



BY FORCE OF ARMS

JAMES NELSON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

The first in the enthralling Revolution at Sea series

As the War of Independence begins in earnest, American merchant seamen prepare to strike the first blows. None strikes more deftly than Isaac Biddlecomb, captain of the *Judea*, whose smuggling activities are making a mockery of His Majesty's Royal Navy. Pursued by the HMS *Rose*, he sacrifices the ship he loved to the depths, together with the fortune he stood to gain, rather than surrender.

On the run from the enraged forces of King George, Isaac disguises himself as a merchant seaman. He is reunited with Ezra Rumstick, a comrade and fierce rebel, as the revolution gathers momentum. On a brig bound for Jamaica, and now serving as a lowly mate, fate tests Isaac's mettle as he is captured by the enemy and faces a life of servitude under the deranged captain and sadistic crew of the HMS *Icarus* ...

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Also by James Nelson
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The Revolution at Sea Saga
Book One

James Nelson

*To my parents, Selma and David,
and my sister Stephanie,
counselors who feelingly persuade me what I am*

And to Lisa, whom I love

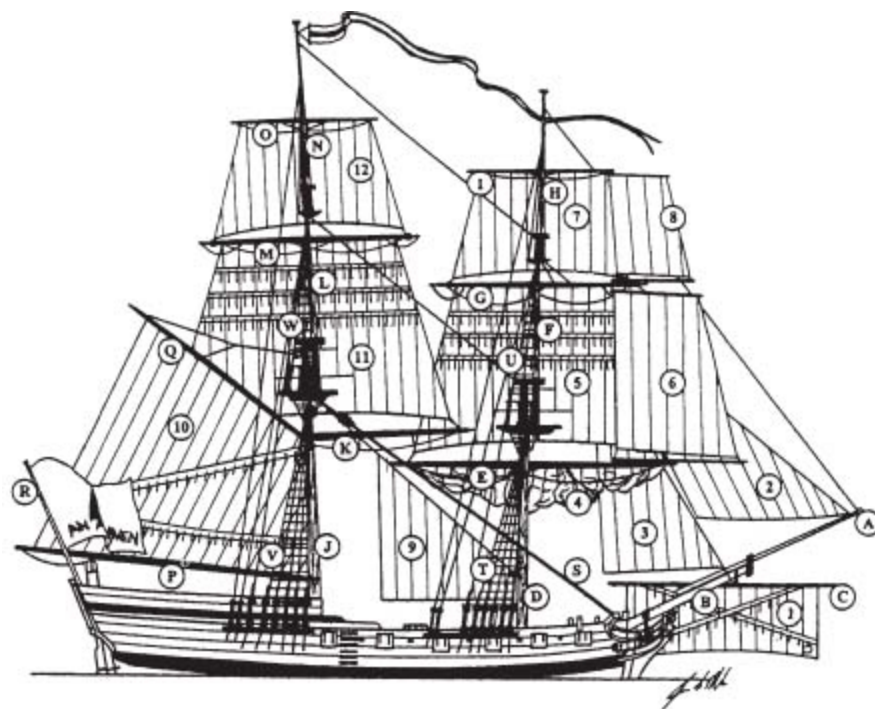
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the following people: Richard Miles, who taught me how to take a risk; C. A. Finger, the best square-rig man I have ever known. Thanks to Tom Montgomery and Stephanie Nelson for their invaluable editorial input. Thanks to Bill Grose, Doug Grad, and most certainly to Peter Wolverton at Pocket Books. My deepest thanks to Nat Sobel, Andrea Harding, Dorothea Nelson, and all of the people at Sobel Weber Associates.

Thanks to my many shipmates of the past years. You are, in the words of Joseph Conrad, as good a crowd as ever fisted with wild cries the beating canvas of a heavy foresail; or tossing aloft, invisible in the night, gave back yell for yell to a westerly gale.

These Special Orders Shall be a full Warrant and Discharge to him, and all others on Board his Said Vessel and the other Vessels fitted out and employed as aforesaid under his Command, to encounter expulse expel and resist by Force of Arms ... all and every such Person or Persons as Shall attempt or enterprise the Destruction, Invasion, Detriment, or annoyance of the Inhabitants of this Colony or Plantation.

