

## CHAPTER ONE

**N**o sooner than folks thought winter had sighed her last hoary breath, she huffed right back in—landing a blow more riotous, more ruinous than a howling tempest.

Fourteen-year-old Rebecca rose early on that bitter Boston morning in March of 1832. It wasn't that she had to worry one of her sisters or her brother would budge ahead of her to run an errand to the upholsterer's shop on Dock Square. None of them champed at the bit to face the angry storm that churned off New England's coastline. They were content to remain cocooned in their quilts.

Mama slipped a copper token into a sack of worsted wool drapery she had finished hemming the night before. She winked at her youngest daughter and whispered, "Spend it on yourself, but say nothing about it to William or your sisters."

Rebecca nodded but the coin wouldn't be the only secret she'd be keeping. Nothing would deter her. Not frozen rain dinging her cheeks or a hostile north wind knifing through her woolen coat and layered garments all the way to the bone. Not even consequences for disobeying Mama's strict orders to avoid lower Ann Street's squalor. From the first time she tagged along with Papa to that notorious district, she had borne witness to his charity toward destitute souls. He ingrained in her the notion that every life was precious, regardless of station. During her sea-captain papa's long absences, she had begun to follow in his footsteps, extending hope to indigent mothers of every kind and color and to the tykes that clung to their tattered skirts. It mattered, not, whether Mama, or anyone else, approved.

A drunken sailor vomited epithets and vulgarities at snowflakes lapping his face as Rebecca reached lower Ann Street. She imagined he had just stumbled—or been tossed—out of one of many brothels in the neighborhood. As she approached, he leaned against the post of a broken gaslamp and leered at her. She angled across the street, only to have him let out a loud whistle and thrust his pelvis at her like an eager cur.

At the next corner, a ring of street-urchins malingered in front of a jilt shop, begging for alms. A passerby, presumably a merchant on his way to open his Faneuil Market shop, stopped to offer a few pennies. One boy snatched the man's coin purse and tossed it to a second boy who dodged into a tavern. The pickpocket's mark slipped and tumbled on the slick sidewalk, spoiling any chance he might have had at recovering his purse.

Rebecca clutched her bundle closer and walked more briskly toward Dock Square. Papa taught her not only to be charitable, but to be careful. He cautioned, wherever need abounded, desperation lurked.

After dropping off Mama's piecework, she visited several merchants who were opening their shops in nearby Faneuil Market. They gave her donations of combs, soaps, second-hand clothes and boots, old blankets, and morsels of food. She had made rounds of the market so many times with Papa that she learned his plea by heart—

*My soul is tortured by the sight of them. I find it impossible to turn a deaf ear to those childish voices, their harsh discords make every nerve in my body shudder with pity.*

She repeated Papa's words with compassion and humility on that day, just as he had taught her, and the merchants did not disappoint. When her rounds of the market were finished, she carried her bounty through frigid lower Ann Street, leading a parade of children and their mothers to an alley near North Square. She huddled the children close to her in a passageway between two tall buildings, sheltering them from the elements. She did not balk at their smudged faces, grimy hands, sour breath, or threadbare, musty clothing. She read nursery rhymes as their mothers rummaged through sacks filled with necessities she had gathered.

Little Ryan nestled into her lap and clutched her thumb as she read. The boy's chubby hand reminded her of Samuel, her eighteen-month-old brother who succumbed to measles and joined the choir of angels three years prior. She paused her reading and pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth, intent on holding it there until the memory dissolved. But that memory was not alone.

Another memory, as hazy as a marine fog, slipped through a seam in her mind—an earlier brother also named Samuel. Dark voices and somber sounds. Rebecca shuddered. Mama's woeful moans and Papa's muted groan. Thud, thump—clods of loamy soil plopped atop a Lilliputian pine box that had been lowered with ropes to the bottom of a shadowy hole, dug in dank earth. Her older sisters had recounted stories of laying flowers in Copps Hill Burying Ground at an infant's grave—another Samuel from a time before Rebecca understood that death had teeth, and it bit—some to kill, others to wound. Both interred Samuels bore Papa's Christian name.

Rebecca found Ryan's mother when she finished reading. She whispered encouragement in the woman's ear and pressed Mama's copper coin into her hands.

