

Captain Burt Against the Solstice Tide

By
Jeff Burt

Dedication

For Jesse, Chris, Taylor, and Hunter—This book would not have been possible without my family.

As you will discover in these pages, family is everything to me.

For the Burts who came before, and for the ones who will carry the tide forward.

Acknowledgment

This story was shaped as much by place as by imagination.

My deepest thanks to the Berkley Historical Society, Dighton Rock State Park, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and the Old Colony Historical Society for preserving the history that makes stories like this possible. Walking those grounds, studying those records, and standing where history still lingers gave this book its spine.

To my readers—thank you for trusting me with your time and your imagination. Stories only endure when they are carried forward.

To the tattoo community, my clients, and fellow artists who have shared decades of conversation, ideas, and belief in my creative work—you have shaped me more than you know.

And to my family, whose strength has endured more than these pages could ever hold—your resilience is the quiet current beneath everything I write.

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Author's Note

Some families pass down heirlooms.

Others pass down silence.

This story began when my wife and I moved into an old house in coastal Massachusetts—a place we believed would be a fresh start. Instead, it became a doorway. Questions surfaced that no one in my family had ever answered. Names went unspoken. Histories ended abruptly. The more I looked, the clearer it became that certain truths had been deliberately left behind.

During that search, I encountered the name Captain Tamburlaine Burt, born in 1690—a man whose descendants are memorialized beneath a weathered obelisk that still stands today in the Berkley Common Cemetery. Standing before it, it becomes impossible to ignore how many lives ended too soon. The stone reads less like a memorial and more like a ledger of grief.

Captain Burt Against the Solstice Tide is a work of fiction, but it is rooted in that discovery—in the unease of realizing that the past is not finished with us, and that legacy can be as dangerous as it is enduring. The characters, events, and supernatural elements in this novel are imagined, yet the emotional truth beneath them is not.

This book is about inheritance: what we choose to carry forward, what we refuse to name, and the moment when silence becomes more costly than revelation. It is also about love—how it survives across generations, and how it may be the only force capable of ending what should never have begun.

I offer this story not as a history, but as a reckoning.

— Jeff Burt

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Chapter One — The Water Remembers

The Taunton River was too still that morning. Jeff noticed it the moment he stepped onto the trail with his German Shepherd, Lola.

Berkley, Massachusetts in the summer is a pretty good place to be, he thought. Pretty sure we did this last year on my birthday too, didn't we, Lola?

Fog clung low over the water, blurring the banks until the river seemed endless. He hadn't planned to walk this far. Jesse was resting at home, and he'd only meant to give Lola a quick outing. But the river had a way of pulling him along.

Jesse hadn't mentioned his birthday yet. Maybe she forgot. Or maybe being three months pregnant earned her a pass. Either way, June 21 was his day, and starting it quietly — just him and Lola-bear — felt right.

Lola slowed.

So did Jeff.

Ahead, the small museum that housed Dighton Rock sat silent, its glass reflecting the pale morning light. Lola's ears pricked forward. Jeff felt it too — a pressure behind his ribs. Not fear exactly. More like recognition.

Through the glass, he saw the rock. Dark. Ancient. Its surface crowded with carvings that seemed to shift in the dimness.

Jeff stepped closer.

For a split second, his reflection wasn't his own.

A pale face stared back at him. Deep-set eyes. Knowing. Old in a way that had nothing to do with age.

Jeff blinked.

The reflection was gone. Just his own face, faintly warped by the glass.

Lola let out a low growl.

Jeff shook his head and laughed under his breath. “Just the fog messing with me,” he said, resting a hand on her neck.

That’s when he noticed it.

He thought he knew every inch of that rock. But there it was — worn as deeply as the rest of the markings: a horizontal line, and beneath it what looked like a star. Or a sun.

That’s weird.

He snapped a photo, then crossed to the nearby plaque displaying a recreation of the carvings. He compared the diagram to the image on his phone.

It wasn’t there.

“What the hell...” he muttered.

The moment passed. Reality pressed back in. He needed to get home. He still had a drawing to finish for work, and his client had already waited months for the appointment.

Gotta bring it.

To Jeff, it was just another tattoo. A good one, sure — but another day at the office.

When he got home, Jesse was standing in the doorway holding a small box wrapped in black paper with a red bow.

Classy, he thought.

“Happy birthday, my love,” she said.

“You remembered,” Jeff said, grinning as he pulled her into a hug. She was warm and solid, grounding him instantly, drawing him out of the fog and back into the house.

She asked about the walk.

“A little eerie,” he said. “Fog rolling in. I caught my reflection in the museum glass and for a second, I looked like some old pirate.”

They shared a brief, uneasy laugh.

“A pirate?” Jesse said. “That’s a new one.”

“Open your present,” she said, barely containing herself.

Jeff peeled back the paper and froze.

“A Jonesy Round back?” He looked up at her, stunned. “Is this real?”

“Well, according to the guy on Marketplace it is,” she said. “It better be — I paid five hundred bucks for it.”

“Five hundred?” Jeff laughed. “Jess... if it’s authentic, it’s worth way more than that.”

He hugged her again. “I can’t wait to tattoo with it,” he said, already knowing it was more collector’s piece than daily driver.

Later, at the kitchen table, Jeff found himself sketching — not the tattoo he had scheduled, but the face from the glass.

He didn’t realize what he was drawing until Jesse leaned over his shoulder and inhaled sharply.

“That’s him,” she whispered. “That’s the man from my dreams.”

Jeff turned. The room felt suddenly smaller.

“I keep hearing the same words,” she said, her voice unsteady.

““On the solstice—””

“—his heart is mine,” Jeff finished.

The sentence rose out of him fully formed.

They stared at each other.

The face on the page wasn’t finished, but it didn’t need to be. The sharp eyes. The set of the mouth. The tricorne hat. It felt less like a portrait than a presence.

“I’ve seen him,” Jesse said. Her hands trembled as she touched the paper. “Not asleep. I’m awake. Walking through the house. Sometimes the yard. Sometimes somewhere older.”

She looked at Jeff. “He’s not visiting me. He’s checking on me.”

Jeff swallowed. “That’s how it felt at the rock. Like someone standing behind me, using the glass to look back.”

Silence settled over the kitchen.

“Do you remember how strange it was that we got this house?” Jesse asked.

“The buyer backing out,” Jeff said. “Cancer.”

“And the timing. The price. The inspection clearing when it shouldn’t have,” she said. “It felt like we were being helped.”

Jeff didn’t like that word.

“In the dreams,” Jesse continued, “the house feels older than it should be. Like it remembers him.”

Jeff folded the drawing carefully.

“This didn’t start with us,” he said.

Jesse met his eyes. “Then we need answers.”

“There’s a historical society in Berkley,” Jeff said. “Old records. Old families.”

“You should go.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“No,” she said gently. “But something’s happening. And we have more questions than answers.”

Outside, the house creaked, settling into itself.

And somewhere, far older than either of them,
someone smiled.

Chapter Two – The Obelisk

Jeff went alone the next day.

The Berkeley Historical Society sat near the center of town, modest and unassuming, the kind of place most people drove past without noticing. He arrived just as the staff was beginning to close up for the afternoon.

An older woman behind the desk looked up as he stepped inside.

“We’re about to shut down,” she said with an apologetic smile. “Can I help you with something?”

Jeff introduced himself and gave his last name.

Her expression changed — not dramatically, but unmistakably.

“Burt?” she repeated. “That’s a name we know well around here.” She glanced toward the clock, then waved him in. “We can spare a little more time for a Burt.”

She led him into a back room that smelled faintly of dust and paper. Maps lined the walls. Letters and ledgers lay stacked neatly on long tables. At the far end, a large, darkened map was pinned in place, its edges curling with age.

“That’s a property map of Berkley from the early 1700s,” she said.

Jeff stepped closer. He traced the Taunton River inland from Narragansett Bay with his finger, following its familiar bends.

“Ferry crossing,” he said when he found it.

She nodded.

He followed the roads inland.

When his finger reached the spot where his house now stood, he stopped.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“This whole area,” Jeff said slowly. “It was owned by the Burts.”

She smiled faintly. “Burt’s Corner. The Burt School. Dozens of them. They were everywhere.”

A tightness formed in Jeff’s chest.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” she said, moving to a shelf. She returned with a stack of documents and set them down carefully.

Shipping manifests. Shipbuilders’ records. Crew lists.

Burt.

Burt.

Burt.

“Berkley was a major shipbuilding port in the early eighteenth century,” she explained. “Many vessels were built and launched near the bridge.”

Jeff nodded, though his thoughts had drifted.

Maybe that explains my pull to the water, he thought.

But why didn’t anyone ever talk about this?

Afterward, he walked to the cemetery on the Berkeley Common. Lola had to stay home — no dogs allowed. The afternoon was quiet, the air heavy with the scent of cut grass and old stone.

Headstones stretched in every direction.

Burt after Burt after Burt.

Then he saw it.

An obelisk rose above the rest, its stone darker, its presence heavier.

Captain Tamburlaine Burt

Born December 21, 1690

Jeff rested his palm against the cold surface.

“You must be proud.”

The voice came from behind him.

Jeff turned.

A man stood several yards away, dressed plainly, his posture relaxed. His eyes weren’t on Jeff — they were fixed on the obelisk.

“It must be an honor,” the man continued, “to have such an ancestor watching over you.”

“Excuse me?” Jeff said.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” the man said gently.

“Do I know you?”

“No,” the man replied. Then, after a pause, “But I know you.”

Jeff felt his stomach tighten.

“I overheard you at the historical society,” the man said. “You spoke our name with certainty.”

“Our name?”

“Burt.”

“That’s my last name.”

“It’s mine as well.”

Jeff frowned. “You’re saying we’re related?”

“I am,” the man said. “Though not in any way that would make sense to you yet.”

The wind moved through the trees. Jeff caught a scent he couldn’t place at first — salt, old wood, something maritime.

“I won’t lie to you,” the man continued. “And I won’t burden you with the truth before you’re ready.”

He stepped closer to the obelisk, close enough to touch it, though he didn’t.

“I’ve watched your family for a very long time,” he said. “Watched them forget what they were meant to remember.”

Jeff’s skin prickled.

“Ever wonder,” the man said quietly, “why no one in your family speaks of our past?”

The stone beneath Jeff’s hand seemed to hum — not audibly, but insistently, like pressure through bone.

Jeff knew then — without doubt — that whatever this man was, whatever he guarded...

He and Jesse would have to hear his story.

Chapter Three — The Resilience

Captain Tamburlaine Burt was born on December 21, 1690—the winter solstice.

Every sailor knew what that meant, whether they admitted it or not. The longest night of the year did not belong to the weak. It belonged to those meant to endure darkness without flinching.

Burt had always believed it was a blessing.

On the morning, he prepared to sail, Berkley buzzed with ambition. Timber groaned beneath wagons. Salt hung thick in the air. Men shouted from the docks with the practiced urgency of those who knew delay was death to profit.

It was time for Berkley to make its mark.

The Resilience sat in the water like she knew her worth.

Her hull was freshly pitched, her lines clean, her canvas folded tight and waiting. She was the finest ship Berkley had ever built, and everyone knew it. The owners wanted Nantucket results and New Bedford glory. They wanted the town spoken of in the same breath as the great whaling ports of New England.

They wanted Captain Burt to make it happen.

Margaret Babbitt Burt stood at the edge of the dock, one hand resting lightly at her waist, her expression unreadable. She had been born into wealth and married into risk, and she carried both with the same quiet confidence.

Captain Burt stood among his men, sleeves rolled, hands blackened with tar, hauling alongside sailors who knew better

than to question why their captain worked as hard as any of them.

He didn't notice Maggie at first.

She watched him with fondness, the corners of her mouth softening. His jaw was set, his shoulders tight—already carrying the weight of command. This was the man the town expected something from. The man with Berkley on his back.

So, she did the only thing that would reach him.

Maggie stepped in close and gave him a sharp slap on the backside.

Burt froze.

Every muscle locked. He spun halfway around, eyes flashing—already halfway to anger—before recognition hit.

“Are you mad?” he hissed.

The First Mate, standing a few paces away, didn't miss a beat. He turned just enough to witness the moment, then very deliberately looked elsewhere, a grin tugging at his mouth.

Maggie smiled like she owned the dock. She didn't—but her father probably did.

“No,” she said calmly. “But the pastor will be if you don't clean up and walk me to sermon.”

Burt stared at her—stunned, stressed, then helplessly amused. The tension drained out of him in a rush he hadn't realized he was holding.

“You can't do that,” he murmured.

“I just did.”

“Not here.”

She leaned in, lowering her voice. “You didn’t notice me for ten minutes. Every man on this dock noticed me—except the only one that matters.”

He glanced around. No one was looking.

So, he kissed her—quick and grateful.

“I love you,” he said.

“I know,” she whispered. “I love you too.”

The First Mate cleared his throat loudly. “I’ll see to the lines, Captain.”

Maggie smirked.

Burt sighed, defeated in the best possible way. “You’re going to get me flogged.”

“No man would dare lay a finger on the great Captain Tamburlaine Burt,” she said, brushing imaginary dust from his sleeve.

He caught her wrist gently, his thumb warm against her pulse. “You always do this right when I’m drowning in it.”

“That’s when you need it,” Maggie said.

He studied her—the certainty, the steadiness, the way she stood like nothing in the world frightened her—and nodded.

“Give me a minute,” he said. “I’ll walk you.”

“Make it five,” she replied. “You smell like the ship.”

He smiled fully then and turned back to his crew with renewed purpose.

By the time Burt joined Maggie in the pew, clean and composed, the church was already full.

“Better,” she whispered.

“Much,” he murmured.

The minister spoke of duty, obedience, and humility. Maggie laced her fingers through Burt’s, grounding him as the weight of expectation tried to settle again.

Berkley gathered there the way it always did—dressed neatly, faces solemn, eyes sharp with quiet judgment.

“If he clears his throat one more time,” Maggie murmured, “I’m convinced it’s part of the sermon.”

Burt bit back a smile.

“You’re thinking again,” she whispered.

“I always think.”

“That’s your trouble.”

“You married me anyway.”

“I married you because of it.”

When the sermon ended, the minister offered a blessing—heartfelt, pointed.

“Lord, watch over our young captain on his journey. Guide him through treacherous waters. Grant him wisdom greater than his youth, and return him and his crew safely to us.”

Maggie elbowed Burt. “Say something.”

He stood, hat in hand.

“You all know me,” he said. “You know my family. And I know some of you wonder if I’m the right man for the job.”

A ripple moved through the pews.

“Truth is,” he continued, “I wonder that myself.”

Silence.

“But these men I sail with are among the toughest Berkley has ever known. And with Thomas Pratt and me leading them, we’ll find the whales. We’ll bring honor to this town.”

He glanced toward the minister.

“I may be young, but I’ve lived on the water my whole life. It may take a year or more—but I promise you this: I will bring every man home, and the largest payload The Resilience can carry.”

The church erupted.

Maggie clapped, beaming. Pratt stared at Burt, confusion giving way to pride.

“RESILIENCE!” Burt shouted, lifting his hat.

Outside, they were met by three men—the three wise men, Berkley called them, though never to their faces.

One was Maggie’s father.

“Daddy,” she said, embracing him.

“Margaret,” Marshal Babbitt said politely. “Might we have a word with your husband?”

She held his gaze, knowing he meant alone.

She held her ground where belong next to her husband.

Dockside Goodbye

The tide was turning when they said goodbye.

She put her hand on his chest “has the pain returned”

He gently pulled it away “I’m fine” he said smiling gently.

“Well, I’ve told my cousin to take care of you” Maggie Confessed

“Oh, Maggie you just signed my death sentence” they both laughed “I’ll be fine my love I promise, and if it returns, I’ll talk to Nathaniel” he said just to comfort her, but he knew that conversation would probably not happen.

Not rushing—just enough movement to remind Maggie that time did not stop for anyone, no matter how badly she wanted it to.

The Resilience loomed beside the dock, her crew moving with practiced purpose. The air held that sharp expectancy that always came before departure.

Maggie adjusted Burt’s collar, fingers lingering.

“You’re clean,” she said. “Respectable. Almost disappointing.”

“I’ll fix that when I return,” he said.

“You plan on returning?”

“I do.”

“Good,” she said lightly. “I’d hate to have married a liar.”

He smiled, then sobered.

“You don’t have to conquer the sea,” Maggie said quietly.

“I know.”

“You don’t have to make Berkley proud.”

“I know.”

“You don’t have to be your father.”

That one landed.

“I just want enough,” he said. “Enough so no one questions us again.”

“They always will,” she said gently. “That’s what people do when they’re afraid someone else might be right.”

She leaned closer. “When the omens start whispering—and they will—listen to yourself.”

He nodded, though something unreadable flickered behind his eyes.

“I was born for this,” he said.

“You were born for many things,” Maggie replied. “Don’t let them tell you it’s only one.”

A shout rang out. “Favorable tide Captain”

Maggie kissed him—firm, certain.

“Come back to me,” she said.

Burt paused at the gangplank. “I always do.”

She watched him climb aboard, watched him become Captain again.

Only when the lines were cast off did she let her hand fall to her belly, her breath catching once before she straightened.

The Resilience slipped into the current.

And the long journey waited.

Chapter Four – The Attack

Not far now, Pratt thought.

Almost clear of Narragansett Bay and into open sea.

Newport lay temptingly to the east—safe harbor, familiar docks—but it was too soon. The Resilience had barely stretched her legs.

Fall River already felt like a memory.

He didn't notice it at first.

A dull thud against the hull.

Then another.

Then another.

“Take cover!” Pratt shouted.

He knew immediately.

Wampanoag.

Since the end of King Philip's War, bands along the coast still reminded the colonists that the land—and the water—had never truly belonged to them.

An arrow jutted from the hull just above the waterline, its shaft dark with pitch and salt. It hadn't pierced deep—just enough to bite and hold.

Pratt's jaw tightened. He'd heard stories of canoes slipping close to ships, men boarding in silence—but this was broad daylight, too far out for that.

No way, he thought.

“Captain,” he called, keeping his voice even.

Burt stepped out from his quarters, irritation already sharp.
“What is it?”

Pratt pointed.

Burt stared at the arrow, then scanned the shoreline.

Trees.

Mist.

Stillness.

“How long?” Burt asked.

“Long enough,” Pratt said. “There’s more.”

As the light improved, they found them—two, then three. One near the stern. Another lodged higher up, angled badly.

None of the crew had heard a thing.

That was the worst part.

Men began to mutter.

Bad luck.

A warning.

A claim.

Pratt felt the turn—the moment confidence thinned into fear.

“They’re putting holes in my ship,” Burt said.

Pratt opened his mouth to argue—and the fourth arrow screamed out of the fog.

Pratt saw it before he heard it.

He didn’t think.

He slammed into Burt, driving him sideways as the arrow tore through the space where Burt's chest had been.

The impact knocked the wind out of both of them.

The arrow didn't miss entirely.

It buried itself deep in Burt's shoulder.

Burt grunted—sharp, involuntary—and went down hard.

“Captain down!” someone shouted.

Chaos erupted. Men scrambled for cover. Others scanned the shoreline, suddenly aware of how exposed they were—how thin a ship's side was when land lay close.

Pratt was already on him, hands firm, controlled. Blood spread quickly across Burt's sleeve.

“Easy,” Pratt said. “Stay down.”

Burt sucked in a breath, pain flaring white-hot. “You... pushed me.”

“Damn right I did.”

The arrow jutted from Burt's shoulder, the shaft trembling with each breath.

Pratt gripped it once, hard.

“This is going to hurt.”

Burt laughed breathlessly and met his eyes. “Then do it.”

Pratt yanked.

Burt roared—not fear, not weakness—pain, raw and unfiltered.

“Leave it!” Nathaniel Babbitt shouted as he forced his way through the crew. “You fool—leave it in!”

Too late.

Blood spilled freely, but the wound was clean.

Babbitt dropped to his knees, fury sharp in his voice as he bound the shoulder. “Next time you wait for me,” he snapped. “You can tear more damage free pulling it like that.”

Babbitt was a man of learning—apprenticed young, widely read—with the calm confidence of someone who knew exactly how much a body could endure before it failed. He was also kin to Maggie—her cousin, though distant enough that most aboard never made the connection.

Alive.

Very alive.

“We should turn back,” Pratt said low, meant only for Burt.

Burt met his eyes—pale, sweating, burning with something dangerous.

“No.”

“Captain—”

“They tried to stop us,” Burt said. “That’s all this was.”

They, Pratt thought.

Did he mean the Wampanoag—or something else?

Pratt glanced at the crew—wide eyes, crossed glances, fear thick as fog.

“This will spread,” Pratt warned. “They’ll talk.”

Burt pushed himself upright.

The effort cost him. Everyone saw it.

But he stood anyway.

“They’ll talk about a captain who bleeds and does not turn back,” Burt said, his voice carrying now. “That’s the story they’ll remember.”

Pratt held his gaze. He knew he’d lost.

At last, he nodded. “They’ll sing songs about you, sir.”

A few men laughed nervously.

Others crossed themselves.

One sailor clapped. Then another.

“Toughest captain on the Atlantic!” someone shouted.

We’re not even on the Atlantic yet, Burt thought.

Still in Narragansett Bay.

The arrows were pulled from the hull and thrown overboard.

The Resilience sailed on.

From that moment forward, no man aboard doubted two things:

That Thomas Pratt would die for his captain.

