



THE CONTINENTAL RISQUE

JAMES NELSON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

A powerful maritime adventure in the epic, true-to-life tradition of Patrick O'Brian.

In the winter of 1776, a decade of simmering tensions finally comes to the boil. The rebel government of Philadelphia, determined to cast off the chains of British tyranny, has authorised the creation of the United States Navy – a brazen act of American aggression against the greatest maritime power in the world.

Still battered from her fight in Bermudan waters, the brig-of-war *Charlemagne* under the command of Captain Isaac Biddlecomb sets sail on a daring mission to raid the British store of arms on New Providence Island in the Bahamas. But he finds that his greatest enemy is an undisciplined crew on the brink of mutiny, and, beset by betrayal and treachery, Biddlecomb must find a way of uniting his men against a cruel and common foe . . . as the British Navy prepares to sink the *Charlemagne* under the merciless blasts of its guns.

An enthralling new instalment in the Revolution at Sea series begun with BY FORCE OF ARMS and THE MADDEST IDEA

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Maps

Prologue: Second Continental Congress

Chapter 1: The Sound

Chapter 2: Hell Gate

Chapter 3: The Naval Committee

Chapter 4: The Sea Lawyer

Chapter 5: Philadelphia

Chapter 6: The Continental Fleet

Chapter 7: Government House

Chapter 8: Downriver

Chapter 9: Icebound

Chapter 10: French Leave

Chapter 11: Capital Offense

Chapter 12: Court-Martial

Chapter 13: 'On Pain of Such Punishment ...'

Chapter 14: Blue Water

Chapter 15: *Hornet* and *Fly*

Chapter 16: Bahamas

Chapter 17: Trojan Horses

Chapter 18: Hanover Sound

Chapter 19: East Point

Chapter 20: Fort Montegu

Chapter 21: Lieutenants of the *Charlemagne*

Chapter 22: Fort Nassau

Chapter 23: Dead Reckoning

Chapter 24: Failure and Success

Chapter 25: The Better Part of Valor

Chapter 26: A Court of Inquiry

Chapter 27: The Spoils of War

Chapter 28: False Colors

Chapter 29: The *Bolton*, Armed Brig

Chapter 30: Block Island

Chapter 31: HMS *Glasgow*

Chapter 32: The Stern Chase

Chapter 33: New London

Historical Note

Glossary

About the Author

Also by James Nelson

Copyright

THE CONTINENTAL RISQUE

The Revolution at Sea Saga
Book Three

James Nelson

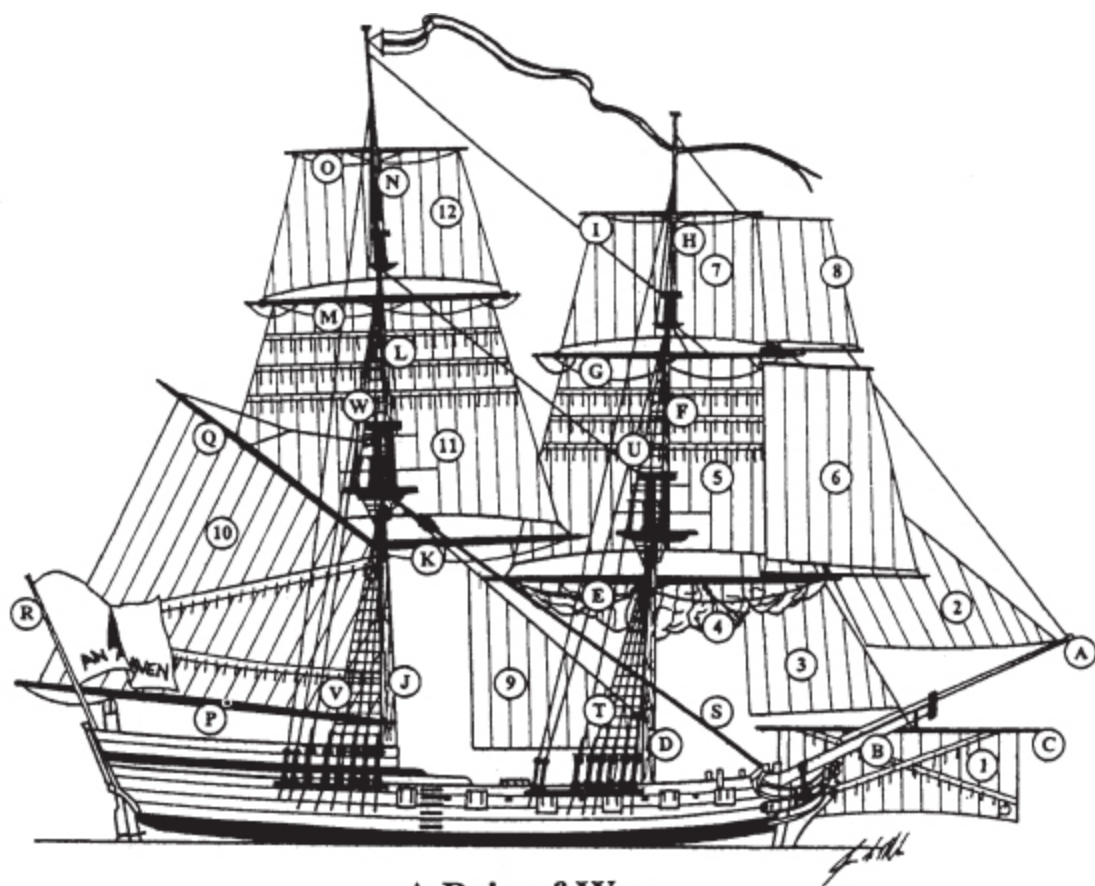
*To Nat Sobel, without whom I would still be a poor, dumb
sailer, rather than the poor, dumb, published sailor that I
am today*

And to Lisa

For the Encouragement of the Men employed in this service I am ordered to inform you that the Congress have resolved that the Masters, Officers and Seamen shall be entitled to one half of the value of the prizes by them taken, the wages they receive from the Colony notwithstanding.

