

# ***SEA CUTTER***

Book I

The Chronicles of  
Nathaniel Childe



Timothy Davis



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*For My Wife ~ Whose Love Made It Possible*

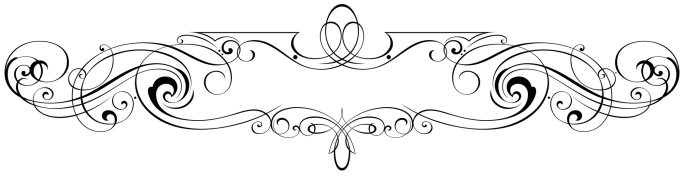
*For all girls and boys who still long for  
Adventure and love to read.*

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 Timothy Davis 



## CHAPTER ONE

# Shipwreck

I kicked the plaque Mother had hung on the church wall.

Sacred  
To the Memory  
Of the Late  
Captain Jonathan Childe  
Of the Ship *Christopher*  
Who in Battle with the Storm  
Went Down with His Ship  
August 3, 1769  
This Tablet  
Is Erected to his Memory  
By His Son and His Widow



“He’s not dead!” I yelled.

“Please, Nathaniel. It’s been two years. He’s not coming back,” Mother begged.

“How can you give up on him?”

She put her hand on my shoulder, but I shook it off and ran from the church. When the world had said Father was dead, I’d defied it, but now Mother had given up hope.

“Whoa! Watch where you’re going, lad.”

A horse-drawn fish wagon rattled past on the cobblestones. The dying fish stared at me with wide, surprised eyes. A sob caught in my throat as I stumbled off the road, slamming into the church’s elm tree like a man being dashed against the mast of his ship in a storm.

“Lost in a storm at sea,” Wayland, my father’s first mate, had said. He was my father’s best friend—my best friend too.

“He stayed on his ship to the end,” he’d told me. “He was cutting through the lines tangled around the last lifeboat. He wanted to save James Talbot and Robert Long.”

“But you didn’t see him go under?” I’d pleaded.

“A towering wave broke over the ship. ’Twas so big it snapped the mast off with a great crack, and it swept all three off the deck. The ship sank fast, the

lifeboat still tangled. I'm sorry, Nat. Remember your father acted nobly staying on his ship to save the last of his crew."

Mother found me sitting under the gnarled old elm. I wouldn't look at her. She sat down beside me anyway and stroked my hair while humming a song we all used to sing together. Sometimes when I was the angriest with Mother was when I needed her the most. I turned and cradled my head against her heart, clinging to her as she rocked me gently.

"Let's go home," she said after a while. "I need your help."

"With what?" We walked along the cobblestone road.

"A problem many eleven-year-old boys might not understand, but you're smarter than most boys, and we have to be smart together to keep our home. We're almost out of money."

"But the trading company owes us thousands of pounds."

"They've figured out a way not to pay it."

A bomb went off in my head. "We'll make them pay!"

Three red-coated British soldiers glanced over in surprise and laughed.

Mother lowered her head. "We'll have to make our



own money.”

We were passing the docks. The masts of great whaling and merchant ships towered above us, while the smell of salt and tar filled my nostrils. Greedy seagulls soared everywhere, filling the air with their harsh “caw-caw-caw.”

“I could go to sea. I’m old enough to work as a cabin boy.”

She swayed and sank on her knees.

“Mother! What’s the matter?” I held her shoulders so she wouldn’t fall to the ground.

She took my hand in both of hers. “Nathaniel, promise me you’ll never go to sea.”

“But I want to be a ship’s captain, like Father.”

“I’ve lost too much to the sea.” Her face was deadly pale. “Promise me. Promise me, Nat.”

“I promise,” I said, stunned by her fervor.

“Promise me. Promise!” she whispered again.

“I promise, Mother. I promise. I promise.”