Before slogging home, Rebecca stopped at the dock where she had bid Papa goodbye as he departed on his most recent voyage. She stood in silence, braced against a swirl of glacial onshore gusts, and anchored to the very spot where she had lingered as his ship disappeared into the horizon. Brackish wafts filled her nostrils as she gazed past billows of iron-grey ocean that heaved and fell, heaved and fell, all the way to a black wall where everything became the same, or perhaps nothing at all.

Alabaster-breasted gulls broadcast incessant shrills, hovering and swooping near shore before soaring off like stringless kites—their dark wingtips conflating with edges of mounting storm clouds. She wished the gulls could pierce the veil beyond which she could not see and spirit Papa home.

Her hopes bore fruit later on that stormy March day. After she returned from her errand on Dock Square, Captain Samuel Holliday docked his crippled ship at Aspinwall's mast yard—a quarter mile from the Holliday family home, a brick cottage behind Ellis Cook's upper Ann Street grocery.

The fierce storm that was hammering the coast of late had forced Papa's schooner leagues off course on the return voyage from Europe. The ship's masthead sustained damage. During the last few days of sailing, the crew feared they might not make it back to Boston Harbor. Rebecca imagined it was Papa's aplomb and steady hand that had disquieted their alarm.

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Papa patted Rebecca's head the next morning after breakfast. He could make her troubles fade with a hearty laugh. She imagined that by speaking a single word he often gentled the storms that roiled and tossed about his sturdy wooden ship.

"Come," Papa said. "Off to Atwood's for oysters. Your mother has promised to make stew for supper. And on the way, I must check on Mr. Aspinwall's repairs."

Eight-year-old William asked if he could go see Papa's ship.

Mama didn't so much as peek away from the pot she was tending over the kitchen fire. "Not you, William. You have firewood to bring in or we shall all freeze to death."

Papa added, "No one goes aboard except crew until the mast is repaired."

Mama called out to Papa as he led their youngest daughter outside. "You shall be avoiding lower Ann Street on your way to Atwood's."

"She shall be safe enough walking with me," he answered.

A curtain of downy snowflakes drifted across their path and pillowed their footsteps. The biting cold no longer mattered to Rebecca as she basked in Papa's presence. Like a faithful pup, she followed him anywhere he would take her when he returned from endless voyages across the churning seas between Boston and Europe.

Rebecca waited on the wharf at Aspinwall's mast yard while Papa went aboard his ship to talk with the repair crew. Soon after he boarded, rows of frothy swells rocked his sleek schooner. It strained against its moorings. A flag, whipped by the wind, drew her gaze to the masthead and to a man who hugged the main pillar as it swayed to and fro. She ducked her head as a salty blast stung her eyes.

In the next instant, the man shouted from the upper reaches, "Watch out below!"

She looked up. The masthead had shivered from the mainmast. Its girth and length grew more menacing as it plunged toward the deck. Her focus flicked from Papa to the freefalling timber, from the timber to Papa, and again to the timber.

A scream stalled in her throat.

A resounding thud. Screeching gulls. Panicked groans. Yelps and yowls erupted on the ship's deck. An outburst of seamen's words, the kind that raised Mama's hackles anytime Papa used them. Rebecca strained to pick out Papa's timbre in the chorus of panic.

No cacophony of sounds could hide his voice from her. Not the chaos of Dock Square, the bedlam of merchant seamen loading and offloading cargo on the docks, nor the ruckus of whalers or fishermen emptying their holds. During Papa's long sea voyages, she often listened for him in thunderclaps, pelting rain, and howling gales. In her nightly dreams, she peered into blackness, in search of him.

A seeming eternity passed before a large man started down the gangway.

A wiry workman angled past him and began running the instant his feet touched the wood-planked wharf.

The large man continued down the gangway and stopped in front of her.

She peered around him. "I'm waiting for Papa."

"It's nasty out here," he said. "Let's go into the office and wait by the stove." His hollow eyes and grim tone struck panic in the deepest corners of her soul. Her mind teemed with questions her tongue dreaded asking.

The man offered his hand. She clung to it as she glanced over her shoulder, craning her neck to keep Papa's ship in sight. Several men appeared at the top of the gangway. Each held an edge or corner of a patchwork quilt—a makeshift litter. An arm dangled at one side. A boot hung over the end. Smudges of blood on a sailor's coat.

She called out, "Papa?"

A knot tightened in Rebecca's stomach. She flashed hot and cold. The edges of her mind caved like a molten candle folding in on itself and extinguishing its flame. Her legs gave way. She tumbled to the ground.