The ships and vessels of War are to be on the Continental risque & pay ...

—John Hancock
October 5, 1775



A Brig of War

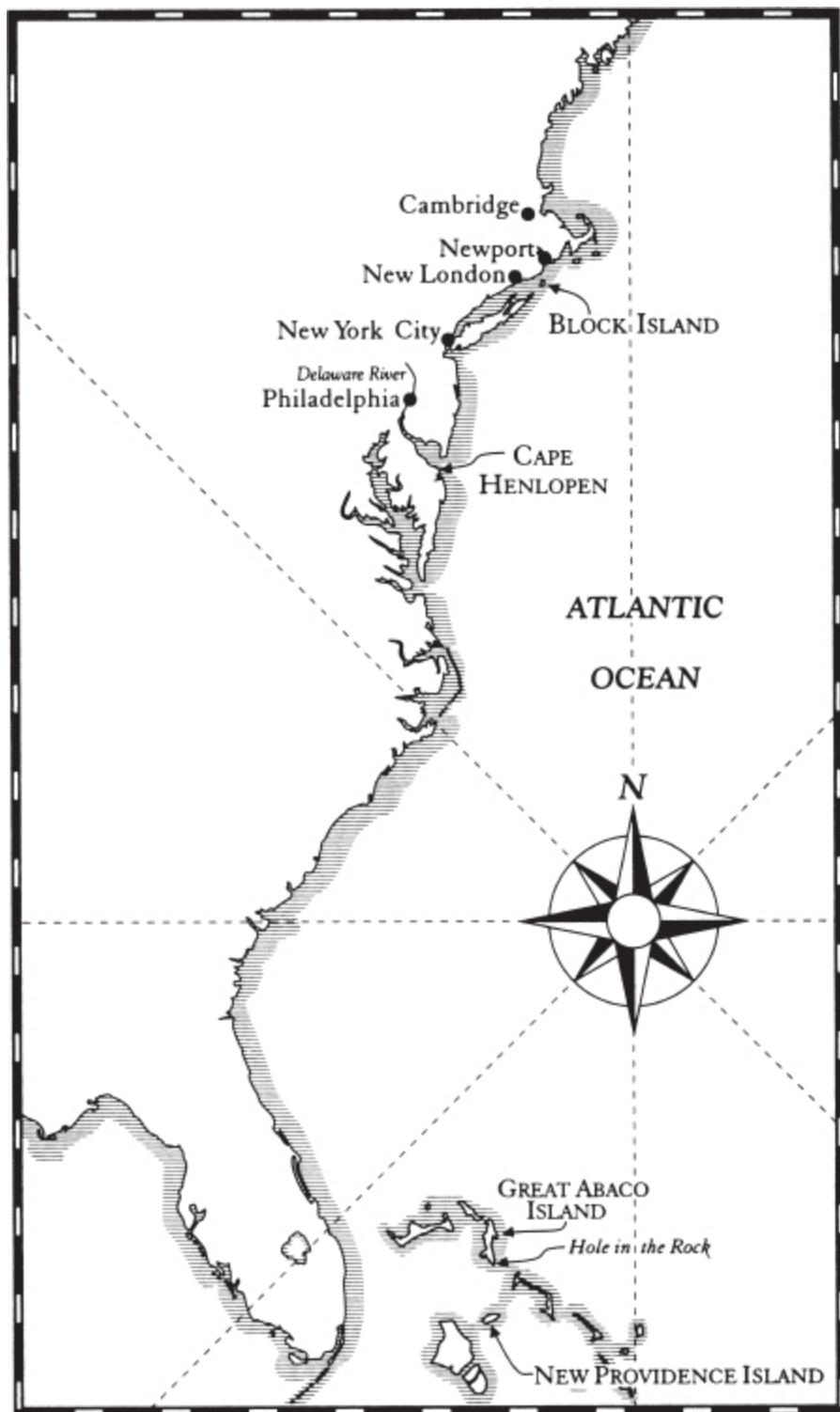
Sails

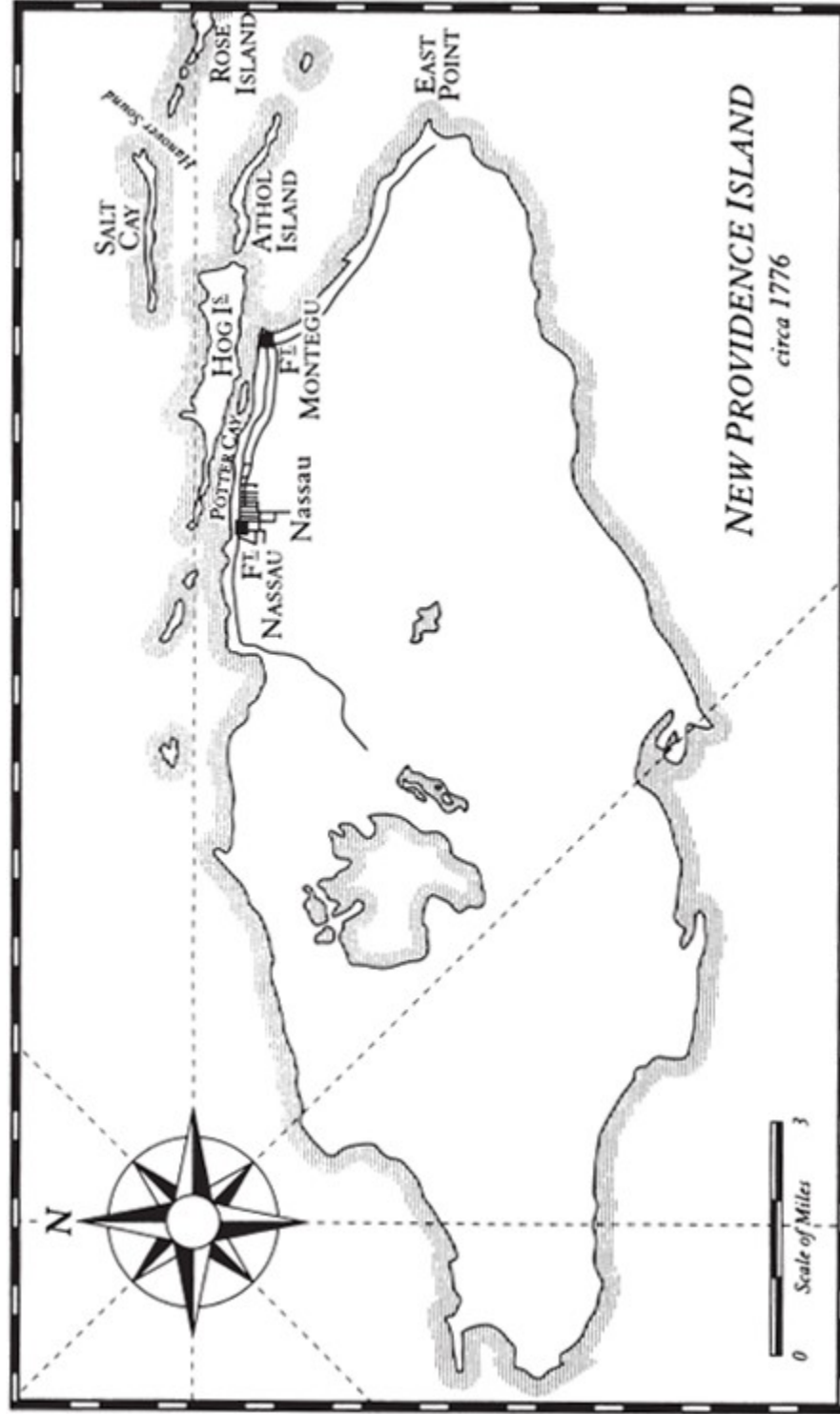
- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Spritsail | 7. Fore Topgallant Sail |
| 2. Jib | 8. Fore Topgallant Studdingsail (removable) |
| 3. Fore Topmast Staysail | 9. Main Staysail |
| 4. Foresail (clewed up) | 10. Mainsail |
| 5. Fore Topsail | 11. Main Topsail |
| 6. Fore Topmast Studdingsail (removable) | 12. Main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

Spars and Rigging

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

*For other terminology and usage see Glossary at the end of the book





PROLOGUE

Second Continental Congress

At least there are no flies, he thought, but the price you paid for that one minor luxury was the cold, the damnable cold. Stephen Hopkins, delegate from Rhode Island to the Second Continental Congress, pulled his coat tighter against his chest and folded his arms. It was October 5, 1775, and Philadelphia was already cold and wet, a prelude to the coming winter. At sixty-eight years old Hopkins was not as tolerant of such weather as he had once been.

