

Destiny's Gold

# I

## First Day Muster

*New York Harbor*

*May, 1820*

"We're going to have trouble with that one, Captain."

Captain Thorn turned to look at the man in question. Tall and broad-shouldered, he seemed healthy and strong enough. With the jaunty air of the seasoned sailor, he was tossing water barrels to one of the ship's boys, who rolled them down the ramp into the hold.

"Seems hardy enough, Mister Galsworthy. Where's the trouble lie?"

"I don't like the look of him Captain. Especially when ye came on deck this morning and he seemed right put out that the rumors were true."

Galsworthy twisted his cap in his hands as he muttered the last bit. He never liked reminding the captain that the master of the schooner *Destiny* was gossiped about in every east coast port from Maine to New York.

"The rumor that we're sailing short-handed to Cuba? Or that I really do wear a skirt under my greatcoat?"

"Yes ma'am. The, well, the skirt thing, if you don't mind my saying," Galsworthy choked out. Sometimes he thought it would all be easier if she would just pretend to be a man, the way so many seafaring women did.

"Well, he won't be the first son of a sea cook to swallow his opinions for the sake of a generous pay packet."

Jane Thorn, master of the schooner *Destiny* out of New York, found that muster week helped reveal the weaknesses in the new crew. Insubordination, laziness, ineptitude, the three deadly sins of the sailor, reared their heads quickly when recruits were put through their paces the first week aboard. Men who had looked strong and hearty on the dock, and came with good references, showed their true mettle once aboard and sent aloft

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to repair the rigging.

Under the watchful eye of Second Mate Galsworthy, the men had been roused out of their hammocks at dawn to start preparing the *Destiny* for departure. During the next seven days, they would either come together as a crew, or be put ashore to find another berth. Captain Thorn didn't much care which as long as the men who made up the final roll were competent, loyal, hardworking; and of course, willing to serve under a woman. The days spent in port preparing for the voyage gave her a chance to find out which of the new hands would be able to accept her as captain, and which would never be able to bring themselves to bow to her command.

Turning to face Galsworthy, she asked, "What is it about him that gives you pause?"

"When he got a good look at ye, he curled his lip and whispered to that fella in the red shirt over there. I suspect Seaman Fairchild has little respect for a captain who pisses settin' down. Ma'am."

Fighting to keep her laughter under control, the captain looked out over the crew hard at work stowing provisions for the coming voyage. The *Destiny* had arrived at her home berth on New York's East River in April expecting to change out the coastal crew for a new set of hands more experienced in the sailing routes between Europe and the United States. She had taken on a ballast load of logwood a week ago, and would be ready to head for the sugar plantations of Cuba as soon as she was fully crewed and her shipping orders had arrived. She was making good use of the interval to effect a number of minor repairs to the spars and rails caused by a storm that caught them as they were making a run for home earlier in the month. Squalls in the north Atlantic didn't usually cause trouble in April, but it seemed like the trade winds had moved up early this year. Jane hoped that wasn't a harbinger of things to come, or the trip up the Atlantic current on the way to St. Petersburg would be more exciting than usual.

"Well, let us see what he's got to say for himself. Bring him to my quarters."

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Jane was glad to go below and escape the turmoil of the deck. Once at sea, the *Destiny* settled into a quiet routine of watch rotations and sightings. But here in port, the sheer amount of work to be done in a very few days meant the ship was teeming with port officials, delivery men, shop runners, lawyers, insurance brokers, and all of their various assistants, clerks, and other hangers-on. Seeing to the cargo and preparing for departure was the responsibility of the first mate, but Jane found it helpful to set foot aboard from time to time as the work progressed. The chaos, though, was enough to drive a sane woman mad.

In the saloon, which served as the navigation station as well as the officers' mess, Jane found First Mate Dawkins hard at work on the ship's manifest. Bent over the table, Dawkins was running his hands through his graying hair as he scratched away at the numbers. With his long legs folded under the carved table and his hair standing on end, he reminded Jane of the gray herons who populated the marshes along the Hudson. He looked up distractedly as she closed the door and turned up the lantern that hung from a bracket above.

