

CHESAPEAKE BOUND

BY THOMAS GUAY

London, 1763: Gifted musician and medical apprentice Michael Shea is living rough when he is framed murder. Michael and his friend, Danny, escape by ship-ping out on the misnamed brig The Delight. On board are forty-eight other desperate souls risking their lives to immigrate to the wilds of America, hoping for a better life in the colonies, enduring the ravages of the long trans-Atlantic voyage from London to Annapolis: killer storms, accidents, sickness, and Barbary raiders. This excerpt is from Chapter 24.

Later, with the storm still raging, Farrell squeezed through the hatch, lantern in hand. A flood of seawater accompanied him. Half-way down the ladder he started barking into the cavernous dark hold: “Tombler, Shea, Hoecker, O’Mara. On deck.” He yelled his command a second time before the ship rocked and he was knocked from the ladder. His landing was softened by the sea in the ’tween deck. Farrell hung the lantern and used his hands as a megaphone to repeat his command.

“Jesus, we’re coming.” Tombler was the only one to answer Farrell’s shadowy outline.

“Hands on deck,” Farrell yelled. “Move it. Can’t leave the hatch unlashed.”

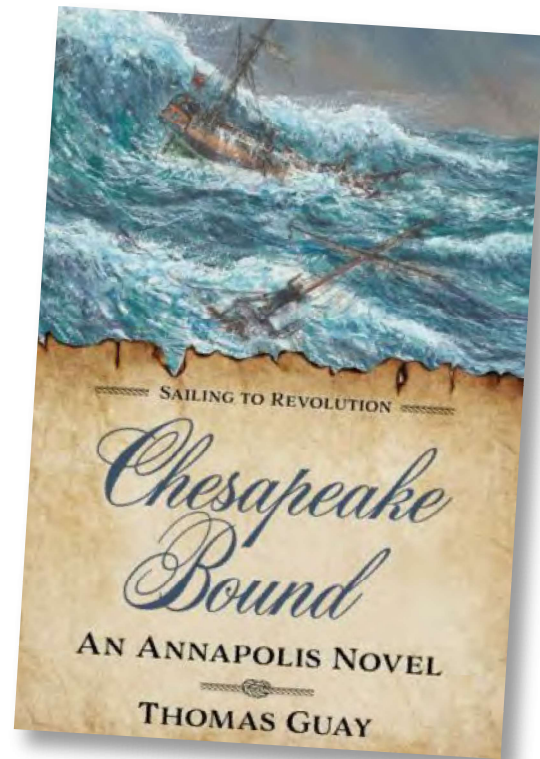
“Where you been, Farrell, whilst we’ve been drownin’ down here?” It was Hoecker who braved a complaint.

“You’ll see, soon enough.”

“What’s our status, Mr. Farrell?” Michael called out of the darkness. Danny swayed in his hammock, snoring away.

“Mr. Shea, report to the captain. Tombler to the helm. O’Mara, Hoecker with me to start the pumps.”

Michael pushed Danny to roust him. “Come on, Danny, it’s a chance to get outta this sty.” He rolled out of his hammock and found his feet underwater. “And get our feet out the damn ocean.”



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As he leaned across his hammock to give Danny a poke, there was a thundering crash, infinitely louder than the last.

Michael found himself in a free fall towards starboard along with everybody and everything loose in the hold: cots, baggage, stools, blankets, clothes, and tools. It was a waterfall of bodies, some headfirst, some sideways, others sliding feet first through the inboard sea and crashing into a tangled pile of bodies and debris.

Those who had set up their camps along the starboard hull were buried and held underwater by the weight of their fellow passengers, all crushed into a wretched heap of human ballast.

Another monster wave had slammed into *The Delight*’s larboard side, throwing her sideways ➤

into the sea, her starboard side now underwater, her keel out of the water ready to slice into the next rogue wave. The Atlantic had the ship laying sideways. In such a death grip, it's only a matter of seconds before any ship, no matter how stout, will flounder and sink.

Everybody in the 'tween deck faced their final agony in a cold wet panic, in the dark, all writhing and struggling against the sea and the weight of their fellow passengers.

Danny was still in his hammock suspended above the melee. "Michael!" No answer. His voice was lost in a cacophony of gurgling screams, the ship's groaning and the crunching of baggage and equipment. Like Danny, Little Jimmy McMahon swung above the pileup secured in his bowline. He kicked about wildly in mid-air and screamed for his parents.

It seemed like an eternity, but only a second or two later, the ship reverberated with the tearing sound of breaking timber. The main mast snapped somewhere above deck. An instant later, the sea swept away the foremast as well. Relieved of this weight, *The Delight* wrestled loose from the ocean's death grip and righted herself, sending the pile of bodies and possessions tumbling back across the 'tween deck. The indentureds gasped for breath as they rose out of their watery graves.

This was followed by a mad scramble of frantic passengers searching for their loved ones. Against a sloshing backdrop of debris and bodies rose terrified screams. All manner of replies echoed back and forth as loved ones tried to relocate each other.

