

Beneath
Red Tail Wings
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First few chapters preview

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Delirium

The festering strips burned, the fever sucked him dry. The voice of his father harangued his ears, accusing.

“Traitorous, wretched boy! No son of mine would do such a thing!”

“How could you do this? Did you think of us, you bastard? Do you know what this means?”

The echo of the door slamming against his battered jaw pounded on his ears until he cried out.

The Captain would hear. He would come and the beatings would begin again.

“Quiet, quiet boy. You want to get caught? You want to the mate to strike with that devilish belayin’ pin? You want to lay in the fo’c’sle waiting to die from another beating? You want to run up and down and up and down for days and nights without sleep or vittles? You want to live boy?”

“No no more, no more. Shut up Papa, shut up. You said follow my conscience. You said be a man and make a stand. I made it Papa. I made it. Ah, don’t hate me Papa. Please listen, please!”

“Get out, get out traitorous, wretched boy! Don’t show your face again. Traitor!”

He wanted to deny forsaking his family. But the truth could not be denied. They were dead. Father and Royal were dead years gone now, hating him, the traitor. He must keep moving or

the Captain would find him. Fearing the tarred ropes and belaying pins striking from the dark, he crawled away from the dock. His body was soaking wet, trembling one moment and burning the next. Desperate, Matthew sucked the briny damp from his filthy shirt. He curled into a stack of cargo already strapped down to be loaded onto another hell ship. He could hear the crowd yelling, demanding the Captain's surrender. He could barely see through his irritated eyes, one swollen shut from a nasty cut and blow to the face he got from a knife or marlinspike. He had never seen it coming.

Charlie had been taken ashore, but the rest of them were not allowed to leave. Lucky Charlie. Say what you want, but he wished he had a friend in this city full of crimps. Benjamin called them that. Crimps. Slave catchers. Need a body? Take it. Matthew was no sailor and tried to explain to the First Mate he was taken under duress. His protest got him a beating. The worst of his life in fact. He had no idea how long he was insensible, but when he was able to stagger from the ragged hammock Harris came and beat him again. Matthew was sure he defended himself the first time, but not this time. There was a belaying pin. He came to, chained to the grates on deck and flogged. It would not be the last time. Mr. Maloney told him to cease resisting and go along so he would stay alive. He was so weak from the beatings and flogging, further protest was impossible anyway.

Months later, Matthew realized it made little

difference if he was subservient. He kept his head down and learned to do the work, but feared he would not see land again. Three of the battered crew died. The story was they jumped overboard or fell by accident, but Matthew would always wonder if Harris had outright killed them. Poor John, he was just a boy. Everyone was starving on hardtack and little water. He was shamed he survived because Harris' ire shifted to someone else and they died.

Matthew didn't know if Benjamin put him over the side tonight hoping he would drown or make it out. The man's loyalties shifted each day. There was some talk about a Sailor's Home for help. Matthew didn't know this place and thought it was a fool's errand. Ben said if he stayed he might just die. He was too weak to fight Ben's insistence.

The tide tried to take him away but he grabbed the anchor line and hung on until he got his bearings. The horrific sting of the cold salt water stole his breath. He believed he would drown for sure. How he managed to get onto the pier remained a miracle to him. His nails tore off at the quick from his desperate effort to climb the ladder. The men on the dock were yelling for the Captain's blood, many drunk and angry waving torches and rope for a hanging.

Matthew had enough sense left to scuttle away through stacks of cargo into the shadows between buildings. Rats squealed and ran about in the darkness. He prayed no other crimps found him. Benjamin said if he got caught he would wind up on another ship even broken as he was. Matthew

decided he would kill himself for sure to escape another hellish journey like this. His overtaxed body soon failed him. His last thought was he would die in mud reeking of urine and feces.

Rescue

Birds were singing. He must be lying in the four poster with the balcony doors open to catch an errant breeze. Matthew's heart reveled in gratitude. For some reason he was especially glad to hear those chirping ditties that used to drive him mad when he wanted to lie in on school mornings. He was safe now. Somehow all was forgiven and he was home. He waited for his mother to come to him with a cool glass of spring water. Where was she? He was so thirsty.