Mother took a deep breath and stood. “Nat, do you know what Father would say if he were here?” We walked on. “He’d say, ‘Son, this is no time to be talking of going to sea. Mother needs a man around the house. Stick by her, Nat. Take care of her. Make me proud of you.’”

I nodded, puffing out my chest and walking taller



as we passed a chandlery overflowing with ship's tackle waiting to be repaired. I stopped, staring at the pile.

"I know. We'll open a chandlery in our home, like Grandfather. He taught me to use the furnace and the anvil and—and all sorts of things."

She cocked her head, studying the mound of broken tackle. "And I grew up with it. It's hard work, though."

"I'm big and strong for my age, and good with my hands."

"You are. Do you think you could do it?"

We reached our heavy, red-painted door. Ambition swelled my heart.

"Mother, you can count on me. I'm going to make sure you have everything you need. Everything you would've had if.... Everything you would've had if Father were still here."

\* \* \*

We opened the chandlery, hired a bellows boy, and I threw myself into the work. Mother kept the books and sold supplies. By twelve, I was doing as much work as a grown man.

Yet even though we worked hard, we weren't making money.

One night, I studied the account books and found



out why. Many of our customers had cheated Mother. I couldn't believe it. Cheating a poor widow.

*I guess I should've learned from the trading company.* My lip curled into a sneer.

Chief among the cheaters was Captain Crawford, who, by my reckoning, had swindled us out of seventy-six pounds.

Our house shook the next morning as his huge hand slammed the door when he came to collect his astrolabe, which I'd stayed awake repairing until the sun rose.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, starting to pick it up. "Looks better than new."

I grabbed the astrolabe too.

"Don't pull," I warned. "It will ruin the repair. You can have it when you pay the seventy-six pounds you tricked us out of."

Crawford turned red and bristled. "I'm used to dealing with your mother about payment."

"You'll be dealing with me from now on, and it's going to be cash on the barrelhead."

"You're a mere—"

"Seventy-six pounds, or no astrolabe."

Crawford growled a curse but pulled out his purse and paid.

"See if I ever come back here," he snapped, before

slamming the door even harder.

But he did come back in three days when his chronometer stopped working and he needed it repaired at once.

So it went with our other customers. I became known as a nasty person to deal with, but the sailors brought me their broken tackle anyway because I did a superb job. Our chandlery prospered, but Mother wasn't happy with my tough attitude.

"Nat, can't we run the chandlery without being so hard on people all the time?"

"Sure, we could just let everybody walk all over us." I pounded out a twist in a whaling harpoon. "Have you forgotten what the trading company did to us? Have you forgotten how our customers cheated us? That's what the world is like. If you're soft, they'll take everything you have."

"But I'm worried about you. People in town say you're mean."

"Let them say what they want! No one gave us a hand when Father died. To blazes with what they think."

"Wayland's been helping us," Mother faltered.

Wayland, at sea for the last two years, sent us money whenever he could.

"He's different," I mumbled.



“Nat, for the peace of your own soul—”

I threw down my hammer. “You think I run the shop wrong? Fine. I’ll hire out on a ship and get out of your way.”

Mother paled. “No, Nat. You promised.” She clutched my hand, but I yanked it away.

“I am. I’m going to the docks right now to sign on.” I stalked out of the room.

“Nat! Don’t!”

I slammed the door.

I didn’t intend on going to sea, for I was still determined to protect Mother, but it hurt when she found fault. I lashed out, stopping her censure however I could. Instead of going to the docks, I crept below the window and listened to her cry.

“Dear Lord, don’t let Nat go to sea,” she prayed between sobs. “When it seemed we couldn’t have a child, you brought him to us. Please don’t take him away from me.”

I crept away, feeling guilty about making her cry. I wondered what she meant about not being able to have a child, but since I’d heard it while eavesdropping, I couldn’t ask her.

After that, Mother let me do things my own way.

Two months later, a letter arrived from Maine. Aunt Mary, Mother’s sister, was quite sick. Uncle

William asked if Mother could come help nurse her.