Most were reunited. But not all happily. A man shrieking, "Marta, Marta dear, breathe! Please my dear, breathe!" was Michael's first memory when he surfaced. In the darkness, he pushed himself out of the black water up on his knees, his hands on the deck as he coughed and wheezed the sea out of his lungs, the mix of sea and sewage dripped from his hair. He shook his head to get the mess off his face.

"Oh Jesus, sweet Jesus, Marta, breathe!"

The voice was right next to Michael. He could barely make out a lifeless form wrapped

in a drenched winter cape. He grabbed the man's arm to right himself. "Get her on her knees, head down."

"Danny," Michael called out in the darkness. "You alive?" "Been better," came a hoarse reply.

The man couldn't manage his wife's limp frame. Desperation set in. "My wife, she won't move." He was panting, shivering, and crying all at once.

"Danny, find me," Michael yelled. "Farrell? Mr. Farrell? Bring us your lamp."

To the man wrestling with the woman, Michael ordered: "On her side now, face in your lap. Head out of the water." Michael found the woman's body in the dark and got his arms around her waist and with effort, turned the lifeless form sideways, facing her husband. "Any response?" he yelled over the commotion.

"None."

"Damn." Michael tried to maneuver the woman's knees together. He couldn't manage it, as her legs were wrapped in her cape. "Get this cape off," he yelled, but the man was frozen in fear. Michael tried to wrestle the cape away but couldn't get the head free.

"Danny, quickly." "Already here, direct me."

"Lift her arse up in the air. I'll wedge her knees together, you lift. Get yer hands under her stomach."

Danny straddled his legs on either side of the lifeless woman and did as instructed. Together they raised her rear up as if she were prostrating herself before a god. This forced her head into the man's gut, her mouth barely above the water. The man held her head between his hands. He was shaking uncontrollably.

"Pry her mouth open. See if we can drain any water."

The man tried to obey. Michael inched his grip forward, his hands now joined at the bottom of the woman's rib cage. He started pressing up and down pulling against her sternum.

"Anything?" "Nothin'."

"Why can't we raise her any higher?"

Farrell arrived. His light revealed why. Two ➤

men recovering from their own near drowning were kneeling on the cape, holding Marta down. Danny pushed them off. Still the cape wouldn't budge. It was snagged under a pile of debris.

"Knife. I need a knife."

Farrell offered Michael his. Michael ripped through the cape, separating it from the hood. Michael traced the hood's closing ribbon to the lady's mouth. She had swallowed the ends while gasping for breath underwater. Michael gently eased the material out. Air passage cleared, he backed up and again jammed his strength against her sternum.

"Anything?"

"No."

Michael renewed his attack on her chest, his hands on the inside of each breast. Still no breathing. Michael pried open her mouth and appeared to be giving her an awkward kiss. The husband was appalled but couldn't speak. Michael parted lips with the girl and took a deep breath and covered her mouth with his, blowing air into her mouth. He did this several more times. When he stopped to recover his own breath, the girl twitched and gagged. Her legs kicked. Michael rolled her on her right shoulder. She vomited in her husband's lap.

"Marta? Breathe girl, breathe," the man begged.

She gulped for air and convulsed another shot of vomit all at once. Then she spit on her own and started coughing. Her breathing, at first shallow, became deeper as she shivered

under her slime-drenched nightshirt.

Scared and exhausted, the group lingered in the black water. Farrell's light revealed Marta as one of the Palatines, indeed a delicate girl, not yet twenty Michael guessed, reclining in the bosom of her husband. Her eyelids fluttered as she tried to return to the living. Her gloved hands, clenched in fists, crossed across her chest to fight the shivering.

"If you don't mind, sir, sit her upright. We want her to vomit and spit as much as she will."

The man complied, still holding his dear Marta. "Such sweet breathing. I've never so welcomed such a sound, my love."

"May I?" Michael didn't wait for permission. He removed Marta's head scarf and used it to wipe the vomit from the girl's face. He freed a matted mess of curly, straw-colored hair that had been tied up in twin ponytails, now mostly undone. Farrell's light also revealed a bloodied nose, deep scratches on her forehead, a swelling right eye, and more of her bosom than a lady would like. Michael covered her with his jacket.

Marta revived enough to stare at Michael, confused as to her situation. He held his hand in front of her face and watched her focus on it. He moved his hand. She followed it with both eyes. Michael smiled.

"Danke," barely escaped her lips.

Farrell didn't wait to witness other reunions and rescues. "Tomblor, Hoecker, O'Mara," he bel-lowed. "If you ain't drowned, get yerselves on deck. Mr. Shea, Captain'll need a count of dead an' injured. No dallyin', report as soon as you know. Tend to 'em later." ■

"Thomas Guay's eighteenth-century high seas adventure brims with irresistible historical and nautical detail. I found myself ripping through the pages to learn what happens next to the exceptionally developed characters. 'Chesapeake Bound' is a terrific read."

—Danny Costello, author of *The Rag Tree: A Novel of Ireland*