—Instructions from the
Rhode Island Committee of
Safety to Capt. Abraham
Whipple, commander of the
armed sloop *Katy*,
June 15, 1775



A Brig of War

Sails

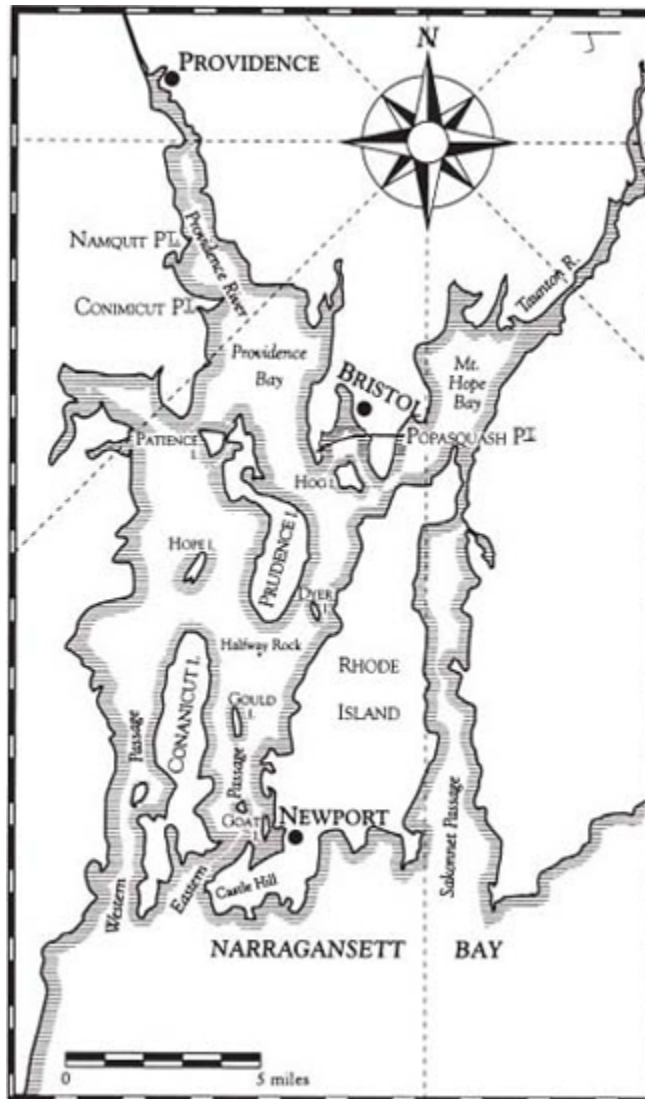
1. Spritsail
2. Jib
3. Fore Topmast Staysail
4. Foresail (clewed up)
5. Fore Topsail
6. Fore Topmast Studdingsail (removable)
7. Fore Topgallant Sail
8. Fore Topgallant Studdingsail (removable)
9. Main Staysail
10. Mainsail
11. Main Topsail
12. Main Topgallant Sail

Spars and Rigging

- A. Jibboom
- B. Bowsprit
- C. Spritsail Yard
- D. Foremast
- E. Foreyard
- F. Fore Topmast
- G. Fore Topsail Yard
- H. Fore Topgallant Mast
- I. Fore Topgallant Yard
- J. Mainmast
- K. Mainyard
- L. Main Topmast
- M. Main Topsail Yard
- N. Main Topgallant Mast
- O. Main Topgallant Yard
- P. Boom
- Q. Gaff
- R. Ensign Staff (removable)
- S. Mainstay

- T. Fore Shrouds and Ratlines
- U. Fore Topmast Shrouds and Ratlines
- V. Main Shrouds and Ratlines
- W. Main Topmast Shrouds and Ratlines

*For other terminology and usage [see Glossary](#) at the end of the book



CHAPTER 1

Judea

CAPT. ISAAC BIDDLECOMB was carrying more sail than was prudent, more sail than was even safe, for the thirty-five knots of wind gusting from the south-southwest. It was a fact of which he was quite aware, but chose to ignore, hoping instead that the *Judea's* thin spars would bear the strain for an hour more. An hour and a half at the most.

He pushed himself off the leeward rail and walked up the steeply sloping quarterdeck to the weather side, noting again, with some irritation, that such physical activity was not as effortless as it had once been. It wasn't his age - he was only twenty-eight - and while he no longer had the lean, tough physique that he had enjoyed as a foremast sailor and even as a mate, he could hardly be considered fat. Still, the work of a ship's captain and its concomitant lack of physical activity was spoiling him, and he made a vague resolve to do something about it.