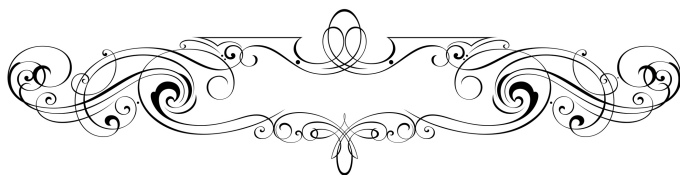
Mother wanted to go, and she planned to close the chandlery for a while. I argued that we'd lose steady customers if we closed, and I persuaded her to let me stay behind and run the chandlery myself.

“That way you can stay as long as Aunt Mary needs you. If I stay here, I can even send you money for medicines. Go help Aunt Mary. I'll be fine.”

Nothing could equal the satisfaction of the grateful hug she gave me the day she left. I'd succeeded in becoming the one she could count on.

Her rattling coach rolled away while she cried and waved to me as if she'd never see me again. I thought it better to act manly, so I waved a few times and then strolled away with my hands in my pockets even before the coach was out of sight.

If I'd known the peril that awaited me, I never would've said farewell so casually.



## CHAPTER TWO

# The Sea Chest

Living by myself was lonelier than I'd expected.

The nights hit me hardest. I tossed and turned through nightmares about Father. He clung to a beam while the sea washed him to an unknown island. He called, "Nat! Nat! Nat!" while Mother and I stood at his plaque, saying, "He's dead. He's dead. He's dead."

"No! He's not!" I woke at my own voice.

I struggled through work at the chandlery. Customers came, but they weren't friendly, since I hadn't been running the chandlery in a friendly way.

Sundays I didn't go to church. Let Captain Crawford and the other cheaters sing their Psalms. I hated standing near them while they pretended to be so pious, and it confused me to hear the pastor talk about God's

goodness with Father's death plaque hanging on the wall.

One Sunday night, I determined to stay awake to avoid the nightmares. I was sitting at the table, staring at the yellow flame of a candle, when I heard a horse and wagon clatter to our door and the *thunk* of something heavy hitting the ground.

A knock, and a cheerful voice bellowed, "Anybody home?"

I threw open the door. "Wayland!"

He gathered me in a bear hug, his bushy gray beard tickling my face as he gave me a laughing kiss on the top of my head. His twinkling blue eyes looked me up and down, every line of his face molded in a smile.

"You've grown up, young man."

"I'm thirteen now," I answered, grinning like I was still eleven.

"So you are. So you are. Now, lad, where's your mother? It's a wonder she can sleep through all this ruckus."

"She's in Maine nursing Aunt Mary."

He scratched the side of his great hooked nose. "Now what'll I do?" I heard him mutter.

"Are you here to stay for a while?" I asked, a plea in my voice.

"The ship I was on, the *Southern Lady*, sails



tomorrow, but I've signed off."

"Oh! Great!"

His brow furrowed. "Nat, I brought something with me. I planned to show it to your mother before I showed it to you, because...because I thought it might wake painful memories for you."

"What is it?"

"'Tis your father's sea chest, addressed to your mother and you."

My stomach tightened. "How's that possible?"

"It was sent before the shipwreck. Then somehow it got lost over these past four years."

"From Father..." I faltered.

"Nat. Are you going to be all right?" He clutched my shoulder, searching my eyes.

I nodded. "Let's get it."

It took both of us to drag the sea chest into the house because it wasn't made of wood, but steel. Father had always kept it polished, but now rust pitted the surface. On the top was a brass plaque that read:

To Be Delivered to  
Jennifer and Nathaniel Childe of New Bedford  
Sent by Captain Jonathan Childe  
Of the Good Ship *Christopher*  
In care of Captain Peter Croop



Of the Good Ship *Majesty*  
On this 26th Day of June  
In the Year of Our Lord 1769

Father had always sent us sea chests full of gifts, although he'd never sent his own steel trunk before. They contained exotic fabrics for my mother to sew into dresses, foreign toys and curiosities for me, and always a long letter about his voyages.

