



**Ransome's Honor**  
by Katherine Nell Dacus



## Chapter One

*HMS Alexandra*  
*Great Yarmouth, England*  
*July 18, 1814*

Captain William Ransome held his stance as the freshly scrubbed deck rolled with the gentle rhythm of the harbor under his feet. Ah, to have the real motion of the sea beneath him once again. Nothing like the chop of the open ocean as the seventy-four gun Man-o'-War took a fair wind.

Pray God the new orders would send them out on a mission again. His crew deserved better than ferrying troops from place to place about England and Ireland. Two days ago, they'd pulled into Yarmouth with the First Division of West Norfolk Militia. Upon arrival, William received a letter commanding him to report to Admiral Witherington in Portsmouth for new orders. They'd all worked like madmen yesterday to prepare the ship to weigh anchor at dawn.

The midshipman on watch reached for the bell. Two chimes, a pause, followed by two additional chimes. Four bells in the forenoon watch. Ten o'clock and *Alexandra* still rested at anchor. When Commodore Northrop sent word he needed transport from Yarmouth to Portsmouth, William responded with a request the commodore arrive no later than three bells in the morning watch. Now, four and a half hours later, William wished he could leave a message with the dock master for the commodore to find another means of transportation. He stepped to the rail of the poop deck. "Mr. Cochrane."

At the amidships entry port, the First Lieutenant turned and touched his hat. "Aye, Captain?"

"Any sign of the Commodore yet?"

"Aye, sir. Jolly boat just cleared the dock."

At last. "Ready the ship for sail. As soon as Commodore Northrop is aboard, we'll get underway for Portsmouth."

"Sir . . ." Cochrane cleared his throat and shifted from foot to foot.

Not like his second in command to act nervous. "What is it, man?"

"Sir, there appear to be two women with the Commodore."

William's stomach clenched. He reached to his right. "My glass."

A midshipman pressed a cool, smooth cylinder into his hand. Through the spyglass, the small transport came into focus. A stout woman held a useless lace parasol over a mound of dark hair. Trouble. Beside her he could make out the slim figure of another woman, light curls cascading under a frill of a hat. Double trouble. Grinding his teeth to keep his thoughts from spilling out, he passed the glass back to the midshipman and returned his attention to midships.

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"Have the men rig the bosun's chair. We'll have to swing the women aboard."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Cochrane conveyed the order to the crew.

In his nine years as Post Captain, he'd never allowed a woman to set foot aboard his ship, not even his mother and sister when *Alexandra* last made berth in Liverpool harbor. He'd learned early on that ships were no place for women. On his first transatlantic voyage as a midshipman, then-Captain Sir Edward Witherington's wife, Lady Witherington, had made no secret of her distaste for life aboard ship—and had passed that misery along to anyone unfortunate enough to cross her path. Years later, during his final commission as lieutenant before becoming master and command of his own vessel, his captain's wife had lived aboard ship. A quarrelsome and selfish woman, the crew blamed everything ill that befell them on her. While William didn't believe in superstitions, the sailors under his command lived by them, as did most of the Royal Navy. A belief that women brought bad luck would create conditions conducive to unfortunate circumstances.

At least the commodore's wife and daughter would be off his ship in less than forty-eight hours, if God granted them a good wind and fair weather.

The crew scurried about, swinging the bosun's chair, a board attached to rope much like a garden swing, over the side. William removed his two-pointed, high domed hat and mopped his brow. His dark hair clung in damp clumps to his forehead and sweat trickled down his neck beneath his high collar.

"Haul away there!" Lieutenant Cochrane called.

A shriek like a mythic banshee rent the air. William sighed and set his hat on his head, the points running fore-and-aft as fashion, rather than regulations, dictated. The men scowled as they heaved at the tackle lines. The short, thick-waisted older woman appeared above the gunwale. The boatswain stepped in to assist her, but she slapped the old sailor's hands away. The seat swung wildly, threatening to dump her into the choppy harbor, and she screamed again.

Women. William bit the inside of his bottom lip and looked away, annoyance prickling his skin. Cochrane required the assistance of the third lieutenant and two midshipmen to untangle the woman from the rigging and set her aright.

Moments later, the seat returned with quieter cargo. Slight of build with hair the color of ripe wheat, the young woman possessed all the physical attributes of a "fine lady." Officers and seamen alike rushed forward to offer assistance to the beauty.

William growled deep in his throat. Women like that spelled disaster for the order and discipline of even the most seasoned crew. He gripped his hands behind his back and resisted the urge to pace the deck as his crew hauled the Northrops' personal effects onto the quarterdeck.

"Be careful with that." Mrs. Northrop squawked cautions at the sailors straining to lift an ironbound trunk, then turned to observe others. "You're crushing those boxes! Those hats are costly. I'll have it out of your pay if you ruin anything."