Father Arturo shook his head in great dismay. Brother Finley worked at his side through the night washing away the filth and cleaning infected wounds across the young man's back and sides. Finley worked with tears in his own eyes until sent away to sleep. In four hours they would trade places beside the cot in the ongoing effort to save this poor soul found in an filthy alley just off the waterfront.

When conscious, the man struggled against the bindings that kept him on his stomach. His back was exposed to the air, the flesh extremely raw from the lancing of the wounds and the harsh carbolic acid wash. The priest hoped he would not be reduced to begging honey or vinegar to keep the wounds clean of further infection.

He was grateful a recent graduate of Tolands Medical College had dared to set up practice nearby. The young English doctor was brimming with enthusiasm and new ideas, but had a razor sharp tongue. That was evident when they were all flayed

for washing the wounds out with the carbolic, which was supposed to be used to clean the room! Father Arturo feared the realities of life the seamen endured would crush the young man's idealism and fervor.

There was certainly little money to support a practice. The doctor would probably leave for a more prosperous part of town and perhaps do charitable work out of St. Mary's. For now Father Arturo would be grateful to God for His mercy and timely intervention that this life may be saved.

Collapsing onto the stool, Arturo's prayers gave way to the meditative stanzas of the Rosary through which he asked the Blessed Mother to pray for the boy's deliverance. Jesus would surely see to it he roused if the poor soul took a turn for the worse. The exhausted man ignored the racket from the street. The humid air was not very good for a sick soul, heavy with foul odors as it was. But leaving the boy to breath air thick with sick and blood could not be good either. So they left the shutters ajar.

Shouting men carried on with the labor of the day. Harness jangled, horses and mules whinnied and brayed. The high pitched voices of children piped up hawking the home grown vegetables for their mothers. The meager goods were spread out on blankets in the street. The less fortunate children handed out advertising bills from more nefarious employers. Occasionally the sounds would escalate, fueled by arguments and the crack of whips. When the day began to wane, hysterical laughter and screams would add to the chaotic music from the

saloons and cribs several blocks away. These dens of iniquity enticed the day laborers to throw away their pitiful earnings on drink and fornication. They were a small part of the overwhelming number that infested the city like fleas.

The priest's efforts to turn men from this folly had not been fruitful. Father Arturo labored against a rising tide of sin from the clapboard structure his group moved into. After driving out the rats and roaches, they offered reasonably clean cots and what medicine they had available from donations. Sometimes medicine was what they stirred up in the kitchen. There were a few men who turned up for confession, weeping over their inability to fight the addiction to liquor and opium. Prayers were said, comfort given and the cycle would begin again. By the Grace of God he escaped many promised beatings from the owner of the local establishments. The sailors and freight drivers threatened to burn the saloon down if hands were laid on a priest or the lay brothers who offered them succor. Sometimes that care was only reasonably clean water and rags to wash away blood, before these men waded back into the cesspit that was their daily life.

Father Arturo dipped the chair back against the gray wall to rest his aching head. Brother Finley woke him up at dawn. The lay brother was upset about resting all night while the priest remained on watch. Arturo listened, mildly amused, to the tirade as he checked on their sleeping patient once more.

The Pit of Despair

The days faded into one another, a sad parade with tired men struggling to save a soul with no desire left to survive. When conscious the poor boy stared as if horror struck for endless hours. His voice was lost completely after screaming, crying and begging through relentless nightmares. Their touch, their very presence finally became unremarked. Exhaustion forced his eyes to shut but when awake, only the stare. The doctor declared his mind was possibly broken forever. But Father Arturo would not give up. They forced broth into the unresisting husk at every opportunity, continued to treat his wounds and prayed.

Four months later Matthew made the effort to stand on his own two legs. He did not know if he was grateful to these men who labored so hard to save him. Two thick limbs from a tree were held in shaky fists propping him up. He remained plagued by bouts of dizziness and his vision seem to be impaired for the long haul. Sometimes the battered muscles in his thighs and legs cramped so tightly he feared they would tear loose from his bones. Dr. Everley assured him that time would resolve these issues, but Matthew worried he was going blind as some days his vision appeared worse than others. Assurances meant nothing to him at this point. He'd been blind before.