We enjoyed the letters best. We'd read them over and over by the fire until his ship put into port again.

How merry we were when word came that the *Christopher* was putting into port! We'd run to the docks. As soon as Father saw Mother he'd sweep her off her feet with a big hug and kiss, and then hoist me onto his shoulders and we'd talk and laugh all the way home....

I noticed Wayland's anxious gaze.

I spoke as evenly as I could. "I've heard of the *Majesty*. Didn't she go down about the same time as Father's ship?"

"Yes. 'Twas due in Boston in April, but she sank in the same storm that took the *Christopher*. The sea chest must not have been on board."

"Where did you find it?"

"On the *Southern Lady*. 'Twas quite odd. We found



it on the deck one morning. No one knew where it came from. I told the captain I knew you and offered to bring it to you.”

“Look at these scratches around the lock. Somebody’s tried to break into it.”

“Which makes me wonder if the trunk wasn’t lost at all, but stolen.”

A burning rage ignited. “Who would do that?”

“I don’t know, but he must’ve mashed his best tools trying to break into it.”

We both knew the strength of the steel.

“I’ll get the key.”

I ran to Mother’s room and grabbed the key from her jewelry box. We threw back the lid and stared in shock.

“Rags.” I said, my stomach falling. “Why would he send us rags?”

“Maybe he packed something else further down.”

I plunged my hands through the rags and felt something hard. I pulled out a knife in a sheath, the hilt elaborately decorated. I drew the blade to reveal two sharp edges.

“It’s a dagger,” I said.

“Looks like a small sword.”

“It does.” I swung the dagger around in the air, pretending to be a knight from the old stories.

“Be careful with that,” Wayland warned, backing

away. “It looks sharp enough to cut through steel.”

“Really?” I swung the dagger down on the steel chest.

“Nat!” We both dove out of the way as the dagger bounced high into the air, then plunged with a deadly *thunk* into the wooden floor.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, hanging my head. “Did I ruin the dagger?”

He pulled it from the floor. “I don’t see a scratch, but look at the chest.”

A nick scarred the steel.

Reverently, he returned the dagger to me. “This is a lethal weapon.”

“I’ll be more cautious with it,” I vowed, sheathing and carefully laying it on the table. “What else is in here?”

I dug into the chest again and pulled out a red leather box about as big as Wayland’s fist. Father had written on the top, “For My Dearest Wife.”

I looked at the keyhole and knew exactly where the key lay—in a locket Mother wore around her neck.

“We can break this box open with my dagger.”

Wayland put his hand over the box, shaking his head. “This box is for your mother.”

“But—”

He looked me in the eye with a sternness I knew



wouldn't waver.

"You're right." I gulped. "Let's look for more."

We pulled out rags and found a package bound in oiled skin with "For Nathaniel" inked on it. I unwrapped the oilskin. It was an old copy of Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

"Why'd he send me this?"

He scratched his head. "'Tis a good almanac."

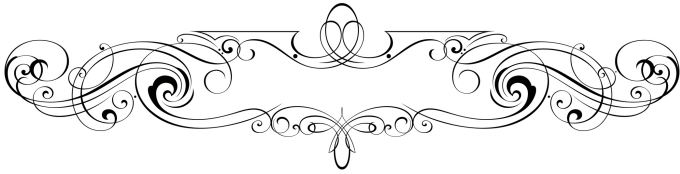
"That still doesn't make sense."

"See if there's anything inside it."

I opened the almanac and a folded paper fluttered out of the leaves, falling to the floor.

"A letter. A letter to Mother and me."

I opened the sheet with shaking hands, but the letter wasn't what I'd expected. Nor did I have any idea about the strange and dangerous adventure it would start.