And that Captain Tamburlaine Burt was either blessed—or already damned.

That night, the sea went glassy.

Too calm.

Stars reflected perfectly on the water, as though the ship sailed between two skies. Men spoke in whispers. Some slept clutching charms. Others stayed awake, staring at the horizon as if it might blink first.

Pratt found Burt at the rail.

“You’re pushing your luck,” Pratt said quietly.

Burt didn’t turn. “Luck has nothing to do with it.”

“That’s what worries me.”

Burt finally looked at him, eyes bright despite the pain. “They needed to see it.”

“See what?”

“That I don’t bend.” Burt glanced back toward the deck, the crew half-lit by lantern glow. “Fear rots a ship faster than barnacles.”

“And arrogance sinks it,” Pratt said flatly.

Burt smiled faintly. “You always mistake confidence for pride.”

“I mistake destiny for a lie men tell themselves when they’re afraid to stop.”

Burt said nothing.

Sometime after midnight, the wind shifted—subtle, deliberate. The sails filled without command. The Resilience leaned into it like a living thing that knew where it was meant to go.

Pratt felt it before he saw it.

“Captain,” he said slowly. “Check the course.”

Burt glanced at the compass.

The needle trembled.

Then settled.

Not north.

“That’s not—” Pratt began.

“I see it,” Burt said.

The needle pointed not toward any true bearing, but toward open water—south by no known measure.

“That’s wrong,” Pratt said.

Burt studied the stars, the needle, the black water ahead.

“No,” he said quietly. “It’s honest.”

“We should correct it.”

Burt didn’t move.

“This ship was built to endure,” he said. “So was I.”

Pratt searched his face for doubt.

He found none.

The longest night deepened around them.

Somewhere far ahead—unseen, unmapped—the world waited.

And Captain Tamburlaine Burt, born under the solstice, set his course without turning back.

Chapter Five — Berkley to Barbados

(Revised Barbados Section — Polished, Complete)

Barbados arrived as both relief and wound.

Green hills. Heat. Music drifting from shore. The air thick with sugar, rot, and rum tangled together. The Resilience made port, and the men were given leave.

Captain Burt sent letters to Maggie the moment his feet touched land—more than he meant to, sealing each with the same careful pressure. He hoped, foolishly, to find one waiting for him. He did not.

Another ship from New England would be weeks behind.

For two days, the ship breathed easy.

Laughter returned. Coin changed hands. Bodies found comfort.

On the second night, a sailor named Reeves didn't come back.

They found him at dawn behind a tavern near the docks, his skull split open against stone, blood dried dark into the dirt. No witnesses willing to speak. No urgency from the authorities.

A constable shrugged.

"Drunk sailor," he said. "Fell. Happens."

Pratt stared at him. "You didn't even ask his name."

The man spat to one side. "Foreign dead don't keep me busy."

The magistrate wanted a fee before he would hear anything at all.

Burt paid it.

Nothing came of it.

Burt stood in the heat outside the office, jaw tight, the noise of the port rolling around him like surf. He looked at Pratt once.

“We’ll find out ourselves.”

They started where Reeves had last been seen.

The tavern keeper tried indifference first. Pratt leaned him backward over a table until the man’s feet left the floor.

“Try again,” Pratt said calmly.

The truth came quickly after that.

A woman. A prostitute. Young, frightened, already certain she would be blamed. Reeves had paid for her time. When he couldn’t afford what she demanded after, she’d called for help—not meaning death, she swore. Just pressure. Just fear.

Dock men answered instead.

Men who handled problems.

“It wasn’t supposed to go that far,” she sobbed.

Burt listened without expression.

“How often?” he asked.

The woman hesitated.

Pratt tightened his grip on the tavern keeper.

“Often,” she said.

That settled it.

Back aboard *The Resilience*, Burt found Nathaniel Babbitt in the shade of the mainmast.

“Ready the ship,” Burt said. “Quietly.”

Babbitt looked up, reading the set of Burt’s face at once. “Captain?”

“Now.”

Babbitt nodded and turned without another word.

Burt chose three men.

Then Pratt.

They didn’t wear coats. They didn’t carry weapons openly.

They found the dock men where the woman said they would—behind a storage shed near the water, laughing over drink and dice.

Burt watched them for a moment.

“What’s the plan, Captain?” Pratt asked quietly.

Burt gave a small smile. “You remember New Bedford.”

Pratt grimaced. “If I recall, it didn’t end well for the drunk.”

Burt’s eyes stayed on the men. “Aye. But that time, the drunk wasn’t you.”

Pratt snorted once, then stepped away.

He began to sing as he approached—tuneless, loud, swaying on his feet. The men noticed immediately. Easy sport. Easy coin.

They grabbed him, pinning him hard against the wall. The song cut off mid-note.

“This is for Reeves,” Pratt said.

The rum bottle shattered against the largest man’s head.

Burt and the others were on them instantly.

It was over quickly.

No speeches. No mercy asked for or given. Burt did not lead it—but he did not stop it either. He struck once, hard, when a man reached for a knife.

Pratt finished the rest.

When it was done, the dock men were left breathing—broken enough to remember.

They returned to the ship before dusk.

No one asked questions.

Reeves was buried at sea before noon the next day. No sermon. Just weight and water and a name spoken once—then swallowed by the wake.

By evening, the island was already slipping behind them.

As the bow turned south once more, Burt stood at the rail, the wind pulling at his coat, the horizon wide and empty ahead.

Below deck, his unfinished charts lay weighted by brass instruments, ink still drying—lines leading south, farther than any sensible man would care to draw.

“We put Barbados to our stern,” Burt said at last. “What waits ahead will make this voyage worth the cost.”

No one cheered.

The sails filled.

The sea darkened.

And The Resilience drove on—southbound, carrying justice the world had refused, and a captain who had learned how easily command could become something else.

Chapter Six – The Three Wise Men

Berkley

They caught him just outside the churchyard, where gravel gave way to packed earth and the sound of voices thinned into private murmurs.

Maggie felt it before she saw them.

Three men stood apart from the rest of the town—not talking, not smiling. Waiting. They hadn’t joined the applause. Hadn’t lingered to congratulate. They stood like stones placed deliberately in Burt’s path.

“The three wise men,” Maggie murmured, not looking at them.

Burt exhaled slowly. “They never miss a departure.”

One of them stepped forward.

Marshall Babbitt—Maggie’s father—solid, well-fed, dressed in restraint rather than finery. His expression was warm enough for appearances, but his eyes were already measuring distance, risk, outcome.

“Tamburlaine,” he said, extending a hand. “That was a fine speech.”

Burt shook it. “It needed saying.”

“Yes,” Babbitt replied. “It did.”

The pause that followed suggested something else had nearly been said—and deliberately wasn’t.

The second man spoke next.

Older. Leaner. Weathered in a way money never fixed. His coat was well kept but old, the sort a man didn't replace because it still remembered him. His hair had gone more gray than white, his face lined by salt and disappointment rather than age.

"Christ," he said quietly. "You sound just like him."

Burt stiffened.

Maggie felt it immediately—like a line drawn tight through her husband's spine.

"Uncle," Burt said carefully.

Michael Burt—his father's older brother. Once the presumed choice to captain *The Resilience* before the town passed him over for *Tamburlaine*. No one ever said why. Everyone pretended not to notice.

Michael nodded once. No affection. No distance. Just acknowledgment.

"I wondered if you would," he said. "Stand up there and promise the town the sea wouldn't take what it always takes."

"I promised to bring my men home," Burt said.

Michael's eyes never left his. "So did your father."

The words were deliberate. Meant to land.

Silence fell hard between them.

Maggie's hand found Burt's sleeve. She didn't squeeze. She didn't interrupt. She stayed—exactly where she was needed.

The third man still hadn't spoken.

He stood slightly apart, hands folded behind his back, his face half-shadowed by the lowering sun. Not old. Not young. His

eyes moved constantly—not nervously, but attentively. As if he were cataloging everything: Burt’s posture, Maggie’s stance, the distance to the road, the direction of the wind.

When he finally spoke, his voice was mild.

“The Resilience is a strong ship,” he said. “Strong enough to convince a man he can finish what someone else could not.” A pause. “We have invested heavily in that belief.”

Marshall Babbitt gestured smoothly. “This is Edmond Crowe. A man who understands risk.”

Crowe inclined his head—first to Burt.

Then, unmistakably, to Maggie.

“We’ve expanded the docks,” Crowe continued. “Built the warehouses. The future of this port depends on whale oil filling them. Until that happens, Berkley remains... constrained.”

Burt’s jaw tightened. “You’ll have your oil.”

Michael cleared his throat. “We’re not here to stop you. That would be pointless.”

“Then why come at all?” Burt asked.

“Because blood remembers,” Michael said. “Even when men try not to.”

Marshall stepped in, sensing the moment fraying. “You’ve married well,” he said, nodding toward Maggie. “You’ve been given command. The town is behind you.”

“Yes,” Maggie said evenly. “We are.”

Marshall met her gaze, something like respect flickering there. “Then you understand why we needed to speak plainly.”

Michael turned back to Burt. “Your father chased something south,” he said. “He called it purpose. Called it duty. By the time we realized it was grief, it was already too late.”

“He died at sea,” Burt said.

“He died chasing it,” Michael corrected. “There’s a difference.”

Crowe shifted his weight slightly. “Some men mistake inheritance for destiny,” he said. “Others make it so.”

Burt studied him. “You speak like a man who expects to be proven right.”

Crowe inclined his head. “I speak like a man who has seen what happens when ghosts are given the helm.”

The word landed heavier than the rest.

Maggie felt Burt move before she saw it—one small step forward. Not aggressive. Final.

“I will not die the way he did,” Burt said. “And I will bring glory back with me.”

Michael studied him for a long moment.

Then he nodded. Once.

“That,” he said quietly, “is exactly what he said.”

The bells rang behind them, signaling the end of the gathering. Voices swelled. Life resumed.

The three men did not linger.

Marshall kissed Maggie’s cheek, murmuring something she couldn’t quite hear, and stepped away.

Michael paused last. His hand rested briefly on Burt's shoulder—heavy, grounding, a touch that carried more history than comfort.

“Chase whales,” he said. “Not ghosts.”

Crowe was already walking off.

Just before he disappeared into the thinning crowd, he glanced back once.

Not at Burt.

At Maggie.

And for reasons she couldn't name, she knew—absolutely—that this was not the last time she would see Edmond Crowe.

Chapter Seven — What was Always Intended

Pratt knew before the captain said a word.

It wasn't the course alone—though the numbers were wrong for any sane man. It was the way Captain Tamburlaine Burt stood at the helm when the night watch changed. Still. Certain. As if the sea ahead had already answered a question no one else had thought to ask.

Pratt waited until the deck thinned, until the lanterns cast long shadows and the men settled into that quiet rhythm that came just before confession—or mutiny.

"You're not planning to turn west," Pratt said quietly.

Burt didn't look at him.

"No."

"You're not cutting north to hunt," Pratt pressed. "Not yet."

"No."

Pratt stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Then where in God's name are we going?"

Burt finally turned.

His expression wasn't defensive. It wasn't secretive.

It was resolved.

"South," he said. "Farther than they expect."

Pratt felt the truth lock into place with sickening clarity. The missing whales. The steady pace. The way Burt never once entertained alternatives.

“You knew,” Pratt said slowly. “From the start.”

Burt didn’t deny it.

“You’ve been setting them up for it,” Pratt continued. “Letting the idea harden without ever naming it.”

Burt’s jaw tightened—not in anger, but memory.

“They’ll follow,” he said. “If they believe I will.”

Pratt stared at him. “Christ, Tamburlaine... this was your plan all along.”

Burt’s eyes flicked toward the dark horizon.

“My father died trying to round the Horn.”

There it was.

Not shouted. Not dramatized. Just placed between them like a body pulled from the water.

Pratt swallowed. “You told the town you’d bring every man back.”

“And I intend to,” Burt said.

“You know that’s not the same thing.”

Burt met his gaze. “It is to me.”

The wind pressed into the sails, low and steady. The ship leaned southward, obedient.

“You’re chasing his ghost,” Pratt said. Not accusing. Naming.

Burt didn’t answer.

That was answer enough.

Pratt turned away before the weight of it crushed him. He walked the deck, listening to the ship, feeling her bones. She was strong—stronger than most. But strength had limits. And the Horn forgave neither pride nor grief nor unfinished bloodlines.

At dusk, he gathered the men.

No speeches. No promises.

Just truth, shaped carefully enough to survive.

“We’re heading into harder water,” Pratt said. “Not tonight. Not tomorrow. But soon. This ship was built for it. You were chosen for it. And no man aboard will be forced where he will not go.”

They listened. Faces tight. Some eager. Some afraid. All paying attention.

“If you stay,” Pratt continued, “you stay because you trust the man at the helm. And because you trust the men beside you.”

A pause.

“If you leave, you leave with no shame.”

No one stepped forward.

That worried him more than fear would have.

Preparations followed—quiet, relentless. Extra lashings. Reinforced spars. Stores checked and rechecked. Men drilled without being told why. The Resilience took on the air of a thing being sharpened.

That night, Captain Burt opened the rum rations for the crew. They sang. They danced. For one night, they forgot what waited ahead.

Later, Burt stood alone at the stern.

The stars were thin. The sea darker than it should have been.

He thought of Maggie.

Of her hand at his chest. Of the way she told him not to let them convince him he was born for only one thing. He had not told her about the Horn. Not directly. Some truths had to be carried alone.

“I will come back,” he said aloud, though no one stood near enough to hear.

The sea did not answer.

Pratt watched from the quarterdeck, a distance he had never felt before. He understood now why Burt had spoken the way he did in church. Why he’d said you know my family without explanation.

He hadn’t been reassuring them.

He’d been warning them.

Or daring them to stop him.

Pratt closed his eyes.

And remembered the bells.

They had been loud that morning.

Too loud.

Chapter Eight — Swine in the House of God

Berkley—

The church was empty when Maggie arrived.

That, more than anything, was why she had come.

She moved slowly now—not from frailty, but from consideration—each step measured, one hand resting instinctively at the curve of her belly. Four months along. Far enough that the truth could no longer be hidden, but not so far that it invited comment unless she allowed it.

The door closed behind her with a soft, final sound.

Inside, the air was cool, carrying the faint scent of old wood and extinguished candles. Light filtered through tall windows in narrow bands, dust motes drifting where hymns usually rose.

Maggie sat.

Not to pray.

Not yet.

Sleep had become a stranger. Nights stretched thin and restless, her body aching in unfamiliar ways, her thoughts circling the same unanswered questions. Letters sent south with careful words and steady hands. Letters of the expecting child, of Berkley, of how badly she missed him—not because she misunderstood the sea, but because it moved on its own time.

Stillness pressed in around her now.

She let herself miss him.

Not the captain.

Not the name spoken with pride at the docks.

Tamburlaine.

His voice in the house.

The way he stood behind her when the wind cut sharp.

The quiet certainty of him.

Her father had visited the day before.

They sat at the kitchen table with untouched tea cooling between them, the house too quiet for conversation to hide behind. The walls still smelled faintly of pitch and salt from Tamburlaine's Sea chest, the chair across from Maggie conspicuously empty.

Marshall Babbitt watched his daughter for a long moment before speaking, as if memorizing her.

"You've changed," he said gently. "Not badly. Just... changed."

Maggie nodded. Her hands were folded over her stomach, more from instinct than intention.

"There's something I need to tell you," she said.

He waited.

"I'm with child."

For a heartbeat, he only stared—then his face broke open in a way she hadn't seen since she was a girl. He stood, came around the table, and took her hands in both of his.

"Oh, Maggie," he said, voice thick. "Your mother would have been so happy to know this."

The words lingered between them, tender and aching.

“She would’ve spoiled it rotten,” Maggie said with a small smile.

“Yes,” he said, smiling back. “Absolutely would have.”

They sat again. The quiet returned, but it was different now—full instead of hollow.

After a while, Maggie spoke again, softer.

“I miss him,” she said. “Every night.”

Her father didn’t try to correct her. Didn’t offer comfort dressed as logic or tell her how strong she was meant to be.

“I know,” he said instead.

She swallowed.

“It gets lonely here,” Maggie added. “When the tide turns at night. When the house settles. I listen for him without meaning to.”

Marshall looked around the room—the worn table, the mended window frame, the hearth Tamburlaine had rebuilt himself.

“You could come stay with me awhile,” he said carefully. “Just until he returns. Or longer, if you need it.”

Maggie shook her head, but she reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

“I’ll visit,” she said. “I promise. I won’t disappear.”

He nodded, then hesitated, something old and paternal rising up despite himself.

“Come home, Maggie,” he said quietly.

She glanced around the room again—the lamp he'd hung, the floor he'd worn thin, the space that held his absence as much as his memory.

"I am home," she said.

Her father didn't argue.

That had been enough.

Now, in the church, Maggie closed her eyes as a subtle movement stirred beneath her palm—small, unmistakable.

Alive.

Her breath caught. Not in joy. Not in fear.

Recognition.

When she opened her eyes, she was no longer alone.

Edmond Crowe stood a respectful distance away, his hat in his hands.

He had not entered loudly. He had not startled her. Somehow, he had simply arrived—as if he'd been there all along and she was only just noticing.

"Mistress Burt," he said gently.

Maggie rose slowly. "Mr. Crowe."

His gaze flicked—just once—to her belly, then returned to her face. Polite. Observant. Nothing a man could be accused of.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he said. "I saw the door open."

"You're not," she replied. "I was about to leave."

She did not move.

Crowe nodded, as though this were expected. “I won’t keep you long.”

Silence settled again, altered now by his presence.

“I wanted to say,” he continued, “how admirably you’ve carried yourself since the ship sailed. Waiting is its own labor.”

“It is what it is,” Maggie said evenly.

“Yes,” Crowe agreed. “So many things are.”

He stepped closer—not toward her, but toward the pew across the aisle, careful not to presume. “I’ve seen too many women made to bear uncertainty alone. It’s an unkind burden.”

Maggie’s fingers curled slightly at her side.

“My husband will return,” she said.

Crowe did not argue.

“That may be so,” he replied. “But the sea is not known for honoring intention.”

The words were measured. Reasonable. Offered like concern, not challenge.

“I have means,” he said after a moment. “Resources. Should you ever find yourself in need—temporarily, of course—I would consider it a privilege to see you protected.”

There it was.

Not temptation.

Not rescue.

Security.

“I appreciate the thought,” Maggie said. “But I have no need of charity.”

Crowe smiled faintly. “I would never insult you by calling it that.”

Lightning flickered distantly through the high windows, too far yet to be heard.

“Men like your husband,” Crowe continued softly, “are driven. Admirably so. But drive has a way of asking payment from those left behind.”

Maggie met his gaze fully.

“My husband is at sea,” she said. “Not gone.”

Something in Crowe’s expression shifted—not offense.

Interest.

“Of course,” he said. “You deserve certainty. Protection. Some futures need not be waited for.”

The implication hung between them, unspoken and unmistakable.

Maggie straightened, one hand settling at her belly—this time with intention.

“I am not waiting,” she said quietly. “I am carrying.”

The words ended the conversation.

Crowe inclined his head, retreat measured. “Then I wish you strength,” he said. “In all the forms it takes.”

He replaced his hat and turned away, footsteps echoing softly as he left the church.

Maggie remained standing long after the door closed.

Outside, thunder rolled at last.

She did not look back.

But somewhere deep in her bones, she knew—

He would not be so easily dismissed.

Berkley — After

Maggie walked home slowly.

The sky had darkened while she was inside the church, clouds stacking low and heavy, the air smelling faintly of rain undecided. The town felt altered—unchanged in shape, but thinner, as if something had been taken from it while she wasn't looking.

Her hand rested at her belly again. Protective. Deliberate.

She was halfway to the house when a voice caught her from behind.

“Hello, Aunt Maggie.”

She turned, startled.

For a moment she didn't place him—only saw the height, the broadened shoulders, the boy's face stretched toward something not yet finished. Then recognition rushed in.

“Nathan Burt,” she said, smiling. “My goodness... I hardly recognized you. How long has it been, how old are you now?”

“Nearly seventeen,” he said, embarrassed and pleased.

They walked the rest of the way together. Nathan matched her pace without thinking, then slowed himself, careful without being obvious.

Inside the house, Maggie set her shawl aside. Letters lay spread across the table—creased, reread, some weighted with a spoon to keep them from curling.

Nathan noticed immediately.

“Are those... from Uncle Tamburlaine?”

“They are,” Maggie said. “From Barbados.”

“He made it, then.”

“Yes.”

“Does he sound... well?”

Maggie considered the question.

“He writes that the seas have been quiet,” she said. “That whale luck has been thin. There was an early incident near Narragansett Bay, but he dismisses it quickly. He says not to worry.”

Nathan frowned slightly. “And do you?”

She gathered the letters, stacking them neatly. “I trust my husband.”

It was true.

And not the whole truth.

A drop of water splashed from the ceiling onto the table. Nathan flinched, then laughed.

“It’s been leaking again,” Maggie said. “Only when the rain comes in sideways.”

“I could fix that,” Nathan said immediately.

She smiled. “I’m sure you could.”

“I mean it,” he said. “I’ve been helping Mr. Cole with his roof. And the Barlow’s’ shed. It wouldn’t take much.”

Maggie considered him, then nodded. “Well, I won’t say no to a steady hand. I could use the help. Around here... from time to time.”