He glanced around the big room in the Philadelphia State House. The delegates from the various colonies were filtering in for the morning's session, though many still remained out of doors, conducting in huddled meetings the real business of Congress. The walls and high ceiling of the room were painted a brilliant white, mitigating the gloom to some degree. The round tables scattered around the floor were covered with rich green cloth, so many little islands, each with a silver inkstand in the middle and a sprout of white quills sticking out at odd angles.

The president's desk sat on a raised stage at the front of the room, flanked on the left and the right by identical fireplaces. Hopkins considered telling the boy to stoke up the fires a bit. He was on the verge of voicing that demand when he heard the familiar clop clop clop of John Adams's walking stick, like someone tapping rapidly on the floor with a small hammer. The Massachusetts delegate moved with his usual frenetic pace across the hall and into the meeting room.

‘Well, damn the fire,’ Hopkins muttered to himself, and then to Samuel Ward, his fellow Rhode Island delegate, he added, ‘Here’s Adams. I’ll warrant things will warm up directly.’

‘Hopkins, there you are,’ said Adams from across the room, working his way through the tables to the Rhode Island delegation. ‘I looked for you at your rooms but you had left already.’

‘I’m willing to rise very early to avoid seeing you first thing in the morning, John,’ said Hopkins.

‘Indeed. Well, you can avoid me no longer. Have you seen the letters from Barry?’