## CHAPTER THREE

# The Map

Dearest Jennie,

I am sorry this letter is so brief, but I write in haste before the *Majesty* sails. I have decided to make a voyage for great treasure. I'll explain it all to you when I return, but in the meantime, keep this trip a secret.

If I don't return, tell Nathaniel to play the game that used to make me laugh so hard. He will find a message. All of my love to you and my brave son.

Love, Jonathan

“Father says that if he doesn't return, I should play a game to find a message.”



“What game?”

“How should I know? We played a hundred games. Maybe we’ll find a clue if we finish with the chest.”

We pulled out every rag but found nothing else. I kicked the trunk.

Wayland looked at me keenly. “They say walking helps you think. Would you care to come take a midnight look at the *Sea Cutter*?”

I brightened, for I loved going aboard Wayland’s sloop. He’d bought the sailboat as an old wreck, but he’d repaired it over the years so now everything shone better than new. She cut through the waves like a knife, and that’s why he called her the *Sea Cutter*.

“What shall we do with these gifts and letter?” I asked.

“Let’s keep them safe with us.”

We lit a lantern and I bolted the iron lock on our door. Our boots made a loud *clip-clop* on the empty cobblestone streets, while our lantern threw only a faint glow.

Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw something move in the shadows. I clutched Wayland’s arm. “What was that?”

He stopped, searching the shadows. “I don’t see anything.”

We kept a good watch the rest of the way but saw

nothing. Soon we reached the *Sea Cutter*'s slip. The lantern shone on the mellow honey color of the polished oak deck and gleamed against the whiteness of the glossy hull. Her single mast towered toward the glowing stars.

We unlocked the hatch, climbed down the companionway, and lit a lantern hanging from the ceiling. It showed a captain's quarters with a desk for calculating navigation and a hammock.

We went through a door into the galley where Wayland had cooked me many a fine meal, then went further forward into a small cabin in the bow where the crew berthed. He lifted a hatch in the floor between the two hammocks and peered into the hold where he stored the sails.

He sniffed.

"It smells as if the sails stayed dry."

A hatch in the roof of the crew's cabin gave a man a way to lift himself quickly to the deck. He opened it to let in the cool night air.

"How about a cup of coffee?" he asked as he went back into the galley and lit his kerosene stove. He took a bag of coffee beans from the shelf, ground them, and brewed us a pot of strong coffee. Then we sipped it from steaming cups while Wayland searched through the almanac.



“Here’s something,” he said.

“Let me see.” I leaped to his side.

He pointed at one of the little sayings Franklin liked to put in his almanac: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

A strong underline ran beneath, with two strokes under the word “play.”

“There it is again. ‘Play.’ But how in the world am I supposed to know what game to play?”

Wayland dragged his hand down his face in thought, drawing his mouth into a deep frown.

I burst out laughing.

“What? What’d I do?”

“For a moment you looked like Old Bill Hicker.”

“Old Bill Hicker.” He chuckled. “I saw him today, still pushing his cart selling limes. Looks as grouchy as ever.”

“His face is so sour it looks like he sucks on his own limes. All puckered, like this.” I scrunched my face and he laughed. “When we’d buy limes from him, I’d always take a suck on one and then walk around the house with my face puckered, pretending to push a wagon. It made Father laugh ’til he was gasping for breath.”

“Sounds fun.”

“We’d play a game with the lime juice, pretending



we were spies writing secret messages. When the juice dried, I couldn't see the message until I heated the paper over a candle...."

I stopped short. Wayland and I stared at each other.

"That's it! Invisible ink. Where would he have written the message?"

"What about on the letter?"

"Light a candle."

I held the letter over the flame, moving it to warm the whole paper. Nothing happened.

"Maybe it's got to be warmer." I held the letter closer to the candle, and it flared into flame.

"Stop!" I waved it in the air, but in seconds the letter was flaky gray ash drifting through the cabin.

"The last letter from Father!"

"I'm sorry, Nat."