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After Rebecca awoke on a cot in Mr. Aspinwall's office, she rose and followed one of Papa's friends outside—her jaw clenched. The horrific scene took root in her memory. She plodded beside the man, until they arrived at the Holliday family home.

On hearing the grim news of Papa's accident, Mama and her eldest, Susanna, scrambled through gritty slush and muck to the three-story, weathered boarding house on Charter Street where the widows Pearson and Brydia—midwives both—tended to him. Men from the ship had rushed him there straight from Aspinwall's.

Rebecca crouched in a dark corner of the upper Ann Street cottage, her knees drawn to her chest. She would not believe Papa could be gone. Sisters Sarah and Dorcas huddled a few feet away, sobbing on a settee Papa had scavenged from an abandoned brig. William clung to Dorcas's elbow, his gaze never wandering from Rebecca, his favorite sister.

Susanna returned within an hour. Her voice pitched as she gave the news, "Papa is dead."

William leapt from the settee and flung himself into Rebecca's arms. She stiffened. The room teetered. Images reeled in her mind—the cascading masthead, the bloody coat, the arm dangling, the boot.

From that dreadful day, March 29, 1832, high places filled her with foreboding.

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Papa had not been long in the ground before the family coffers ran almost dry and the cupboards approached empty. Rebecca could no longer afford the time to make rounds of lower Ann Street, offering relief to destitute families and entertaining the children. She and her three sisters worked long hours alongside Mama, competing for pennies against a host of other women in the same predicament.

Piecework wages that Mama and her daughters earned from sewing draperies, slipcovers, and the like were scarcely enough to make ends meet. The upholsterer on Dock Square who employed them aggravated their poverty by dithering when wages came due. Even when they succeeded in collecting whatever sums were owed them, Susanna had nothing to share of her part. She and her carpenter apprentice husband struggled to keep their own household with a young daughter and infant son. But the other three girls turned over all their wages to Mama.

William struggled to find any work at all, and Mama would not hear of him begging for alms on street corners. When he did so behind her back, he slipped the pittance he collected into the tin cup that held the family's meager savings. His cheeks warmed any time Mama announced her previous counting must have been wrong.

Hunger would have compounded their misery, were it not for the generous widow Cook, who took charge of the grocery business after her husband's sudden death.

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Mama carried an armful of root vegetables and a bag of flour into the cottage a year after Papa's death. She ignored the girls who sat in front of the hearth, fast about their sewing. She spread out the meager rations Mrs. Cook had doled out to her on the rough-hewn table, gripped the back of an idle chair, and released a soft quavering moan.

Sarah, wispy at almost eighteen, and hardy Dorcas, a year younger, dropped their work and rushed to Mama's side. Rebecca kept her head down and continued sewing.

Mama straightened and muttered, "We shall persevere."

"Yes," Dorcas said. "We surely shall."

Rebecca brought herself to her feet and joined them. "What do you mean?" she asked.

“Mrs. Cook,” Mama answered. “She has found a new husband and is giving up the grocery. So, empty stomachs will not be our only problem. Anyone who purchases the grocery will become our landlord and will surely raise our rent. What shall we do for a roof over our heads? We cannot afford to pay any increase.”

Dorcas elbowed Rebecca as she reassured the others, “Then we must seek more work and sew all the faster.”

Rebecca sat in bed later that evening, reading by candlelight. Her throat pinched as she sounded out each word in her mind. She and her sisters never enjoyed the privilege of formal schooling, though Papa taught them the rudiments of reading whenever he was home from sea, just as his father had done with him back in his native England. The volumes of *The History of Tom Jones a Foundling* were Papa’s prized possessions. He allowed his daughters to begin reading the first volume when they were twelve years old, the later ones were reserved for a time when they were more mature. Rebecca had hoped to read to him from it the night he .... Echoes of grief traced the contour of her face, depositing tangy drips at the corners of her mouth. She wanted to prove how earnestly she had practiced while he was away.

Her chin quivered as she inhaled the earthy aroma of the book’s leather binding. She craved Papa’s strong arms, his baritone notes, and mischievous laugh. She longed for the scent of sea that clung to his wool coat. Memories which once warmed her like embers aglow on the hearth had become daggers slashing at her heart.

A crack of thunder touched off a storm in her mind. Rogue memories rained down in torrents. Falling mastheads, sailors scurrying past, their boots red as blood. William. She awakened with a start, panting, gasping. Why was William in her dream? She scanned the room.