‘I have.’ The letters in question, not yet officially read before Congress, had been carried from England by Capt. John Barry. They reported the sailing of two brigs, unarmed and unescorted, carrying great quantities of military stores and bound away for Quebec.

‘I think it likely that we’ll see some action now, in the naval line,’ Hopkins said. ‘Those members who do not have enough imagination to see the need for a navy in the abstract should at least be able to see the benefit of arming a few ships to capture those brigs.’

He ran his eyes over the room. It was now all but full, the many delegates congregating in the hallway having taken their seats, and John Hancock, president of the Congress, was making his usual flamboyant entrance. ‘Once we turn this corner, we pave the way for the creation of a navy. If you will allow me to thus mix my metaphors.’

‘In point of fact I agree with you, Hopkins, your literary style notwithstanding,’ Adams said.

In the front of the room President Hancock brought his gavel down on the desk and called for order, but Adams continued, ‘I’ve arranged for Lee to move for a committee of three to draft a proposal to fit out some armed vessels. Once that is passed, I’ll require you to nominate myself, Deane, and Langdon for that committee.’

‘And you reckon you can draft such a proposal?’

‘We have already. We need only for the Congress to ask for it.’

Hancock once again pounded the desk with his gavel. ‘I trust you gentlemen will not be too disappointed if we give over our discussion of trade for the moment. We have recently received several letters from England, brought to us by Capt. John Barry, containing information upon which we should consider action. Mr Thompson, if you would?’ Hancock nodded to the secretary.

‘Sir,’ Thompson read out loud, ‘It has come to my attention, through sundry sources, that there has sailed from this place on the eleventh of August two north country built brigs of no force, last loaded with six thousand stand of arms and a large quantity of powder and other stores for Quebec without a convoy ...’

Hopkins watched the various expressions across the room as the implication of the letter became clear. He could see on some faces disgust; John Dickinson of Pennsylvania for one, while beside Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin sat expressionless, not even appearing to listen.

I wonder what old Franklin is thinking, Hopkins thought. No doubt he’ll favor going after these brigs, thinks we’ve been too cautious as it is.

Hopkins’s eyes moved toward Connecticut’s table. Silas Deane sat quite erect, listening intently, like a dog waiting for his master to say ‘Fetch.’ New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, all of the delegates listened closely as it dawned on each of them that they would once again have to make a decision the implications of which were far greater than the immediate effects.

Then finally Thompson came to the end of the letter. At Virginia’s table Richard Henry Lee fidgeted and drummed his fingers on the table, anxious to make his motion before

any other could be made, as Hancock went through the formalities of having the letter entered into the record.

‘Mr President!’ Lee leapt to his feet and called out even before Hancock was quite done speaking. ‘Mr President, I move that a committee of three be appointed to prepare a plan for intercepting these two vessels bound for Canada and that said committee proceed on this business immediately.’

‘So moved,’ said Hancock. ‘Does anyone—’

‘I second the motion,’ said Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina.

John Adams leaned over, close to Hopkins. ‘Now we shall see some lively discussion, I’ll warrant.’

The first to offer that lively discussion was Edward Rutledge of South Carolina. He rose from his seat beside Gadsden, casting an ugly scowl at his fellow delegate as he did, and addressed Hancock.

‘Mr President,’ he began, glancing around the room with shifting eyes in his peculiar and annoying manner, ‘not all of us from the Southern colonies, nay, very few of us indeed, share Mr Gadsden’s enthusiasm for a naval force. A challenge to Great Britain of the high seas, the unprovoked capture of her merchant vessels, would be no less than a declaration of war, a declaration of our desire for independency—’

‘If the gentleman would care to put that in the form of a motion, sir,’ Adams called across the room, ‘I should gladly second it.’

Rutledge stood silent, nodding his head and shrugging his shoulders until the laughter and pounding subsided, then began again. ‘Sir, I submit that it is the most wild, visionary, mad project that has ever been attempted. We cannot hope to take on the might of the British navy, and such an attempt would bring ruin down on our heads, would destroy any hopes that we might have for

reconciliation. It is like an infant taking a mad bull by the horns.

‘What is more profound and remote,’ Rutledge continued, ‘such a plan would ruin the character and corrupt the morals of our seamen. It would make them selfish, piratical, mercenary, and bent wholly upon plunder.’

‘One thing’s for certain,’ Hopkins said to Adams, ‘Rutledge doesn’t know much about the morals of our seamen if he thinks sending them after these brigs will corrupt them any more than they are now.’

At last Rutledge finished, and John Adams took the floor. ‘Mr President,’ he began, his voice soft, calm, and reasonable as he began, and building in intensity as he spoke. ‘As a considerable part of my time, in the course of my profession, I have spent upon the seacoasts of Massachusetts, I have conversed much with the gentlemen who conduct our cod and whale fisheries, as well as the other navigation of the country. I have heard much of the activity, enterprise, patience, perseverance, and daring intrepidity of our seamen. As a result of this personal knowledge I have formed a confident opinion that if they were once let loose upon the ocean, they would contribute greatly to the relief of our wants as well as to the distress of the enemy.’

And so it went on through the morning and into the afternoon. Outside the rain let up and a watery sunlight made its way through the tall windows as inside the State House the issue of sending armed vessels after the unarmed ordnance brigs and the greater, the much greater, implications of such action were made to run the gauntlet of debate.