I swallowed. "But that doesn't mean the message isn't somewhere else."

"No, it doesn't." Wayland patted my shoulder.

"Where do you want to look next?"

"How about the blank cover page at the beginning of the almanac?"

"Fine," he answered, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Just let me fetch some water in case you set that page on fire too."

"You'd better get a bucket, in case I set the whole



almanac on fire,” I kidded back, holding the page a safe distance from the flame.

We both gasped as a map appeared.

“That’s not lime juice,” I breathed. “It’s red.”

The map showed a large island with longitude and latitude numbers written alongside. Pictures of reefs and wrecks surrounded the island with arrows snaking through them. Father had written, “Hidden reefs. Follow arrows for safe passage to Perlas Grandes.”

“Perlas Grandes!” Wayland held his fist to his mouth, frowning.

“An island with huge pearls?”

“Everyone says it’s only a legend, Nat,” he warned.

I stared at the map. Then a cannon went off in my chest.

“Wayland. The longitude and latitude. Isn’t that near where Father’s ship went down?”

“It is.”

“Then Father might be on that island!”

“Nat, I know how you must feel, but look at my own map.”

He unrolled a perfect map of the South Atlantic and pointed at the spot where Father had positioned Perlas Grandes. “There’s nothing there, Nat. The only islands anywhere nearby are St. Helena and Tristan da Cunha. Hundreds of ships have sailed these waters and seen

nothing.”

“If a ship did see it, the hidden reefs would explain why it never came back to tell about it.” I formed a plan.

Wayland looked me right in the eyes. “What are you thinking of doing?”

“What do you mean?”

He slapped his knee and chuckled. “Oh, Nat. Don’t you think I’ve known you long enough to read your face? Now come on. You’re planning something.”

I averted my eyes. “I guess I’m thinking of hiring onto a ship as a cabin boy, and then convincing the captain to search that area.”

“Why, you’re a green swab if you think a captain would listen to a cabin boy. He’d hang you on the spot for impertinence.”

“I’d think of something,” I protested.

“What about your mother? She told me that you promised her never to go to sea.”

“When I came back with Father, she’d have to understand.”

“If you came back, you mean.”

I bristled. “You can’t stop me.”

Wayland looked intently at me, then stood to make some more coffee. “No. I don’t suppose I could stop you. When you plan to do something, you don’t let



anything stop you. Here's a better idea. Why don't you and I sail the *Sea Cutter* out to search for Perlas Grandes?"

"Do you mean it?"

"I could keep you safer than you'd be with your own plan. We can sail exactly where we want. Search as long as we want."

Something broke in me, and I sobbed. Wayland sat beside me, rubbing my back.

"How can I ever thank you?" I dried my eyes.

"By making two promises."

"What promises?"

"Promise you'll write to your mother and get permission to sail with me, and promise that if she doesn't give her permission, you won't try to go some other way."

"But she'll have to agree when she learns about what we've found!"

"I need her permission. Otherwise she might think I'm trying to take you back...." He stopped, flustered.

"Take me back where?"

"Back...uh...back to a life on the sea." He coughed, looking away.

I was confused. I'd never been on the sea.

He turned back toward me, his eyes like nails.

"Promise me, Nat. Promise you won't go to sea

without your mother's permission."

"I—I promise."

"Put your hand on my Bible. Promise again. Word for word."

I put my hand on his Bible. "I promise I'll get Mother's permission, and if she doesn't agree, I won't go to sea."



He smiled and put his arm around my shoulders. "If Perlas Grandes is out there, we'll find it. If your father is on the island, we'll find him too. Now, come on, I'll take you home. Write to your mother in the morning, then meet me here. I've got to start teaching you how to sail this old boat."

I was too excited to sleep when Wayland left me at my door. The house seemed hot and stuffy after the brisk night walk, so I opened the window.

I took out Father's gifts and laid them in a row—the dagger, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, and the mysterious box. I shook it but heard nothing.