William eyed the commodore, waiting to see if he would silence the woman, but the cadaverously thin man seemed to find nothing amiss with her behavior. After nearly half an hour, when everyone and everything was aboard, William gave his superior a slight bow. "Commodore Northrop, with your permission, sir?"

"Yes, yes. Take her out, Captain Ransome. Your quarters for my wife and daughter?"

"Of course." William turned to his steward and pointed to the mountain of luggage littering his deck. "Escort them below and see their dunnage is stowed."

The sailor nodded crisply and jumped-to.

"Mr. Cochrane, take us out." William squinted into the mid-morning glare of sun on the

water. This crew had sailed under his command for nigh on two years, each man-jack of them proving his worth time and again. God had blessed them when the Admiralty kept the *Alexandra* on active duty after Bonaparte's abdication in April. With the war over, too many men of the service had been turned out on land, trying to survive on half-pay and praying for another war.

Once clear of the harbor, he started to relax. *Please Lord, give us a mission worthy of this excellent crew and our ship. Bless us with a safe journey—*

"Cap'n Ransome, sir?"

Although interrupting his prayer, he smiled at the boatswain. "Yes, Matthews?"

The seasoned seaman swept his knit cap off his silver curls and touched the knuckle of his first finger to his bare forehead. "Sir, about the guests . . ."

William raised his eyebrows. Matthews respected William's rank, but never before had he hesitated in speaking up. "What is it?"

"Well, sir, it's their dunnage. It don't all fit in your cabin, sir. And it took four of the boys three trips to get it all below and now they've no place to put it."

Women and their baggage! "Have the Purser make room for it in the hold. We're low enough on supplies there should be plenty of space."

Matthews saluted again. "Aye, aye, Cap'n." He retreated a few steps, then paused.

William had worked with the sailor long enough to know when he had more to say. "Is there anything else, Matthews?"

"Sir, the guests . . . what I mean is, how long will they be our guests?"

William suppressed his smile. "Only until we reach Portsmouth. And you may tell the men to be prepared to unload our guests and their cargo immediately upon arrival."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n." The slip of a man grinned broadly, knuckled his forehead, and scurried away.

The wind picked up, filling the sails. Smooth as an eel, *Alexandra* slipped through the water southeast toward Dover Strait. Eight bells and the afternoon watch began. He took a deep breath as salt air embraced him. *Lord God, thank you for bestowing upon us the blessing of good wind and fine weather. Speed our journey and if it be your will, let the Admiralty—*

A crash below deck brought him out of his prayer. William leapt down the poop deck steps and raced down the companionway. For a moment, he couldn't see in the dark interior, but when his eyes adjusted, he barely suppressed angry words. Covered in food, Cook sprawled on his back like a harpooned whale. His large silver serving tray lay several feet away, dented but not beyond repair.

The commodore's daughter flitted about Cook, fanning him with a lace handkerchief, while Midshipman Kennedy scooped food off Cook and into a bucket.

"What happened, Mr. Kennedy?"

The boy jumped to his feet and saluted. "Cap'n, sir. Cook fell, sir."

William swallowed his annoyance with the young man, hardly past his fifteenth birthday. "Yes. I can see that. *How* did Cook fall?"

Miss Northrop whirled. "It's my fault, Captain. I was just looking for something. I didn't realize it was time for dinner already."

Matthews arrived, lamp in hand. Around Cook and covered with the victuals now scattered across the floor, William could make out the shapes of half a dozen somewhat crushed bandboxes. He turned a questioning gaze on Matthews.

"Beggin' pardon, sir, but the boys an' me was working on getting it moved."

"See to it, then. Mr. Kennedy, get some of the boys up here to clean this up and then

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return to your station.” He turned on his heel and ascended to the upper deck. A bracing wind and dark clouds on the horizon warned of a storm chasing them to Portsmouth. If they encountered rough waters with women aboard . . . the smell of sickness would stay in his cabin for ages. They had to be making ten to twelve knots. *God, please don't let this storm delay us.*

“Excuse me, Captain?”

He prayed for graciousness as he turned to look at the commodore's daughter. “Yes, Miss Northrop?”

“I know I'm supposed to be below decks, but I wondered if I might stay up here and enjoy the scenery until dinner is ready . . . again.”

So she could damage something else? He opened his mouth to say no when the commodore appeared and took the girl by the arm. “Ah, my dear Lucy. Walk with me for'ards. Come see how the water breaks against the bow all white like frosting.”

William touched his hat. “Sir, Miss.” He returned to his former posture, doing his best to ignore them. But the crew—his well-trained, efficient crew—stopped their work and gawked as the pretty, young woman went by.