At last the motion of forming a committee was put to a vote, and the motion was passed. Like an actor taking his cue Hopkins moved that the committee consist of Mr John Adams, Mr Silas Dean of Connecticut, and Mr John Langdon of New Hampshire, and that motion too was

passed by the same vote as the first. The newly created committee took their leave of the Congress. In an hour they were back.

‘Mr Adams, has your committee prepared a plan regarding the ordnance brigs?’ Hancock asked.

‘We have, Mr President, and by your leave I shall read it.’

‘Pray, Mr Adams, proceed.’

‘Resolved, that a letter be sent by express to General Washington, to inform him that Congress having received certain intelligence of the sailing of two north country brigs ...’ Adams read the report, the words couched in his lawyerly language. Hopkins was once again surprised at how such wording could render even the most dramatic documents dull and nearly intolerable to the ear.

‘... he apply to the council of Massachusetts Bay for the two armed vessels in their service, and dispatch the same, with a sufficient number of people, stores, etc., particularly a number of oars, in order, if possible, to intercept said brigs and their cargo, and secure the same for the use of the continent; also, any other transports laden with ammunition, clothing, or other stores—’

‘Hold a moment, sir!’ John Dickinson was on his feet. Adams stopped and peered with ill-disguised irritation over the top of the paper at the delegate from Pennsylvania.

‘What is this business about “any other transports”? The plan was to call for the intercepting of two brigs, two specific brigs. It was not a general invitation to piracy.’

‘Well, Good Lord, man,’ Adams replied, ‘should our vessels ignore any ship just because it is not one of these brigs? Should they let pass a wealth of materials that will strengthen our enemy simply because they are carried on ships that we were not aware of?’

‘You go too far, sir, too far by half.’

‘Point of order, Mr President,’ Hopkins called out. ‘Is this the time for debate?’

‘It is not. Mr Dickinson, please be seated. Mr Adams, pray continue. We shall have debate after the motion is read.’

Adams continued. He read on through instructions for securing the prizes in the most convenient places for the purpose above mentioned, for requesting the governors of Rhode Island and Connecticut to provide the general with ships, for the vessels of war to be on the continental risk and pay.

It was half past eight when the issue came to a vote. One by one the colonies were called, and on the big board that recorded their votes the markers were slid to yea or nay. It seemed to Hopkins that for all the shouting the debate had swayed few opinions. The colonies voted just as they had for the original motion to form a committee.

But that was enough for passage.

‘Virginia,’ the secretary called out.

‘Virginia,’ said Lee in his smooth, confident, aristocratic tone, ‘says yea.’

Hopkins caught Adams’s eye and the two men smiled and nodded. Hopkins knew full well what Adams was thinking; it was the same thing that he himself was thinking. They did not yet have a navy, per se, but they had the next best thing. The United Colonies were, as a nation, sending armed vessels out to hunt for British ships. They were taking the war to sea.

CHAPTER 1

The Sound

Capt. Isaac Biddlecomb turned and stared over the taffrail of the *Charlemagne*, brig-of-war. Four miles astern and dead in line with their wake was a British frigate, a powerful enemy in all-out pursuit. Again.

The only odd thing about being thus pursued was how familiar it felt, as if being chased by the Royal Navy were a daily routine. To be sure, they had been chased so often in the past year that Biddlecomb had reason to feel that way. And while the familiarity failed to eliminate his fear, it did much to mitigate it.

They were being overtaken, of that there was no doubt. But in their favor, they were halfway down Long Island Sound, heading for Hell Gate and the East River and the many islands and inlets around New York, with no more than four hours of sunlight left. And that, he felt, with a confidence born of experience, made their escape a near certainty.

He considered the sensation brewing in his gut, the vague terror that was as familiar as the sight of the frigate astern. He was reminded of the time, fifteen years earlier, when as an ordinary seaman he had discovered that laying out on a yard to reef sail in a howling storm was no longer a new and terrifying experience. It had become, rather, an old, familiar terrifying experience.

And so it was here, in late October of 1775, after nearly a year of fighting in a conflict that was not quite a war, for an end on which few agreed, Isaac Biddlecomb found himself

once more in the all too familiar position of being chased by a frigate of the Royal Navy.

He had, in the past year, been chased by the frigate *Rose* all over Narragansett Bay. He had been chased by the *Cerberus* through the Caribbean and through these northern waters after leading a mutiny aboard the brig *Icarus*, a vessel of the Royal Navy aboard which he had been impressed. He had been chased by the frigate *Glasgow* in Bermuda, in his ill-fated attempt to liberate British gunpowder from that island, and chased by the two-decker *Somerset* clear across Boston Harbor to the American lines.

So Biddlecomb was not overly surprised when, that morning, with the *Charlemagne* just south of Block Island, the lookout aloft reported the sails of what might well be a man-of-war hull down on the eastern horizon.

And when the strange ship hauled her wind and set studdingsails aloft and alow in what was without question pursuit, Biddlecomb had ordered the brig's canvas stretched, had turned her bow northwest to pass Montauk Point and run into Long Island Sound, and had settled into the monotony of eluding a stern chase. He was tired of being chased and wondered if his grudgingly chosen career as a naval officer would ever entail attacking, as opposed to running away.

'I must say, Captain, your calm demeanor does much to bolster the confidence of your passengers,' a feminine voice broke the quiet on the quarterdeck. Biddlecomb pulled his gaze from the frigate's sails and looked over at the leeward side where Virginia Stanton leaned against the rail.

