Sir." Jeremy agreed.

"My thinking is; this is the first of many storms we will encounter on this passage, and a boy just from his mother's teat is full of fear of what a storm at sea brings. As right he should be. If he does not spot a mast hiding among the clouds, or any wreckage in the waves soon, send him below to ride out the storm."

The Captain knew that a body in the water, unaccompanied by any other sign of wreckage, was a known pirate's trick to get a ship to luff and becalm her sails. Then they would come racing out of the coverage of the storm and take the ship while it was busy rescuing a person long-time dead. Likewise, the absence of another ship could be a sign of something even more dangerous to come.

As the bank of black clouds appeared before the Rummy Gale, Jeremy Simmons ordered Jack Quick from the riggings, and replaced him with other sailors reefing the upper sails in preparation for the storm. Thunder rolled across the waves and Jack shuddered as he, and Jeremy made their way to the Captain's quarters.

Jeremy, towering over the frail boy, placed a firm hand on his shoulder, "a storm is a storm, the same at sea as on land. It is just a bit of wind, water, and wailing. Calm yourself, Jack."

"Yes Sir."

"Oh, but it is not just a storm when you are at sea." The Captain contradicted the midshipman, as he stood in the cabin's doorway watching the men prepare. The waves already rocking the ship even as heavy as she was.

The storm was still several hours ahead, but Jack was right, it stretched from port to starboard with not a break in sight and he hoped the wall of black did not go on for too long. Jeremy had convinced him that carrying milled lumber would increase the load and therefore the profit of the voyage, but it also meant that the ship was much heavier, ride lower in the waves, and be more prone to sinking in a violent storm. "On land, a storm does not open the ground beneath your feet and pull you under. Now, what did you see from your lookout, Master Roggies?"

"You mean the body," Jack said carefully, as he was quite afraid of the Captain. The grey beard was rugged and unkempt, and the face hard and scarred. "I saw a body with long streaks of blood down its back. But the blood was bright crimson, like fire, it was there for but a moment, then gone."

The Captain led them into his cabin and poured the young boy a full glass of grog. Four times his daily ration. Then he lit up his pipe, taking several strong pulls to get it going. Smoke whorls streamed from his nose and surrounded his weathered face. "Ah, you saw your first mermaid, my boy."

"Captain!" Jeremy objected. "Do you think it wise to fill the boy's head with fancies?"

The Captain laughed. "Fancies, Mr. Simmons? You went to sea as a lad a little older than good ol' Jack Quick here, been on the water some six years now, and you think you have seen all there is. I walked a deck since the day I could walk at my father's side, I have seen monsters. Fish the size of a ship that can reduce this boat to driftwood. They surface without warning and send clouds into the skies. And yes, mermaids too. They either come to lead us through a storm safely, or to collect our souls for the devil."

"As to your giant fish, I have heard of them, although I have never seen one myself," Jeremy said, lighting up his pipe, the red glow reflecting the copper streaks in his hair, which was tied tight into a neat ponytail and his equally freshly minted copper eyes lit up brighter as he spoke passionately. "But I have never heard one creditable story of a mermaid. Most are told by those who have had as many years of grog as actual sea duty, and are usually told in exchange for a pint." He laughed. "And they all end with the rum-soaked brain being unable to forget her face, or the love gained and lost in a single glance."

Jack's eyes widened as saucers and glossed over as another wave rocked the Rummy Gale.

The captain squared him up, "a man might well take rum as his mistress once his heart has been touched by a mermaid. Drown himself in drink, as it were, to finish the job left undone by the sea. Jack, my boy, you be too young to feel this now, but I assure thee there be no purer love for a sailor than that for the maidens of the sea."

"You said they come for our souls."

"Well, not all love is reciprocated," claimed the captain.

The boy became unsteady on his feet again, and Jeremy, several inches taller than the Captain was at six-feet caught his arm and steadied him before letting go. "Finish your grog, Jack, then, go below and help me secure our load."



Down in the ship's hold, Jeremy pounded the wooden pegs that held stacks of lumber in place. The beams were four-by-four and twenty-feet in length, stacked floor to ceiling in the lowest of the holds. There were three rows then vertical beams held in place by the pegs, a narrow passage and then the next three rows. The rows ran the length of the Rummy Gale with vertical beams every five-feet. Much more efficient than carrying logs loosely loaded into the ship.

The dark and the grog had Jack's mind playing tricks on him. The waves sounded like knocking, as if someone was desperate to get in; the mallet in Jeremy's hand amplifying the desperation. His hands were smooth but his biceps bulged through his white dress shirt once he removed his blue brass buttoned waistcoat. He was a properly dressed naval man and took pride in keeping his appearance as such while on duty. Jack held the heavy wool coat neatly folded over his arms. "What do you think I saw in the waves, Mr. Simmons, Sir?"

"I do not know, Jack. Maybe the carcass of a dolphin attacked by sharks, but a mermaid... definitely not, my boy." Jeremy pulled on one of the vertical beams. "These are all secure. The Captain was just having a laugh at your expense, and I'm sure he does not believe in mermaids either."

When they returned topside, rain had begun to fall. It was cold and driven by the wind, and the waves were cresting several feet higher. Five bells of the Last Dog Watch, the night was just beginning. Jeremy instructed Jack to return to his cabin off the Captain's quarters, told him to try to sleep, but to stay ready in case he was needed, his words punctuated by a crack of lightning.

Wind and spray tortured the men as they struggled to keep the ship driving through the ever-mounting waves, icy blows sending them tumbling across the deck as waves crashed over the rails. Sails beat louder than thunder as the winds pushed the Rummy Gale where it willed and she leaned dangerously to one side, causing sailors to swing in the riggings. Then she rolled over to the other and the men were tossed back, their bodies striking hard against something in the dark, wave upon wave drenching them in frigid water, sapping their strength.

Each man held to his duty and prayed, some silently, others calling aloud for God's mercies. Jack Roggies held tight to his restraining straps in his hammock, sleep impossible, and thunderclaps as loud as the cannon fire he had heard on his first day aboard.

The Rummy Gale had four cannons on each side, two out the bow and two more pointing aft. His training exercise was to run powder from gun to gun, aft to bow and port to starboard, making sure gunners never ran out of gunpowder and the bags never got wet. Not an easy task as the lower decks always seemed to have a slick film of seawater on them. More importantly, Mr. Simmons informed him, was to stay clear of the gunnery tracks. If he were hit by the recoiling cannon, his injuries could be fatal.

Jack made countless trips from the powder store in the armory with pairs of canvas bags hung around his neck, the fuses connecting the two five-pound bags oily and gritty with black powder, they rubbed his neck raw. The sounds of the cannons made it impossible to hear anything else, so instead of waiting for the gunnery crew to call for more powder, he kept track of how many shots each cannon fired and resupplied them when they were down to their last two.

Both Captain and crew were pleased with his performance and grasp of the situation, and like all other jobs he was assigned to, Jack took to the duties of a powder monkey quickly and naturally.

Right now, however, he would be happy if the boom that rattled his bones was that of cannon fire. But it was not, instead of the flash of cannons, it was the flash from the Almighty. It seemed to be louder than any cannon on the Rummy Gale, and it was aimed at him.

In the darkness, lightning, thunder, howling, and screams all closed in on him. How he wished for the warm glow of his oil lamp, but Mr. Simmons had sternly worded him against the use of such a thing during a storm. "The dark will be terrifying to be sure, but a shattered lamp in your cabin will unleash Hell upon you."

Jack was bawling aloud when Jeremy burst into his cabin, screaming. "On your feet, got to get topside! MOVE lad, there is no time to waste." But the boy was in shock and could not move from his spot. A rush of water propelled Jeremy into the cabin and slammed him against the hammock and he barely managed to get his arms up in time to stop himself from crushing the boy against the wall. Then he gathered him up and sloshed through the calf-deep water.

"What is happening, Mr. Simmons?" asked Jack between sobs. "I'm sorry, but I tried to be a man..."

"You are as much a man as anyone aboard, Mr. Roggies. We are taking on water. The ship is sinking, we must abandon her quickly."

A torrent of seawater rolled over them on the stairs leading to the main deck and a bloodied body thumped against the wall and tumbled down into the darkness. Jack's eyes grew huge at witnessing the spectacle of violence the sea had brought forth. The mizzenmast was broken in two and swung like a pendulum from its riggings, men ensnared in the lines were being whipped about the deck broken and lifeless, and still others hung in the riggings as if a mass execution had been ordered. Jack gripped tighter onto Jeremy's neck. "I don't want to die," he cried.

"You won't, I promise," Jeremy told him sincerely as another massive wave broke over the bow and a surge of frothy sea drove them back. The Rummy Gale, rolling to port, Jeremy climbed along the starboard railing with Jack under his arm.

"Where is Captain Meyers?"

"I am afraid he is gone, swept overboard before I came for you."

A loud crackle above them was followed by their bodies becoming weightless, being flung up, and propelling them through the air. Jeremy gripped the boy tighter, preparing to land he knew not where. He hoped in the water because landing back on deck could kill them both outright, as it had so many of the sailors already.

They were lucky, splashing down in the water surrounded by bits of the Rummy Gale, big and small. The last horrific breaking of wood meaning the ship was doomed. Spotting a part of the mast and yardarm floating nearby, Jeremy swam to it, dragging the unconscious Jack in tow. The sea was surprisingly warmer than he expected and he draped Jack over the cross section. There were a few yards of sail attached to the mast and stretching it out, he tied its corners to the wood.

Jeremy worked quickly to fashion a makeshift raft from the debris, feeling eyes upon him in the darkness. Sharks to be sure, drawn by the trail of bloody bodies already in the water. Rolling Jack onto the sail, he slapped his face a couple of times. He was alive but the ordeal obviously been too much. Jeremy hung onto the raft firmly, as they were tossed around in the angry sea, as it was not big enough to keep both afloat. He could see other items; barrels, pieces of decking, larger too, but he could not risk becoming separated from the boy to swim for one, resigning himself to hold on for as long as he could. This was his charge, his solemn duty, to see this boy safely through the storm and deliver him home.

Home. There was a thought he had clung to in the last few months. This was to be his next to last trip at sea. His duty to the Royal Navy done, he was returning home for Beth, his fiancée, to wed her and bring her to the colonies. Together they would build their future in lumber.

Elizabeth Parisson was a beauty to behold. With bright chestnut eyes peeking out from behind the blackest of lashes, her pink rosy cheeks plumped and caused her obsidian hair to curl around them in a carefree manner. He knew her almost from birth and had watched her grow into the lovely lady she had become and there had hardly been a day that the two had not been found in each other's company. He accompanied her to fetch water from the well; she followed him when he went to chop wood. It was therefore no surprise to either of their families, or townsfolk, when he petitioned her father for her hand.

The war with the French delayed his plans, and being a man of honor, he did not want his wife waiting at home wondering if she were widowed or not. But Jeremy was quick to promise that after his service to the Crown was fulfilled he would return for her. Now that he had his lumber mill running smoothly, he was going to make good on his word. He had faced

sword and cannon fire, felt the hot breeze of musket balls sizzling past his face, but they had not altered his plans. So, he was not about to let a little wind and water change them either.



His shipmates' voices became fewer and fewer as the night got darker and longer. He called out periodically, and each time the replies came from farther away. The storm was subsiding but he was exhausted, and he told himself that he had to hold out until dawn, when he could get his bearings and fashion a proper raft for him and the boy. And if he were lucky one of the longboats had survived the sinking and they would be plucked from the sea.

The voices finally went silent in the oppressive darkness and he lost all sensation in his legs. Sporadically, he tried to kick to keep himself warm and alert but they felt like anchors. Then he tasted more blood in the water; not far from him, sharks had claimed yet another shipmate. Jack was safe on the sail but he would draw the predators to them, and as the seas began to calm, his fears were confirmed as they arrived in ever-greater numbers. Mustering his last bit of strength, he kicked hard away and let go of the makeshift raft.

With God's mercy, he might find something he could use to remain afloat not far from the boy. He swam and bobbed around in the water for an eternity but could not see another piece of debris. Then he realized that he could also not see Jack, or any sense in swimming further. He wiped his blurry eyes, not knowing if it was seawater or tears and begged Beth forgiveness as his legs pulled him under.

Instinctively, Jeremy held his breath as he began to sink slowly, but when the burning in his chest grew, he let out tiny air bubbles. Shining like pearls in the shafts of light penetrating the darkness from holes in the sky, he let out the rest of the air in a roiling act of surrender to the inevitable. The fire extinguished, he sank rapidly through the moonbeams.

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