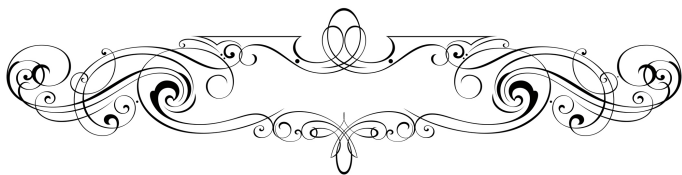
I opened the almanac to the map of Perlas Grandes and then rolled out one of Father's maps of the South Atlantic to daydream of the oceans we'd soon sail.

My head started nodding. I took the dagger, the almanac, and the red box into my bedroom, leaving Father's map on the table. In bed, my daydreams turned to the dreams of sleep—the first happy dreams

 Timothy Davis 

I'd had in years.

It was still deepest night when a faint sound woke me. Through the space at the bottom of my door, I saw shifting light.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Snake

I grabbed my dagger and crept out of bed, but a board creaked. Instantly, the light went out and I heard someone scrambling. I threw open the door and saw a dark form slithering out the window.

I sprang toward it but in the dark knocked my knee hard against a heavy wooden rocker and fell down. By the time I got to the window, I couldn't see anybody on the street.

"Coward!" I shouted into the night. With trembling hands, I slammed the glass shut, then limped to the table and lit the lantern.

The map of the South Atlantic was gone.

I took the lantern off its peg and searched through the room. Nothing else was missing. I rubbed my knee. It



was starting to swell and hurt worse. None of this made any sense. Why would a thief break into our house, only to steal a map of the South Atlantic? It was the deepest, deadest part of night, but I was far too shaken to sleep, so I limped up and down the room.

“Wayland will teach me how to sail the *Sea Cutter* today,” I said, trying to cheer myself, but instead my body tightened.

“The letter to Mother!” I remembered with a lurch in my stomach. Last night I’d been sure she’d give me permission to sail with Wayland. How could I have been so dumb? She’d never agree.

An ugly thought wormed its way into my head. “Wayland tricked me. He knew all the time Mother would never give permission.”

The night looked even blacker. Cruel faces seemed to be floating in the dark corners of the room.

“But what’s more important, keeping a promise or finding Father? If Wayland won’t take me on the *Sea Cutter*, I’ll find another way to go.”

I fell into an impossible daydream of having enough money to hire my own ship to sail out to Perlas Grandes. Then the image of the red box flashed into my mind. I jumped up, certain of what it contained.

I placed it on the table, poisoning my dagger carefully above it, and gave the box a light tap.



It sprang open, revealing a large, white, glowing sphere nestled in the blood-red velvet.

I grabbed it. A pearl from Perlas Grandes.

\* \* \*

I limped onto the docks when the sun rose, admiring the massive hulls and tall masts of the trading ships with a zealous eye. Before the day was over, I'd hire one of these ships to rescue Father. The pearl nestled in my pocket and I'd already written a letter to Mother.

Dear Mother,

Wayland brought home Father's sea chest addressed to us. Someone stole it four years ago. Father drew a secret map for me of an island in the South Atlantic called Perlas Grandes. I believe Father is marooned there, and I'm going to sail there to rescue him.

He also sent a giant pearl, big enough for me to hire a ship. Try not to worry. Only think how happy we'll be when I bring Father back!

Love, Nat

I'd posted the letter on my way to the docks, beyond which a cloud bank massed along the eastern horizon and dimmed the sun. The waves looked as dull as lead.



The docks swarmed with men: ship owners in satin frock coats, tough-looking sailors covered with tattoos, and expert whalers with their favorite harpoons slung over their shoulders.

Some sailors swapped stories over their long clay pipes and talked about newly discovered trade routes. Others scrambled up masts, dangled from the rigging, and even dived into the water to clean the submerged hulls. Their shouts, commands, and coarse laughter competed with the screaming gulls.