Biddlecomb reached the weather side, grabbed on to the caprail atop the bulwark, and peered aloft. His long dark hair, bound in a queue, whipped around his head and stung his cheek like driving rain, and the tail end of his long wool coat beat against his legs. His cocked hat was jammed into the binnacle box for safekeeping. He buttoned the uppermost of the silver buttons on the coat and flipped the broad collar up to keep the wind off his neck and to tame his flogging hair as he studied the sails and spars above.

In the light of the gibbous moon he could make out the fore and main topgallant masts, one hundred feet and more above the deck. They bowed dangerously to leeward,

bending to the pressure of the yard and sail. He looked down at the water rushing along the ship's side and streaming aft in a long, straight wake before disappearing in the night. They were making eight knots at least, more likely eight and a half. Through the darkness he could just see the loom of the land ahead, the colony of Rhode Island. In an hour they would be safe in Bristol.

'Fall off a point, Rigney,' Biddlecomb said, turning to the helmsman.

'Fall off a point, aye,' replied Rigney at the wheel, easing two spokes to larboard.

Biddlecomb leaned over the weather rail and peered forward around the edge of the mainsail, staring into the darkness ahead. At last he saw it, a thin gray line, broad on the starboard bow.

'Rigney, there's Castle Hill. Do you see it?' Biddlecomb pointed toward the rocky slope that marked the entrance to Narragansett Bay, just visible in the moonlight.

'Aye, sir,' the helmsman said at last.

'And the breakers on the rocks?'

'Aye.'

'Good. We'll stand in as close to those rocks as ever we can. Plenty of water there, so don't be shy.'

In the glow of the binnacle light Biddlecomb could see Rigney's face, and he did not look happy. 'Aye, sir,' was all he said.

The tip of Beaver Neck was now well astern and the *Judea* was charging down on Castle Hill. Biddlecomb drew a deep breath of the cold December air and grabbed hold of the mizzen topmast backstay. The rigging was hard as an iron bar, and Biddlecomb could feel it quiver under his hand, eight thousand square feet of canvas driving three hundred tons of ship and cargo. It was exhilarating and it made him deeply happy.

The ship raced through the short chop of Narragansett Bay, driven by the fresh southwesterly gale. The sails were

full and hard; in the moonlight they looked as if they were carved out of marble. Considering how foul the *Judea's* bottom was from the two months she had just spent in the Caribbean, Biddlecomb knew that no amount of additional canvas would make her go faster than she was at that moment.

He looked past the starboard leech of the mainsail. Castle Hill was bearing three points forward of the starboard beam and a quarter mile off.

'Bear up, Rigney!' Biddlecomb ordered. 'Right up to the breakers, head right for the breakers. I want to be in the shadow of the land. We don't need any prying eyes tonight.'

'Aye, sir,' said Rigney, grim faced, as he eased the wheel to starboard, turning until the *Judea* was sailing straight at the murderous rocks.

Biddlecomb kept his eyes fixed on Castle Hill. The rocks, black patches in the night highlighted by the white breakers beneath, appeared just at the edge of the foresail.

'Good. Steady as she goes. Hold her there.'

The *Judea* rushed down toward the rocks, one hundred yards, fifty yards. Biddlecomb gripped the backstay until his hand ached. He felt his stomach tighten, felt the soles of his feet tingling, like a limb that one has slept on wrong, his well-recognized signs of fear and exhilaration.

In contrast to his churning innards and his tingling soles, his face was stoical, his expression one of a man only vaguely interested in his surroundings. It was a trick he had learned from the better captains under whom he had served. As a young seaman he had thought them utterly fearless; as a mate he had discovered that they were simply good at hiding their anxiety. That was important.

The *Judea* charged down on the rocks, like something out of control. Biddlecomb recalled the chart in his mind's eye; he knew every ledge, every sounding, by heart, and he knew that there was deep water there. But looking at a

chart was one thing, driving the ship he loved down on the rocks at night was quite another.

And suddenly the ledge was abeam, the breakers so close that the spray dashed Biddlecomb in the face where he stood on the quarterdeck. He heard Rigney suck in his breath. They hurtled past, the closest outcropping not fifteen feet away. And then the rocks were gone, and the East Passage of Narragansett Bay opened up before them.

‘Good,’ said Biddlecomb. ‘Steady as she goes.’

It was worth the trouble to make certain that no one witnessed their landfall. Biddlecomb knew he was being cautious, perhaps overly cautious, sneaking into the bay at night and keeping in the shadow of the land, but it was the cautious ones who grew old and rich, and he intended to do both. The chances of encountering a British revenue vessel were slight; in the two and a half years since the revenue schooner *Gaspee* had been run aground and burned by angry Rhode Islanders, the British had never seriously attempted to collect the import duties that they had imposed.

