



CHAPTER 5

Boarding the Repulse

Will sidled the longboat up against the starboard side of the *Repulse*. The tide was low, and the gently rolling sea was pleasantly calm. He tied up the craft and reached for the tangled rigging hanging over the side that would provide the easiest access aboard. But before he started his climb up, his eyes were drawn back down into the water. They settled on a dark object, partially submerged and undulating with the tide. He fished it out of the sea with an oar and slogged it down over the gunwale of the longboat. At first he thought it was a waterlogged blanket or a dark coat, but upon further inspection, it proved to be neither.

“That’s a flag,” he muttered.

He held up the sodden black standard, looking for signs indicating country of origin or military significance. What he discovered was much more astonishing. In one corner was a white, laughing human skull missing several teeth. Beneath it were two crossed cutlasses, each dripping with bright-red blood. These images and what they undoubtedly represented was both chilling and intimidating, even to Will, who had seen them in picture books.

Pirates! he thought. He looked back up at the *Repulse* and wondered if he was truly about to board a pirate ship. Where exactly was its port of origin? Was it indeed a stolen English vessel? Had it been fleeing from and unwillingly forced to engage the now

sunken *Firefly*? And what was it protecting that had compelled its captain to risk everything in battle with a larger and more heavily gunned man-of-war? A dozen other questions entered Will's head before his mind settled on the realization that there could be something of tremendous value still on board—and as long as the ship was firmly aground and still intact, he had a good chance of recovering whatever lay hidden in its main hold. It was time to get some answers.

Will slung his musket and satchel, then climbed up the rigging and set foot on the upper deck. He had to balance himself with each step due to the list of the ship. He moved cautiously aft, taking in everything he could lay eyes on. He wondered if the ship had been razeed during an earlier time, as the top deck was devoid of a forecastle, a stern castle, a pilot's cabin, and other more subtle features commonly associated with such sailing vessels.

The deck was in shambles, strewn with shattered rigging, charred and mangled wood fragments of all sizes, warped shards of metal, and broken glass. There were also various weapons—mostly swords, daggers, and pistols—scattered about. Several of the deck guns were damaged and lay askew, the barrels blown clear off their carriages and trunnions. Will also spied several mounted swivel guns that appeared undamaged, but heavily used. Despite all the debris he had been expecting to discover, there was one thing oddly absent—bodies. Not a one...and scarcely a drop of blood or other indication of human remains...anywhere.

He warily continued aft, abruptly stopping amidships to look down through the massive wooden-grated hatch that covered the huge opening to the main hold. The wood was damaged, which allowed a better view inside. Will peered down into the hold, cursing both the angle of the sun and the ship's list, which hindered his ability to penetrate the darkness and see what lay deep down at the bottom. After a few moments of intense scrutiny, coupled with the *ker-plop!* of a cannonball fragment he dropped down below, Will realized the hold was flooded to a fairly high level, even at a time when the tide was near its lowest. Whatever foodstuffs or goods rested at the bottom—wrecked, ruined, or otherwise—were safely concealed for the time being.

Though frustrated and a bit disheartened, his attention was soon drawn to an odd sight. He walked over to the base of the mainmast. Stuck peculiarly in the ship's foremost spar, at about eye level, were two wooden arrows. The arrowheads were fashioned from flint, and the shafts were fletched with eagle feathers. Will looked down, and at his feet was what appeared to be a strip of torn leather leggings caught on a protruding iron hook. He plucked it free and closely examined the piece of material along with one of the arrows. Both were undeniable evidence of recent Abenaki encroachments. The arrows were almost identical to some Will had seen embedded in the skeletal remains of numerous bodies still littering the overgrown fields of Falmouth Neck.

A bolt of fear ripped up and down his spine. He now held in his hand indisputable proof that native savages had been aboard and were possibly still lurking in the area. He wondered how many and just how brazen they were...and, more importantly, had they managed to defeat the currents ringing the islands and successfully come ashore in strength? His thoughts went back to the shrieks heard the previous night. Had they snuck aboard in the darkness? What did the arrows mean? Were they a message...a warning of sorts?

He made his way to the quarterdeck with his musket at the ready should any form of danger decide to reveal itself. He entered the ship and meandered through twisted piles of battle-damaged refuse to find the Great Cabin. He felt that would be the best place to find answers.