“I’d like that,” Nathan said, quick and sincere.

She poured water, then realized she’d already done so earlier and hadn’t touched it. She set the cup aside.

“I had heard,” she said gently, “that you’d gotten into a bit of trouble in Taunton.”

Nathan stiffened—not defensively, but like someone bracing for judgment.

“That’s true,” he said. “I didn’t go looking for it.”

“I didn’t think you did.”

“There was a man,” Nathan continued. “Drinking. Loud. He wouldn’t leave a woman alone. Everyone else kept their eyes down.” He hesitated. “I told him to stop.”

“And?”

“He laughed,” Nathan said. “So, I decked him.”

Maggie studied him. “Did you hurt him badly?”

“No,” he said. “Enough.”

“And the woman?”

Nathan glanced at the floor, a small smile tugging at his mouth. “We’ve become... friendly.”

Maggie laughed softly. “Oh, you Burt boys.”

That seemed to be the end of it, as far as Nathan was concerned. She nodded once. “Then I won’t lose sleep over it.”

Nathan let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

Maggie opened a small drawer and set a few coins on the table. “If you’re going to be helping around here, you’ll let me pay you.”

He shook his head immediately. “I could never take money from you, Aunt Maggie.”

“You’ll insult me if you don’t.”

He hesitated, then smiled crookedly. “Then maybe... instead of payment... you could speak to your husband.”

She raised an eyebrow. “About?” She already knew

“About taking me on his next whale hunt,” Nathan said carefully, like words rehearsed a hundred times. “I learn quick. I’m stronger than men ten years older. I listen. I work harder than any two.”

Maggie studied him—really studied him now. The steadiness. The restraint. The familiar pull of the sea she’d learned to recognize in Burt men long before they admitted it themselves.

“And what does your mother Rebecca, what does she think about you taking to the sea?” she asked.

“I think she knows it’s bound to happen,” Nathan said quietly.
“I just thought... he might listen to you.”

Maggie sighed, then smiled. “You help me around here from time to time, and in exchange, I’ll put in a good word with your uncle when he returns. Deal?”

She extended her hand.

Nathan ignored it and pulled her into a careful hug instead, blinking hard. “Deal, Aunt Maggie. You won’t regret it.”

“I’m going to fetch my tools,” he said, already moving toward the door. “I’ll be back shortly to mend that roof.”

Outside, thunder rolled again, closer now.

Maggie moved to the window and drew the curtain.

The child shifted.

A small thing. A reminder.

Maggie leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She thought of Mr. Crowe “what a pig” she whispered out loud

Outside, the storm finally broke.

She waited it out.

Chapter Nine – Mi Casa Su, Casa

The kitchen had gone quiet in the way rooms do after something irreversible has been said.

Jeff sat back in his chair, both hands wrapped around a mug that had long since gone cold. Across from him, the man who had just finished telling a story—a life—watched them with an expression that was neither defensive nor apologetic.

He looked patient.

As though this moment had always belonged to them.

Jesse broke the silence first.

“That was...” She searched for the word and failed. “One hell of a story.”

The man inclined his head slightly. “I know this story well, madam.”

Jeff let out a breath that was almost a laugh. “You talked about dates. Places. Names. Storms.” He shook his head. “You didn’t say it like someone repeating something they read.”

“No,” the man said calmly. “I didn’t.”

Jesse’s fingers tightened around her mug. “You spoke about Maggie as if—” She stopped herself. Swallowed. “As if she were in the room with you.”

For the first time since he’d arrived, something unmistakable surfaced on his face.

Not pain.

Not regret.

Love.

Jesse studied him. When she spoke again, her voice was softer—steadier.

“You really did love her,” she said.

Not a question.

A recognition

Jeff wasn’t surprised by that at all.

The man didn’t answer right away. His gaze drifted to the table, to the tattoo machine resting in its open case, metal catching the light. When he finally spoke, his voice carried the weight of centuries without ever naming them.

“There are loves that don’t fade with time,” he said. “They change. They harden. But they do not loosen their grip.”

Something cold settled behind Jeff’s ribs.

Jesse shifted. Her hand moved instinctively to her stomach, rubbing slow circles as the baby stirred—more restless now. The man’s eyes dropped immediately.

He watched.

Not with curiosity.

With appraisal.

“Strong,” he murmured.

Jesse stiffened, though she didn’t know why. She forced herself to meet his gaze. “You said something earlier,” she said. “About life being harder back then. About men being stronger.”

“They had to be,” he replied. “The sea did not forgive weakness. Neither did the world.”

Jeff leaned forward, elbows on the table. “You’re not talking like someone remembering history. You’re talking like someone comparing it.”

The man smiled faintly. “People today are distracted. Pulled in too many directions at once. Back then, a man knew exactly what was expected of him.”

“And what was that?” Jeff asked.

“To endure.”

Silence fell again.

The house felt smaller now. As if it were listening.

Jesse’s voice was quiet, steady. “So, what are you saying to us?”

The man’s eyes lifted from her stomach to her face.

“I’m saying blood remembers,” he said. “Whether we wish it to or not.”

A chill crept up Jeff’s arms. “Then why tell us any of this?”

The man stood, smoothing the front of his coat as if preparing to leave a place he already knew too well.

“Because stories don’t like to stay buried,” he said. “And because what’s coming doesn’t begin where you think it does.”

He moved toward the doorway without hesitation—walking around the squeaky floor—like someone who knew the house.

At the threshold, his hand brushed the frame, admiring.

Almost fondly.

“The sea takes what it’s owed,” he said quietly. “Sometimes it waits generations to collect.”

Then he stopped.

Looked at his empty mug.

“Do you have anything stronger?” he asked, gesturing to it.

“Hell yes,” Jeff said.

Jesse hesitated—noticed the time of day—then poured anyway. A generous measure of Bib & Tucker. Jeff’s favorite. The size of the pour betrayed her curiosity more than indulgence.

The man lifted his glass.

“May the sea never forget,” he said.

They clinked.

Then—without comment—tapped the bottoms of their glasses once against the table.

Jesse blinked.

Jeff was the only person she had ever seen do that.

Jeff noticed something else.

The man’s hands were perfectly steady.

Jesse shifted again as the baby rolled hard beneath her palm. The man’s eyes followed the movement, then lifted to her face.

“You feel it, don’t you,” he said. “That sense that something has already begun.”

Jesse swallowed. “I feel like you’re still not telling us everything.”

A corner of his mouth lifted. Not amusement.

Recognition.

“No,” he agreed. “Not yet.”

Jeff leaned back, pulse loud in his ears. “Then why start?”

The man folded his hands on the table. The gesture was deliberate. Grounding.

“Because stories resist being told all at once,” he said. “Given too quickly, they are rejected.”

“Rejected by who?” Jesse whispered.

“By those who must carry them.”

The room seemed to tighten.

“You’ve heard where it began,” he continued. “But beginnings don’t explain what a man becomes.”

Jeff’s jaw clenched. “And what did you become?”

The man’s gaze turned inward, as if down a corridor only he could see.

“I became what was required.”

The baby kicked sharply. Jesse gasped, her hand pressing protectively to her stomach.

“Strong,” he said again—softer now. “As he should be.”

“You keep saying that,” Jesse said.

“Strength is rare,” he replied. “When it appears, it draws attention.”

“Attention from what?” Jeff asked.

The man exhaled slowly. “From the same forces that noticed me.”

Silence—thick, loaded.

Jesse steadied herself. “So what happens now?”

The man studied them both. Not hunger. Not cruelty.

Calculation.

Jeff snapped.

He slammed his S&W Shield 40-cal onto the table, the muzzle landing squarely toward the man’s chest.

“I need to know my family is in no danger,” Jeff said, voice raw.

The man smiled.

“There’s that Burt temper,” he said lightly. “I was wondering when it would show.”

Jesse’s hand closed over Jeff’s arm. “Jeff.”

He hesitated.

“Relax,” the man said. “If I meant harm, I wouldn’t have gone through all this trouble. On my honor, I’m here only to help you.”

Jeff looked to Jesse.

She nodded.

He put the gun away.

“I’m sorry,” Jeff said. “My family is everything to me.”

“I know,” the man replied.

Jeff said it aloud then, without thinking.

“Captain Burt.”

Jesse felt the room settle.

She had known it too—but she was glad Jeff said it first.

“Now,” Captain Burt said, “I finish my story.”

The clock ticked.

Once.

Then again.

Outside, the wind rose slightly, brushing the house as if testing it.

Burt leaned forward.

“And where it truly turns,” he said, “is not where you think.”

Chapter Ten – A New Life, Cape Horn

The air changed first.

Not the wind—not yet—but the weight of it. The way sound flattened. The way even seasoned men began to move with a carefulness that had nothing to do with caution and everything to do with instinct.

Pratt stood beside Burt on the quarterdeck, eyes fixed on the darkening horizon.

“She’s coming,” Pratt said.

Burt nodded. “Aye.”

For a time, they stood without speaking. The ship pitched gently now, deceptively calm, the sea rolling beneath them like something drawing breath.

Burt broke the silence.

“Can’t do this without you, Pratt.”

Pratt glanced at him, surprised—not by the words, but by the timing. He smiled thinly.

“Wouldn’t let you have all the fun, Captain.”

They clasped forearms once. No ceremony. No speeches. Just understanding.

Then the wind struck.

It came down out of the sky like a wall—snapping canvas, throwing spray hard enough to sting skin. Men shouted. Orders cut through the chaos. Sails were reefed, lines hauled, hands numb almost instantly from cold and ice.

The Resilience groaned—not in protest, but effort. As if she understood what was being asked of her.

Maggie woke with something that wasn't pain yet.

Pressure. Tightness. A pulling low in her belly that came and went. She lay still, listening to the house settle, to the wind worrying the walls.

By the third time it returned—sharper now—she knew.

The midwife arrived by lantern light. Candles were lit. Water set to warm. Calm voices. Reassurance.

“It will be some time yet,” the woman said.

Maggie nodded, breathing carefully. She did not think of Burt. Distance made danger unreal. He was already gone. Whatever happened now would happen here.

The storm did not rise.

It closed.

Waves steepened until they felt vertical. Ice formed along the rails, on beards, in the rigging. Men moved like ghosts through spray and darkness, tethered, slipping, swearing.

A yardarm cracked. Two men were thrown hard against the rail. One screamed—then bit down on it as Pratt dragged him clear, blood already dark against the deck.

“Below with him!” Pratt shouted.

No one was lost. Not yet.

But the ship was bleeding.

Burt held the wheel until his hands burned, then went numb. The compass spun uselessly. The sky was gone—only black and white and motion.

Then—through the driving sleet—he saw it.

Wreckage.

Mast timbers. A broken hull shape half-glimpsed between waves. A ship that did not belong to this sea or this moment.

His father's ship.

He knew it with a certainty that bypassed reason.

A voice came with it—low, familiar, carried not by wind but memory.

Press on.

Burt sucked in a breath.

She can take it.

For a heartbeat, he nearly answered aloud.

Pratt was beside him instantly. "Captain?"

Burt blinked. The wreckage vanished. Only sea remained. Only storm.

"She'll hold," Burt said. Whether it was command or prayer, he couldn't say.

They pressed on.

Labor stripped time of meaning.

Pain came in waves now, stronger than the last, leaving Maggie shaking between them. The midwife's voice stayed steady, but

her hands moved faster. Candles guttered as thunder rolled close enough to rattle the windows.

Lightning split the sky.

For an instant, the room burned white.

And there—clear as flesh and bone—stood Edmond Crowe.

Rain streamed down the glass between them. His face was calm. Attentive. Not cruel. Not kind.

Watching.

Another flash lit him again—etched his features into Maggie's sight with terrifying clarity.

He did not move.

Then pain seized her, dragging her back into her body—into breath and blood and effort.

When she looked again, the window was empty.

The storm raged on.

At sea, The Resilience climbed a wave that felt like a wall and slid down the other side into a trough that swallowed sound.

The ship shuddered. Timbers screamed. Men clung where they could.

For one endless moment, Burt was certain they were done.

Then the bow lifted.

Not cleanly. Not gracefully.

But enough.

The sea relented—not in mercy, but completion.

Maggie screamed.

The sound tore free of her without permission. The midwife's composure finally cracked.

"Now," she said. "Now, Maggie."

And Maggie bore down with everything she had left.

Thunder rolled overhead. Lightning fractured the night.

Life forced its way into the world.

Not strong.

Not perfect.

But breathing.

Dawn found The Resilience battered, iced, wounded—her main mast gone—but afloat.

Men moved slowly, speaking little. Injured were tended. Sails were patched. No one cheered. Survival sat too close to loss for that.

Burt stood alone at the rail, staring south, unable to shake the feeling that something had passed through him unseen.

Maggie held her child as the storm moved on.

Exhausted. Shaken. Whole.

Somewhere beyond the horizon, a ship survived a sea that should have taken it.

Neither would know of the other for months.

And when they did, the knowing would change everything.

Chapter Eleven – To Hell with the Pacific

The first days after the Horn were almost worse than the storm itself.

Cold lingered in everything—in the deck planks, in the rigging, in the men. The wind no longer screamed, but it cut all the same, slipping under coats and settling deep in bone. Rations were reduced without announcement. No one needed to be told why.

The ship limped north and west, the jury mast holding just long enough to keep them moving. Progress came in bitter miles, earned slowly, the sea never fully releasing them. Burt stayed on his feet longer than he should have, his shoulder stiffening with each hour, pain blooming dully beneath the skin, and in his chest. He did not speak of it.

By the fifth day, the cold began to loosen its grip.

Not warmth—just less cruelty. Ice no longer formed on the rails overnight. Wool dried faster. Breath no longer hung so long in the air.

By the seventh day, the land changed.

The coast folded inward, breaking the swell. The water darkened and slowed, no longer driven hard from the south. Forested hills rose from mist, green where there should have been gray.

Burt spread a chart across a barrel lashed near the rail.

“Here,” he said, tapping it. “Bahía Fortescue. I’ve heard sailors speak of it. Not much, but protected. They say the native people are friendly.”

Pratt leaned in. The ink was thin, the coastline uncertain. Soundings were scarce and widely spaced, but there was enough—just enough—to suggest shelter.

A young sailor passed by and muttered under his breath, “To hell with the Pacific.”

They both laughed.

“If the holding’s good,” Pratt said.

Burt nodded once. “She won’t take open water again like this.”

They set a course and limped north for days, making their way toward something—anything—that would let them regroup and heal both ship and crew.

They anchored carefully, easing *The Resilience* into the bay as if approaching something that might still change its mind. She settled slowly, lines creaking as the strain bled out of her hull.

For the first time since the Horn, the air felt almost kind.

The damage revealed itself gradually.

The main mast was gone entirely. The jury mast stood in its place, serviceable only so long as the weather stayed agreeable. Rigging hung mismatched and frayed, spliced and re-spliced until it barely remembered its original purpose. Two sails were torn beyond proper repair. Water casks had split. Provisions were thin enough now that every meal was counted.

The losses ran deeper than timber.

Of the boats they had carried out of New England, only a few remained fit to lower. Harpoons were bent or gone entirely, lines cut or carried away with the storm. What gear remained had been

scavenged and reworked so many times it barely resembled what they had set sail with.

Pratt went over the tally in silence, then said it plainly.

“There’s no profit left in this voyage, Captain. We’ll be lucky to make it home at all.”

Burt nodded. He already knew.

“Then we concern ourselves with keeping her afloat,” he said. “Everything else comes after.”

The men bore it quietly. Frostbitten fingers. Cracked ribs. One arm splinted tight.

No deaths.

That fact alone carried weight.

They rested, then worked, then rested again.

The second day passed in measured labor. Lines were replaced where they could, splices made from rope that had already lived one hard life. Blocks were freed and rehung, though some protested no matter how carefully they were coaxed. Spars were checked and checked again, then left where they lay.

Replacing the main mast remained the unspoken priority.

There was not nearly enough sound rigging to raise one even if they found it.

Too much had gone to the storm.

Too much had gone with the mast itself.

Fires burned ashore. Men hunted birds along the rocks and pulled fish from the quieter water inside the bay. Boots came off. Salt was washed from skin. Wet wool steamed.

It felt warmer here—almost wrong after what they had come through. The air carried the smell of green things and damp earth, not ice and iron.

Some of the men found that more unsettling than the cold.

By the third day, they turned inland.

They searched carefully, farther into the forest than Burt would have liked. The trees were tall and green, but no straighter for it—shaped by wind and weather over generations. Twisted grain. Bowed trunks. Scarred limbs. Some were long enough but warped. Others straight but too short. Too green. Too soft.

A carpenter ran his hands along one promising length, then shook his head and moved on without comment.

“We might make something work,” a sailor offered.

Pratt said nothing.

Burt didn’t either.

Nathaniel Babbitt spend his days cataloging different plants and insects in the area, working on drawings tirelessly in his journal.

That evening, they returned to the charts.

Three lay before them, weighted at the corners with tools and iron. None agreed.

Coastlines wandered. Channels narrowed, vanished, reappeared elsewhere. Soundings contradicted themselves. Margins were crowded with cramped notes—warnings, guesses, half-measures left by men who had survived by luck or stubbornness and recorded neither.

Pratt flipped through them once more, slower this time.

Then he stopped.

“This one.”

Burt leaned in.

The passage was barely marked—a narrow cut through land, inked lighter than the rest. No soundings worth trusting. Just a name scratched near the margin, as if added by a hand that hadn’t quite believed it belonged there.

Burt traced it with his finger.

“The Strait of Magellan.”

Pratt nodded. “I heard a man speak of it once. Years back. Might’ve been Barbados. Might’ve been Newport. Could’ve been Brazil for all I know.” He shrugged. “Said it was narrow. Said it was ugly. Said it saved his ship.”

“And?”

Pratt studied the map again. “He also said most men never found the same way through twice.”

They stood over it in silence.

“It’s barely a guess,” Pratt said.

“So is everything else,” Burt replied.

He didn’t look up when he spoke again, his voice quieter—more thought than command.

“If it carries us through,” he said, “I might give it a better name.”

Pratt snorted softly. “We’ll worry about names later. First, we survive it.”

Outside, the bay lay calm. The air warm enough now that the men had shed layers they hadn't dared remove days earlier.

The contrast felt wrong.

That night, Burt took the late watch.

He stood at the rail, the ache in his shoulder a steady companion, watching the water darken as the light drained from the sky. Behind him, the ship creaked softly—rigging under quiet strain, ropes that had already given more than they should have, holding only because they had no choice.

Across the bay, something moved near the shoreline—too deliberate to be wind, too low to be fog.

A thin thread of smoke rose where the land bent inward.

Burt watched it until it faded into dusk.

They had survived the sea.

They had not yet been spared by it.

And somewhere ahead—beyond guesses, beyond maps, beyond the reach of sound rope and honest timber—something waited to tip the balance.

Chapter Twelve — Lines Drawn

By the time the baby was two weeks old, the house had found a new rhythm.

Not an easy one—but a workable one.

Richard slept in short stretches and woke with purpose, announcing his needs without apology. He was strong for his size. Solid. His grip surprised people, fingers locking fast around whatever they found.

“He’s got his father’s hands,” the midwife had said, smiling. “Strong grip.”

Maggie believed it.

She was stronger too. Tired, yes—but steady. The birth had taken something from her and given something back in its place. She moved through her days with a new clarity, less inclined to hurry, less willing to be pressed.

Nathan came by most mornings now.

Sometimes with tools. Sometimes with nothing more than an apple in his hand and his sleeves already rolled. He fixed what needed fixing without ceremony. The roof no longer leaked. A loose hinge was rehung. Firewood stacked where Maggie wouldn’t have to bend for it.

He never stayed too long.

He never needed to be told when it was time to go.

They developed an easy shorthand between them—glances, half-finished sentences, an understanding that required no

explanation. Maggie trusted him. Nathan felt it and took the responsibility seriously.

It had been nine months since The Resilience left Berkley.

Nearer to ten now.

The town felt it.

Men talked longer at the docks. Women lingered after church. Absence stretched thin and invited speculation. Some ships came home. Others did not. No one had heard word of Burt's vessel—not from Newport, not from Barbados, not from anywhere that mattered.

Maggie wrote anyway.

She sat at the small table by the window while Richard slept in his basket nearby, his breathing soft and steady. She pressed the paper flat and began again.

[This is the sixth letter I've sent you. I don't know if you've received any of the others, but I need to believe one will reach you.

Your son, Richard, is alive and well. I named him for your father. He has your eyes and your hands—strong grip already. He holds on as if he means to stay.

We are safe. We are waiting.

Come back to us.]

She folded the letter carefully and set it with the rest.

Edmond Crowe returned to her days the way damp settles into wood—gradually, without invitation.

He appeared where he might be expected. On the road. Near the market. Once, at the edge of her yard, hat in hand, watching as Nathan descended from the ladder with a coil of rope over one shoulder.

Crowe noticed everything.

He noticed Richard. He noticed Nathan. Most of all, he noticed the ease between them.

“You’re fortunate,” Crowe said mildly one afternoon, eyes tracking Nathan as the boy leaned against the doorframe and bit into his apple. “To have such devoted help.”

Maggie didn’t look up from the table. “I’m fortunate to have family.”

Crowe smiled. “Of course. Still—some in town may see it differently.”

She met his gaze then. “How so?”

“A young man,” Crowe said. “Unmarried. Here often. People talk.”

Before Maggie could answer, Nathan shifted his weight and glanced over, apple still in hand.

“You want me to take out the trash, Aunt Maggie?” he asked casually.

Maggie laughed before she could stop herself.

Crowe did not smile.

“I don’t believe that will be necessary,” Maggie said, her voice light, her eyes steady.

Crowe stepped closer, careful not to cross any line that could be named.

“I only speak out of concern,” he said. “A woman alone with a child draws attention. Protection has a way of... changing hands.”

Maggie stood.

“You’re mistaken,” she said quietly. “About nearly everything.”

Behind her, Nathan didn’t move. Didn’t speak. He simply stayed where he was—present, solid, unbothered.

Crowe studied him longer than politeness required.

Then he tipped his hat.

“Good day,” he said, and left.

The yard felt larger once he was gone.

Nathan took another bite of his apple. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” he said. “Storm might loosen that patch again.”

“I’ll have coffee on,” Maggie replied.

Inside, Richard stirred.

Maggie closed the door and leaned her back against it, listening to the quiet.

Outside, the town would keep talking.

But the lines had been drawn.

Chapter Thirteen — Canoes, Tattoos and Brackish Water

The canoes came in at first light.

Not drifting. Not testing distance.

They came straight in, their paddles dipping in perfect rhythm, cutting the water without sound. Five of them. Low and narrow, built for places charts refused to name.

The watch called it out. Men gathered along the rail, careful not to crowd. No weapons were raised. No orders barked. Whatever this was, it had already decided how close it would come.

Burt stood at the rail when the lead canoe stopped.

The elder stood within it.

He was broader than the others, his skin weathered and scarred, his hair bound back with a strip of leather worked smooth by years of use. His chest and arms were marked with ink—dark lines laid into the skin with purpose, not ornament.

All of them were tattooed.

But his markings were different.

Across his chest ran a horizontal line, dark and deliberate. Beneath it, set just below the line, a half-circle—sun or star, rising or setting, impossible to say. The same mark appeared again on his shoulder. On the forearms of two others. Repeated. Consistent.

A murmur moved through the crew.

Burt felt it before he understood why.

A pressure behind the eyes. A tightening in the chest. His shoulder flared sharply, heat blooming beneath the scar where cold had lived too long. He drew a slow breath through his teeth and forced himself to stay still.

The elder's eyes were on him.

Not curious.

Knowing.

He spoke then—low, steady, his intense stare, The words meant nothing to Burt, but the cadence did

This was not greeting.

Not challenge.

It was instruction.

One phrased surfaced again and again in the elder's speech k'aat k'iin spoken over and over and every time he pointed at the captain.

Pratt stepped forward, hands open, palms out. He spoke slowly, choosing each word as if it might be weighed.

“We mean no harm.”

The elder listened. Then shook his head—not refusal, not agreement.

He gestured inland, tracing a line with his hand. Then curved it sharply, the motion tight, enclosed. His fingers closed into a fist.

Blocked.

Then he crossed his arms over his chest and struck them once with an open palm.

No.

Another of the men lifted his arm, turning it so the tattoo caught the light. The same symbol. Line. Half sun. Star.

The pain in his shoulder spiked hard enough to steal his breath. He gripped the rail until the world steadied, his knuckles white.

Pratt saw it. “Captain?”

“I’m fine,” Burt said, though the words felt thin.

The elder watched him closely, then said it again “k’aat k’iin”

A warning, an offer?

The men shifted uneasily. Someone whispered gold.

As if in answer, one of the younger natives reached up and touched a chain at his neck. Yellow metal. Softly worked. Another lifted a bracelet, dull with wear but unmistakable Gold.

When a sailor pointed and spoke the word, the native did not nod.

He pointed instead—past the bay, past the shelter, toward the narrow waterways beyond.

Toward the Strait.

Enticement and refusal, bound together.

Pratt shook his head slowly. “They’re saying don’t go.”

“And showing us why we might,” another man muttered.

The elder stepped back, his meaning spent. He raised one hand, palm outward—not farewell, not blessing.

Enough.

The canoes turned as one and pulled away, their paddles biting cleanly into the water. Within moments they were mist again, as if they had never been.

No one spoke.

At last Pratt said quietly, “They’re warning us off the Strait.”

Burt nodded.

“And pointing us toward it,” Pratt added.

Burt stared at the place where the canoes had vanished, the ache in his shoulder pulsing now like a second heartbeat.

Maps lay useless behind him. Timber stood just out of reach. Rope frayed. Boats broken. A voyage already lost by every reasonable measure.

And somewhere inland—marked on skin, bound in cloth, heavy enough to be felt without being seen—lay something that knew him.

They had not been saved.

They had been shown the price.

Burt stayed at the rail long after the men dispersed, watching the water where warning and temptation had arrived together.

Chapter Fourteen — They Wore Gold

They weighed anchor at dawn, the Pacific clinging to the ship as if it did not want to let go.

Captain Tamburlaine Burt stood at the rail as the last length of chain rattled aboard, watching the water darken as The Resilience nosed eastward. Heavier here. The men spoke little. Even the gulls kept their distance.

Ahead lay the Strait—narrow, coiled, and waiting.

The charts were poor. Everyone knew it. Old guesses stacked atop older lies. Burt ordered soundings taken almost immediately. Lead lines dropped, hauled, dropped again. He marked everything himself—depths, distances, currents that shifted without warning.

By the second day, the williwaws came.

They struck without pattern—short, violent gusts screaming down from the mountains before vanishing just as suddenly. One moment the sails hung slack; the next they snapped hard enough to make the spars groan. Men cursed. One sailor was knocked flat, left gasping on the deck, staring up at the sky as if it had aimed for him.

Burt said nothing. He watched the cliffs slide past—sheer faces streaked with water and shadow.

Progress was slow. Deliberate. The Strait bent back on itself, offering false passages and blind turns. At night they anchored where they could, mountains pressing close while the men worked the ship as best they could. The shortage of rope, rigging, and the loss of the main mast weighed on everyone.

“Even if we reach the Atlantic,” an older crewman muttered, “how are we supposed to get home like this?”

On the fifth day, they saw the natives.

They came in narrow boats, movements practiced, eyes sharp. They kept their distance at first, calling out in a language that rolled like stones in water. Burt ordered no weapons raised. Eventually, one boat drew close enough for trade.

The men noticed the gold immediately.

Not coins. Not crude ornaments. Smooth bands worn at wrist and throat—simple shapes worked too cleanly. Too perfect. One sailor turned a piece over in his hands and frowned.

“No hammer marks,” he said quietly.

Through signs and halting translation—Nathaniel Babbitt proving invaluable with his books and learning—the stories came.

The Old Ones.

Sky People.

Those Who Came Before the Cold.

When asked about the gold, the natives spoke of ruins high on the slopes, half-swallowed by moss and stone. Places they would not go. Places where water fell from the mountain and vanished into the earth.

They wore the gold, they said, because it had been given—long ago.

On the sixth day, the ship grounded hard on an unseen shoal.

They worked her free by evening, but the damage was done. Morale began to fray. Two men took ill that night—feverish, gums swollen, eyes too bright. By morning, there were more.

Babbitt came to Burt's cabin with his report, voice steady but tight.

"It isn't scurvy," he said. "Not yet. But something's wrong. The air here is thick. The delay isn't helping."

Burt listened. Nodded. Thanked him.

He did not change course.

Instead, he bent back over the charts, recording every bend of the Strait as if mapping a living thing.

The ruins revealed themselves on the ninth day.

Chapter Fifteen — The Cave

A break in the trees high on the port side. Stone that did not belong to the mountain. A waterfall spilling down the slope, its sound constant—like breath.

Pratt and the captain spoke at length. If the voyage was already compromised, perhaps it could still be salvaged. The gold the natives wore. The chance for the men to stretch their legs. Hunt. Breathe.

Burt saw it before anyone pointed.

They anchored beneath the falls by afternoon.

Burt took a small party ashore—Pratt, Babbitt, two hands. The climb was steep, the air wet with mist. The ruins were older than expected. No hearths. No signs of living. Just stone walls grown into the mountain itself, joints so precise it looked as though the rock had been melted together.

Strange symbols marked the walls—like constellations, but wrong. Familiar, yet mirrored.

The roar of the waterfall drew them closer, until a cave revealed itself—too perfect to be natural.

At its mouth, carved smooth by time, was the mark.

A horizontal line.

Beneath it, a sun—or a star.

The same symbol.

The same warning.

Burt stopped.

The others waited.

Inside, the walls were so strange, more like polished iron than stone, the cave narrowed before opening into a chamber veiled by falling water. The sound was deafening at first, then oddly muted, as if the stone absorbed it.

The air was stale. Foreign. Wrong.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” Babbitt said.

Doubt passed through the group—but the captain was already being pulled forward.

Against the back wall lay a shape.

As they approached, the air grew worse.

“What is that?” Pratt whispered.

Burt was already two steps ahead.

Its skull was elongated—symmetrical. Its limbs thin but intact, folded in a deliberate fetal curl. Around its neck hung gold: a simple bar, a star beneath it, a dark gem set at the center. The metal was warm. It looked older than the cave itself.

Burt stepped forward.

Pratt caught his arm. “Hold fast, Captain.”

Nathaniel Babbitt whispered, half in awe, half in fear.

“What kind of man was this?”

Burt reached anyway.

When his fingers closed around the relic, the air changed.

The roar of the waterfall dulled. The chamber stilled.

Then—

The being's head lifted. Just slightly.

Its arms moved.

Enough.

Its mouth opened.

“Thank you.”

Only the captain heard it.

As Burt lifted the relic free, the body lost cohesion. It did not collapse. It did not fall. It simply failed—bone and skin turning to fine gray dust that slid soundlessly to the stone floor.

A sudden flash of light.

A violent gust tore through the cave—another williwaw, perhaps. Or something else entirely. Something released.

Then silence.

Outside, the wind died.

The williwaws ceased as if a long-held breath had finally been let go.

The waters of the Strait smoothed—unnaturally calm.

Burt stared at the relic in his hand.

Then, without a word, he lifted it and placed it around his own neck.

The moment it touched his skin, his body tensed. Blood surged. Every muscle in him drew tight. Pratt and Babbitt saw it immediately—something passing into their captain, something that did not belong to any man.

Whatever it was, it overwhelmed him.

Burt collapsed.

They dragged him from the cave and down to safety. When he finally came to, he wore a dazed, almost drunken smile.

“What just happened?” he asked.

“Not sure, sir,” Babbitt murmured. “But we need to get you back to the ship. Now.”

The water had never been this calm since they entered the Strait. The air itself seemed to hold still, as if the world had paused to watch.

The Strait was alive.

And it was watching their every move.

Chapter Sixteen — Lady Luck is a Beautiful Woman

Captain Tamburlaine Burt woke with the sun already on his face. That alone was unusual.

More unusual still was his body—whole, insistent, answering itself with a certainty he had not known in years. Youthful. Unmistakable. He lay still for a moment, surprised more than embarrassed, allowing the sensation to pass before it could demand explanation.

No pain followed.

No stiffness. No familiar negotiation with old injuries.

His shoulder—the one that had spoken to him every morning since it took an arrow—was silent.

Burt exhaled slowly.

At his throat, the gold was warm.

He touched it with two fingers, not to reassure himself it was there, but because some part of him expected resistance. It did not resist. It rested easily against his skin, heavy and settled, as if it had always belonged there.

Above deck, the ship was already alive.

When Burt emerged, the change was impossible to miss.

The sun shone cleanly through the Strait, warming the deck despite the mountains hemming them in. The water lay smooth—not glassy, not dead—but moving with a steady,

purposeful current that carried The Resilience forward even under reduced sail.

Pratt stood at the rail, watching it with a frown that never quite left his face.

“We’re being carried,” he said when Burt joined him. “Tide’s doing the work for us.”

Burt nodded. He had already felt it.

Below deck, the men were improving—too quickly to ignore.

Fevers broke overnight. Gums that had bled the day before were pink again. One man who had been too weak to climb the ladder asked for salted pork, then asked for more. Laughter returned—tentative at first, then real.

Babbitt recorded everything.

He could not explain any of it.

By the twelfth day in the Strait, they found the tree.

It stood just inland from the bank, straight and tall, its trunk unwarped by wind or rot despite its age. Dead, but preserved. The grain ran true from root to crown, as if it had grown with purpose and then simply stopped.

The men gathered around it in silence.

At last, one of the older hands broke into a grin and spat into the grass.

“She’s sittin’ pretty on the bank, sir,” he said. “Waitin’ on us. Almost like a gift.”

No one laughed.

But no one argued either.

They made camp among more ruins and stayed for days. The mast was cut, shaped, and set with a precision that surprised even Pratt. Hunting parties ranged farther than expected and returned heavy with meat. The men ate well. Slept well. Spirits lifted.

Too much.

Too fast.

Burt watched it all without comment.

When they broke camp and resumed their passage, the Strait continued to yield.

On the seventeenth day, they rounded a bend and found the wreck.

It lay half-submerged along the bank, timbers splintered but not yet claimed by rot. Recent. Close enough that the paint on her stern was still visible beneath the waterline.

No bodies.

No signs of struggle.

Just abandonment.

The men worked in near silence, salvaging rope, rigging, blocks—everything they had lost and more. Two intact boats were hauled free, fit for whaling once they reached open water.

No one took a souvenir.

No one cheered.

They finished the work quietly, efficiently, with a strange care, as if afraid to draw attention to themselves.

The Resilience was whole again—armed, provisioned, ready to prove her worth.

That night, Burt stood alone at the rail.

The Strait widened ahead, its grip loosening at last. The water darkened, deepened. The air smelled different—open.

Almost Atlantic.

He rested his hand against the gold at his throat.

Somewhere behind them, a ship lay broken so that his own might live.

Burt did not thank God.

He did not thank the sea.

He watched the widening water and felt—without doubt—that they would reach the Atlantic with everything they needed.

And that whatever had claimed him in the cave had not finished collecting.

Chapter Seventeen – The Maggie Straight

The eastern mouth of the Strait widened ahead of them.

Not suddenly—not like an escape—but with the slow, unmistakable easing of pressure, as though the land itself were finally loosening its grip. The water darkened, deepened. The air sharpened.

The Atlantic was waiting.

Burt stood over the chart table long after the bell, the candle burned low, fingers blackened with ink. He worked patiently—every bend measured, every shoal marked, every current noted with care. The Strait sprawled beneath his hand in clean, confident lines, ordered at last.

When Pratt stepped in, he stopped short.

For a moment he said nothing.

“That’s... thorough,” he said finally.

Burt didn’t look up. “It needed doing.”

Pratt moved closer, studying the page. The chaos they’d survived lay there now, legible and tamed.

“Some of your best work yet, Captain,” Pratt said. After a beat, half-smiling, “Be a shame if folks kept callin’ it by the wrong name after this.”

Burt’s pen paused.

“Maggie Strait,” Pratt added lightly. “Has a better sound to it.”

Burt glanced up once, unreadable, then returned to his work.

Outside, the wind rose.

Not a shriek. Not a warning.

A push.

The sails filled hard and clean. The Resilience leaned into it, timbers humming, bow lifting as if she'd been waiting for this very moment. The ship surged forward, faster than she had any right to.

Men shouted—not in alarm, but delight.

“She’s takin’ it!” someone cried.

“She’s bloody takin’ it!”

Laughter carried across the deck as the wind pressed harder and the ship answered, eager and sure-footed. The Strait fell away behind them, mile by mile, until land loosened its grip entirely and the swell opened beneath the keel.

By midday, they were in open water.

By afternoon, the lookout sang out.

“Whales!”

The cry carried sharp and electric. Men spilled onto the deck, shading their eyes. Ahead, dark backs broke the surface—slow, deliberate.

Too close.

“Never seen ’em come up like that,” one of the hands muttered.

Pratt looked at the captain he just smiled and nodded his head.

Then Pratt gave the order “alright let’s go boys”

The boats were lowered within minutes.

The first kill came easy.

Too easy.

The whale rolled broadside as if presenting itself, spout hanging in the air like a held breath. The harpoon struck true. The line ran clean. No fouling. No panic. The animal sounded briefly, then returned, spent.

The men exchanged glances but worked without question.

The second kill followed before the deck was even washed down.

Then another the next day.

And another.

Day after day, the sea yielded. Whales surfaced where they shouldn't have been. Lingering. Turning. Once, a bull rose so close a man could have touched its flank with an oar.

“Almost feels like they’re waitin’,” someone said quietly.

No one answered him.

Tryworks burned. Oil filled the casks. The ship grew heavy with success. The men were tireless. Cuts healed clean. Hands stayed strong. Sleep came easy.

At night, the sea lay calm as a held breath.

Stars burned bright and steady overhead, reflected so perfectly in the water it was impossible to tell where sky ended and ocean began. The men slept deeply, untroubled by dreams.

Burt slept too.

He dreamed of Berkley—not as it was when he left, but as it had been when he first knew it as home. Lamplight at the small table

by the window. The soft scratch of a pen across paper. Maggie's quiet certainty filling the room like warmth.

She stood close to him in the dream, closer than she had any right to be across so much water. Her hand rested against his chest—familiar, steady.

“Come back,” she said.

He reached for her, but her expression changed—not fear, not panic, just a sudden seriousness.

“And don't take it off,” she added.

“Take what off?” he asked.

She didn't answer. The lamplight dimmed. The room thinned like mist, and the dream broke apart gently, as if the sea had simply swallowed it.

Burt woke before dawn with the words still lodged in him.

He lay still, staring up into the dark of his cabin, the gold warm against his throat.

A long moment passed before he breathed out and dismissed it for what it was.

A dream.

When he rose and climbed to the deck, the Atlantic lay open and willing before them.

The hunt showed no sign of ending.

And the Resilience, heavy with oil and favor, pushed onward into the widening dark as if the world itself had decided to help her home.

Chapter Eighteen — There She Blows

The luck did not wane.

If anything, it settled in.

The wind held steady day after day—never straining the canvas, never falling slack. The Resilience moved as though she had found the exact pace the sea preferred, her wake clean and narrow behind her. Whales rose where charts said they should not, lingered longer than sense allowed, and sounded shallow, as if reluctant to leave the surface.

They took sperm whales—great bulls, scarred and heavy—with a success that bordered on the absurd.

A good voyage might hope for twenty. A great one, perhaps thirty if fortune truly smiled.

They passed that mark quickly.

By the time Burt allowed himself to reckon it, they had doubled what any man aboard would have called a glorious score, and still the ocean offered more. Casks filled faster than they could be stowed. Spermaceti cooled pale and clean in the tryworks—the finest oil a man could hope to bring home, bright-burning and nearly smokeless, worth more than all the rest combined.

“It should’ve taken us a year,” a harpooner said quietly one evening, staring down at the sea.

No one answered him.

Nathaniel Babbitt found Burt on the quarterdeck that night, his expression caught between satisfaction and professional concern.

“You’re breathing easier,” he said—not a question.

Burt smiled faintly. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Nathan stepped closer, hesitated, then placed two fingers at Burt’s wrist. He counted in silence, brow furrowing—then lifting in disbelief.

“That tightness,” Nathan said. “The one we spoke about. It’s been with you since before we cleared the Cape.”

“Aye,” Burt said. “Longer than that.”

“It’s gone,” Nathan said softly. He looked up, pride breaking through despite himself. “Entirely gone.”

Burt considered the dark water beyond the rail. The old ache—the pressure that came with exertion, with climbing, with the long night watches—had simply stopped. He drew a deep breath now, full and unguarded.

“So, it seems,” he said.

Nathan exhaled, pleased. “I told you the tonic would help. Citrus, spice—keeps the blood moving.”

Burt chuckled. “Aye. I’m sure it was the cinnamon and lemon you’ve been feeding me.”

Nathan laughed and went below believing he had done something good and true.

The next morning, they brought another whale alongside.

She was immense, her body rolling dark and gleaming in the sun, steam rising where cold sea met warm flesh. The work began at once—blades flashing, men shouting instructions through blood-slick air.

Then someone laughed.

“Captain!” a deckhand called, voice bright with humor. “You best come see this.”

Burt and Pratt approached together, stepping clear of the worst of the gore. The man stood grinning beside an exposed section of bone.

“Swear to God,” he said, shaking his head, “this whale’s gone and scrimshawed itself.”

Pratt snorted. Burt shook his head, smiling despite himself.

“Get on with it,” Burt said—then glanced down.

And stopped.

The mark wasn’t clean. It wasn’t carved. It looked as though the bone had grown around it—a straight line running true through the ivory, beneath it a star-shaped fracture, subtle enough to be mistaken for chance.

Subtle enough—unless you knew it.

Burt felt Pratt’s gaze before he met it. They shared a look, brief and unspoken.

Unease passed between them like a held breath.

“Well,” Burt said evenly, straightening. “I’ve seen stranger patterns in worse places.”

Pratt nodded. “Aye. Bone does odd things.”

The deckhand laughed again, relief quick to return, and the work resumed. The moment vanished into noise and motion.

But Burt carried it with him.

Later that day, a tackle fouled while hoisting a great slab of blubber. Four men leaned into it, boots slipping, muscles straining.

“Hold!” someone shouted.

Before anyone thought better of it, Burt stepped in.

He took the line, braced once—and pulled.

The load surged upward too fast. The men stumbled back as the blubber swung higher than intended, crashing hard against its stop. Silence rippled across the deck.

Burt loosened his grip, unsettled by his own strength.

“Careful, Captain,” someone said, laughing thinly. “Nearly sent it to the Azores.”

Burt smiled, said nothing, and walked away.

That night, the sea lay calm again, The Resilience moving smoothly through water that seemed content to part for her. Burt stood alone at the rail, the gold warm against his chest, and allowed himself—just this once—to feel pleased.

Confused, perhaps.

But pleased.

The voyage was everything it should have been.

And the ocean, for reasons he did not yet name, appeared more than willing to agree.

Chapter Nineteen — Sailors Sing

The air changed first.

Not the wind—though that softened too—but the smell. Sweetness carried low over the water, mingled with rot and warmth, a promise of land long before it could be seen. Birds followed the ship now, circling wide and patient.

Barbados lay somewhere beyond the horizon.

The Resilience moved easily, heavy with oil and success, her timbers creaking contentedly as if she knew she was rich. The men felt it. They walked the deck differently, spoke more freely, already spending coin not yet in their pockets.

It was the singing that stopped Burt.

He had stepped out of his cabin just as the sun began to lower, the light turning copper against the sea. The sound drifted up from the waist of the ship—low at first, half-swallowed by the wind.

Then a line carried clear.

We left our fear in the Maggie Strait...

Burt froze.

The words weren't polished. The tune wasn't fixed. It was being made as it went, shaped by voices and boots and rope. But Maggie's name rose again, easy and unforced, passed from one man to another like it had always belonged there.

He listened longer than he meant to.

When the song faded into laughter and work, Burt crossed the deck to where Pratt stood watching the horizon.

“How long’s that been goin’ on?” Burt asked.

Pratt didn’t look at him. “What’s that, Captain?”

“The song.”

Pratt’s mouth twitched. “Couldn’t say.”

Burt waited.

Pratt finally turned, the faintest smirk tugging at his beard. “Men sing when things go right.”

Burt shook his head once, more amused than displeased. He let the matter drop, but the sound lingered with him, a warmth he hadn’t expected to feel this far from home.

Later, Nathaniel Babbitt knelt beside a deckhand who’d slumped against the rail, one hand gripping his shoulder.

“Feels like it’s split clean through,” the man groaned.

Nathan brightened. “Let me see.”

He produced his small bottle with practiced pride, uncorked it, and dabbed the sharp-smelling liquid onto his fingers.

“Hold still,” he said. “This’ll sting.”

The deckhand hissed, then laughed. “If this works, I’ll drink the whole lot next time.”

Nathan grinned, pleased. “Careful. It’s not meant for miracles.”

Burt watched from a distance, a quiet smile on his face. The boy moved with confidence now, certain of his place, certain he was useful.

As dusk settled, Pratt joined him again at the rail.

“Port’ll be busy,” he said. “Word’s bound to spread once we tie up.”

Burt nodded. “Aye.”

Pratt’s eyes flicked—just once—to the gold at Burt’s throat.

“Might want to mind that,” he said mildly. “Come morning.”

Burt’s hand rose without thinking, fingers brushing the relic. The warmth of it was familiar now, steady as a second pulse.

“I will,” he said.

Pratt nodded, satisfied, and left him there.

Night gathered. The men quieted below. The Resilience pressed on, Barbados still unseen but close enough now to taste in the air.

Somewhere on the deck below, the song drifted up again—only a line this time—then faded.

Burt stood listening, the gold resting easy against his chest, and told himself there would be time enough in the morning.

Chapter Twenty – A New Pair of Trousers

Burt woke to lamplight and the faint scratch of a pen.

For a moment he didn't know where he was. The ceiling was too low, the air too close, the boards beneath him alive with the slow, familiar breathing of the ship.

Then the dream thinned.

Maggie stood at the small table by the window, hair pinned up, shoulders wrapped in a shawl that failed to keep out the cold. Her hand moved steadily across the page, unhurried. Every so often she paused, palm resting at her belly, as if listening for something only she could hear.

She didn't look frightened.

She looked tired.

When she lifted her eyes to him, the room felt warmer than anything the sea could offer.

"Come home," she said.

He tried to answer, but his throat tightened, thick with salt air and distance.

The creak of ropes and shouted voices pulled him upward, and he woke with a start.

Late.

Bright light cut through the small window. The ship's motion was different—slower, muffled—like a great animal easing itself into a stall.

Burt dressed quickly and stepped out.

Pratt stood on the quarterdeck, hands braced on the rail, watching the chaos ahead. The harbor seethed—small boats darting like insects, men shouting from the pier, the heavy smell of sugar and heat pressing in from all sides.

Pratt turned, surprise flickering across his face.

“You all right, Captain?” he asked. “Didn’t expect you up so late.”

Burt didn’t answer. His hand rose briefly to his throat, fingers brushing the gold.

They were nearly alongside. Lines were readied. The men moved with eager tension—hungry for land, hungry for coin, hungry for whatever foolishness waited ashore.

Pratt stepped closer.

“Captain.”

Burt looked at him.

Pratt’s eyes dropped, just once, to the relic.

Burt’s mouth twitched faintly, as if he’d forgotten something small and familiar.

“Ah,” he said. “Yes. Nearly forgot.”

He lifted the chain over his head.

The relic came away warm—reluctant. Burt held it in his palm a moment longer than necessary before tucking it into his coat and returning it to his cabin, stowing it where no light reached.

When he emerged, he addressed the crew.

“Mind your tongues in port,” he said, voice carrying. “We load, we take what’s owed, and we keep our business ours. No tall tales. No numbers. You’ll get your pay—and you’ll keep it.”

The men listened.

The Resilience kissed the dock with a final, gentle nudge.

Planks came down. Boots thudded onto wood that didn’t move the way a deck moved. Laughter broke out—too loud already. Someone shouted for rum.

A young deckhand jogged for the plank.

His foot slipped.

At first it looked like nothing—just clumsiness.

Then came the sound.

A wet, sharp crack.

The man collapsed screaming, his leg bent wrong beneath him, bone pressing pale against torn skin. Men surged forward, swearing, hands hovering uselessly.

The harbor noise dulled. Even the gulls seemed to quiet.

Burt stood very still.

Pratt and Babbitt were already moving, shouting orders, clearing space. The men obeyed, shaken.

Burt looked over to his cabin, where the relic lay hidden.

He said nothing.

By afternoon, the fear had been swallowed. Sailors learn to do that quickly—especially when land is beneath their feet. Rum helped.

Pay was counted out. Coin clinked into palms still smelling of oil and blood. The injured man was carried away while promises were made—drink, women, laughter offered as cure.

The rest of the crew poured into Barbados.

By evening, the voyage was no longer theirs alone.

Stories spilled into taverns and alleys, growing larger with each telling. The Maggie Strait became legend. Whales offered themselves. The captain's hand became providence.

Burt watched none of it.

He went ashore with measured steps and a guarded face, making his way through heat and noise to the mail office. The clerk's irritation softened when Burt set coin down.

"New England," the man said. "Resilience."

A bundle appeared—more than one letter, tied with twine. Burt recognized Maggie's hand immediately.

He took them carefully.

He found a quiet overlook above the pier and loosened the twine with fingers that trembled despite him.

Maggie wrote plainly—of repairs, of weather, of the fence that would not sit straight.

Then he reached the letter that mattered.

A son, she wrote. Healthy. Loud. Hungry as a wolf. I've named him Richard, after your father, as you wished.

Burt sat back hard, breath leaving him.

A son.

The word changed the shape of everything.

Pratt found him there and sat without asking.

“What is it?”

Burt handed him the letter.

“A boy,” Pratt said, smiling. “About time the world gave you somethin’.”

“There’s more,” Burt said softly.

Pratt read again, nodded. “Your nephew’s coming to help her. She won’t be alone.”

“Good,” Burt said.

For a moment, the sea felt far away.

Later, a naval official examined Burt’s charts with quiet interest.

“Accurate work,” the man said. “These will be copied, if you please, Captain. You’ll be compensated.”

“They kept us alive,” Burt said.

“They were drawn to keep sailors safe,” Burt added, with a trace of pride.

When Burt returned to the ship at dusk, something felt wrong.

Men avoided his eye.

Pratt met him at the plank. “We’ve been into.”

“What?”

“Looted. Tools. Food. A lockbox.”

Burt went straight to his cabin.

The relic was untouched.

Safe.

Behind him, Pratt said carefully, “Funny thing... they took everything but that.”

“Maybe they didn’t see it,” Burt said, though the words felt thin. Night fell.

Burt and Pratt gathered five hard men and walked to the dock office.

The dockmaster barely looked up.

Burt shut the door hard. His men waited outside.

“My ship was looted,” Burt said.

“Happens,” the dockmaster replied.

Burt swept the table clean.

He seized the man by the front of his coat.

The dockmaster’s feet left the floor before either of them seemed to notice.

Burt held him there—effortless, unstraining—until the room went completely still.

Then he lowered him, smoothing the wrinkled fabric with almost careful fingers.

“You’re in on it,” Burt said. “I want everything returned by morning.”

He leaned in close.

“Or I’ll burn this building to the ground with you in it.”

The dockmaster agreed.

Outside, one of the men laughed as Burt stepped back onto the pier.

“Reckon he’ll be needin’ a new pair of trousers, Captain.”

Laughter followed—easy, careless.

It lingered a second too long.

Then someone screamed.

A hoist snapped.

The load swung.

Nathaniel Babbitt stepped forward.

The line whipped.

The body fell.

The head did not.

The world stopped.

Pratt’s hand crushed Burt’s arm. “Captain.”

Burt didn’t answer.

Somewhere, the Maggie song drifted from a tavern—obscene with cheer.

Burt stood over what remained of Nathaniel Babbitt and felt something in him go very quiet.

A thought began to form.

Not yet whole.

But it would not leave him.

Chapter Twenty-One – Money Well Spend

Barbados did not mourn.

The harbor went on as if nothing had happened—boats creaking at their moorings, dock men shouting, gulls fighting over refuse. Heat pressed down on everything, sweet with sugar and rot. Somewhere in town, music rose and fell, careless as laughter.

On the pier, the place where Nathaniel Babbitt had fallen had been scrubbed. The boards looked newer there—wet-dark in a shape that didn't match the rest. Men stepped around it without meaning to. Or stepped over it too quickly, eyes forward, as if the wood itself might speak.

Burt did not speak.

Neither did Pratt.

They moved through the days like men wading through deep water—everything slower, everything muffled. When they had to talk, they kept to the plain language of work: rope, cask, ledger, tide. Nathaniel's name stayed behind their teeth.

The crew felt it.

The men who had laughed loudest the first night ashore came back quieter now. Some avoided Burt entirely. Others watched him the way men watch a thunderhead—careful, respectful, waiting to see if it would break.

And the rumors, instead of dying, fattened.

Word ran ahead of Burt wherever he went.

Dockworkers paused when he passed. A few removed their caps without knowing why. Men leaned close in doorways, whispering. Women looked him over with bold curiosity, then glanced away when he turned.

Captain Burt, they said.

The man who charted the Maggie Strait.

The man whose ship came home heavy.

The man the ocean favored.

They said it with reverence.

They said it with fear.

Burt wanted none of it. He wore his face the way he wore his coat—buttoned, closed, leaving nothing for strangers to take.

He kept the relic off, and paid for it.

The ache returned—first in his shoulder, then his chest. His breath shortened. The strength he'd found at sea thinned, day by day, like a tide slipping away.

It can't be from a piece of jewelry, he told himself.

The relic stayed wrapped and hidden, deep in his cabin where no prying eye could find it. Even at night, when harbor sounds crept in like insects and sleep refused him, he did not put it on. Not in Barbados. Not under these eyes.

Pratt did not ask.

But Burt caught him once, looking at his bare throat with something thoughtful in his gaze—then looking away the moment Burt noticed.

On the second day, a messenger found Burt on the pier.

“Captain Burt,” the boy said, breathless. “From Captain Harrow. Naval office.”

Burt followed him through the heat to a clean white building that smelled of ink, lime, and authority. Inside waited a man in a crisp coat—tall, spare, sunburned at the nose, his hair pulled back neat as rope.

Captain Elias Harrow.

Laid out on the table were the looted goods from *The Resilience*.

“The dockmaster happened upon your stolen property,” Harrow said mildly.

He looked Burt over with a practiced eye, measuring ships and men without wasting effort on charm. Then he handed Burt his charts, carefully bundled, corners protected as if they mattered.

“They’re returned.”

Burt took them, feeling the weight of his own hand in the work.

Harrow placed a small pouch on the table. Coin clinked—not a fortune, but not an insult.

“And payment,” Harrow added. “For the trouble.”

Burt’s gaze lifted. “Trouble?”

Harrow’s mouth twitched. “The finest chart of the Maggie Strait to date.”

Burt didn’t correct the name. He didn’t have the strength to argue with something the world had already decided.

“You’ve given us coastline besides,” Harrow continued. “Soundings. Shoals. Currents. Work like this finds its way to Admiralty hands.”

“It kept us alive,” Burt said.

“Aye,” Harrow replied, and there was respect in it. “That’s the only reason a man needs.”

Outside, Harrow’s ship rode the harbor like a fortress—tall-masted, disciplined, built to endure.

“The Vanguard leaves tomorrow,” Harrow said. “If you’re still here, Captain Burt, you’ll have my thanks again.”

“Fair winds,” Burt said.

“And to you.” Harrow paused. “Next time your ship’s looted, seek the Navy’s assistance.”

“I figured you had more important things to tend to,” Burt said modestly.

They parted like two men who understood the sea would introduce them again if it wished.

When Burt returned to The Resilience, Pratt was waiting.

“Hathaway,” he said.

Burt’s chest tightened. “Dead?”

“Not yet. Surgeon’s ashore.”

They went without another word.

Jonathan Hathaway lay in a low room that smelled of spirits and metal. Sweat shone on his brow. A stump ended above the knee, wrapped in cloth already blooming red.

The surgeon began talking numbers.

Burt cut him off.

He set all of Harrow’s coin on the table—one hard spill.

“Keep him alive.”

The surgeon glanced at the money. “He shouldn’t sail.”

“I will,” Hathaway rasped. “With you, sir.”

“You’ll heal,” Burt said flatly.

“I won’t be left.”

Hathaway tried to rise, shaking, sweat pouring, sheer will be clawing for balance where bone no longer answered. He nearly fainted.

Burt watched.

Then said quietly, “Good.”

He leaned in. “You’ll sail. After you heal. You’ll stay out from underfoot and do as you’re told.”

“Aye, sir,” Hathaway whispered.

“I’ll have the carpenter fashion you a leg, now let’s get your ass back to the ship” Captain Burt said with pride in his voice.

“Aye sir” he said much louder.

Outside, the sky had begun to change.

As Burt and Pratt passed the harbor master’s office, with Hathaway in tow, the dockmaster stepped out, keys in hand.

Their eyes met.

The man’s expression shifted—not fear, not anger. Something smaller.

He broke eye contact first, went back inside, closed the door, and drew the blinds.

“Those manners wouldn’t stand back home,” Hathaway muttered.

They laughed—for the first time since Nathaniel died.

The heat stayed, but the wind grew strange—too warm one moment, dead still the next. Clouds stacked far beyond the harbor mouth, dark as stone.

“Storm’s coming,” men muttered. “Ugly one.”

The third night, Burt did not sleep.

Before dawn, he took the relic from its cloth. It drank the lamplight the way deep water drank the sun. In his palm it felt heavier than gold—warm, intimate.

He thought of Maggie’s letters.

Of Richard’s name on the page.

Of Nathaniel’s body on the dock and the way the world kept singing.

At first light, Pratt found him on deck.

“They say the storm’s got teeth.”

Burt watched the horizon darken.

“Aye.”

As the lines were cast off, Pratt glanced once—only once—at Burt’s bare throat.

Burt’s hand closed around the relic.

He hesitated.

Just long enough to feel the choice.

Then he lifted the chain and settled the gold against his chest.

Warm. Immediate. Familiar.

As if it had been waiting.

Out beyond the harbor, the storm shifted.

“Looks like it’s gonna miss us!” a lookout shouted, laughing with relief.

Cheers followed—too loud, too eager.

Burt felt the relic’s warmth through his shirt.

His face stayed still.

But his mouth tugged, just slightly, into a private smirk no one else could see.

And The Resilience slid into open water as the dark weather turned away—

like a thing that had changed its mind.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Resilience Surged North

With the storm behind them and clear skies ahead, they made way to New England.

The Resilience surged north as if she'd been unchained. Wind filled her sails full and steady, not gusting but pushing—constant, confident, almost intentional. The sea rolled beneath her keel in long, even swells, lifting her forward rather than resisting her weight.

They made astonishing time.

Too much time.

By the third day out of Barbados, men had begun to notice. By the fifth, they were talking openly about it—checking the sun twice, counting hours, arguing softly over figures scratched into wood or inked in ledgers.

“We should still be south of the Carolinas,” one man said, shading his eyes.

Pratt checked the horizon again, then the compass, then the wake streaming clean and straight behind them.

“We are,” he said slowly. “Which means we shouldn’t be seein’ that.”

He pointed.

Dolphins cut the water off the bow, sleek and silver, pacing the ship as if escorting her. They leapt and vanished and leapt again, racing the Resilience with effortless joy. Somewhere farther out,

a pod of whales broke the surface—dark backs rolling, spouts hanging in the air like punctuation marks.

The men cheered.

Laughter carried across the deck for the first time since Barbados—real laughter, unforced. Someone began to sing, and others joined in, loose and happy, the sound stitched together by wind and salt.

For the crew, it felt like grace.

For Burt, it felt like acceleration.

He stood apart near the rail, hands resting on the wood, the relic warm against his chest. He could feel it now—not as weight, but as presence. As certainty.

The ship answered him.

Every command came easy. Every adjustment seemed to anticipate itself. Sails trimmed clean. Lines stayed taut. The Resilience ran true, her timbers humming beneath his boots like a living thing in agreement.

On the seventh day, Hathaway climbed the ladder to the quarterdeck without help.

Pratt noticed first.

“Easy, lad,” he called, already moving.

Hathaway waved him off and planted his crutch with practiced confidence. His color was better—too good. The swelling had gone down faster than any of them expected. The stump, once angry and raw, now looked clean and pink, the surgeon’s stitches holding firm.

“I’m fit enough to work the books, sir,” Hathaway said, chin lifted. “Or keep watch. Anything useful.”

Burt studied him.

“You’re healing fast,” Burt said.

Hathaway hesitated, then shrugged. “Guess I’m stubborn.”

A few men chuckled. One crossed himself without thinking.

Burt nodded once. “You’ll keep the log. Midday and night.”

Hathaway’s face lit up. “Aye, sir.”

As the boy turned to go, Pratt leaned in quietly. “He shouldn’t be on his feet yet.”

“I know,” Burt said.

Pratt glanced at Burt’s chest, then away. “Just saying.”

They made New York in fourteen days.

The lookout shouted first, disbelief thick in his voice.

“Land ho—by God—land ho!”

Men rushed the rail. The coastline rose ahead of them, familiar and impossible all at once. Sandy Hook stood clear against the sky. The mouth of the Hudson yawned wide and welcoming, ships clustered like beetles in the distance.

Cheers broke loose—wild, joyous.

“Two weeks!” someone shouted. “We made it in two bloody weeks!”

Pratt stood beside Burt, eyes narrowed, counting, recalculating, then giving up.

“That’s... that’s not possible,” he said.

Burt said nothing.

He watched the shoreline slide past, felt the pull of home tightening in his chest. Berkley lay farther north still, but this—this was proof. Civilization. Dock and stone and smoke. The end of the long, unbroken blue.

That night, the sea lay flat as glass.

Stars burned overhead, reflected so perfectly in the water that the world seemed doubled—sky below, ocean above. The ship cut through it without effort, leaving barely a ripple.

The men slept deeply.

Burt did not.

He stood alone on the deck long after the watch changed, the relic warm beneath his shirt. He closed his eyes and imagined removing it—imagined the wind faltering, the sea turning ugly, the invisible hand withdrawing its favor.

He imagined Maggie’s letters sinking into the water. Richard’s name dissolving into foam.

His jaw tightened.

“This isn’t right,” he murmured—not to the sea, not to the relic, but to himself.

The relic offered no answer.

Only certainty.

By morning, the wind was still with them. The current still strong. The Resilience still running like a ship chosen.

The crew called it luck.

Burt began to call it something else.

And as New England drew closer with unnatural speed, he wondered—not for the first time—whether getting home so easily was the blessing... or the last kindness before the cost was finally named.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Payback

They recognized the water.

That was the first thing that unsettled the men.

The coastline slid past beneath a clear sky, familiar in its curves and shoals. The air smelled different here familiar but from a dream—brackish, pine-tinged, carrying the memory of home. For the first time in a while Newport lay farther east than north, Fall River not far beyond the bend. Landmarks came and went with a quiet certainty that left no room for doubt.

They were almost home.

The Resilience ran bright that evening.

Lanterns burned along her rails and masts, throwing gold across the water, making her visible for miles in every direction. Her sails were full but easy, the wind steady and indulgent. From a distance, she looked careless. Fat. Slow, just as the captain ordered.

Pratt noticed it immediately.

“Captain,” he said quietly. “We’re lit like a festival.”

Burt stood at the rail, eyes on the darkening shore. The relic rested openly against his chest now, no longer hidden, its gold catching lantern light with every movement of the ship.

“I know,” Burt said.

Pratt waited.

Burt didn’t turn. “Let them come.”

The order followed without explanation.

Lanterns stayed lit.

Men vanished from the deck.

Weapons were brought up silently and passed hand to hand.

The ship went quiet.

The first arrow struck the hull just above the waterline with a dull, familiar sound.

Then another.

Then three more.

They bounced, skittered, fell uselessly into the wake.

No one shouted, they passed the test.

From the shadows along the shore, canoes slipped free—low, narrow shapes cutting the water fast and confident. The attackers moved the way they always had, the way that had worked before.

They believed the ship was unready.

They believed wrong.

Hooks caught the rail. Hands reached up. Bodies rose.

The first man, the second, then a third crested the deck, Burt gave the command.

“Now.”

The Resilience came alive.

Men surged from concealment in coordinated motion, blades flashing, musket stocks cracking bone. There was no panic, no scrambling—only execution. The crew moved where Burt

pointed, closed ranks where he directed, struck and withdrew with practiced economy.

The attackers fought hard. Bravely.

It didn't matter.

Steel met flesh. Bodies fell. Blood slicked the deck and ran toward the scuppers. The fight was over almost as soon as it began.

Then Burt was hit.

A blade found its way between ribs, driven deep and sure. The impact rocked him back a half step, the breath tearing from his lungs. For a moment, the world narrowed to heat and pressure and the wet sound of his own blood.

Pratt saw it, they all saw it.

“Captain!”

Burt didn't fall.

He looked down instead—saw the spear buried to the shaft, felt the warmth spreading beneath his shirt. Around them, the last of the attackers were thrown overboard, the water closing without ceremony.

Silence followed.

Pratt was already at Burt's side, hands steady by habit even as his face drained of color. He reached for the spear, then stopped—memory flickering sharp and unwanted.

Leave it in.

Pratt pulled it free anyway.

Blood poured out, dark and heavy. A wound no man walked away from.

The deck held its breath.

Burt touched the relic.

Not in desperation. Not in prayer.

Just contact.

The gold was warm—hotter than before, his blood dripping off the gem in the center on it. He felt something shift, deep and immediate, like pressure releasing. The pain dulled. Then receded. The bleeding slowed... stopped.

Before their eyes, the wound closed.

Not cleanly. Not prettily.

But completely.

Flesh knit. Breath steadied. Burt straightened.

Confused. “What the hell are you all looking at” he shouted

A man crossed himself. Another stepped back as if the deck had tilted beneath him. Somewhere, someone whispered a name—God, or devil, or something else entirely.

Burt looked around at his crew.

Some stared at him with awe.

Some with devotion.

Some with naked fear.

The line had been draw, and Captain Burt knew it.

They sailed on without stopping, without speaking.

Past Newport.

Past Fall River.

Past the places where Burt had once bled and refused to turn back.

Pratt joined him at the rail as the coastline slipped into dusk.

“I don’t know whether to follow you to the ends of the earth,” Pratt said quietly, “or put a bullet in you while I still can.”

Burt didn’t look at him.

“Apparently that won’t work” Burt replied

“Well, what is this captain, help me understand”

“I wish I could brother”

Pratt watched him for a long moment, then nodded once—not agreement, not surrender. Something harder.

The Resilience cut north through familiar waters, unchanged by what had happened upon her deck.

Behind them, the sea closed.

Ahead, Berkley waited.

And Captain Tamburlaine Burt sailed home no longer merely blessed...

...but known.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Careful Boy

Berkley learned to wait.

The house by the river did not change much in Burt's absence, but Maggie did. Not in the way people remarked upon—her posture still straight, her voice still even—but in the quiet math of endurance. Days measured by feedings. Nights broken by a child who did not yet understand waiting.

Richard was nearly five months old now. Solid. Awake. His eyes followed light the way Burt's once followed the sea. When he cried, it was with conviction. When he slept, Maggie watched him longer than necessary, memorizing the rise and fall of his chest as if it were something that might be taken.

Nathan came often. More eager to protect than serve

Burt's nephew had grown into himself over the year—shoulders broader, hands rougher, eyes sharper. He chopped wood, fixed latches, carried water, and never lingered too long inside. Maggie trusted him. That trust was unspoken and absolute.

Which was why Edward Crowe noticed it.

Crowe had a way of being present without being invited. He appeared at the edge of the property more than once, boots clean, coat always buttoned, eyes too curious. He spoke pleasantly enough when spoken to, but his gaze lingered—on Maggie, on the house, on the child.

On Nathan.

"You're here often," Crowe said one afternoon, voice mild as rain, as Nathan stacked firewood.

Nathan didn't look up. "Family."

Crowe smiled thinly. "So I've heard."

The accusation came later.

It was whispered first—just enough to be repeated. A suggestion of impropriety. A look exchanged too easily explained. Crowe said nothing outright, but he didn't correct it either. He let the idea breathe.

When Nathan confronted him near the dock, there were witnesses. Nathan a blunt tool, but Crowe was more of a surgical instrument.

"You keep my aunt's name out of your mouth," Nathan said, fists clenched, voice low.

Crowe tilted his head. "Struck a nerve?"

"You don't get to speak about her," Nathan snapped. "Not ever."

Crowe's eyes flicked toward the river, then back. "People notice things. Absences. Loneliness. A woman alone too long..."

Nathan stepped closer, a quick punch to the nose faster than anyone could muster

That was when Crowe smiled, blood trickling out of one nostril.

"Careful, boy," he said softly. "You're drawing lines in the sand you don't understand."

Maggie heard about it before Nathan could tell her.

She did not cry. She did not shout. She folded Richard into her arms and listened until the words ran out. Then she said only, "He wants something."

Nathan nodded. "Aye."

That night, Maggie dreamed of her husband again.

Not as she remembered him, but as he was now—older, weathered, standing just out of reach. He didn't speak. He only watched her, eyes full of urgency, as if time itself were failing him. As if he had a secret so important but he was gaged.

She woke with her heart racing and the smell of salt in the room.

The river changed the next morning.

The tide came in stronger than usual, pushing dark water up against the banks. Unexpected and unpresidential Men paused in their work. Someone shaded their eyes and stared south.

Crowe felt it before he saw it.

He stood rigid at the edge of town, breath shallow, watching the bend in the river as if expecting judgment to round it.

Then the shout came.

“Sail!”

The word cracked through Berkley like a bell.

Another voice took it up. Then another.

“She's coming in!”

“By God, it's the Resilience!”

Maggie was already moving.

She reached the dock as the masts rose into view—tall, familiar, unmistakable. The Resilience cut the water clean and proud, her hull dark with distance and return. Flags snapped in the wind. The town surged forward as one body, laughter and tears colliding.

Maggie pressed a hand to her mouth.

Nathan stood beside her, grinning like a boy again.

Crowe did not move, he just stared at the both of them.

His face had gone pale, his eyes fixed on the approaching ship with something like dread.

“That ship’s been gone too long,” he muttered.

The river carried the Resilience closer.

And Berkley ran to meet her.

Chapter Twenty-Five — Homecoming

The water gave her back.

That was how the town would remember it later—not as a ship arriving, but as something returned. As if The Resilience had never truly belonged to the water in the first place.

The shout came first, from the far bend of the river.

Then another.

Then the bell at the meetinghouse began to ring—slow at first, uncertain, then faster as hands took hold of the rope with conviction. Doors opened. Children ran. Voices gathered and spilled downhill toward the docks like a tide answering its own call.

“She’s back!”

“The Resilience!”

“God above—she’s sittin’ low!”

Maggie felt it before she saw it.

The river had shifted. The air thickened with sound and motion, and something in her chest tightened—not fear, not hope, but recognition. She lifted Richard higher against her shoulder and turned toward the water.

The Resilience came into view, heavy and dark against the afternoon light, her hull riding low, her lines clean and proud. She moved without hesitation, cutting upriver with the quiet confidence of a thing that knew exactly where it was meant to go.

The town surged forward.

Men ran ahead, already shouting names, throwing hats into the air. Women followed more slowly, hands pressed to mouths, eyes wet. Children darted between legs, pointing, laughing, asking questions no one could answer yet.

Ships didn't return like this in New Bedford—not anymore. But Berkley was small. Everything it had was tied to the water. And when hope showed its face, the town couldn't help itself.

Nathan Burt was already at the front, grinning like he'd been waiting his whole life for this moment.

"There she is!" he shouted, waving both arms. "That's her! I told you!"

Uncle Mike Burt stood a few steps back, hands folded, studying the ship's approach with narrowed eyes. He wasn't smiling—not yet. He was counting. Watching. Taking measure.

Maggie didn't move.

She stood where she was, calm as still water, her gaze fixed on the deck as the ship eased closer. She searched without panic, without hurry.

She found him immediately.

Her hand flew to her mouth as she fought back tears.

Burt stood near the rail, straight-backed, one hand resting on the wood. He did not wave. He did not lean forward. He simply watched the shore approach, as if he'd known all along it would come to him.

Thomas Pratt stood half a step behind him.

The gangplank dropped.

Lines were thrown and caught. Men leapt onto the dock, boots striking wood that did not sway. Laughter burst free now that the ground held them. Some dropped to their knees and pressed palms flat, as if to reassure themselves it was real.

Others stayed aboard.

A few stood back, quiet, eyes darting—not toward the town, but toward Burt.

The town did not notice.

All eyes were on the captain now as he descended the plank with measured steps, coat still fastened, the gold at his chest catching the light.

Maggie stepped forward, Richard in her arms.

The noise around her dimmed—not vanished, but muffled, as if someone had laid a thick cloth over the world. She felt the press of bodies behind her, the heat, the sound—but none of it touched her.

Burt stopped when he reached her.

For a heartbeat, they simply looked at each other.

Then she stepped into him, and he wrapped his arms around them both—firm, grounding—hugging as if he were holding their very souls. The commotion dulled, just for them.

Maggie breathed in the warmth, the certainty of her husband's arms around her.

“Well,” she said into his shoulder, voice steady, dry with humor.

“About time.”

A few people laughed—soft, relieved.

“Would you like to hold your son?” Maggie asked, smiling.

Burt smiled.

And the big, iron-backed captain transformed into something gentler as he took Richard into his arms for the first time.

Behind them, Nathan whooped. Uncle Mike exhaled slowly. Pratt remained where he was, eyes scanning the crowd, never fully relaxing.

And Edward Crowe, standing at the edge of the gathering, felt something cold settle in his stomach.

The ship had returned.

And it was not the ship that frightened him.

Chapter Twenty-Six – That Old Burt Temper

Burt stood at the side of the crib longer than he meant to.

Richard slept on his back, one small fist curled tight against his chest, the other open as if already learning how to let go. His breathing came steady and sure, a rhythm Burt found himself counting without realizing it. One. Two. Three. Alive. Whole. Real.

He had crossed oceans for this sound.

Burt reached out, careful, and let a finger rest against his son's knuckles. The skin was warm. Solid. Nothing fragile about him at all.

For the first time since returning, Burt felt the memory of the wound beneath his shirt—not pain, just the echo of it. His hand drifted instinctively toward his chest, toward the gold that rested there.

He stopped himself.

Maggie noticed and questioned his new jewelry

He told her about how he found it in the cave, the strange looking being who wore it and how there lucked change upon leaving, about Barbados the boy loosing his leg. He told her all of it, well almost all of it. He talked about the attack just days ago but downplayed the part about the wound.

Maggie stood in the doorway, watching him.

“People will talk,” she said softly.

Burt smiled without turning. “Just making sure he’s still there when I look again.”

She crossed the room and stood beside him. For a moment, neither spoke. The house creaked the way old houses did—settling, remembering.

Then Maggie said, “There’s an incident that will be coming to a head soon.”

Burt’s smile faded, but his voice stayed calm. “What about?”

“Edward Crowe.” She didn’t look at him. “He never came inside without invitation. Never said anything that could be repeated cleanly. He just... stayed too long. Watched too closely.”

Burt nodded once.

“He let people talk,” she continued. “About me. About being alone. About Nathan.”

That got his attention.

Maggie turned then, meeting his eyes. “Nathan didn’t punch him out of temper. He punched him because Crowe wanted him to hear what was being said.”

Burt exhaled slowly through his nose. “And Crowe?”

“Smiled,” Maggie said. “Like it was all going exactly as he hoped.”

Burt looked back down at his son.

“I should have been here.”

“There’s no way you could have known,” Maggie said gently. “But I don’t trust him. Nothing he does is without purpose.”

They stood like that a moment longer, husband and wife, the silence between them no longer peaceful—but resolved.

Outside, Berkley celebrated.

Uncle David Burt's tavern was already loud by the time the sun dipped low. Long tables filled the common room, crowded with men who smelled of salt and smoke and the deep, private relief of having survived something they didn't yet know how to name.

Cups were raised. Toasts shouted.

"To the Resilience!"

"To Captain Burt!"

"To home!"

Burt arrived late, Maggie at his side, Richard left with kin. The room shifted when he entered—not falling silent, not exactly—but bending subtly around him, the way water bends around stone.

Someone clapped him on the shoulder. Someone pressed a cup into his hand.

Stories began almost immediately.

"At first light they came," one sailor said, already half gone with drink. "Arrows bouncing off the hull like rain." And then a voice from the rear "and also the captain" the bar laughed confused

"No," another cut in. "Before that. They waited. Tried to see if we'd break."

"Aye—and the captain let 'em think we would."

Laughter followed. Burt listened without correcting, without feeding it.

Then a man near the end of the table spoke too clearly for someone that drunk.

“I saw the metal go in.”

The table quieted, just a little.

“Clean between the ribs,” the man continued. “Would’ve dropped any other man where he stood.”

“That’s enough,” someone muttered.

“I’m saying what I saw,” the man insisted. “There was blood.

Then there wasn’t.”

A chair scraped. Nervous laughter bubbled up, forced and thin.

“Drink’s talking,” someone said.

“Aye,” another agreed too quickly. “Drink and bad light.”

But a third man crossed himself—quick and small—and said nothing at all.

At the far edge of the room, Edward Crowe sat with a cup untouched before him, listening.

By morning, the Resilience lay open to the town.

Cargo came off in orderly lines. Tallies were marked. Barrels rolled. The river smelled of work again.

The men gathered when payment was called.

Crowe stood with the ledger, immaculate as ever. Mike Burt stood nearby, hands clasped behind his back, his face

unreadable. Maggie's father was there as well—the three wise men watching closely, though Crowe was clearly in command.

The amounts were spoken.

Too low.

Murmurs rippled through the crew. A man stepped forward, then another. Voices rose—not yet angry, but close.

Burt moved before it could turn.

“That's not what was promised,” he said evenly.

Crowe looked up, mild surprise on his face. “Adjustments were necessary.”

“These men bled,” Burt replied. “For my ship.”

Crowe's pen paused.

“Captain,” he said gently, clearly, so all could hear, “she is my ship. You merely command her.”

The words landed hard.

No one spoke.

Crowe smiled thinly. “Market values. Maintenance. Transport. There are many considerations, gentlemen. I'm sure you understand.”

He closed the ledger.

“And there is another matter,” Crowe continued, turning slightly so the town could see him now. “Your nephew laid hands on me. Publicly. That cannot be ignored.”

Nathan stepped forward at once. “I'll answer for it.”

“No,” Burt said, placing a hand on his chest. “You won't.”

Crowe's brow lifted. "Then who will?"

"I will," Burt said.

"Captain," Crowe began, recovering his composure. "It was your nephew who insulted me—"

Burt didn't let him finish.

The blow came fast and clean, dropping Crowe to his knees. The crowd erupted in shocked laughter.

"Now I'm the one who's insulted you," Burt said calmly. "Just as you've insulted my men—and my wife."

A hush fell.

Crowe, burning with humiliation, struggled to his feet. Mike Burt stepped forward to intervene, but it was already too late.

"A duel," Crowe spat. "Tomorrow at dawn. Properly witnessed. At the old carved rock."

Someone in the crowd shifted. Someone else swallowed.

Crowe stepped back, then vanished into the press of bodies.

As the men dispersed, Pratt came to Burt's side.

"What the hell did you just do?"

"He can't treat people like this," Burt said.

"He owns half the town," Pratt replied quietly. "And I've seen you shoot."

Burt didn't answer.

Nathan was already pleading, begging to stand in his place. Burt silenced him with a look.

“This is my fight,” he said. “But I want you beside me in the morning. You too, Pratt.”

“I’ll be there,” Pratt said. He already knew.

When Maggie heard, her fury came first—then fear.

“Only you would be this foolish, Tamburlaine,” she said, tears breaking free now. “I can’t lose you again.”

“We could run,” she whispered, even as she knew better.

Burt held her, saying nothing. They both understood the weight of his pride. His sense of honor.

That night, as lamps dimmed and doors closed, Berkley did not sleep easily.

Names were not spoken aloud yet.

But they were being chosen.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Blood Spilled

Dawn came cold and thin.

Frost clung to the ground near the old carved rock, whitening the grass and dulling the earth as if the land itself were holding its breath. The river lay quiet beyond the trees, its surface smooth and unreadable.

Six men stood apart from the town.

Edward Crowe arrived first, coat buttoned, boots clean. With him the other two wise men—men of standing, men who knew how to speak carefully and remember selectively. They took their places without greeting, already arranged by habit rather than plan.

Burt came next.

Thomas Pratt walked at his side. Nathan Burt followed close behind, jaw set, hands clenched as if he could still stop this by force alone.

No one spoke.

The pistols were checked. Measured. Loaded by both Mike Burt and by Pratt “aren’t you standing on the wrong side of this” Pratt glared at Mike Burt

Uncle Mike glared back, but said nothing

“Let there be no confusion,” Crowe said, his voice calm, almost gentle. “No question later of what occurred.”

Pratt watched him closely but said nothing.

They took their positions.

The distance was set. Ten paces. Enough to kill cleanly.

Burt stood with his back to Crowe, breath steady, shoulders squared. He did not look afraid. If anything, he looked tired.

Nathan shifted. “Captain—”

Burt lifted a hand. “It’s done,” he said quietly.

The signal was given.

They began to walk.

One step.

Two...seven, eight!

Crowe turned early.

Not much. Just enough.

The sound cracked through the trees like a branch snapping in winter.

Burt fell forward into the frost.

For a moment, no one moved.

Blood darkened the ground beneath his head, spreading fast, too fast. Nathan shouted and rushed forward, dropping to his knees, hands shaking as he turned Burt onto his side.

“God—no—”

Pratt knelt too, one hand at Burt’s neck. He noticed the relic around his friend’s neck, it shined in an unnatural way only he noticed.

Crowe stood frozen, pistol still raised, his face pale but composed.

Then Burt moved.

Not rising.

Not clean.

He twitched. His body jerked as if pulled by a bad dream. His eyes fluttered open, unfocused, glassy, as if he were waking in the wrong place.

He tried to speak.

Only a wet sound came out.

Burt coughed.

Then he choked.

His body convulsed, fingers clawing weakly at the ground. Nathan grabbed him, shouting for help that no one could give.

Then Burt retched.

Something dark and slick spilled from his mouth and struck the frozen earth with a dull metallic sound.

The bullet lay steaming in the frost.

For a long moment, no one breathed.

Burt sucked in air like a drowning man hauled from water. He rolled onto his side, shaking, disoriented, blood still streaking his face. When he tried to stand, he nearly fell again, swaying as if drunk.

Pratt caught him.

“Easy,” he whispered. “Easy, Captain.”

Crowe took a step back.

One of the wise men Maggie’s father crossed himself. Mike Burt stared at the bullet as if it might move again.

“This... this isn’t natural,” Crowe said finally, his voice tight.
“You all saw it.”

“We saw you turn early,” Nathan snarled.

Crowe’s head snapped toward him. “You lie.”

“I watched him fall,” Pratt said quietly. “Shot from behind.”

The men looked at one another, six witnesses already dividing.

Crowe straightened his coat. “He survived because something unnatural intervened. That much is plain.”

Burt laughed then—a broken, breathless sound that startled everyone, his blood stained his teeth.

“I didn’t survive,” he said hoarsely. “You missed.” And with that captain Burt raised his weapon at Crowe and fired.

Missing by feet not inches, then Burt falling drunkerdlly to the ground.

The wisemen took there leave, they returned to Berkley in silence.

By the time they reached the edge of town, Crowe spoke first.

He spoke calmly. Reluctantly. As if burdened by what he had seen.

A man shot through the head.

A man who did not die.

A bullet expelled like a thing rejected by the body.

The magistrate listened.

The minister listened.

Mike Burt stepped forward “I’m not sure what I saw, but until we can understand it better it’s best to lock him up”

“You’re locking up the man who brought glory back to Berkley,” the magistrate questioned “Who filled your holds. Who fed your families.”

Crowe answered gently. “We are protecting the town.”

It was then Captain Burt, Pratt and Nathan Burt emerged

They took Burt at the arm as he swayed, still half lost to the world. Maggie reached him just once, gripping his sleeve.

“Tamburlaine—”

He looked at her, eyes clearer now, fear finally breaking through.

“Don’t let them take it” he said the her and Pratt

They locked him away before nightfall.

The relic was placed under guard.

The town told itself it had done the right thing.

By morning, the whale oil had begun to sour.

Lamps smoked black. Barrels leaked. The smell turned sharp and wrong, clinging to the docks and the streets alike.

Rats followed.

Then sickness.

And still, Berkley prayed harder.

Because if this was not God’s will—

Then the truth was far worse.

Chapter Twenty-Eight — God Fearing Town

Burt stopped shivering only when his body ran out of strength to do it.

The cell they kept him in was not a dungeon. There were no chains, no dramatic cruelty—just plain wood and steel with another cell next to it, a locked door and a single narrow window that let in more cold than light. The air smelled of old boards and damp stone, as if the building had been waiting years for someone to be placed inside it.

He sat on the cot with his hands in his lap and tried to remember what warmth felt like.

It wasn't just the cold.

It was the way his joints protested when he moved. The way his shoulders ached like they remembered every rope he'd ever hauled. The way his vision blurred at the edges when he stood too quickly. His breath came shorter. His pulse felt slower, heavier, as if time had found him again and meant to collect, and the pain in his chest had returned.

He pressed two fingers to the scar beneath his shirt.

It throbbed—not pain, exactly. A dull insistence. Like a wound remembering what it was.

Burt closed his eyes.

He could feel the place where the relic had rested on his chest as clearly as if it were still there. A phantom weight. A missing anchor.

It had been doing more than he understood.

The door opened with a groan.

Two men stepped in—one a guard from town, the other older, his hair thinning, his face set in the strained seriousness of a man forced to play judge without wanting the part.

The elder didn't sit. He didn't meet Burt's eyes for long.

"We're keeping you here until this can be made plain," he said.

Burt gave a tired laugh that turned into a cough. "Made plain."

"Your condition is... a concern," the man continued. "Your behavior at the rock—your firing—"

"He shot me in the back of the head," Burt rasped.

The elder's mouth tightened. "And yet there's no wound, also there are witnesses who say otherwise."

Of course there were.

Burt leaned forward, elbows on knees. The movement cost him more than it should have. "Where is it?"

The elder blinked. "Where is what?"

"The gold," Burt said. "The piece you took from me."

A pause.

"A thing like that ought not be worn," the man said, voice stiffening. "Not after what we've seen and heard."

Burt's eyes narrowed. "And what have you done with it?"

"It's kept safe," the elder replied.

Burt almost smiled. “Safe.”

The men left him with that word as if it were mercy.

When the door shut again, the cold came back in like it had been waiting outside, impatient.

He lay down, but sleep didn’t come clean. When it came at all it came in fragments—salt and darkness and voices too far away to answer. In one broken dream he stood again at the mouth of the cave, the wind wrong, the air heavy, the walls carved with marks older than language. A line. A half-circle beneath it. And words scratched into stone like a warning meant to outlast breath.

Babbitt’s voice, calm and certain, translating as he went.

The words were there. Burt knew they were. He could almost see them.

But the order would not settle.

Born...

Longest...

Night...

Day...

Burt woke with his heart racing and his hands numb.

Across town, Maggie did not wait.

They told her she could not see him.

She told them they were wrong.

It began as it always did in Berkley—with a polite refusal and a woman who did not accept it.

Maggie arrived with a basket of bread, clean cloth, and a small bottle wrapped in burlap that might have been tea, or broth, or something stronger. She spoke to the men at the door as if they were neighbors, not gatekeepers.

“My husband is cold,” she said. “He’s injured. He needs food. He needs clean bandages.”

“Mrs. Burt,” the guard started, already uncomfortable.

She stepped closer. “Move.”

The guard hesitated. He looked past her, as if hoping someone more important would appear and make the decision for him.

Someone did.

Edward Crowe emerged from the meetinghouse yard like he’d been there all along.

He moved with the same calm he always wore, but his face had changed since the duel. A paleness that didn’t belong to winter. Shadows under the eyes. A faint tremor he tried to hide by keeping his hands clasped.

“Mrs. Burt,” Crowe said gently. “You should go home.”

Maggie didn’t lower her gaze. “I am going to see my husband.”

Crowe’s expression tightened by a fraction. “Your husband is confined for the safety of the town.”

“My husband brought this town a ship heavy with oil,” Maggie said. “He brought men home alive. If you want to speak of safety, speak of your own.”

A few heads turned. A few faces stiffened.

Crowe smiled as if saddened. “You don’t understand what you’re involved with.”

“Oh, I understand you,” Maggie said. “Enough.”

Crowe held her gaze a moment too long, then nodded toward the door.

The guard, flustered, opened it just enough to take the basket.

Maggie pushed through.

It happened quickly—too quickly for anyone to stop without making it worse.

She was inside before the guard could decide whether to grab her. Inside before Crowe could raise his voice and turn her into a spectacle.

And when she reached Burt, she stopped.

He looked older.

Not in a way that years did, but in a way sickness did. His skin dull. His eyes sunken. His hands trembling faintly as if his body were trying to remember strength and failing.

Maggie’s throat tightened. She set the basket down and knelt beside him, touching his face with both hands.

“Tamburlaine...”

He leaned into her touch like a man starving.

“They took it,” he whispered. “They took it off me.”

“I know,” she said fiercely. “I know.”

Behind them, the door opened wider.

Crowe stood in the threshold now, just outside the room, careful not to cross it. He let the guard enter first, as if to show he was not forcing anything. As if he were merely witnessing.

Maggie rose slowly to her feet, turning to face him.

“She’s interfering,” the guard muttered, uncertain.

Crowe’s eyes stayed on Burt. “He looks worse,” he said, almost to himself.

“Because you stole from him,” Maggie snapped.

Crowe finally looked at her. “Stole?”

“You took something that was his,” she said. “And now you’re surprised he’s breaking.”

Crowe’s jaw tightened. “That object is under guard.”

Maggie stepped toward him, daring him to hold her back. “Then put it back where it belongs.”

The guard shifted, uneasy. The word belongs sounded like ownership, like claim, like sin.

Crowe didn’t answer right away.

Because in that moment, with Burt pale and shaking on the cot, the equation began to form in his mind—not complete, not proven, but sharp enough to cut.

Burt with the gold: unkillable.

Burt without it: wasting.

Crowe swallowed.

Something in him wanted to test it again. Something in him already had.

Not power.

Hunger.

Crowe steadied himself with breath and posture, and spoke as if he were still simply protecting the town.

“This is precisely why you must be kept from him,” he said quietly. “You don’t see what you’re doing.”

Maggie’s laugh was sharp. “I see exactly what I’m doing. I’m keeping my husband alive.”

Crowe looked at the guard. “Remove her.”

The guard hesitated.

Maggie did not.

When the guard stepped forward, she did not shrink. She did not plead. She lifted her chin and let her voice carry just enough for the hallway to hear.

“You’re afraid because you don’t understand,” she said. “And you’d rather hang an innocent man than admit it.”

The guard grabbed her arm. She did not fight like a frantic woman. She fought like a wife protecting her house—steady, furious, dignified.

Burt tried to rise.

Pratt appeared in the doorway then, breath visible in the cold, eyes hard.

He took in the scene in a single glance—Burt weakened, Maggie held, Crowe watching like a man measuring a tool.

Pratt's gaze flicked to Crowe and stayed there.

"You're doing this wrong," Pratt said quietly.

Crowe turned, polite again. "Mr. Pratt."

Pratt didn't greet him. "You took something off him," Pratt said. "And now look at him."

Crowe's smile thinned. "Your captain is confined."

Pratt's jaw tightened. Behind his eyes, the cave wall returned without warning—stone, carvings, the feel of salt on his tongue, Babbitt's voice translating and rearranging like a man trying to make madness readable.

Born... longest... night...

Broken... longest... day...

All the words.

Wrong order.

Pratt swallowed, the memory bitter in his throat. He didn't understand it yet—not fully—but he understood enough to be afraid of the town's certainty.

"Give it back," Pratt said.

The guard froze.

Crowe's eyes sharpened. "What did you say?"

Pratt didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to. "Give it back," he repeated. "Or you're going to learn what you've actually taken."

Crowe's face went very still.

"Listen to yourself," he murmured. "You sound—"

“Like a man who was there,” Pratt cut in. “He took it off in Barbados and bad things happen”

A silence settled that felt heavier than the cold.

Crowe stepped back, as if to keep himself righteous. “Take her home,” he told the guard. “And keep Mr. Pratt away from the lock.”

Maggie tore her arm free at last, not fleeing, not breaking—just standing her ground long enough to let Crowe see she would not be made small.

As she was forced out, she met Pratt’s eyes once.

He nodded—just once.

Not comfort.

Not promise.

A warning.

That night, Berkley whispered louder.

Not witch yet.

Not in daylight.

But other words began to take its place—influence, affliction, unnatural—spoken by men who prayed harder the more frightened they became.

In the storehouses by the river, barrels of oil began to leak.

Not all of them.

Just enough.

Lamps smoked black. Wicks burned wrong. The smell turned sharp and sour and clung to the dock planks like rot.

And in the locked room, Burt lay shaking beneath a thin blanket, staring at the darkness, hearing the sea in his blood and feeling—somewhere beyond the walls—the relic calling to something that was finally awake.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – The Rats

The first man died quietly.

He collapsed on the docks just after dawn, one hand still wrapped around a coil of rope, his mouth opens as if he'd meant to call out and found no breath to do it with. By the time anyone reached him, he was already cooling, his eyes fixed on the river like it had something left to explain.

"He was fine yesterday," someone said.

By nightfall, a child on Water Street followed him. Fevered by noon, gone before supper. The mother's wailing carried farther than it should have in such a small town, and no one stopped to listen for long.

Berkley did not like patterns.

The whale oil finished what it had started.

More barrels leaked. Not all of them—just enough to ruin confidence. The oil inside turned sharp and sour, refusing to burn clean. Lamps smoked black. Wicks sputtered. The smell clung to clothing, to hair, to the inside of houses no matter how many windows were opened.

Merchants argued. Accounts were checked and rechecked.

"This never happens," one said.

Another answered, "Not like this."

Rats came next.

First along the docks, bold as thieves, running in daylight without fear. Then the storehouses. Then the alleys behind homes. Someone crushed one beneath a boot and three more

appeared by morning, slick-eyed and fast, as if they'd been waiting for permission.

And then the river changed.

Not all at once. Not dramatic.

Just a tint near the banks, red-brown where the current slowed, like rust stirred from the bottom. A few fish floated belly-up, turning gently as if unsure which way was down.

Runoff, someone said.

A sign, someone else whispered.

That word traveled.

Edward Crowe watched it all with careful eyes.

He walked the docks. He stood near the storehouses. He listened to the minister speak of endurance and testing, of God's hand and human frailty. He visited the place where the relic was kept more than once, lingering just long enough to feel the wrongness of it waiting.

He did not put it on.

Not yet.

But he imagined it.

Burt, without it, was failing. Crowe had seen him carried once across the yard, shoulders sagging, steps uncertain. The man who had stood after a bullet now shook beneath a blanket.

Crowe folded his hands and considered.

If the thing could give strength...

What else might it take?

Across town, Maggie felt the turn before anyone said it aloud.

Doors closed sooner. Conversations ended when she approached. A woman she'd known for years crossed the street rather than pass her. At the baker's, the man behind the counter hesitated just long enough to tell her everything she needed to know.

"Best you go home," he said.

Maggie did not answer. She gathered her things with steady hands and left without looking back.

By evening, the word witch still hadn't been spoken.

But its shadow lay over everything.

At the far edge of town, behind a net shed that smelled of salt and rot, Thomas Pratt stood with four men.

No speeches. No raised voices.

Just facts.

"They're going to kill him," Pratt said.

No one argued.

The sailor with the missing leg Hathaway —the one who'd left it in Barbados—shifted his weight and nodded once. Another man spat into the dirt. A third stared out toward the darkening river.

Pratt didn't tell them how to stop it.

He didn't know.

He only knew this: the town was wrong.

And whatever they were doing to fix it was making everything worse.

That night, Berkley prayed harder.

And the rot did not stop.

Chapter Thirty – They Came for Maggie

They came for Maggie at first light.

Not with ropes. Not with raised voices. Just two men at the door and a folded paper bearing the town seal, the words written carefully, as if neatness could soften what they were there to do.

“For your protection,” one of them said.

Maggie listened without interrupting. She had already dressed. She had already packed what little Richard would need for the morning. When they finished speaking, she asked only one question.

“May I see my husband?”

They did not answer.

That was answer enough.

She kissed her son’s forehead once, longer than necessary, breathing him in as if the moment could be stored and drawn from later. Then she straightened her back, handed the child to a neighbor who would not meet her eyes, and stepped outside.

The hearing was held before noon.

The meetinghouse was full, but quiet. Sunlight streamed through the high windows, illuminating dust motes that drifted like something alive. The magistrate sat centered beneath the pulpit, flanked by elders and the minister. No one looked hurried. No one looked angry.

Edward Crowe sat near the front.

Burt was brought in next, supported more than escorted. Without the relic, he looked diminished—his shoulders slumped, his face

drawn, the fire that once lived in him reduced to embers. When he saw Maggie standing alone, his mouth opened as if to speak. She shook her head once.

The room settled.

The magistrate spoke of concern. Of duty. Of the burden placed upon them by God to protect the town from influences they did not yet understand.

Then the testimonies began.

A woman stood first, hands clasped tight. "I saw her," she said, voice trembling. "Out after dark. Unclothed. Standing in the moonlight as if she weren't cold at all."

Maggie did not react.

A man followed. "She spoke words I didn't know. Not English. Not any tongue I've heard. It unsettled me."

Another voice, older. "She walks alone too often. Watches too much. Never weeps like a proper wife should."

Each statement was offered gently. Regretfully. As if the speakers wished it were otherwise.

When Maggie was asked to respond, she said only, "That is not true."

Her voice did not shake.

It was not enough.

Her father stood next.

Babbitt did not look at her when he spoke.

“I fear for my daughter,” he said quietly. “I fear that whatever has taken hold of her husband has reached her as well. I believe she does not see it herself.”

Maggie closed her eyes.

Pratt and Nathan testified after.

They spoke plainly. Of the duel. Of Crowe turning early. Of the shot fired into Burt’s head from behind.

“And yet,” the magistrate said carefully, “there is no wound.”

“No scar,” an elder added.

“No blood,” someone else murmured.

Pratt clenched his jaw. “There was blood.”

“But there is none now,” the magistrate replied. “You ask us to believe what cannot be seen.”

Mike Burt stood then.

He shifted his weight, cleared his throat. “I don’t know what I saw,” he said. “I only know the town is frightened. I want peace.”

Burt looked at him for a long moment.

Crowe spoke last.

He did not accuse. He did not raise his voice.

He talked of Maggie’s advances toward him, in the church—the house of god of all places—in the town common. He talked a lot more than anyone else, how observant one would think. Then he said it “witchcraft”

He said he had resisted belief. That he had hoped reason would prevail. That he feared not just for Berkley, but for Maggie most of all.

“This influence spreads,” he said softly. “It weakens the body. It confuses the mind. It corrupts what it touches.”

The room leaned toward him.

The magistrate folded his hands.

The verdict was read without flourish.

Guilty of witchcraft.

Guilty of unnatural influence.

Guilty of corrupting the town.

Sentence: death by hanging.

The date was named.

Then came the final order.

“The child,” the magistrate said, not unkindly, “is to be removed for his safety. He will be placed in care at Hospital Hill.”

The words landed harder than the sentence itself.

Maggie’s breath caught for the first time. “No” she screamed.

Burt took a step forward and nearly fell.

“No,” he said hoarsely. “Please.”

The magistrate looked away.

They were led out separately.

As Maggie passed the threshold, she looked back once—not pleading, not raging, simply seeing the town as it was.

They had not judged her.

They had chosen relief.

And Berkley, satisfied it had done God's work, returned to its business.

Chapter Thirty-One — Hospital Hill

Night settled over Berkley like a lid.

The town grew quiet in the way small towns did when they believed they had done something righteous—doors latched, lamps trimmed, voices lowered, as if sound itself might invite doubt back in. Beyond the houses, the river moved dark and steady, indifferent to judgment, carrying the sour smell of oil upriver on the breeze.

Burt lay on the cot in the room they called a cell and listened to his own breathing.

It was wrong now.

Too shallow. Too slow. Each inhale felt like it had to be earned.

Somewhere beyond the wall came the scrape of boots. A cough. A key turning. Then the careful sound of someone approaching who did not want to make the night worse.

Maggie's voice came first, low.

"Tamburlaine?"

Burt pushed himself upright. Pain flared through ribs, shoulder, spine—old injuries waking like dogs hearing their master return. He braced a hand against the wood.

"I'm here," he said.

Iron bars separated them—age, law, and the town's certainty made solid. They leaned close, clasping hands as best they could. Maggie knelt on her side. Burt did the same on his.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Maggie said, “I hate them.”

Burt let out a breath that almost became a laugh. It turned into a cough.

“Aye.”

“I hate what they’ve done,” she continued. “And I hate you—just a little—for giving them a reason.”

Burt closed his eyes.

“Fair.”

Her anger was sharp but controlled. Not hysteria. The clean edge of a woman who had held a household together and refused to be reduced.

But when his breathing changed—when the tremor crept in—something in her shifted.

“You’re cold,” she said.

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve never been a good liar.”

She pressed closer to the bars. Burt lifted his hand and rested it opposite hers, warmth separated by iron. The cold bit—but the contact grounded him.

“Tell me what you feel,” she said softly. “Tell me the truth.”

Burt swallowed.

“Like I’ve been pulled from the sea and left on deck to dry,” he said. “Like my bones remember every storm.”

A pause.

“Like betrayal.”

Maggie's breath caught.

"You're fading," she whispered—and the fury in her voice weighed heavier than fear.

Burt did not answer.

She steadied herself. When she spoke again, anger had given way—reluctantly—to tenderness.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Not for what I said. For... for not stopping it."

"You were never meant to," Burt murmured. "This was always coming."

Silence.

Then Maggie spoke the name that hurt them both.

"Richard."

Burt's throat tightened. He waited too long to answer, as if delay might make the sentence untrue.

"They said Hospital Hill," Maggie said, and the words became a place you could smell.

Burt's hand clenched.

"Aye."

They both knew it. Everyone did. A cold building on a rise where the unwanted were sent. Thin blankets. Thin soup. Thin chances. A place called a hospital because mercy sounded better than truth.

"He'll be raised by strangers," Burt whispered.

Maggie swallowed.

“He’ll be raised by neglect.”

Burt’s breath shook.

“He won’t know us.”

Her voice broke for the first time that night.

“He won’t know he was loved.”

Footsteps approached.

A guard stopped on Maggie’s side of the wall.

“Time.”

She didn’t move.

“When?”

“First light,” the guard said. “Town wants an end to it.”

“To what?” Maggie snapped. “To their guilt?”

The guard hesitated.

“To the sickness. To the rats. To the stench. The deaths, To whatever this is.”

As if a rope could cleanse a river.

Maggie leaned into her husband.

“Tamburlaine...”

“I’m here,” Burt said roughly.

“You listen to me,” she said. All anger gone now—what remained was love sharpened into command. “Don’t you leave me alone in that square. Don’t let them make me walk up there without you.”

“Never.”

“That’s enough,” the guard said, already turning away.

“Maybe we can talk to them,” Maggie whispered. “Maybe we can apologize—maybe—”

“Did I ever tell you about the Maggie Strait?” Burt interrupted. She blinked, sobbing, confused.

“What’s that?”

“The most beautiful stretch of water I ever sailed,” he said, smiling.

“I wish you could take me and Richard there right now,” she said, brushing tears away.

“As do I, my love,” Burt murmured. “As do I.”

Across town, Edward Crowe sat alone.

The relic lay on the table before him. Its gold caught the lamplight as if it enjoyed the attention. The black center drank the light—not reflecting it, but swallowing it until it looked less like a gem and more like a hole cut into the world.

Crowe stared at it a long time before touching it.

He did not pray.

He told himself he needed understanding. That he needed to know what he was fighting. He told himself a hundred reasonable things until reason became permission.

Then he lifted it.

The metal was colder than it should have been.

When he slipped the chain over his head and let the relic settle against his chest, the breath left him as if struck.

His stomach dropped. Vision narrowed. The room tilted.

Pressure filled his skull—not pain, but presence. Like being watched from the inside. He gripped the table, jaw clenched until his teeth ached.

He waited for it to stop.

It didn't.

It pulsed instead—slow, heavy—like a tide coming in.

Crowe forced himself to breathe. Forced himself to stand. He had endured worse than dizziness. Worse than fear.

And beneath the fear—deep, buried, shameful—something else stirred.

Not power.

Not quite.

A taste of inevitability.

“Mine,” he whispered, as if ownership could make it true.

At the docks, Thomas Pratt moved like a man with a clock in his bones.

He didn't gather men in taverns. He didn't speak where listeners lingered. He met them where sailors went when words needed to vanish—behind sheds, near net racks, in the dark gaps between buildings where the wind carried secrets away.

Eight men waited.

The one-legged sailor from Barbados leaned on his crutch, eyes steady. Two others stood with hands buried in coats, anger banked but ready. Nathan Burt was there too—young, but with

a look that no longer belonged to youth. The rest were men who knew the captain, and more importantly, were loyal to him.

Pratt didn't waste breath.

"They'll do it at first light."

No one asked who.

No one asked why.

Nathan spoke quietly.

"We stopping it?"

Pratt watched the Resilience—dark, breathing with the tide, lines creaking like sleep.

He was counting.

Lanterns moved along the dock. One guard. Then another. Steps. Pauses. Men who believed themselves unchallenged.

"If we wait for the bell," the one-legged man said, "it's too late."

"Then we don't wait for the bell," Pratt replied.