Still, Biddlecomb felt compelled to defend against the slightest possibility of the *Judea*’s being boarded and searched, as every corner of his ship was crammed with molasses smuggled from Barbados and destined for the distilleries of New England. As one-fifth owner of the *Judea* he would have made a handsome profit even if he had paid the duty. By ignoring the British tax his profit would far exceed *handsome*.

In the lee of Castle Hill the wind fell off and the *Judea* came down on a more even keel. Biddlecomb pulled his hat from the binnacle box and pushed it back into shape, then jammed it down on his head. He walked forward along the quarterdeck and stepped down into the waist of the ship. The watch on deck was standing by the leeward rail, talking softly, the men busy at various tasks. Biddlecomb’s eyes moved automatically around the deck, noting

everything. He was pleased with what he saw; *Judea* was a good ship with a good company. And that was what he had come to expect. In five years as a ship's captain Biddlecomb had acquired such a reputation as a savvy businessman, a fair captain, and a hard-driving sailor that more often than not he had to turn good men away.

'Where's the watch on deck?' he called out in the dark.

'Here, sir,' a voice called out.

'Take another pull in the weather mainsheet. The sail looks like a fishmonger's clothesline.'

'Aye, sir,' the seaman replied, but Biddlecomb was already past the foremast.

In the bow, with the courses no longer obstructing his view, Biddlecomb could just discern Bull Point and Point Adams in the moonlight. It was all so familiar to him, like the rooms of a house in which one has grown up.

Once past Point Adams the *Judea* skirted the entrance to Brenton Cove and Newport, hugging Goat Island and making careful use of the deep water that ran right up to the rocks. Biddlecomb conned the small ship through the shoals that littered the passage between Rose Island and the mainland. They continued northerly as their course wound its way through Narragansett Bay, quickly closing the distance to Bristol and safety.

Mr Sanders, the first mate, stepped aft.

'Happy New Year to you, sir,' said Sanders, and in response to Biddlecomb's confused look added, 'It's past eight bells, ain't it?'

'Yes, of course!' In their effort to remain unnoticed they had not been striking bells, and with all hands employed for the last few hours of the voyage and no change of watch, Biddlecomb had entirely overlooked the passing of midnight. 'Welcome to 1775, Mr Sanders. We will toast it proper when we're safely in Bristol.'

'I look forward to it, and I'll wish that 1775 is as kind to us as 1774 was.'

The mate turned and looked at the shoreline gliding past. 'We've knocked out what shoring that we can, and once we're abeam Prudence Island, I'll break open hatches,' he said.

'Very good. We'll warp alongside tonight, and if we can get the help 'longshore, we'll start off-loading molasses. If we have someone aboard sober enough to be trusted, we'll send them to roust out some hands.'

Sanders cleared his throat. 'Sir, can I ask what kind of profit we'll realize this trip?'

'Fairly handsome, I should think. I bought the molasses from Glacous at eighteen sous per gallon.'

'Eighteen sous per gallon? From that thief? Sweet Jesus, sir, but how'd you manage that?' asked Sanders with undisguised incredulity.

'By convincing him I could buy molasses elsewhere for nineteen sous per gallon, rather than the twenty-five he was holding out for. Didn't you wonder why we spent that second day loading barrels of seawater?'

'Bless you, sir, I long since give up trying to figure what you're up to.'

'That might be best. Anyway, Glacous saw us loading barrels and he fairly panicked. I knew he hadn't any other buyers, so he sold to me at eighteen.'

'Eighteen sous per gallon! Sweet Jesus ...'

The two men stood in silence watching the shore slip past and the water streaming down the hull. In the moonlight Biddlecomb could just see the buoy that marked Halfway Rock, lurking just below the surface. Sanders followed Biddlecomb's gaze.

'You were aboard the *Nightingale*, weren't you, when she went up on the rock?' Sanders asked.

'I was. I was third mate then. I was down in the hold breaking out shoring when she hit.' Biddlecomb looked out in the direction of the submerged rock and thought back to that night, the men in the black hold knocked about by the

rush of water, the sea rising above his chest as he drove the last frightened man up the ladder. It was one of the most terrifying experiences of his life. 'Stove in the whole starboard bow. The old man was drunk.'