His recovery was tedious, the depression worse than any he suffered during the war. Fear was a specter which hovered over his shoulders. What if

Harris or the Captain found out he was here and not dead overboard? What if someone carried the tale? He knew from the priest there had been searches carried out. Accusations of bribery, outright lies and speculation had fueled gossip and many outright fights in the street outside their doors. He avoided reading about the searches and the trial of the Sunrise. For the first time in his life Matthew was unsure he could stand up for what was right. The desire to flee was all there was left of him. Even after Father Arturo declared the monstrous duo incarcerated, fear dogged his waking and sleeping hours.

His letter to McNamara had gone unanswered so far. Therein he confided in his law partner about the attack and his subsequent travail at sea. Expressing his desire to be shut of the city and Harris, Matthew wished only to be gone and rebuild his life. The priest had sent an accompanying letter stating how he had found Matthew and the months of recovery. Matthew truly hoped he could be smuggled out of the city without Harris finding out. He was plagued by nightmares of the man. He would awaken choking on bile and gagging and sometimes crying aloud. It shamed him to be in such a state.

Why had he survived the war against his kin and the Indians only to come to this? Was it punishment for taking the stand which betrayed his family and way of life? Was God truly seeing him as a turncoat? Would he ever see his way clear of guilt and punishment? All he had left was a thorough disillusionment with life and the conviction one day

he would be even more helpless when the periodic blindness was a permanent state. Even if he could remain in law for now, how could he go before a jury or make a living once blind?

Morning arrived after another sleepless night. Matthew eased into an old pea coat and made his way out the back door of the derelict storefront. He grimaced at the pull of scar tissue on his back. He wished to forget the horrible experience of the brothers forcing him to move about so the worst of the scars would not cripple him.

The priest and his assistants barely managed to get by in their efforts to minister to the riff raff that populated this area off the waterfront.

Matthew didn't even know where they were in the city. He never asked. What did it matter?

He eased down upon an old crate and let the weak sun attempt to warm his exhausted body. The yard was muddy with only a rope strung between the building and a pole for the endless washing. The ragged bedding stirred in the chill breeze. Matthew realized some of the stains that would not wash away were caused by his own blood. Everything was washed and scrubbed and used again. The brother's hands were raw and calloused from their constant labor and scalding water. No one gave a damn, not about them and not about him. No one. He ignored the big barrel of water boiling, full of rags and sheets even now. It added little warmth to combat the foggy atmosphere.

As fast as the public appeared enraged by the torture of the crew, the winds had changed and

Captain Clarke was once again being hailed as a bastion of good will. If Matthew ever got the chance, he would kill Clarke. He wanted Harris dead too, so very much. But the thought of that brute set him to trembling and tearing up like a baby. When nightmares plagued him, Matthew had thrown himself against the walls of his room in terror. He learned his lessons well, the size of a man doesn't give you any idea of how much of a monster he could be. Matthew promised himself, he would get better with a gun. He would never be taken again.

Distractions

Father Arturo entertained Matthew with stories of his personal travels from Spain to Rome, where he studied for the priesthood. His family was well off and expected him to rise to power in the church. But God had other plans for Arturo. Waylaid by robbers during his travels, a poor man rescued him even though his family were suffering lean times. Arturo never forgot that selfless kindness. His father settled no little gold on the man for the sparing of his son. Later Arturo's father was not so overjoyed when that same son took vows to minister to the diseased and desperate. So instead of treading the golden halls of the Vatican, Arturo crossed the world to find his calling among the miserable souls that ferried the world's wealth in the great sailing vessels.

As the months passed, Matthew's spirit was soothed by the unrelenting faith the brothers expressed as they labored and the sameness of his days. Their kindness never wavered even as their patience was tested to its limits. He occupied himself in a relentless focus on weaving bits of string and rope into Solomon knots. He wore the bracelets he made or left them lying around the place for the errant sailor to pick up. Some days he blocked out his surroundings completely in a desperate effort not to remember his experiences. No war, no ship, no Harris.