She was dressed in a hooded caraco jacket over a silk dress that flared out at the waist and draped down off the wire hoops of her false hips. Her hands were thrust into either end of a fur muff to defend against the cold winter air. From beneath her hood and cotton mobcap her brown hair tumbled down around her ruddy face, her girlish

smattering of freckles, her playful smile. Biddlecomb could see the toes of her old and well-worn riding boots peeking out under the long skirts. Despite himself and his assumed air of detachment, he smiled as well.

‘I am pleased that I can be of some comfort to you, Miss Stanton,’ Biddlecomb said, smiling broader still at their sham of formality. He wanted to rush across the deck and grab her in his arms and kiss her, a long, lingering kiss, and would have done so had they been alone. ‘With any luck at all we’ll shake them off through Hell Gate or around Long Island,’ he said instead.

‘Hell Gate, is it?’ said William Stanton, Virginia’s father, who stood beside her at the leeward rail. Stanton squinted at the hilly shoreline of Connecticut, ten miles north of them, then at Long Island, ten miles south. The *Charlemagne* was running nearly dead downwind in a fifteen-knot breeze, running west southwest through Long Island Sound toward the point where that bay narrowed into the East River, with its cluster of islands and the wild dogleg turn through Hell Gate.

‘Tide’s on the ebb now,’ Stanton observed. ‘Water’ll be running like a son of a bitch through Hell Gate by the time we get there.’

It was an observation by an experienced mariner, and Biddlecomb could hear no implied criticism in Stanton’s tone. Stanton, he knew, understood the situation perfectly.

There was every chance that the frigate would not dare follow them through the treacherous passage. Big ships rarely went through that way; indeed, it was rare for any ship, big or small, to risk itself among the rocks, islands, and back eddies of that twisted passage, particularly at the height of the ebb when the water crashed through the Gate like a flash flood.

And even if the frigate did dare to follow them, and assuming they both made it, on the other side were any number of rivers and bays around New York in which they

could hide or at least keep ahead of their enemy until nightfall. Once it was dark, the *Charlemagne* could disappear. Virginia's confidence was not misplaced, or so Biddlecomb assured himself, and her obvious admiration of his boldness bolstered in turn his own confidence.

'Did I ever tell you, Isaac, of the time I took the old *Providence* through Hell Gate, back in the winter of '64 ... or '65, one of those?' Stanton asked.

'No, sir, I don't believe you did,' Biddlecomb lied, running his eyes over the *Charlemagne*'s rig and her waist as Stanton launched into the story, as well-worn as Virginia's boots. From long experience Biddlecomb nodded and smiled at the appropriate spots, but his thoughts were on the condition of the vessel under his command. To any observer a mile or so away, or to anyone unfamiliar with the way of ships, she was a lovely sight, well proportioned, her sails set and drawing, her rig taut and blacked down.

But a closer look would reveal the crazing in that facade. Her mainmast was fished five feet above the deck; stout lengths of timber were lashed around the circumference of the mast to take the strain where the actual wood had been nearly shot through. The red paint on the inboard side of the bulwarks and the linseed oil on the outboard side were variegated shades of dark and light where sections of the brig's side had been knocked flat and then repaired and freshly finished. The main topgallant sail and the fore topsail were brand-new and stood out from their worn and much patched brethren aloft. The *Charlemagne* was a tired vessel.

Over a month before she had fought a running battle with the two-decker *Somerset*, racing across Boston Harbor, and was nearly beaten to death before Biddlecomb ran her aground at the feet of the American army encamped in the hills surrounding the city and laying siege to the ministerial army there. Along with the *Charlemagne*, Biddlecomb had brought in a prize, the *Mayor of Plymouth*, loaded to the

deckhead with gunpowder, that precious compound of which the American forces were in desperate need.

The praise, bordering on adoration, that had followed that feat had been overwhelming. For the next month, after working the battered *Charlemagne* up the Charles River to Cambridge, Biddlecomb had seen to the *Charlemagne's* repairs during the day and allowed himself to be toasted in all circles by night. In a year of novel situations he found himself in the most novel, and most pleasant, of all. He was a hero.

They did the best that they could, setting the *Charlemagne* to rights, but Cambridge was not a maritime center and the facilities for repairing a vessel were less than adequate. So rather than hope for a new mainmast they split their damaged spars into long fishes and bound them with rope to the mast and patched their sails in those instances where there was material enough left to patch.

And in those cases where the canvas could not be patched, or the lines long spliced or the spars fished, they tried their best to wrest stores from the few chandlers in the area, but acquiring new supplies, it turned out, was even more difficult than repairing old.

The General Court of Massachusetts had passed an act to issue letters of marque to ship owners with a thought to go privateering, and these private men-of-war were gobbling up stores at a prodigious rate. So confident were the privateersmen in the profitability of their ventures, and so eager were they to get to sea, that they were quite willing to give the chandlers three times the asking price for needed materials, a largess that the beleaguered Continental Army could never hope to match. And so the poor *Charlemagne*, commissioned by General Washington, whose authority over naval matters was at best questionable, had to settle for the scraps left by the privateers.

He had written to William Stanton in Bristol, informing him of his whereabouts and the events that had led him there. He had written to Virginia as well, and if he had not, at the last instant, been able to pour out his affections with as much abandon as he had intended, he nonetheless made it clear that he was not writing with any sense of mere platonic affection.