Prudence Island was now visible on the larboard beam, a mile distant. 'I'll start breaking open the hatches,' said Sanders.

'Very good,' said Biddlecomb, and the mate started forward.

Biddlecomb stared out toward Prudence Island and thought about how he would spend the profits from this voyage. He would buy a house, to be certain, and buy a greater share of the *Judea*. At this rate it would be less than five years before he would be complete owner of his beloved ship, the finest vessel he had ever sailed. She would be the foundation of the fleet of merchant ships he intended to build.

From there his thoughts turned to Virginia Stanton. She was the daughter of William Stanton, the man who owned the major share of the *Judea* and the man who had practically raised Biddlecomb after his parents were gone. Biddlecomb had been shipping out on Stanton's ships since he was a boy, and between voyages he had stayed at Stanton House, where William had educated him, introduced him to the classics, to poetry and Shakespeare, had taught him navigation and taught him how to fence.

It was just in the past year that Biddlecomb had noticed that Virginia, William's scrawny, annoying daughter, was scrawny and annoying no more. She was seventeen now, lovely and exciting, and Biddlecomb found his thoughts turning to her more and more. He wanted to court her, though his much vaunted nerve and eloquence often failed him in her company. That in itself was annoying; he had always had great success with women in the various seaports all over the Atlantic, but something about Virginia put him off his guard.

He couldn't imagine how William would react, but he was resolved this time to find out. He had made the same resolve before, he reminded himself.

Footsteps on the quarterdeck shook him from his dreams. He looked up, expecting to see Sanders coming aft to report some problem, but it was only the lookout.

'What is it?'

'I don't know, sir. Might be a ship. A big one. It's hard to see.'

'Show me,' said Biddlecomb, leading the seaman to the bow.

The lookout pointed into the gloom toward a spot just beyond Popasquash Neck. Biddlecomb saw it immediately, a dark shape moving against the darker background. It was a ship under two topsails moving slowly down the bay, close-hauled. On this heading it would pass well astern of the *Judea*. Biddlecomb looked forward past the *Judea's* bowsprit. Popasquash Point was a mile away. They would close with it in less than ten minutes, and ten minutes after that they would drop the anchor in Bristol Harbor. He looked back at the strange ship. Who could it be?

'Well spotted. Keep an eye on her, let me know if she alters course.' Biddlecomb hurried back to the quarterdeck.

Who would be sailing at this time of night? Biddlecomb had good reason, but this strange ship was on a heading bound for sea, so she could not be a smuggler. Could it be a British revenue vessel? A vessel sent to stop smuggling? That was most unlikely. There had not been a revenue vessel on Narragansett Bay in years. Besides, Biddlecomb had never seen a revenue vessel larger than a brig, and this was a ship, and a big one at that.

And then the answer came with a flash of light and the roar of a single gun erupting from the ship's side. The muzzle flash, blinding in the night, revealed a single row of gunports, each one open, each gun run out.

‘God damn me to hell!’ shouted Biddlecomb, his practiced composure quite gone under the novel threat of gunfire. ‘Clew up the courses! Clew them up!’ he ordered, and he heard the men running for the gear.

The sails rose like curtains and now Biddlecomb was able to see in every direction. They were running down on Popasquash Point, would leave it just to larboard if they ran into Bristol Harbor. But there they would be trapped.

‘Heave to! Heave to or we will fire into you!’ a voice called across the water, metallic sounding through a speaking trumpet. Biddlecomb considered his options. Heaving to was out of the question. If they were boarded, they would be arrested for smuggling and found guilty. He would rot in prison and his men would be pressed into the British Navy, a miserable fate in either case.

The stranger fired again, the same gun, forwardmost on their larboard side. The *Judea*’s fore topgallant stay parted, and the jib, robbed of its support, collapsed and blew forward in the quartering wind. Biddlecomb heard a sharp crack aloft and knew that the fore topgallant mast had snapped. Looking up, he could just see the tangle of wreckage high above the deck.

Several of the *Judeas* flung themselves into the fore rigging, racing aloft to secure the damage.

‘Avast there! Belay that!’ Biddlecomb shouted. It was senseless to try to save the topgallant gear at that point, and he did not want anyone aloft.

Once again the voice came from across the water, demanding that the *Judea* heave to. Biddlecomb considered the *Judea*’s guns and dismissed the thought. She carried six absurd little four-pounders. Even if they could have done this enemy any harm, there wasn’t the time to clear away the gear that was piled on top of them and to locate where their attendant rammers and sponges had been stowed.