Nathan swallowed.

"What's the plan?"

Pratt's jaw tightened.

"There isn't one that doesn't end in blood," he said. "I only know they're wrong."

The men held the silence.

That was the oath.

"Check the lines," Pratt said. "Quiet. No mistakes."

They split without another word—shadows moving with purpose, not panic.

Pratt lingered, watching the ship rise and fall.

He thought of stone and symbols. Of warnings mistaken for blessings. Of men who believed order could be restored with rope and wood.

Morning was coming.

And Berkley believed it could hang its way back into order.

Pratt turned into the dark.

Behind him, the Resilience shifted against her lines as if waking.

And somewhere in town, men tested a rope, checked a trapdoor, and told themselves the same comforting lie:

At first light, it ends.

Chapter Thirty-Two — A Life Ended, Not an Existence

Morning came thin and gray, as if the sun itself had reservations.

The square filled early. Not with shouting, not with anger—just people arriving because they had been told to. Children were kept close. Hats were removed. The gallows stood clean and newly checked, the rope coiled with care, the trapdoor tested once more for certainty.

Berkley meant to be finished with this.

Burt was brought out first.

Without the relic, he looked like a man already half gone—thin, hollowed, his steps uneven. Maggie walked beside him, her hand steady on his arm, her spine straight, her face calm in a way that made some people look away.

The town erupted, yelling the most wild things, throwing anything from rotten tomatoes to dead rats at them.

They were placed together beneath the beam.

Burt searched the crowd once, not for mercy, but for understanding. He found neither.

Then he saw Crowe.

Edward Crowe stood near the front, pale and sweating despite the cold. The chain was visible at his throat. The relic lay against his chest, wrong on him, heavy as a theft.

Crowe swayed slightly, as if the ground refused him.

And in that instant—too late to matter—everything aligned.

The cave.

The carving.

The words, jumbled into safety by a man who meant well.

The truth hidden in order, not language.

Longest night, the winter solstice his birthday. That's it!

Burt met Maggie's eyes.

She smiled at him. Not bravely. Honestly.

The prayer was read.

The question was asked.

"Any last words?"

Burt shook his head.

Maggie spoke instead. "Take care of our son."

The trapdoor opened.

They fell.

The rope snapped tight. Maggie's body stilled almost immediately.

Burt's did not.

Seconds passed.

Then Crowe cried out.

It wasn't loud—just a sound of surprise, of betrayal. He staggered forward, clutching his chest as if the relic had suddenly remembered what it was there to do.

He collapsed in the dirt before the crowd could decide whether to scream.

The relic burned cold against him, draining what it could from him.

Crowe died gasping, eyes wide, mouth working uselessly around a final word that never came. No one alive noticed the relic, except Pratt.

Chaos erupted.

Someone shouted. Someone prayed. Someone ran.

Pratt moved.

He did not ask permission. He did not hesitate. He reached Crowe's body, tore the chain free, and ran for the gallows as men argued over whether Burt still lived.

Pratt cut the ropes

Both bodies fell.

But they were both already gone

Pratt forced the relic over Burt's head and pressed it to his chest.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then Burt inhaled.

Not a breath—a claim.

Air slammed into him as if the sea itself had been waiting. His back arched. His fingers dug into the dirt. Strength flooded him all at once, violent and complete, his body recognizing the relic like an old wound snapping shut.

He tore the rope from his neck and rolled onto his knees.

He was whole.

More than whole.

Burt turned to Maggie.

“No,” he yelled! He grabbed her rocking her “oh god no please”

He pressed the relic to her chest. Again. Harder. As if force could persuade fate. He took it off his neck and put it on hers.

Nothing.

The sound he made then was not a word.

It was grief tearing loose.

Something in Burt broke completely—and something else took its place. Sobbing, he took back what has claimed him and only him.

He rose.

It was then the magistrate raised his weapon and fired, point blank at Burt.

The crowd backed away, Captain Burt did not.

He grabbed the weapon and with one swing blood spilled everywhere, and a lawman was dead.

Screams followed people scattered

Pratt couldn't move, frozen he stared at Burt

“We’ve got a small crew and there ready for your order captain”

“Ready the ship,” said Burt

“And where are you going Captain”

“I’m bringing hell down on them”

He went to the docks.

No speeches. No commands.

Just purpose.

The whale oil had already betrayed the town—leaking, spoiled, volatile. Burt took a lantern from a piling and hurled it into the first storehouse.

Fire raced the oil like it had been waiting.

Flames leapt from barrel to barrel, from shed to shed. Smoke poured upward, black and thick, swallowing the sky above the river. Men shouted warnings that came too late. Water thrown against oil only fed it.

Berkley's future burned first.

Ships moored nearby caught, lines snapping as hulls blackened. Nets went up in flame. The smell of oil and salt and ruin filled the air.

Pratt stood at the edge of it, stunned.

“What are you doing?” he shouted.

Burt didn't turn. “What they deserve.”

Nathan came running from the square, breathless, a bundle in his arms.

Richard.

Alive. Crying.

When Burt saw his son, the fire left him all at once.

He dropped to his knees in the ash, taking Richard into his arms with shaking hands. His rage collapsed into something smaller, more terrible—sorrow sharp enough to cut.

Behind them, Berkley burned. His Love was lying dead on the town square.

Pratt didn't argue. He didn't moralize.

He only said, "We need to go."

The Resilience slipped her lines as the town screamed and burned behind them.

They sailed before anyone could stop them.

From the river, the flames looked distant. Contained. Almost orderly.

Berkley's docks collapsed inward, taking with them the town's claim to the sea, to oil, to trade. Whatever hope had lived there burned with the storehouses.

Burt stood at the rail, Richard pressed to his chest, smoke drifting out over the water.

That was the last morning Captain Tamburlaine Burt belonged to any town.

When he finished telling it, Burt went quiet.

The room in Berkley—centuries later—felt too small for the story.

"That's where my life ended," he told Jeff and Jesse at last.

Not his existence.

His life.

Outside, the tide moved.

And the curse waited.

Chapter Thirty-Three – The Transfer of Power

The house felt smaller with him in it.

Not crowded—contained. As if the walls had leaned inward the moment Captain Tamburlaine Burt crossed the threshold, listening.

He stood near the kitchen table, hands resting lightly on the back of a chair he did not sit in. He looked older than the man Jeff had first seen in the glass at Dighton Rock. Not weaker—just closer to the truth of his years.

Jesse watched him carefully. One hand rested at her belly, protective without thinking. The other lay flat on the table, steady.

“I didn’t come to frighten you,” Burt said at last. His voice was quieter now. Worn smooth by telling the same story too many times. “I came because I felt it wake again.”

Jeff swallowed. “You mean the relic.”

Burt nodded once.

“For many years, it slept as it always has. Quiet. Satisfied.” His mouth tightened. “Then it stirred. The way it does when something aligns.”

Jesse felt it then—not fear, not pain—just a subtle pressure behind her ribs. Awareness.

“You think our baby—” Jeff began.

“—will be born on the solstice,” Burt finished. “Yes.”

“But that’s six months from now,” Jesse said, grasping for certainty. “And my due date is two weeks after the twenty-first.”

Silence settled between them. Heavy, but not hostile.

“There were others,” Burt went on. “Before you. Three, in my line. Winter solstice. Every one of them died before they ever drew breath.”

Jesse’s hand tightened at her stomach.

“Because the relic wouldn’t allow it,” Jeff said.

“Because it couldn’t,” Burt corrected gently. “There can be only one continuity at a time. One living thread. When another begins without mediation... the system corrects.”

Jesse lifted her eyes. “You mean it kills them.”

Burt didn’t look away. “I mean it prevents overlap.”

Something cold moved through Jeff’s chest. “So why Hunter? Why not anyone else born that day?”

“Hunter Burt” Captain Burt nodded in approval.

“Because it doesn’t move sideways,” Burt said. “Only forward. Only through blood. Through the same line that’s carried it since the beginning.”

Jesse exhaled slowly. “You want me to wear it.”

“Yes.”

The word landed without force. Without command.

Jeff turned to her immediately. “Jess—”

“I know,” she said softly. “I know what happened to Crowe.”

Burt nodded. “Crowe was unaligned. The relic was cold on him. It burned through what it couldn’t use.”

“No. No way,” Jeff said, shaking his head. “You can’t possibly be considering this.”

“I don’t see that we have a choice,” Jesse said. Her voice was calm—but final.

Burt opened his shirt and drew the relic free.

For a moment, it drank the light.

“When I wear it,” he said, “it’s warm. Always has been.” His fingers curled faintly, as if remembering the weight. “On you—if I’m correct—it will be neither. It will wait.”

“You’re not even sure this will work,” Jeff said.

“It’s the best chance your child has,” Burt replied—and for the first time, his voice wavered.

Jesse studied it. The simple gold bar-and-star. The dark gem that swallowed reflection.

“And you?” she asked. “What happens to you?”

Burt hesitated.

“Time,” he said finally. “Will remember me again, but I still cannot die”

Jesse held out her hand.

Jeff’s heart pounded as Burt placed the relic into her palm. It was cool. Ordinary. He watched her face for any sign of pain—anything.

Nothing.

Jesse lifted it and slipped the chain over her head. The relic settled against her chest.

No light.

No sound.

No surge.

Just weight.

Burt inhaled sharply.

It was small—barely a sound at all—but he lifted a hand to his mouth and coughed once. Dry. Surprised.

When he lowered his hand, his eyes were wet.

Jesse waited. Felt her body. Her breath. The steady, familiar presence beneath her ribs.

“I’m okay,” she said.

Jeff let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

Burt straightened, though it took him a moment longer than it should have. “This doesn’t end it,” he said. “Not yet. It only makes an ending possible.”

He turned toward the door.

“You’ll stay?” Jeff asked. “Watch over her?”

Burt paused, one hand on the knob.

“I’ll be close,” he said.

Then he stepped outside.

The door closed softly behind him.

Jesse rested one hand over the relic, then lower—over her belly. Jeff moved to her side, close enough to steady her if she needed it.

She didn't.

Outside, footsteps faded down the drive. To a waiting old black Rolls Royce the driver already opening the door for the captain, he turned and gave Jeff a reassuring. Look then climbed into the car.

And for the first time since the morning at Dighton Rock, the house felt quiet.

Chapter Thirty-Four — So Many Questions

They didn't talk about it right away.

For days after Captain Burt vanished, the relic hung against Jesse's chest like a held breath. It never warmed. Never cooled. It simply was—dark, patient, waiting. Just as he said.

The house settled back into its familiar sounds. Floorboards. Pipes. The distant hum of the river at night. But something had shifted. As if the silence now had expectations.

It was Jeff who finally said it.

“What if it means he'll live forever?”

Jesse didn't answer at first. She sat on the edge of the bed, one hand resting over the relic, the other spread protectively across her belly. Outside, the wind moved through the trees with the low, restless sound of water.

“Forever sounds like a gift,” Jeff went on. “At first.”

Jesse nodded slowly. “At first.”

They followed the thought where it led them, neither stopping it.

Will be grow to a man then not age after that?

Well, he be a child forever?

A child who never aged.

A boy who stayed while his parents grew old.

Friends who came and went.

Faces that blurred into memory while his remained unchanged.

“And the necklace,” Jesse said quietly. “How do you even do that? How do you keep something like this on a baby?”

Jeff frowned. “You don’t.”

“No,” she said. “You make the baby adapt to it.”

That was the moment the word gift fell apart.

Jeff leaned back against the headboard, staring at the ceiling. “It sounds like protection,” he said. “But it isn’t.”

“It’s not life,” Jesse said. “It’s endurance.”

Silence filled the space between them.

Then she said it—soft, but absolute.

“I don’t want him untouched by pain,” she said. “I want him untouched by the relic.”

Jeff turned his head toward her. Really looked at her.

And just like that, the question ended.

Some days, Jesse felt weaker.

Not sick. Not unwell. Just... thinner. As if something small but constant was being drawn from her. She noticed it in the way she tired more easily, the way her breath shortened when she climbed the stairs.

Once—just once—she wondered if taking the relic off for a few minutes might help.

The thought scared her enough that she never tried.

How unfair of him to do this to us!

If it left her—even briefly—would it reach for something else?

Would it feel the life beneath her ribs and adjust?

She kept it on.

They waited for Burt.

Days passed. Then weeks.

Jeff checked the places he thought the captain might return to—the river, Dighton Rock, the old property lines Jesse had marked on a map. Nothing.

His absence began to work on Jeff's mind.

"Why this house?" he asked one night. "Why did he want us here."

Jesse agreed "was this his and Maggie's house?"

"Dates don't line up I checked" Jeff said "The house was build almost a hundred years after in the early 1800's

"What happened to the people before us?" he pressed. "The sale fell through fast. Too fast."

She hesitated. "I heard something about the husband getting sick."

Jeff's jaw tightened. "Cancer?"

Did Captain Burt cause that, Jeff thought it but didn't say it out loud, he didn't want to upset Jesse any more than she already was.

Jesse didn't know. Or maybe she did, and didn't want to say it aloud.

They didn't accuse Burt of anything outright—but the questions gathered anyway, circling the same dark center.

Had he guided them here?

Had he cleared the path?

Is He dead?

Jesse's dreams changed.

Not violent. Not prophetic in the way people expect.

She dreamed of Jeff reaching for the relic.

Touching it.

Holding it too long, hurting him.

Standing still while it darkened against his skin.

She woke from these dreams with her heart racing, hands already clutching the chain at her neck.

After that, she didn't let him touch it.

Not casually. Not out of curiosity. Not even when he asked.

"I just want to feel it," he said once.

"No," she said—too quickly.

He saw the fear in her face and didn't press her further. But the distance settled in anyway. Not between them—but between Jeff and the relic.

Jesse believed she was protecting him.

She didn't yet understand how.

Late at night, when Jeff slept, Jesse studied it.

She sat at the kitchen table with a magnifying glass and a lamp, turning the relic slowly, angling it toward the light.

At first, there was nothing.

Then—faintly—structure.

Not symbols. Not writing.

Lines.

Geometric paths. Interlocking shapes. Something like circuitry buried deep within the black stone, as if it had been built rather than formed.

The realization chilled her.

This wasn't alive in the way curses were alive.

It functioned.

She lowered the lamp and closed her hand around it, breath unsteady.

She told no one.

Jeff coped the only way he knew how.

The spare room filled with paper.

Books stacked open on the floor. Notes taped to the walls. Photocopies of land deeds, solstice charts, old maps of Berkley and the river, genealogies with names circled and connected by red yarn.

He read late into the night.

Bloodlines.

Cycles.

Houses built on older foundations.

Patterns that repeated whether people noticed them or not.

He was trying to understand the thing that refused to be understood.

Jesse watched him sometimes from the doorway—her husband surrounded by fragments, convinced that if he just gathered enough of them, the shape would reveal itself.

Captain Burt did not return.

The relic stayed where it was.

And beneath Jesse's ribs, there son grew—unaware of the burden circling his life, protected for now by a choice made quietly, without witness.

For the first time in centuries, the relic waited.

Final Chapter

December 21, 2010

They'd been talking about the storm for days now, first big Nor'easter of the season.

Jeff and Jesse never said his name, but they were both thinking about him. Maybe it was just a dream. Maybe stress. But the hardware resting against Jesse's chest said otherwise.

By afternoon the storm was starting to make its presents known—a red spiral turning on the screen, reporters warning about tides and wind shear and timing. Jesse listened with half an ear. She felt fine. Heavy, yes. Slow. But she'd felt that way for weeks.

They debated the hospital more than once.

Jeff suggested they go early, just to be safe. Jesse agreed—later. After dinner. After the wind settled. The doctors were still holding to the due date: two weeks out.

The wind did not settle.

By nightfall the trees were already bending, branches scraping the house like knuckles along wood. Rain came sideways, hard enough to blur the windows. When the power went out, it did so cleanly, without warning—as if the house had been unplugged from the world.

Jeff lit candles. The small, ordinary kind. Their flames trembled but held.

Thunder rolled so close it rattled the cabinets.

Jesse stopped mid-step, one hand finding the wall.

Jeff knew before she spoke.

“No,” she said quietly. “No, not yet.”

The contraction answered her anyway.

They never made it down the driveway.

The oak fell with a sound like tearing cloth, roots lifting, trunk crashing across the exit. When Jeff reached the dispatcher, her voice was steady but distant—already stretched thin.

“We’ll get there,” she said. “As soon as we can.”

Jesse breathed through the next contraction standing at the window, forehead pressed to the glass. Lightning split the yard white—and in that brief reflection, she saw him.

Captain Burt stood where the yard met the trees.

Not solid.

Not fading.

Simply there.

Watching.

Thunder cracked again, and the image broke apart.

“Jeff,” she said.

He was already at the door, already soaked, scanning the yard, the trees, the dark. There was nothing there but rain and wind and the sound of the world coming apart.

The paramedics arrived on foot. The ambulance never made it past the flooded bend in the road. They didn’t argue. They didn’t hesitate.

There was no leaving now.

They got her as comfortable as possible, “this baby is coming” the parametric announced.

Candles burned low. The house groaned. Jesse cried out, gripping Jeff’s arm, then his hand, then the edge of the table as another contraction tore through her. Lightning flashed again, close enough to feel.

And then—

a cry.

Thin. Furious. Alive.

The storm didn’t stop—not right away. But it loosened. The wind softened. Thunder pulled back into the distance, as if something had finally been allowed to pass.

By morning, Berkley was digging out. Roads cleared slowly. The paramedics stayed the night—they hadn’t had much choice. Just minutes after they left to retrieve their ambulance and prepare transport for Jesse and Hunter—

There was a knock.

Jeff looked up.

Captain Tamburlaine Burt stood in the doorway.

He looked older now. Not aged—tired. In his hands was an ornate wooden box, its surface worn smooth by time and handling.

“Where have you been?” Jeff asked.

Burt met his eyes. “Close.”

“May I come in?”

Jeff stepped aside.

Burt crossed the threshold and held out the box. “A gift,” he said. “For the mother and father.”

Then he hesitated.

His gaze went to the baby and stayed there.

“He must wear it,” Burt said quietly. “It’s the only way.”

Jesse’s arms tightened around Hunter.

“No,” she said. Her voice did not shake. “We will not do that. Not to our child.”

“He’s healthy,” she continued. “He’s safe. And we will not sentence him to a life made of death.”

Burt’s control cracked. “I can’t continue any longer,” he said, voice rising. “You don’t understand—”

Jeff reached for the relic on the table.

“Not at his expense.”

The moment Jeff touched it, the gem flared—not warm, but violent. It tore free of his hand and slammed into his chest, burning, blinding. Light burst outward. The sound was sharp and final.

Jesse screamed—every nightmare she’d ever had flooding back at once.

When it ended, Jeff was on the floor, breath knocked from him, blood spreading across his shirt.

The gem was gone.

Only scorched gold remained—smoking, hot. Jeff grabbed it with a hiss of pain and hurled it across the room.

Burt stared at the fragments, then at Jeff—understanding arriving too late to stop it.

“The other solstice,” he whispered.

Jeff met his eyes. “You never seemed to care when I was born.”

Burt staggered backward. His shoulders found the wall. His legs failed him.

Jeff stood, unsteady, moving toward him. “Captain—”

Burt raised a hand, stopping him. He pressed the wooden box into Jeff’s hands.

Confused “It’s never happened before,” he said.

He slid down the wall slowly, folding inward, drawing himself small—the way something does when it is finally finished.

He locked eyes with Jeff and gripped his arm.

“Thank you.”

And then he was gone.

They found the door days later.

Behind a false wall in the cellar was a room Burt had built with care—journals stacked neatly, charts marked in a steady hand, a stack of letters from Maggie carefully arranged. A sextant. A compass. A spyglass.

Proof not of power.

Proof of time spent paying attention.

There was another letter, sealed with wax, addressed to Jeff. As he read it, a smile grew slowly.

“Jess!” he called. “The captain was loaded.”

That night, Jeff opened the box again.

Inside was the letter—an apology, gratitude, directions to the hidden room. And a final gift, given without condition.

Jesse stood in the doorway, Hunter asleep against her shoulder. She did not step inside.

She didn’t need to.

Jeff closed the box and set it down.

“How’s the new tattoo?” Jesse asked.

“What tattoo?” Jeff frowned.

She nodded toward his chest.

“Oh—that tattoo.”

He pulled his shirt open. The shape of the relic was perfectly branded into his skin.

“It’s raw as hell,” he admitted. “But I kinda like it.”

They curled together on the couch, Hunter between them. Jesse was quiet.

“What’s up?” Jeff asked.

“All he ever wanted,” she said softly, “was to get back to Maggie.”

They looked out the window toward the river.

In the fog, just for a moment, two figures stood together—hands entwined, faces turned toward the water.

Then the fog closed.

Gently.

The End.

About the Author

Jeff Burt began tattooing over thirty years ago in Newport, Rhode Island, where the sea, the docks, and the layered history of New England first took hold of his imagination.

A lifelong student of history and a devoted family man, Burt has always been drawn to the places where fact and legend quietly overlap. His deep connection to Narragansett Bay—its shifting tides and enduring presence—forms the living backdrop of his debut novel, *Captain Burt Against the Solstice Tide*.

What began as curiosity about his own ancestry grew into a sweeping maritime saga fueled by historical research, lived experience, and an imagination that rarely rests.

He continues to create art and tell stories inspired by the water, the past, and the strength that carries families forward.