A ship's captain with a black beard strolled over to me.

"You looking to go out to sea, sonny?" he asked.  
"I'm looking for a new cabin boy."

"I want to go to sea, but not as a cabin boy."

He laughed. "A cabin boy is generally how a young lad starts out. Or do you be hankering to start out as the first mate?"

I tried to laugh with him, for I'd said too much too soon. "Tell me. Where are you bound?"

"We run regular routes 'tween various ports and Cape Town on the southern tip of Africa."

My excitement grew. "Then you must know the South Atlantic well."

"Know it?" He slapped his hand over his eyes. "I could sail it with my eyes closed."

“Have you ever seen any islands out there?”

“Sure. St. Helena and Tristan da Cunha. We stop there all the time if it’s them you be hankering to see.”

“But there’s supposed to be another island in the South Atlantic—Perlas Grandes.”

He threw back his head with a bellowing laugh.

A smelly, slim, oily-looking sailor sauntered over. A tattoo of a snake coiled around his arm, ending with the open mouth and poisonous fangs of a viper. Its red, vicious eyes stared right at me.

“What’s the joke, Captain?” the oily man asked while looking at me with a cruel grin.

“This lad wants us to sail the *Southern Lady* to Perlas Grandes!”

*Southern Lady*. The ship Wayland had sailed aboard.

The smelly man put a hand on my shoulder, the tattoo of the snake reaching for my neck. “We’ll take you to Perlas Grandes, little one.” His grin grew even crueller. “But first we got to make stops at Fairy Land and the Island Above the Clouds. Ain’t you afraid of the Great Sea Serpent? He don’t like people sailing to Perlas Grandes.”

They both erupted into laughter again, while a few other sailors ambled over.

“We got us a new cabin boy?” one of them asked.

“Oh, yes,” said the tattooed man. “One who can



amuse us with fairy tales. He wants to sail to Perlas Grandes.”

I shrugged the hand off my shoulder. I was furious at him. I hated him.

“How do you know it’s not out there? New islands are always being discovered.”

The oily man snickered. “Maybe in the Pacific, sonny, but not in the Atlantic. Better go back and study your maps.”

My voice rose. “I dare say I know the maps as well as you do. My father traced out every voyage he made on our maps.”

“If your father used maps with Perlas Grandes on them, I’ll bet the captain never asked him to help navigate. Kept him locked in the loony bin, no doubt.”

“My father *was* the captain,” I said, with a threat in my voice.

“Was? What happened? Lost his ship?”

“Take it easy on the lad, Snake,” one of the sailors spoke up. “I recognize this boy now. He’s the son of Captain Jonathan Childe of the *Christopher*. A finer captain you’d never meet.”

“The *Christopher*?” the captain mused. “Didn’t the *Christopher* go down in the South Atlantic about four years ago?”

“Yes,” the oily man said. “Probably went down

searching for Perlas Grandes.”

“And what if he was?” I shouted, trembling with rage.

“I’ve sailed the Atlantic all my life. I’ll name myself a fool if I ever see one bit of evidence Perlas Grandes exists.”

“Then that’s just what you are—a fool!”

I pulled out the pearl, which glowed with flawless beauty. Every man gasped in astonishment. Every man except the oily one. While the others stared in awe at the pearl, he looked me in the eye with a triumphant gleam.

“I thought so,” he mouthed so only I could see, and a killing look shot from his eyes.

I stood frozen a moment, then ran wildly.

I dodged through the alleys of New Bedford. Get away from Snake. Get away from those eyes. Get home and bar the door. Grab my dagger. Defend myself.

I reached my door, my lungs on fire, my knee screaming pain. I threw open the lock, dashed in, and barred the door.

“You have something I want,” a voice hissed behind me, making me jump.

Snake gloated at me, holding my dagger.

I lunged toward the window, but something hit me



*Sea Cutter*



hard on the back of my head.

Sparks flew from my eyes as I hurtled into darkness.