A dozen times at least he had informed Ezra Rumstick, his longtime friend and the *Charlemagne's* first lieutenant, that he would be leaving for Bristol forthwith. And every time something – an unplanned meeting with General Washington, crucial negotiations with a chandler, some aspect of the *Charlemagne's* repair that required his attention – had come up and stopped him. So he planned and waited and fretted about Virginia's feelings for him.

Midway through their third week in Cambridge, Biddlecomb resigned himself to the idea that he would not be going to Bristol anytime soon, and that there would be no new mainmast. The next morning he began fishing the old.

He was supervising the job personally, and by midafternoon it was all but done. 'Vast heaving!' he called out to the men on the capstan. The line running from the mainmast to the capstan was hauled nearly to the breaking point. He put his hands on it and tried to flex it back and forth, but it was unyielding. Along its length drops of tar were oozing from the strands.

'That's well,' Biddlecomb said. He glanced over at the wooden wharf to which the *Charlemagne* was tied. William Stanton was standing there, and beside him Virginia, familiar faces from another place. He stared for a minute, confused, trying to place those faces with this location. Then Stanton leapt onto the gangplank and ran aboard, arms outstretched, and embraced him, unaware of or unconcerned about the tar with which he was liberally splattered.

Biddlecomb squeezed the old man in turn and looked over Stanton's shoulder at Virginia, still standing on the dock. She smiled, her wide smile, in parts amused and mocking and affectionate, and gave him a tiny wave.

He was about to call out to her, his mouth was open, when Stanton released him, grabbed him by the shoulder and half spun him around, shouting, 'Rumstick!' as the hulking first officer stepped up, grinning, hand outstretched. There followed half an hour of introductions, congratulations, and technical discussions, during which Virginia stood off to the side, smiling to mask her boredom, and Biddlecomb was able to get no more than a 'Good to see you so fit, Captain Biddlecomb' from her by way of conversation.

At last Biddlecomb was able to pull Stanton from the boisterous camaraderie and invite him and his daughter below. 'There was some fine Madeira, wonderful stuff, in the great cabin of the *Mayor of Plymouth* that I reckoned to be fair spoils of war,' he said. 'Won't you join me in a glass? Virginia?'

'Delighted! Lead on, sir,' Stanton said, and the three of them, Stanton, Virginia, and Biddlecomb, made their way down the narrow after companionway. They crossed the gunroom and stepped into Biddlecomb's quarters, which carried the traditional, if perhaps, for that cramped space, pretentious title of 'great cabin.'

'Oh, damn me,' Stanton said. 'I've a message for Rumstick. Please excuse me for a minute.' And with that he was out the door.

And they were alone. 'Well, Virginia,' Biddlecomb began. His eyes were fixed on her face. Her smile was fading, not gone, but changed into something else: a frustrated desire, perhaps, to say something, a desire for him to say something. He stopped and looked at that smile, but he could think of nothing to say.

And then the desire rushed over him, an aching need, a physical thing, and before he even knew that he was going to speak, he said, 'I love you, Virginia.'

'I love you too,' Virginia said, and suddenly he was across the cabin and wrapping his arms around her small frame and she was wrapping her arms around his shoulders and they were kissing, long and desperate. He could feel the curve of her waist even through the riding cloak and the silk dress and bodice and shift, could feel her breasts pressed against his chest.

He wanted to hold her completely, to feel every part of her pressed against every part of him. He wanted to say so much to her, he wanted to laugh with joy, but he did not. He could not stop kissing her, he could not stop the venting of years of suppressed passion.

From somewhere beyond the cabin he heard the scuttle door open and heard boots on the ladder, but he could not pull away from her. He heard boots coming across the gunroom, and at last he stepped back, his hands still on her waist, seeing nothing but her eyes. Then he dropped his hands to his side and turned just as Stanton stepped back into the great cabin.

'You know, Isaac, about those wedges under the woolding there on your fish ...' Stanton began, and his eyes moved between Biddlecomb and his daughter, then back to Biddlecomb. The old man could be obtuse at times, but he was not so obtuse that he could not see what was happening there. The great cabin was silent, and Biddlecomb could hear Rumstick topside calling orders to the men on the capstan.

'Yes, sir, the wedges?' Biddlecomb asked at length, and with obvious relief Stanton leapt into the subject of repairing damaged spars.

'In any event,' Stanton said, after giving his advice on fishing spars, 'I received a letter from Hopkins ... you know

Stephen Hopkins? Of the Providence Hopkinsons? Delegate, former governor?’

‘I know of him,’ Biddlecomb said. Indeed it would be hard to live in Rhode Island and Providence Plantations and not know of Stephen Hopkins.

‘Well, Stephen wrote and asked if I’d like to serve his committee, assistant secretary of the Naval Committee, or some such nonsense.’

‘Naval Committee? What does the Naval Committee do? I wasn’t aware that there was even a navy.’

‘It just happened, officially,’ Stanton said. ‘They just authorized the purchase of a few ships and formed this committee. So now there is a navy of sorts, a bunch of merchantmen they’re beefing up and turning into men-of-war.’

Stanton’s tone left little doubt as to his position regarding that plan. ‘Nonsense, of course, as you well know. If you want a man-of-war, you have to build a man-of-war, like *Charlemagne* here. No merchant brig could have lived through the pounding she’s taken. But I reckon there’s neither time nor money to build new—’

‘So Hopkins asked you ...?’ Biddlecomb cut Stanton off. If he was allowed to get full under way with this line of thought, Biddlecomb knew from long use, there would be no stopping him.