Upon locating the captain's quarters, Will entered through the remains of a doorway that looked as if it had been struck heavily by cannon fire. To the rear of the cabin were shattered windows and gaping holes in the stern that had been shot away. Will imagined a few well-aimed cannon blasts were responsible for the damage. On the floor was a morass of detritus—pewter plates and cups, navigational brass dividers, a scale and troy weights, sheet music, a mangled violin and bow, brass candelabra, books and maps, empty bottles of varying shapes and sizes, quill pens, a blanket, two damaged pistols, and an array of other sundries, most of which had been destroyed in the battle or robbed of their

usefulness through exposure to the elements. There was even some rotting meat in the corner covered with flies and emitting a foul stench.

Will searched for the ship's log and manifest. He examined several paper scrolls and parchments but found little of any significance. He also became keenly aware that there was nothing of meaningful value lying about in the cabin—no gold or silver, no princely garments, precious gems, or treasured consumables like tobacco, rum, salt, sugar, or exotic spices. If anything, the Great Cabin generated more questions than it answered. Will began to understand that if the *Repulse* was in fact a pirate ship, presumably of Royal Navy origin, and stolen, then perhaps it had been to the captain and crew's advantage to destroy all the routine nautical records to help prevent incrimination if captured.

Will exited the quarters and worked his way further below-decks. He stepped down into the poorly lit lower deck and found himself in knee-deep water. He slogged around carefully amid the flotsam, making his way toward the submerged hatch that led to the main hold. He was pleased to discover that the wooden grates that covered it had been dislodged, leaving a big opening that he could easily fit large objects through—including himself. A radical idea came to mind, and he returned to the Great Cabin and removed his satchel, hat, and boots. He propped his musket in a corner and returned to the lower deck.

At the edge of the hatch, he took a number of deep breaths and plunged into the cold, murky water. Almost instantly, his body went numb as he recklessly dove into the hold. He swam down for what felt like an eternity despite the vessel's reasonably shallow draft. He quickly reached the bottom and began mindlessly groping for anything that felt like a box, sack, chest, cask, or barrel. At first there was nothing save what he perceived was the ship's inner hull; then his hands slid over a hard and jagged mass that jutted upwards. He had discovered the rock formation on the ocean floor that had impaled the *Repulse* during battle. He swam away from it and toward the stern, thinking that the impact and the list of the vessel could have shifted the hold's contents down and aft, away from the bow.

As the frigid seawater numbed and gnawed at his bones and the absence of air began to impact his brain and lungs, Will surged forward with one last mighty push. And just when the physical stresses on his body began to threaten his life, he finally put his hands on several large boxlike objects that felt like cargo chests. His right hand then brushed against a small, round, and weighty object resting on the bottom. He was barely able to scoop it up with his numb fingers, but he managed to tuck it into a pocket of his breeches.

Courage would have propelled him to investigate further, but his time was up. His body needed air or he would surely drown, forever entombed in a watery grave. He sprang upwards and swam hard through the blackness until his hands hit wood. Frantically, he felt about for the opening to the hold. Disoriented by the darkness and sapped of strength by the cold water, panic set in and he nearly lost consciousness. His body began to sink back into the frigid and foreboding depths, but just as his eyes began to close for good, a glimmer of light came into focus. With his last bit of strength, Will kicked and lunged for it until his head punched through the surface. With a mighty gasp and several choking coughs, he regained enough energy to pull himself out of the hold and back into the knee-deep water of the lower deck. As he looked about, he saw a ray of sunlight shining through a damaged section of the hull and illuminating the opening of the hold just enough to light his way out. However, what he saw next was unnerving.

Now present on the lower deck and bobbing horizontally in the shallow water were three bodies. Bloated and white as ghosts, the corpses had presumably been freed from the depths of the hold during Will's explorations, or perhaps they had simply gone unnoticed prior to his plunge. Regardless, he was in no shape to investigate further.

He sat on the edge of the hatch coughing and shivering, not yet fully realizing how fortunate he was to be alive. Though out of immediate danger, he still needed to get topside before the icy water drained all the vitality from his body. He pulled himself up and staggered back to the Great Cabin, where he retrieved his

belongings before collapsing in the sunniest spot he could find on the quarterdeck. He lay there still shivering, with his eyes closed, and took a moment to praise the Lord for blessing him with such a warm day.

Will soaked up the sun. It both dried and reenergized him, driving the watery chill from his body and soul. He dozed off several times under the warm blanket of sunlight. When his strength returned, all thoughts of pursuing further scavenging quickly abandoned him when he saw that the ocean had churned to life. Choppy whitecaps, whipped up by the wind, danced on the surface of the water as the tide began to rise. Will could feel the *Repulse* beginning to rock ever so gently with the intensifying sea, and decided it was not safe to remain aboard much longer. He couldn't risk an injury from a freak accident alone aboard an unstable ship. Besides, he needed to devise a proper plan to recover whatever useful or valuable loot lay hidden in the depths of the *Repulse's* hold. It was also getting late, and he knew he could not go another day without filling his boat with fish. The mysteries of the *Repulse* would have to go unsolved a bit longer.