“Mr. O'Rourke?”

His second lieutenant didn't respond.

William glanced at the man to his right. As he'd suspected, the Irishman's green gaze was firmly affixed to the most unwelcome guest. “Lieutenant O'Rourke.”

O'Rourke jumped at William's lowered voice and clipped syllables. “Aye, Captain?”

“The men . . .” With raised brows, William brushed his gaze over the deck.

“Aye, aye, Captain.” The junior officer stepped to the fore of the poop. “Look lively there! Mr. Gibson, see the men get back to their work.”

The midshipman below belted out a few commands in a deep voice that belied his youth and the crew hastened to obey. The lad wouldn't be eligible to sit for his lieutenant exam for two more years. Until then, he, along with the other fifteen midshipmen, still had much to learn from the officers aboard—as the officers still had much to learn from him.

“Carry on, Mr. O'Rourke. I shall be—” Where? He couldn't go to his quarters as they'd been invaded. “I shall be in the wardroom should I be needed.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

Near the larboard bow, the commodore's daughter tripped on a block and tackle. Fast action by the sailor stowing the line kept her from taking a spill over the side.

William shook his head. A ship was no place for a woman.



*13 Willoughby Street  
Portsmouth, England  
July 21, 1814*

Julia Witherington closed her eyes, and rubbed her forehead. The columns of numbers weren't adding properly, which made no sense. Logs in the fireplace shifted and popped, the sound sending shards of pain through her already throbbing head. She'd stayed at the Highmores' card party until the small hours of the morning when her mother finally consented to leave. Rising to breakfast with her father after just a few hours' sleep left her exhausted. But discussing with him the new peacetime regulations Parliament wanted to impose upon the Navy had been

worth the indisposition of a headache now.

Leaving the account books on her desk, she crossed to the window seat. Rain wept down the rippled glass windowpanes. Two days of chill drizzle with no signs of abatement. She pressed her forehead against the cold smoothness and closed her eyes, pulling her shawl tighter as a draft leaked in about the frame to envelope her. She missed Jamaica. She could almost smell the spices in the tropical air, hear the chattering of the seagulls, see the crystal waves as they scraped along white beaches. . . .

An unmistakable sound clattered on the street below. Julia opened her eyes. A carriage pulled to a stop at the door, and a figure in a dark cloak and high domed hat edged in gold with a large black cockade stepped out into the rain. She smoothed her white lawn dress and stretched away the stiffness of inactivity.

She couldn't hear any movement across the hall. Slipping into her father's room, she found the valet asleep on the dressing stool beside the wardrobe. She rapped on the mahogany paneled door of the tall cabinet. The young man rubbed his eyes then leapt to his feet. "Miss Witherington?"

She adopted a soft but authoritative tone. "The admiral's home, Jim."

He rushed to see to his duty, just as Julia had seen sailors do at the least word from her father. Admiral Sir Edward Witherington's position demanded obedience, but his character earned his men's respect and adulation. The valet grabbed his master's housecoat and dry shoes. He tripped twice in his haste before tossing the hem of the dressing gown over his shoulder.

She smothered a smile as she followed him down the curving staircase of the townhouse at a more sedate pace. The young man had yet to learn her father's true nature.

The admiral submitted himself to his valet's ministrations, a scowl etching his still-handsome face, broken only by the wink he gave Julia. She smiled but dug her nails into her palms as white-hot pain shot through the left side of her head.

He extended his left arm toward her. "You look tired. Did you rest at all today?"

Warmth enveloped her hand as her father's wrapped around it. "The plantation's books arrived from Jamaica in this morning's post. I've spent most of the day trying to keep my head above the flotsam of numbers."

Her father's chuckle rumbled through his chest as he tucked her hand under his arm and together they ambled down the hall toward his study. She smiled in response, but her joy faded quickly. "You may want to reserve your laughter, sir. I do believe the new steward is trying to cheat us."

His humor vanished. "The devil, you say! Show me these books."

She patted his arm. "After dinner, sir. Mother is already furious at the lateness of the hour. You know we are expected at some card party or another this evening."

"Ah, yes, dinner's more to the point." He opened the study door and ushered her in, then took a few steps back down the hall. "Creighton," he called. "Please inform Mrs. Stooksbury of my arrival. We shall be ready for dinner in half an hour's time."

Distance muffled the butler's affirmative response.

Julia settled into her favorite wing chair. A cheery fire crackled on the hearth, warming the dim room. Flickering light danced off the volumes lining the walls, books primarily about history and naval warfare. She alone knew where he hid the novels. "Anything of interest happen today?"

She loved this time alone with him in the evenings, hearing of his duties, of the officers, politicians, and government officials he dealt with on a daily basis while making decisions on which ships to decommission and which to keep in service.