"Leave it for now, Mister Dawkins. I've got a seaman to interview. And better have the cash box handy. I don't think he's staying."

"Aye, ma'am. Which one is it?"

"Fairchild. I know you thought he might be worth a trial, but it seems his attitude may be lacking in proper deference to the captain. Unless that landshark Sculley can find a replacement, I am afraid we shall still be down a sailor for the coastal leg, and I had hoped to beat the weather around Hatteras."

Crawling the docks of ports large and small, landsharks scoured the coasts seeking mariners to sign aboard their clients' ships. Jane had lost many a good man to the enticing offers held out by Sculley and his ilk, and was no fan of the system. But times were changing and her family had to change with them or lose their business. Sculley had helped fill out her crew for this

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voyage, but had come up one man short in the end. As a result, Dawkins had been happy to consider the employment of seaman Fairchild when he had appeared at the *Destiny's* side the evening before, asking to see the first mate. Dawkins had taken a long, hard look at Fairchild's papers and credentials, and the letter of recommendation he carried from an old acquaintance of the captain's, before deciding to give him a chance. Like the other new recruits, Dawkins had hired him for one week to help prepare the vessel for departure. Should Fairchild prove to be a competent hand, he would sign articles for the voyage with the rest of the men at the end of the week. However, if things went as Jane suspected in the next few minutes, they would soon be short one more able seaman with little time to find a replacement.

A sharp knock on the door brought the second mate into the cabin with Fairchild hard at his heels. Jane could see the insolent laughter in the sailor's eyes as he straightened up to his full six-foot height and affected something like a half-salute in her direction. Curious to find out just how much cockiness he thought he could get away with, she waited calmly until he pulled his eyes off the floor and tried staring her down. A lot of cockiness, apparently.

"Fairchild, is it?"

"Yes sir. Ma'am. Sir."

"You may call me ma'am. If I remember correctly, you came to us with a strong letter of recommendation from Captain Jamison of the *Betsy Lee*. William and I have been friends since childhood, and he knows my preferences in men."

Fairchild had obviously interpreted her reference to "men" on a more personal level, as witnessed by the smirk that ghosted around the corners of his mouth.

"What I mean to say, is that Captain Jamison is well aware of my demands for competence and loyalty, and a positive attitude with regard to the unconventional nature of the officers aboard this vessel. Perhaps you can enlighten me as to why he might have considered you suitable to my command, Fairchild."

"I had the pleasure of serving under Captain Jamison during

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his last run from Montreal. He spoke kindly of my skills as helmsman during the voyage, and he hoped that I might be of able service aboard the *Destiny*, sir. Ma'am."

"I see. I understand from Mister Galsworthy that you had some comments this morning at muster. Perhaps we could prevail upon you to share those thoughts with us."

Appearing to consider his options, Fairchild looked around the cabin at the assembled officers. As rumor had it, the captain did indeed wear a skirt under her greatcoat, which along with her fine features and an auburn plait cascading nearly to her waist, made it clear that the master of the *Destiny* was without doubt a woman. But her erect stature and firm brow bespoke a determined captain who had the clear loyalty of the mates who were regarding Fairchild now with unconcealed hostility.

"Ma'am, I was remarking on the general seaworthiness of this fine vessel. And our great fortune to sail with her..."

"Enough! Mister Dawkins, pay the man off and see him ashore."

Jane's patience had run out. Like many others before him, Fairchild thought that a woman would countenance insubordination because she had few choices in crew. He was wrong. Her reputation as a skilled navigator and steady master in the coastal trade meant that many experienced mariners were willing to put aside their prejudices and sign on to sail aboard the *Destiny*.

Reaching into the cashbox, Dawkins extracted a week's wages for an able seaman and handed the coins to Fairchild with a sigh. The captain's penchant for fair play meant that the promise of a cash bonus for the muster week would be honored. Even for a worthless wharf rat who had worked less than a day.

"Shift yer legs, man," Galsworthy growled as he opened the cabin door.

Bending his head to pass through it, Fairchild took the opportunity to scan the captain from head to toe. With a wide grin, he winked at her, and was gone.

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## II

### Anchors Aweigh

The morning breeze cut sharply across the flats of the New Jersey marshlands to the west as Jane stood on the quarterdeck listening to Mister Dawkins direct the men. All hands had been called above at two bells of the morning watch to prepare for weighing anchor. With any luck, they would catch a northerly coming down the Hudson as they rode the morning tide out of the harbor. The bustling port in the East River had come alive early as other captains sought to make the most of the strong spring current, and Jane wanted to be well out of the channel before the larger ships began the complicated process of getting under way. At 350 tons and 130 feet on deck, the *Destiny* was not a small schooner, but she was dwarfed by many of the tall brigs and frigates that cluttered the waterfront and river. The last thing she wanted was for one of them to come crashing aboard.

“Prepare to hoist the jib!” Dawkins’ bellow cut across the sounds of the busy port. As they were planning to catch the early ebb at the front of the pack, he was pushing the men to run from task to task.

An hour earlier, the harbor pilot had come aboard and was now standing forward of the helm. The Thorns had nurtured their contacts with the Sandy Hook pilots over the years, and a message to them the evening before asking for an early departure had been met with a promise of one of their best men joining them in ample time to catch the outgoing tide. Mister Soames’ yawl had appeared in due course out of the morning mists and he had been hoisted over the side along with his latest apprentice.

“Heave short!” The foredeck crew rammed home the capstan bars and prepared to pull the *Destiny* downriver until she floated over her port bow anchor. As soon as the tide turned, they would heave the anchor and set sail on a broad reach with the wind on the starboard quarter. It was a tricky maneuver in

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tight quarters, but would give them a jump on the larger vessels if they could pull it off.

Perched on the near end of the *Destiny's* eighteen-foot jib boom, Galsworthy peered down at the anchor chain, waiting for it to draw slack.

"Heave ho!" came the call, and the men bent their backs to the work, pushing the bars around the capstan as one of the hands led them in a rousing chorus of *Maid of Amsterdam*.

"Anchors aweigh!" rang out as the flukes cleared the bottom and the *Destiny* began to move with the outgoing tide.

"Hoist the jib! Helm to windward!" The orders were coming fast as Jane watched her crew move nimbly to execute Mister Dawkins' commands. Over the past week, these seven sailors had come together under the firm hand of the chief, and Jane felt a shiver of pride and anticipation as the sails filled and they began the long tack down the harbor and out into the Atlantic.

What had started as a trying few days with the dismissal of the insufferable Fairchild had not improved as the time in port wore on. While at the dock, the crew had moved swiftly to stow casks of fresh water, sea bread, salt beef, cheese, and butter in the hold, and to load crates of fresh vegetables and fruits into the galley. The men were glad to see that they would eat well during the ten-day run to Cuba. Three days of hard toil had seen the vessel provisioned for departure earlier than anticipated, and Jane and the crew were eager to get underway.

Then, on the fourth day, she received word from Messrs. Bernard & Banks, the cargo brokers, that a special consignment of luxury textiles from the new mills in Lowell was on its way from Boston. The New England mills were turning out products to rival the best that England or France had to offer, and they hoped to expand their markets abroad. The schooner was to wait at anchor until it arrived, delaying their departure for another three days. Impatient to be off on the first long voyage entrusted to her by the family shipping firm, the young captain had used the time to check and recheck her navigation plan for the trip. She also pestered her officers with questions about the fitness of

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the crew, the status of several minor rigging repairs, the condition of the ballast and cargo, and a dozen other matters.

Eventually, an exasperated Mister Dawkins asked if there were perhaps any final arrangements to be made at the shipping office prior to their departure. Not one to ignore a hint, Jane turned her attention toward home and made use of her final days in port to visit with friends and family. The following days spent ensconced in the elegance of her uncle's home waiting for the merchant house's final direction for the cargo were a torture for Jane. While the sumptuous house was a second home for her, it now felt like a gilded cage. Long evenings in the bosom of her family were delightful, but her mind was already in the middle of the north Atlantic.

When the final orders were at last delivered to her on May the seventh, Jane was dismayed to learn that the *Destiny* would pick up a smaller load of sugar in Havana than anticipated. The trade route from Cuba to Russia and back to New York had recently opened to American vessels, and Thorn Shipping and Cargo Company was determined to win a substantial portion of the business. Sailing for the Baltic with a partially filled hold would make the trip more costly and profits leaner.

Bursting into her uncle's den waving the orders above her head, Jane demanded, "Can they do that? Just cut my load at the last hour? Surely they knew we were offering favorable terms because they would stand for the whole cargo!"

Josias Thorn, long accustomed to his outspoken niece, smiled at her from behind his desk as he reached out to take the offending papers from her.

It had taken some doing to talk Jane's father, Richard, into sending his younger daughter on this transatlantic run, but she had proven her mettle in the coastal trade. At nearly twenty-four, Jane had been working the family's fleet of sloops on the Hudson River, and up and down the eastern seaboard, for ten years. The hardy men she sailed with had taught her well, shaping her into an able sailor and captain.

With their recent purchase of four sturdy schooners, Thorn Shipping was branching out into international waters, carrying



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cargo from abroad to the growing domestic markets. When they sought captains for their new fleet, Jane had put herself forward.

"I have as much time on deck as any of those other masters," she pointed out at the company meeting. "And besides, it will be good for the firm to have one of the family in command."

Josias' brother had finally come around when the other family members, including Jane's elder sister Prudence, could see no objection to her taking on the schooner. He made only one stipulation before allowing her to spread her wings and take on the challenge of the Atlantic trade, however.

"You've got to take Galsworthy with you. Ezra will see you right, and keep you out of trouble while you learn the way. He's has had the teaching of you all these years, and it will be good to have a familiar face aboard."

"Aye, that it will," Josias agreed. "And I am thinking of sending Dawkins along as chief to show you the ropes. He's sailed that route for a dog's age and can help you keep the course."

Opening the orders, Josias now read quickly through the cargo manifest. Jane was right; those bastards Bernard & Banks had shorted them on the tonnage. The only way he could see to make up the difference and preserve the financial success of the trip was to carry sugar on their own and sell it at market price in St. Petersburg. They would have to extend their credit with the bank in Havana to do it, but he couldn't see any other solution at such short notice.

"You shall just have to buy on our behalf and do your best at the other end. It may delay you a couple of days in the Baltic, but there you have it. Sorry, Jinks, but that's the way of it sometimes."

Watching the shore slide past as they finally left the dock, Jane shifted her thoughts away from the close-knit family she was leaving behind for six months. It was time to turn her mind to the coming voyage and the need to make it a success. As she looked out over the bow from her place on the quarter deck she

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suddenly noticed an odd movement out of the corner of her eye. Waiting another few seconds to be sure, she shouted to the pilot, who was now standing at the foremast.

“Mister Soames, is that vessel adrift?”

Soames peered over the starboard rail and then bolted aft, calling to Griggs at the helm, “Hard over! Hard over! She’s heading straight for us!”

Before the *Destiny* could turn away, the wayward sloop, unmanned and unmoored, crashed into the starboard bow, sending a shudder through her and tossing men to the deck.

“Bear away! Bear away!” Back on his feet, Soames was lurching again toward the helm while Galsworthy mustered the men at the rail with spars to push off the intruder. Long minutes later, they had drifted away from danger without evident damage to the *Destiny*’s hull. The crew, though, had not fared as well, with several men complaining of bumps and bruises. One sailor, a salty fellow named Tyne off the Grand Banks fishing fleet, had been thrown against the capstan and appeared to have broken a rib or two.

“Mister Dawkins, give the order to heave to and drop anchor. We shall get this man ashore and assess the damage.” Jane knew that the captain’s first duty was to the souls aboard, and she would lose another day in harbor rather than endanger a single man. Within minutes, the bow anchors had been dropped with a splash and the small boat launched to take the injured man ashore along with Galsworthy, Soames and the apprentice.