Taking a few moments to search the top deck for useful supplies or precious foodstuffs, Will eventually gave up after finding nothing worthwhile. He climbed down into the longboat and hoisted his sail. He set a course for his favorite fishing grounds and prepared his hooks and lines for a bountiful haul. He watched the *Repulse* slip from view as he sailed away, thinking about how he could recover whatever treasures lay hidden in its gloomy, flooded innards. Ironically, it was not treasure or material wealth that filled his thoughts—he had no use for money, or anything to purchase with it—but raw materials and food that could improve and prolong life on Storm Island. His ideas of riches came in the form of forged metal tools, rope, lumber, wooden pegs, iron spikes, nails, cloth, window glass, tar, and resin. However, he was most distraught at the lack of food aboard the ship, particularly seeds. He had hoped to find seeds with which to plant fresh crops and grow new life into Storm.

Some of the materials he dreamed about could easily be scavenged from *Repulse's* decks at a later time, but others he

feared would rot or rust away, trapped in a watery tomb forever. It was at this point that Will's frustration clouded his thoughts. He had to adjust his heading several times after straying off his initial course—the result of a distracted mind. As the boat rocked and swayed in the choppy sea, Will had to sit and stand several times to steady the small vessel and adjust the sail accordingly. As he did this, he became acutely aware of the weight in his pocket. He had completely forgotten about the small item he had hastily snaffled while submerged in the hold. He reached into his pocket and carefully brought its contents to light.

He sat there in awe as the object caught and reflected the sunlight. He had never held anything like it in his life, and knew nothing about its origins, but he was certain of one thing: In his hand was a gold coin. He studied the specie carefully, flipping it over repeatedly. One side was dominated by what looked to be a crown over an ornate shield, which Will took to be a symbol of royalty. On the edge was the name *Philip V*. The other side of the coin had a large cross on it that Will immediately associated with religion...plus one very interesting marking—a date.

“1714,” he muttered.

After a moment of thought, he decided that the coin was probably of Spanish origin. He began to reminisce about earlier years when his father was of sound mind and would tell him stories of the warring nations of Europe, about how the English, French, Spanish, and Dutch sought to control the world through colonization and exploitation of conquered territories wealth. Cyrus had told him about gold and silver, and how the whole world longed for it. He'd shown him pictures of mighty Spanish galleons and spoken of the vast amounts of riches they hauled back to Spain from the seemingly endless tropical locales scattered throughout the New World. Will felt sure that a tiny fragment of those riches now rested in his hand. Try as he might, though, he could not come up with the word his father had used so many times to describe coinage of this nature. Finally, he remembered and said it aloud.

“Doubloon.”

In that moment, Will's thoughts shifted in a more radical and far less practical direction. It was as if he had been infected by a

potent and all-consuming disease—greed—and all he could think about was gold and how much of it might be within his grasp. He jerked the tiller and nearly brought his small vessel about...back in the direction of the *Repulse*. But fortunately, he regained his senses and sailed onward to his prime fishing spot.

"I cannot *eat* or *drink* gold, nor am I inclined to try. I must fill my belly before I fill my pockets," he said as he furled the sail and cast his first line into the water. "Patience," he mumbled. "Nothing good can come of this unique gift from God without proper reflection and preparation. I must be cautious and mindful...or risk losing everything." Such were his thoughts.



Dusk was soon upon the land and sea as the drowning sun plunged deeper into the western horizon. His boat filled with a healthy catch of cod, Will sailed back to Storm Island, where he promptly beached, took down the mast, and unloaded his fish on the south-east shore. He hurried along with his tasks, as he wanted to be home before dark. He was also anxious to find out what had developed over the course of the day while he was away. After securing his gear and overturning the boat, which he again hid under sand, dry leaves, and tree branches, he gathered the fish in his most durable net and swung the heavy load over his shoulder.

Will struggled along through the woods, his catch weighing down one shoulder and his musket and satchel the other. He made it home without incident, but he was tired and very hungry. Once through the door, he was shocked to find the cabin empty, with a cold fireplace and an empty cooking kettle. He dropped his load, stepped back outside, and looked around.

"Father," he called out repeatedly, searching the crop field and then wandering down near the shore. Returning to the cabin, it struck him that perhaps Winnie was making good on her earlier promise and tending to his father's needs in the comfort of her own home. The thought put Will somewhat at ease. He gathered up the fish, his musket and satchel again, and headed for the Eustis cabin. He hoped Elizabeth was there and that she had been