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He sat at his desk and slipped on a pair of spectacles as he fingered through the stack of correspondence from the day's post. "Aye. An old friend made berth in Spithead today. Captain William Ransome. You remember him, I'm certain. He served under me for almost ten years as a midshipman and lieutenant." He leaned back, removed the glasses, and tapped them against his chin as his sea-colored eyes took on a nostalgic glaze. "One of the brightest and most promising officers I ever had the privilege of commanding."

Julia bit back her jealousy. Since her twin brother's death at sea nearly fifteen years ago, her father looked upon Ransome almost as a son. During her girlhood in Jamaica, her father's letters had been filled with tales of his adventures on the high seas, laced with references to William Ransome. Her father's patronage had accelerated Ransome's rise through the ranks.

When her father came to Jamaica to fetch her and her mother back to England less than a year ago, he'd known more about Ransome than Julia. The intimacy between daughter and father grew stronger every day now that he had his admiralty and a command that kept him in dry-dock. She couldn't risk Ransome coming between them. "He's here, in Portsmouth?"

"Aye. But not for long. He came back at my request to receive new orders."

"And where are you sending him, now that we're at peace with France?" *Please, let it be some distant port.*

Sir Edward smiled. "His ship is to be in dry-dock several weeks. Once repairs are finished, he will be sailing to Jamaica."

Julia's heart surged then dropped. "Jamaica?" *Home.* The place she'd lived from age ten when her father used his fortune gained at sea to purchase a sugar plantation. Only twice in the last nineteen years had she been forced to return to England. She hoped this time would be the last. She was ready to go home, to leave this wet place where the chill came not just from the weather, but from the people her mother insisted on socializing with.

"To hunt for pirates and privateers—and if the war continues much longer, possibly for American blockade runners trying to escape through the Gulf of Mexico. He'll weigh anchor in five weeks, barring foul weather." A bell sounded. "Ah, dinner." He glanced at his pocket watch. "Nearly ten minutes earlier than I requested, but not everything can operate with a ship's efficiency."

Julia's head throbbed and her stomach churned—but whether the nausea came from the headache or the thought of the inimitable William Ransome, she wasn't certain.

The sooner the man set sail, the better.

## Chapter Two

William pulled the collar of his oilskin raincoat higher to try to keep the water pouring from the aft point of his hat from going down the back of his neck. He checked the paper once more, then tucked it safely into his pocket.

After paying the hack cab driver, he took the four steps up to the front door of the townhouse in one leap. He knocked. The cold rain intensified. After a minute or two, William raised his hand to knock again, but the door swung open to reveal a warm light and a wizened man in standard black livery.

“Good evening, sir. How may I assist you?”

“Good evening. Is this the home of Captain Collin Yates?”

The butler smiled, then frowned. “Yes, sir, it is. However, I’m sorry to say Captain Yates is at sea, sir.”

“Is Mrs. Yates home?”

“Yes, sir. Please come in.”

William stepped into the black and white tiled entry, water forming a puddle under him as it ran from his outer garments. “Thank you.”

“May I tell Mrs. Yates who is calling?” The butler reached for William’s soaked hat and coat.

“Captain William Ransome.”

A glimmer of recognition sparkled in the butler’s hazy blue eyes—in the light of the hall, he appeared even older than William originally thought. “The Captain William Ransome who is the master’s oldest and closest friend?”

William nodded. “You must be Fawkes. Collin always said he would have you with him one day.”

“His father put up quite a fight, sir, but the lad needed me more.” Fawkes shuffled toward the stairs and waved for William to join him. “Mrs. Yates has just sat down to coffee. I’m certain she will be pleased to see you.”

Watching the old man slowly ascend the dark wooden stairs brought to mind a snippet of a memory—a child climbing the shrouds of a ship. It was a specific memory from many years ago, but he couldn’t capture it in detail to understand why that particular image came to mind. How many boys had he toughened up over the years by having them climb to the foremast top once a day as part of their regular training? What was unique about this one instance?

He shook his head to clear it and turned his attention to his uniform, checking it for lint, straightening the jacket with a gentle tug at the waist.

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Fawkes knocked on the first of two doors leading to rooms at the back of the house—family rooms rather than more formal entertaining rooms, meaning Susan was most likely alone. A soft, muffled voice invited entry. The butler motioned toward the door. It took a moment for William to understand the man wasn't going to announce him, but rather allow him to surprise the woman on the other side of the door. He turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open.

Susan Yates sat on a settee with her back to the door. The sitting room was well appointed and decorated with exotic items Collin had collected all over the world. "What is it, Fawkes—?" She turned to look over her shoulder and let out a strangled shriek. "William!"

He met her halfway around the sofa and accepted her hands in greeting. "Good evening, