



# Roland – of pirates and patriots

A Novel by Timothy Freriks

## CHAPTER ONE

September, 1800, somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean

The sun was dying again, extinguished by the horizon of water in the distance. The wispy clouds above looked like the eyebrows of an old man. The clouds turned slowly from white to orange to dark gray. Then they were gone, absorbed into the night that was just starting to swallow the remaining day. The ocean was a polished table, flat and still; it was a cause for concern, of course, among the captain and crew of the merchant vessel, but Roland didn't understand that. His twelve-year-old eyes only saw the beauty of sunset, the purity of nature entering another cycle of wonder. He had come to love the ever-engaging, ever-changing canvas of the water and the movement of the schooner, rocking softly in shallow waves. Conditions had been dead calm for the last twelve days.

Worn and tired and sodden by years of having boards and seas under his feet, sails over his head, and an endless line of worn and tired and sodden men to command, Captain Charles Bigelow watched the boy standing by the rail. Roland's elbows rested on the wood, his woolen sailor's cap pulled tight over his ears, his cheeks cradled in his hands as he stared out to the west. The captain tried to remember what it felt like to be absorbed in wonder, but couldn't—it was just too long ago. Given his present predicament, he doubted the feeling would come through anyway. For two weeks the schooner had floated without a puff of wind. Nothing had guided it. Nothing had pulled it out of the inevitable force of the slow and merciless current pushing it closer and closer to unknown waters. It was like so many other recent events Bigelow could do nothing about.

He choked back tears as he looked out at the last gasp of day and thought about his only son, James, who was now lost to him, taken by his ex-wife, along with almost everything else. The only property Bigelow had kept was the warehouse on Cahir Street in the Isle of Dogs, the center of London's marine commerce.

However, as the violent events of three weeks before flashed through his mind, he wondered if that had been wise. He had not killed those men, to be sure, but he had been responsible for the events that

caused their deaths. His body tensed as he saw again the blood and heard the dizzying whirlwind of movement and screams of men dying on the docks next to his vessel. The captain tried to close his mind's ears to the gunshots and plunging knives. The sounds that the four murdered men had made as they passed from this world would haunt him forever, he knew—as would the last earthly words of his dear friend, which pulsed in his consciousness: *Take care of Roland.*

Bigelow wondered what awaited him when—if—he reached his destination. He put his thick fingers to his jaw, still square and strong after all the years that managed to soften other parts of his face, and rubbed his sandpaper beard, considering the decisions he had made.

*Was it worth the risk? Was it worth the cost?*

Bigelow examined his heart. More than the marriage had died; he was done with it all. His life in England had come to an end; America is where he belonged. Whereas England had become dirty and cruel and oppressive, America shone fresh and clean and free. If his acts came to benefit his new allegiance, then so be it.

Roland was the same age as the boy Bigelow had left so often to sail the ocean and make love to his own lover, his mistress, the sea. Bigelow hoped James would grow up to be like Roland who had strength, depth, a confidence and wisdom that didn't belong to many men even three times his age. Roland had lived only twelve years, but they were good. He had a fine man for a father; Bigelow knew it was a strong foundation. Roland would have a good future.

Bigelow's mind switched to a projection of his own future: Uncertainty generated a different kind of hollowness. Had his treachery been found out? News carriers from London had certainly arrived in Baltimore by now.

Trying to erase the sounds and sights of the wharf, Captain Bigelow removed his old black tricorne and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. He focused on the sleek 95-foot shape of his Baltimore Clipper stretching out before him. The schooner's two bare, raked masts eagerly waited to push against the bones of the hull below with a trailing wind that hadn't come yet. The *Passage* was a fine vessel. Built ten years before, it presented a beautiful vision when all sails were full and drawing. But no sails were full now except the square-rigged fore topsail, which luffed helplessly. No need. No air, and little prospects for air by the look of the deepening blue-black sky above. Following Roland's gaze, Bigelow could see his son's eyes faintly in the few remaining clouds that chased the sun down into the depths.

“Captain?”

Bigelow replaced his hat and pulled his thoughts back to the moment. “Yes?”

“I believe I see dark water in the southeast.” First mate John Robinson pointed aft.

The captain rotated his head and his body followed, his eyes squinting. He couldn't find any trace of wind on the water. “I don't see it. Maybe it was a school of fish.”

“I’m sure I did,” Robinson said as he peered into the darkness.

Bigelow turned back and smiled. “I’m sure we will find some soon. Get the sextant and try to determine our position. I’m retiring.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sure you’re right.”

As was his custom, Bigelow rose early the next morning and took the helm to watch the day come alive although with no wind it hardly seemed to matter: The rudder gave him no traction. The southwestern sail from London to the Azores had passed quickly; Bigelow had dared to hope that the weather would hold. But two days after leaving port and turning directly west to catch the equatorial current north of the doldrums, the wind had died. Bigelow had never experienced ten days of a dead calm and even though he knew the boat was being pushed at two or three knots, it was as if they had dropped anchor. The trip should be taking 45 days; now, 60 would be a gift.

He looked for Roland and found him curled up like a dog against the railing amidships, the dirty gray woolen cap under his head, dreaming about what, the captain had no idea... something beautiful, certainly. The guilt hit Bigelow again: he couldn’t help thinking that he was being punished; how he wished it could be different; how he wished it was James curled up on the deck.

Bigelow caught himself day-dreaming when the first kiss of wind touched him, gently luffing his bloused sleeves. He removed his tricorn again and raised his gaze to the main mast telltale, which fluttered at a 10-degree angle in the faint early light of dawn. Wind began to arouse itself from close starboard as the morning considered opening its eyes.

“First mate!” he called loudly, his voice cutting like a blade through the stillness of the ocean landscape, reaching through the hatch into the officer’s cabin just under the captain’s feet.

Moments later John Robinson appeared, wiping sleep from his eyes, fumbling with the brass buttons on his deep blue open-faced waistcoat while straightening his fashionable white cravat. He stumbled the rest of the way up the companionway. “Yes, sir?”

“I believe we are getting some wind,” Bigelow said, pointing ahead, northwest across amidships. “Awaken the riggers and prepare to unfurl the fore topsail and the staysail for a close beam reach. We’ll test the direction then raise the foresail if it holds.”

There was no reply.

“Mr. Robinson? Did you hear me?”

But the first mate stood frozen, his black tricorn paused halfway to his head, staring at a point far behind the vessel on the port aft-quarter. “It won’t be a beam reach, sir.”

The captain turned, following Robinson’s gaze, and gasped. “Dear God.”