The others were asleep.

As her heart and mind settled, her thoughts lit on nine-year-old William, on whom had fallen the responsibility of carrying the Holliday name into posterity. William had taken on work at Aspinwall’s dock for the few pennies a day paid to urchin boys who toiled at the meanest tasks. Rebecca begged him to find employment elsewhere, fearing calamity might befall him.

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William learned from his first day on the docks to strap muslin bands around the knuckles of both hands before scraping barnacles off the hull of a ship. He paused on a chilly November day to tighten the knot on his left hand—biting down with his teeth on one end of the strap and gripping the other end with his right hand.

A tall, weathered-faced stranger approached.

“Hello,” the man said. “Looks like rough work.”

A crisp onshore gust nipped William’s cheek. “Not as rough as those seas get.” He continued scraping.

“That’s some excitement for a boy your age, sailing across a vast ocean. How old are you?”

“Almost twelve.”

“That so?” the stranger said. “I was about your age when I first went to sea.”

William let the barnacles be and wiped his hands on a coarse rag. “I’ve not been. But Papa had.”

“Your papa’s a sailor?”

“He was a captain, but a masthead fell and killed him. Over a year ago, right on this wharf.”

The stranger removed his hat. “I’m truly sorry. My name is Father Taylor. Men around here call me the Mariners’ Apostle. You may have heard of me.”

“Heard of you? Everyone who works these docks knows who you are. You’re from that new church, the Seamen’s Bethel. I ain’t much for religion, anymore, but Mama is. She’s staunch Baptist.”

“I would like to offer my assistance to your family. Where can I find your mother?”

“Don’t know if she’d be interested, but you can try. We live in a cottage on upper Ann Street behind Mr. Cook’s old grocery. The grocery’s not there anymore.” William turned back to his work.

Later that afternoon, Rebecca answered a rap on the cottage door to find Father Taylor at the stoop. After he introduced himself, she asked, “Are you from the new brick church down on North Square?”

“Yes.”

“I watched your church being built,” she said. “Part way, I mean. I stopped when men started working on the tower. I got dizzy watching them.”

Father Taylor’s gabled church took up half of a city block near the Black Sea district of lower Ann Street. It was seven bays deep and four bays across, with a one-and-a-half story center tower, all atop a raised basement.

“Invite the parson in,” Mama called out from inside the cottage. “We cannot afford to heat the whole out of doors.”

Father Taylor stepped inside and found Mama and her girls wrapped in shawls and blankets as they worked. Only a remnant of ash remained in the hearth. He thought better of shedding his coat.

Mama introduced her daughters and asked, “What can a brood of destitute girls do for you? We are scratching to survive.”

“I should be the one offering help,” Father Taylor replied,

“We are not too proud to accept charity.” Mama stiffened. “Even from a Methodist.”

“If you have children at your church,” Rebecca said, “I can read to them in return for your kindness. It would be good practice for me.”

“Yes, miss. In fact, Mother Taylor and I have our own litter of sea pups. They love reading.” He looked to Mama for approval.

“So long as she keeps up with her share of the sewing and you do not lead her astray into your Methodist persuasion.” Mama added, “We are staunch Baptists.”

Rebecca took Father Taylor's acceptance of her offer as a sign. Maybe, help did come from on high. She could return to lower Ann Street and the destitute children and their mothers who struggled there to survive. In turn for her service, God would surely reward her family and spare them from further affliction.

Rebecca traded her nighttime reading for afternoon story times with the children at the Seamen's Bethel. Mornings continued to find her in a sewing circle with her sisters and Mama. Piecework not finished during the day was carried over into the night, sometimes into the early morning hours, under candlelight. Every noon time Mama took great care inspecting and counting Rebecca's work before she left for the Seamen's Bethel. Then she would shake her head and wave her daughter out the door. Rebecca endured her mother's scrutiny. All were aware that many hands make light work, but they could not deny Father Taylor's aid had been a godsend.

As word of Rebecca's work at the Bethel spread, many of the mothers and urchins from lower Ann Street followed her there. After a few months, Father Taylor recruited her to solicit alms from local merchants to finance the increased costs of serving growing numbers of sailors' families. To prevent her new responsibilities at the Bethel from taking away time from her sewing duties, she rose another hour earlier each morning and stitched at a fevered pitch until the others woke. Any sleep she might be giving up would likely cut short the night terrors which had begun to visit her with increasing frequency.