Later that morning, the second mate returned to the *Destiny* without the wounded sailor.

“Bad news, ma’am. Doc says Tyne’s punctured a lung as well as broke a couple ‘a ribs. He’s off the muster and we’re down another man.”

Now, this was bad news indeed. Her skeleton crew of eight was reduced to six and they needed to fill at least one of the two empty berths before the schooner left port.

“Mister Dawkins, pray take Mister Galsworthy with you and see if you can scare up a man or two at the hiring hall. I should

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like to make the morning tide tomorrow, if you please.” Resigning herself to another day in New York, Jane turned and went below to go over her plotted course one more time.

The *Destiny's* voyage would start with the run down the eastern seaboard to Cuba. Mostly within a few miles of the coast, the trip would eventually take them off Cape Hatteras and out around the barrier islands where the shifting sands of the Diamond Shoals, along with the low-lying islands, made for a treacherous passage. Just six weeks earlier, the *Islington* had been blown ashore and wrecked on the cape. All aboard had survived, but it was a sobering reminder that trying to dodge the currents along the coast was a perilous business.

Adding to Jane's worry about the weather was the knowledge that the yellow fever season in Cuba was beginning to advance. Already subject to being detained for quarantine at the toll station in Elsinore, reports of a major pestilence in the West Indies would encourage the health authorities in Denmark to delay their passage into the Baltic by many weeks, and each day of delay increased the cost of crew and provisions. It was imperative that their voyage be prosecuted with all possible dispatch. Jane knew that her reputation as a successful master in the transatlantic trade was riding on her ability to make this voyage pay off handsomely, and she was determined to see it through and sail home in glory.

It had just gone eight bells on the afternoon watch when Jane climbed back onto the deck to clear her head. Looking to the west, she saw the *Destiny's* skiff headed out from shore with the sturdy second mate at the oars. A lifetime aboard the trading fleet had turned Galsworthy into a compact sailor, half a head shorter than Jane but all tattoo-covered brawn. With long, efficient strokes, he moved the small craft swiftly along. Dawkins in the stern was helping steer around the many river obstacles, shouting out in his clipped Yankee accent.

“Avast there! Ye'll have our heads off if ye' don't come to starboard and quick!”

Squinting to catch sight of the third man in the bow, Jane gasped. No, it couldn't be. The closer the boat drew, however,

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the clearer it became that the single seaman her damnable officers had managed to round up in all of the great wide city of New York, was none other than that confounded scallywag Fairchild.

### III

## Back Aboard

"Explain yourselves, gentlemen," Jane demanded.

Dawkins and Galsworthy had left the returning recruit to cool his heels on the deck and followed their captain below. Jane was careful not to display signs of disagreement among the officers in front of the crew, but she set a swift pace to her cabin once her mates had climbed back aboard the *Destiny*.

"Are you set to tell me that there were no other seamen in the whole of New York who were willing and able to sign on? And what godforsaken hole did you dig him out of? Did you think to speak with me before bringing that grinning bastard back aboard?" For the love of God, what were you thinking?"

Jane's tirade lost some of its menace given that it was delivered in a loud whisper, albeit with much gesturing and waving about of arms. Her two mates, standing awkwardly just inside the closed saloon door, exchanged glances while waiting for her to run out of steam. Eventually, Dawkins laid Fairchild's articles on the mess table and drew himself up.

"This had better be good," Jane crossed her arms and looked directly at them.

"Yes ma'am, we did consider your feelings in the matter before bringing the man," Dawkins said. "The long and short of it is that we could not find another suitable man in the hiring halls. Unless you were looking for someone with a peg leg or half an arm, there was not a hale and hearty sailor in the pitiful bunch on offer. Galsworthy and I had given up our quest and were headed back to the *Destiny* when Fairchild accosted us outside the tavern. Turns out he had not found a new berth and heard we were looking. He wondered if we would plead his case with ye. Those articles there are not signed, and won't be until ye give the say-so. Ma'am."

The silence that followed this explanation stretched uncomfortably long while Jane pondered her next move.