‘Yes. He said they need people working for them that know ships, understand what’s required. I reckon my involvement in the Rhode Island navy gave him the idea I know something of naval affairs.’

‘You know as much as anyone in the Colonies, I should think.’

‘Well, I was honored, to say the least, and I accepted right off. I had to take Rogers, of course, I’d be lost without him, and I couldn’t leave Virginia alone, so we’re moving the whole household to Philadelphia.’

Biddlecomb glanced at Virginia. She was excited about the trip, he could tell as much, excited to live in the biggest city in the Colonies.

‘It was my thinking, you know,’ Stanton continued, ‘that you and *Charlemagne* would be best off going to Philadelphia. That’s where it’s happening, in the naval line.’

‘You see a place for *Charlemagne* in this navy they’re forming?’

‘I do. I reckoned when *Charlemagne* was ready, why, we’d all take passage to Philadelphia. Kill two birds, you know. I’d a mind ... I mean I had thought that, if it is agreeable to you, perhaps *Charlemagne* might just be leased to the Naval Committee. You’re to retain command, of course.’

Biddlecomb smiled and nodded his head. Stanton was being as political as he could; despite the familial aspects of their relationship, Stanton was in fact the outright owner of the *Charlemagne* and could do whatsoever he pleased with her.

‘A fine plan. I would be honored, of course, to serve as an officer in the navy of the United Colonies, and frankly I’ll be quite pleased to see a real navy come together, converted merchantmen or not.’

It was another week before they were blessed with the right conditions for slipping past the blockading squadron: quarter moon with a promise of morning fog, light airs from the northwest, and an ebb tide just past midnight. A pilot was summoned, a man whose local knowledge encompassed every shoal, rock and shifting bank of sand, and in the darkness the *Charlemagne*’s dock lines were singled up and topsails loosened off.

‘Mr Rumstick,’ Biddlecomb called forward. He spoke in a loud whisper; there were enough people in Cambridge of dubious loyalty, and enough time for such people to get word to the Royal Navy, that he did not care to advertise their departure. He was about to follow the hail with orders to set the fore topsail when a coach and four came

rumbling and creaking down the quay. The driver reined the horses to a noisy stop as the door was flung open.

'Ahoy, there! Ahoy, is this the *Charlemagne*?' a voice called from the dark interior of the carriage. Biddlecomb wondered if there was anyone in Cambridge who was not startled awake by the noise.

'Yes,' he called back hesitantly.

'Are you getting under way?' the man in the carriage demanded next.

It was irritating in the extreme that any degree of secrecy was now lost, and Biddlecomb was not about to begin shouting out his intentions like a town crier. 'Look, here—' he began, then the man in the carriage cut him off.

'Of course you're getting under way, singled up and topsails loosened off, I must be quite blind.' The stranger stepped out of the carriage struggling with a large bag which he carried over to the *Charlemagne*. The driver of the coach snapped his whip and the vehicle rumbled off into the dark. The stranger dropped his bag on the quay and glared at the sailors staring back at him.

'You there, take this on board,' he snapped in a tone that demanded obedience, and much to Biddlecomb's further annoyance a sailor leapt ashore and snatched up the man's bag and carried it on board, as behind him the bag's owner clambered over the bulwark.

Biddlecomb turned to William Stanton, who was standing on the starboard side of the quarterdeck, hoping tht he might have some explanation. 'I think that may be ...' Stanton began, but before he finished the stranger was up the quarterdeck ladder and making his way aft. He was not a tall man, and the lines of his conservative black coat showed him to be plump. His long hair – he wore no wig – was tied back in a queue, and a civilian-style cocked hat was on his head.

'Are you Biddlecomb?' he asked.

'Captain Biddlecomb. And as such I will not—'

‘Yes, I am fully aware of who you are. Good show with the powder, by the way. I’m John Adams, and I’m sure there’s no need to explain who I am. I shall be taking passage to Philadelphia with you. And I will say simply that the British would willingly lose half their navy to capture me, so please do not take any unnecessary risks. You there’ – he pointed with his walking stick to Midshipman Weatherspoon – ‘take my bag and show me to my cabin.’ With that he turned and went forward, then disappeared down the scuttle.

‘Oh, yes, Isaac,’ Stanton said, ‘I’m afraid there was one other arrangement that I failed to mention.’

And now, four days later, Biddlecomb stood on the quarterdeck watching either shore of Long Island Sound slip past and enjoyed the relative calm of being chased by a frigate.

From the moment the *Charlemagne* had successfully slipped out of Boston Harbor, passing at least one British man-of-war so close that they could hear the ship’s bell ringing out in the fog, he had endured Adams’s presence in the gunroom and his loitering about on the windward side of the quarterdeck, quite contrary to maritime etiquette. He had endured Adams’s suggestions and his criticisms and his condemnation of all but a handful of his fellow congressmen.

Fifty yards off the larboard beam a seal rolled its sleek body out of the water. ‘Oh, Virginia, look at this,’ Biddlecomb said as the door to the after scuttle burst open and with it came Adams’s grating voice, and Biddlecomb knew that his moment of peace was at an end.

‘Honest to God, Rumstone,’ Adams was saying to the first lieutenant, Ezra Rumstick, who was, as he had at every opportunity, tagging behind Adams like a big dog, ‘if we keep referring to ourselves as “United Colonies,” we shall never rid ourselves of the notion that we *are* but colonies and not free and independent states, as we should be. It’s