When he was not intent on the one thing he learned on the hell ship, Matthew helped the

brothers do their work around the place. Soon his own hands were raw from the endless chore of washing sheets and boiling bandages. He hammered nails into ill-fitting planks to patch the leaking roof and cover gaps which let in chilled air. Some days he would sweep the floors and Father Arturo would warn the brothers off while Matthew completed turn after turn through the sanctuary, his mind lost to the movement of broom back and forth. As suddenly as he became lost in repetitive actions, Matt would be reconnecting with everyone again, listening to their stories and absorbed in Arturo's history lessons.

Time lost all meaning to the healing man. Matthew considered remaining inside the confines of the Father's mission forever. He was safe there, hiding from a world filled with enemies wanting his demise.

Discovery

Matt dangled from the end of the rope, his chest scrapping against the side of the cliff. He would have more than a few abrasions after this was done. Sweat from exertion and the sun baked rocks stung his eyes. He was pretty much climbing blind, depending on his pony to get them up. The man hitched to his back was shorter than he, but at least twenty to thirty pounds heavier. That he was unconscious added to the problem of getting him back up to the narrow trail. Blood from a bullet wound in the man's shoulder soaked the back of Matt's shirt.

He braced his legs once more and pulled himself up another foot. His old pony continued to take up the slack, holding steady against all the cropped eared evidence suggesting he was a killer to anyone fool enough to mount up. Matt's gloved hands scrabbled for a hold onto the crumbling edge of the drop off. He was suddenly dragged over the top a few feet more before Cobby snorted in relief and returned to nipping at the sparse grass. He lay for a moment gasping for breath, the man a dead weight on top of him.

After a minute or two, Matt squirmed out from under the body. He got his canteen from Cobby's saddle and used a little to moisten the man's parched lips. The bullet had passed through the

body so Matt poured a little of his last few swallows of whiskey in the holes then used his one clean bandana and a few strips of rawhide to tie down for a bandage. The man had lost a lot of blood and his face was pale and sweaty with shock. Now they were up here, Matt hoped that the darkening sky wouldn't bring a storm before he found some place to hold up with his unconscious charge.

Cobby snorted and pranced away as Matt pulled him over to the body. His legs were no longer trembling from the climb, so he figured he could hoist the man into the saddle and get moving. The old pony's notched ears were flat and teeth bared. But he stood perfectly still under the weight and didn't kick Matt in the head as he tied the man's wrists to the saddle before mounting up behind him. There wasn't any sign of a horse running down the trail ahead of him, so Matt wondered where the man's horse could have gone. Thunder rumbled in the distance. He knew a night in the rain would probably end the man.

They journeyed for maybe an hour before the first icy drops fell. Matt covered the man with his slicker and put his own wool lined jacket and gloves on. The temperature dropped abruptly. If he had to make do with the sparse trees they would both probably get struck by lightning. Thunder echoed around the mountains and Cobby threw up his head and refused to move another inch.

"Come on you mule headed nag. You won't stay dry standing around out here."

Dismounting, Matt grabbed the bridle and halter

alongside Cobby's jaw and pulled him along the narrow trail he had been following. The old horse kept baring his teeth and snorting all the while but didn't kick or bite. The trail was too wide to be an animal track, so perhaps there was a cave or cabin at the end of it. At this point a cave would be grand as long as it was free of bears.

Lightning cracked overhead, scaring the hell out of man and horse. Some distance away a tree sizzled as it burst into flames, but the sudden torrent of rain thankfully overwhelmed the fire. The first flash of light left the impression of some kind of structure ahead. Relief was quickly replaced by caution. Whoever ambushed the old man could be hold up there. For the first time in months, Matt pulled his gun.

He took time scouting the area thoroughly before approaching the building. Just because he didn't see any lights didn't mean a killer couldn't be watching from the dark windows. Someone wanted this man dead. They could still be around. It wouldn't be the first time and the thought of that incident made him shiver. His mother used to say someone was stepping on your grave when that feeling crawled up your spine. So he made himself wait until his nerves settled before he circled the cabin and eased along the west wall to the door.

He nudged the door open with his gun barrel. Rusty hinges resisted the intrusion, but the door swung back against the wall. He eased down and went in low, the pounding rain covering his first cautious entry. Lightning lit up the night and the

sudden flare exposed no other intruders, though it was a near thing not to fire his weapon at the shadows! Matt holstered his gun. He had the impression of a table with a lamp atop it. He hoped there was oil. A crude fireplace was the last image from the lightning flash. It would do. So he hurried out to bring the wounded man in.

First he carried the old man inside and laid him on the floor nearest the fireplace. Matt stripped the saddle and his meager supplies from the pony. He hobbled old Cobby in the wind protected space between the cabin and the rock wall that rose up behind it. He hoped the battered overhang resembling a back porch would be enough shelter from the lightning. Matt wanted to take him inside the cabin, but Cobby hated barns, stalls and men in general. He tied on the feed bag with the last of the oats he'd bought in Silverton. He left the horse rolling his eyes and staring him down with laid back notched ears. There would be hell to pay come morning for leaving him out here, but having a right fit thrown inside and stomping on his patient wouldn't do.

Matt felt his way to the fireplace, finding fairly dry kindling already laid and a rusted crane and trivet. He took flint and steel from the inside pocket of his coat and set to work. He was relieved when smoke disappeared up the chimney and the tiny flame grew. Thank goodness there was wood already stacked against the wall. He was dogged tired and still needed to bed down his feverish patient.

Matt removed the man's outer garments and boots. He discovered a crude bunk and took the dusty blankets for a good shake in the open doorway. He dragged the bunk over to the fire, then lifted the old man atop it, tucking him in against the damp. A further search of the single room turned up kerosene and a few cans of beans and peaches. Someone obviously used the place from time to time. The cans weren't old and the blankets weren't moth eaten. He filled the lamp and lit it. Unpacking his gear, Matt got coffee going with collected rainwater. After checking the shutters were secure, he latched the door. When the room warmed up he shucked off his coat and hat. After a while the scent of frying bacon and potatoes filled the room.

He checked the old man's wound, cleaning the holes out by lamp light. All that time lying in the open and then the ride just might do him in. Matt hadn't heard any shots the last days riding in the mountains. He would have thought the sound would have carried to him. The fact that a fat roll of bank notes and silver dollars remained in the money belt around his waist, was a sure indication of why the old man was bushwhacked. But Matt couldn't just leave him. Nobody should have to die alone.

Exhausted, Matt finally set down to the unsteady table to eat. The crude chair rocked on its uneven legs until he sat in it. A can of beans and peaches bulked up his meal. Those rare peach slices were much appreciated. There wasn't any money left for pleasures like these right now. The bread, cheese and the rest of his meager stores would have to

be rationed until he could get out of this situation. Matt needed to get a job before his last few dollars were gone. He wasn't always welcome at smaller homesteads, because of his worn clothes and nightmare pony. He usually worked the ranches as he traveled, but steered clear of the mining operations. The rowdy mining camps were filled with rotgut and greedy men scrabbling over silver and the few women that dared to try and survive there. A law abiding man had to keep close watch on his property and worry too much about a bullet in the back. Those places brought back bad memories.

Luck graced him once more when he discovered a thick bar of wood leaning in a dark corner of the room which he used to keep the door firmly shut. The latch was no more than tattered rope over a nail. Now there would be warning if those bushwhackers showed up. He built up the fire considerably before he bedded down on the floor, hopefully to get a full night's sleep without dreams. Mindful of that money belt, he tucked it in next to the man. He didn't need to be accused of theft. The old man had been shot from the front. He wasn't wearing a gun. The horse and rifle he should have had was gone without a trace. Matt slept with his rifle close at hand by the fireplace. Contrary as ever, dreams did not disturb his rest at all during the remainder of the stormy night.

The rain pummeled the cabin for three days. Random holes in the roof left puddles on the floor. Matt had to move his bedroll twice to avoid the

irritating splashes of cold water startling him from sleep. The old man's fever worsened and for a while Matt was sure he wouldn't make it, but he was a tough one alright. For the time being his fever was down and his breathing deep. Maybe he would wake up soon and tell Matt where he should take him. Right now his most dangerous task was seeing to his right irritated pony. No, Matt didn't shiver as he cautiously made his way across the muddy track to the back of the cabin.