Biddlecomb looked at the strange ship, and at Popasquash Point, both of which were now considerably

nearer. He could tack right now, spin on his heel, and race back to sea. But this stranger with his fast gun crews would cut them to ribbons before they were settled on the new tack. He would not subject his men to that danger.

If they ran into Bristol Harbor, they could sneak around Hog Island and then head for the sea. No they couldn't. Not in this wind. He would be stuck in the harbor, windbound, and the man-of-war would follow him right in. The man-of-war will follow us in regardless, he thought. His stomach clenched like a fist. They were trapped.

He saw the men standing nervously in the waist, waiting for orders, waiting for their captain to think of something.

'Lay aft!' he shouted. 'Everyone lay aft here!' In that instant he had come to a decision and he felt the tension abate. The men hurried aft, stumbling up the steps onto the quarterdeck and hurrying to the stern, eager for salvation.

Biddlecomb grabbed a fistful of Rigney's coat and yanked him from the wheel, grabbing the king spoke as he did. 'I'll take this, Rigney.'

Suddenly the night was illuminated by the man-of-war's broadside, twelve guns firing as one. The roar and shock made the *Judea* shudder. The longboat was cut in half and a section of the larboard bulwark disappeared.

'What are we—' someone began to ask, and was cut short.

'Silence!' shouted Biddlecomb, and the men fell quiet, the sound of the water and wind lost to their ringing ears.

Biddlecomb glanced aft at the man-of-war, tensing as he waited for the next broadside. He could smell the thick forest smell from the land mixed with the odor of expended gunpowder.

'Everyone, grab hold of something!' he ordered. 'Clap on to that taffrail there.'

The men obeyed, grabbing anything solid within reach. Biddlecomb could hear the squeal of the man-of-war's guns running out, a short pistol shot astern. He turned the

wheel, three spokes to larboard. The rocky outcropping that made up the tip of Popasquash Point lay under their bow. It did not matter if the man-of-war fired now.

The *Judea* plowed into the rocks off Popasquash Point at a little over eight knots. The stem collapsed on impact, and the planks ten feet aft of the bow sprung or were crushed, allowing the water of Narragansett Bay to flood unimpeded into the hold. The crew were flung to the deck and lay there, hands held over their heads in a useless attempt to shield themselves from falling debris.

The foremast broke off at the partners and tumbled over the bow, dragging the main topgallant and the topmast down with it. The main shrouds, twelve in all, seven-and-three-quarter-inch hemp, parted like spunyarn. The mainmast shattered eight feet above the deck and followed the foremast over the bow. The main top, weighing three tons, stove in a ten-foot section of the deck. The mizzen topmast snapped off at the doubling and crashed down through the main hatch.

For nearly a minute they lay on the quarterdeck as five tons of spars, rigging, sails, and blocks collapsed into so much garbage. Then it was quiet again. Biddlecomb scrambled to his feet and looked along the deck. The destruction was complete, absolutely complete. Already he could feel the ship settling lower in the water. But his men were stirring around him, and none of the wreckage had landed on the quarterdeck.

'Come on! Get up! Get up! Follow me!' Biddlecomb shouted, racing toward the bow. He tripped and fell over what had once been the mizzen topsail yard, then picked himself up and continued forward, his crew following close behind. They climbed over the fallen mainmast, kicking aside the tangled running gear, and rushed to the bow.

The *Judea's* deck was steeply slanted, and Biddlecomb guessed that she was not afloat at all, simply resting on the rocky ledge. If that was the case, she could slip off at any

moment. The base of the foremast lay ten feet inboard of the bow forming a bridge between the wrecked ship and the shore. Biddlecomb looked down at the sea and the rocks twenty feet below, and then along the smooth, round mast. The fresh oil on the wood shone in the moonlight, and Biddlecomb cursed himself for having had the men oil it not two days before. This type of balancing act was not at all to Biddlecomb's liking, and it was worse that he was expected to lead his far more nimble men across this makeshift bridge.

He mounted the horizontal mast and carefully stood, his arms stretched out at his side, and stepped out along its length, first over the deck, then over the beakhead, and at last over the rocks below. His pace quickened and he was practically running along the mast when he began to lose his balance. His arms flailed in the air as he tried to take the last two steps, and failing that, he lunged out and twisted his arms through the futtock shrouds still clinging to the shattered foretop. He hung there for a moment, breathing hard and fast.

'Beg pardon, sir,' came a voice from behind, and Biddlecomb realized that the rest of the men were waiting, balanced on the spar, for him to continue. He pulled himself up and over the foretop, so familiar but for its odd angle, and stepped onto the doubling. From there it was a drop of five feet to the ground.

Biddlecomb turned and looked at the shattered vessel as one by one the men leapt from the doubling and formed up behind him. With a groan the *Judea*, his beloved *Judea*, and all that he had in the world, settled lower in the water and then stopped, hung up on the ledge. Biddlecomb was overwhelmed with sadness, with loss and confusion. It was absurd, he knew, the *Judea* was just a ship, but he had not felt this way since he had watched them lower his mother's coffin into the frozen ground, sixteen years before.

Beyond the wreck of the ship, just visible in the moonlight, Biddlecomb could see the man-of-war was hove to and lowering a boat. In a few minutes they would be swarming over the wreck, the bastards, going through the personal papers left in his cabin, examining his contraband cargo. His name was on every manifest, every bill of lading. There would be no doubt about who had been master of that vessel.

After a moment of silence Sanders touched his arm. 'We best go, Isaac,' he said. Biddlecomb took a last look, then turned and followed his men into the night.

CHAPTER 2

Stanton House

THE SITTING ROOM was all warmth and order, cast in the orange light that radiated from the oak logs in the fireplace and the first glow of dawn streaming through the huge bay windows. The light fell on the western wall, with its shelves of books, interrupted here and there by curios from South America and Asia and Africa. The walnut paneling fairly glowed, and the flickering light from the fireplace danced on the high ceiling and illuminated the intricate pattern of the Persian rug that lay across the polished oak floor. Everything about the room was shipshape, save for the muddy footprints that led to the overstuffed reading chair in which Isaac Biddlecomb was sprawled.

On the sideboard stood a model of the *Virginia Stanton*, a merchantman of five hundred tons, now under construction and destined to be the pride of the Stanton fleet. The father of the ship's namesake, Mr William Stanton, former ship's captain and now at sixty the owner of Bristol's largest merchant fleet, stood at the bay windows as the rays of the new sun washed over him, the light accentuating the lines carved in his face by years of standing a quarterdeck from the North Atlantic to south of the Line. His hair, tied back in a queue, looked as white as if it were powdered.

'She is the frigate *Rose*, His Majesty's frigate *Rose*.' These were the first words that Stanton had spoken since Biddlecomb began fifteen minutes before his account of the destruction of the *Judea*. 'She mounts twenty-four guns,

nine-pounders. But I imagine that I do not have to tell you about her firepower.'

'No, faith. I already know more than I care to.'

'I was afraid that this would happen, you know. The *Rose* arrived here in November, just a few days after you sailed, as luck would have it. I sent word to you by every means that I could. Obviously you didn't receive my warnings.'

'I did not.'

The two men were quiet, each lost in his contemplations. 'God, I'm sorry, William!' Biddlecomb said at last. 'Eighteen sous per gallon I paid for that molasses! We would have made our fortune off that cargo!'

'Your fortune, Isaac. My fortune was made some years ago, and you played no small part in making it. Hell, I built the new stables and tack room with the profit from your last voyage.'

'And the ship ... ' Biddlecomb's eyes wandered around the familiar room, toward the north wall, which he had been avoiding. He had to look, like a man unable to resist running his tongue over a sore tooth. He stared at the painting that hung there: the *Judea* as seen from three angles. Biddlecomb marveled again at how perfectly the artist had captured the spirit of his ship. His former ship.

'It's a shame about the cargo, and certainly about the ship. Such are the fortunes of war,' said Stanton.

'War? What war?'

'The war for American independency,' Stanton said simply.

'No war has been declared. Has it?'

'It's only a matter of time now, and not much time, either. It's incidents like the *Judea* that bring the conflict closer.'

'Oh, come, William, let's not make a political issue of this.' Biddlecomb paused, gathering his thoughts, thinking through his anger. 'No one is more bitter about the loss of the *Judea* than me, but I can still be reasonable about it. I

was breaking the law. I was ... well, smuggling. Let's call it what it is.'

'Yes, you were smuggling. You were violating the law, English law, there's no question. The question concerns England's right to make such a law, to impose their taxes.'

'We've grown to be a rich colony under English law.'

'We've grown to be a rich colony despite English law. We've grown to be rich by flaunting English law. By smuggling.'

'Exactly. If the British didn't make molasses a scarce and expensive commodity, we wouldn't make so much money. More's the reason to preserve the status quo.' Biddlecomb was not in the mood for this discussion.

The two men were quiet for a moment, then Stanton spoke. 'Since you made captain, you've spent - what? - ten months total ashore in five years? There's been fighting already, you know. That revenue schooner the *St John* was fired upon, and then the *Maidstone's* tender was burned, and then the *Liberty* was burned. And of course you recall the *Gaspee* affair, do you not? That was just two years ago.'

'Of course.' There was no one in Rhode Island who did not recall the *Gaspee* affair. The *Gaspee* was a British revenue vessel whose captain, to the universal anger and resentment of the colony, had actually tried to collect the duties that were owed. She had been tricked into running aground on Namquid Point on a falling tide, and that night men from Providence and Bristol had rowed out to the stranded vessel and burned it to the waterline. Biddlecomb had often wondered at the extent of Stanton's involvement in that affair.

'The British are no longer willing to ignore these incidents,' Stanton continued. 'That's why the *Rose* and her captain, that damned James Wallace, are here. She was sent to stop all smuggling, and so far she has been bloody effective. Nearly choked Newport to death. Commerce there's practically come to a halt. The British are taking

this very seriously, and so are the Americans. There'll be war soon, mark me.'

'Bah! War! We'd do well to stay out of any war we could never hope to win. Besides, Britain has the finest, freest government on earth. There are a lot of men in Rhode Island who've become rich under British rule. And I'd rather we didn't cripple the country just now, just when I'm starting to make some headway in my fortunes.'

'*Were* starting to make some headway. Need I remind you that the British just deprived you of every cent you had?'

Stanton was right, of course. The British had taken everything he had. Why didn't he blame them? He was Biddlecomb the forgiving one, Biddlecomb the reasonable one, always able to see the rational argument underlying any situation. He felt himself growing angry, angry at himself.

The sitting-room door burst open and both men started as Virginia Stanton rushed in, still clad in her nightgown, her bare ankles protruding beneath, her long brown hair tousled, her breasts sharply defined under the garment.

'Captain Biddlecomb! I just heard! Are you all right?' she said, the words tumbling over themselves.

Biddlecomb stood and moved his gaze up to her face, the flash of her white teeth, her dark eyes, and the playful freckles that dotted her ruddy cheeks, and his dark thoughts were swept away. He loved to look at her face. He remembered that she had asked him a question. 'I'm, ah, fine. I'm fine. Virginia, thank you. How could you have heard ...?'

'Good God, Virginia!' Stanton interrupted. 'Go and dress yourself, child!'

'In a moment, Father. You are uninjured, Captain?' Virginia asked, her voice more controlled.

'I'm fine, as I said, and quite touched by your concern.'

‘Don’t be, sir. I am concerned with all Americans, especially when they are so ill-used by the British,’ she said, flashing a quick smile that belied her disinterest.

‘She follows in your wake, William,’ Biddlecomb observed.

‘I could wish that she would learn a bit of modesty from me,’ said Stanton, sounding scandalized. ‘Virginia, return to your bed or dress yourself at once!’

‘Humph!’ said Virginia, tossing her hair back over her shoulder in a way that Biddlecomb found profoundly enticing. ‘Very well. I wished only to inquire after Captain Biddlecomb’s health, after the rumors that I’ve heard.’ She stepped from the room and Biddlecomb followed her with his eyes. She loved to pretend that she had no interest in him, he knew that. He was equally certain, save for those few dark moments of self-doubt, that it was an act. Now Stanton was talking to him, and he forced himself to listen.

‘There is not a day goes by,’ said Stanton after Virginia had taken her leave, ‘that I do not grieve her mother’s passing, but never so much as when I see that I am not able to educate her in the way a young woman should be educated. You know, Isaac, Virginia is not a little girl anymore, skylarking in the stables.’

‘No indeed,’ replied Biddlecomb, his eyes still fixed on the door through which Virginia had departed.

‘I know what you’re thinking, Isaac,’ Stanton said, interrupting Biddlecomb’s thoughts. Biddlecomb looked at Stanton. He felt his face flush. ‘You’re wondering if there’s another command for you.’ Stanton’s eyes moved to the model that stood on the sideboard. ‘You’re the best captain in my fleet, Isaac, perhaps the best in Rhode Island.’ Stanton paused. ‘Eighteen sous per gallon! You’re gifted, Isaac. I’ve never known a man who could talk his way through anything like you can. You’ve been the best in my fleet for sixteen years now.’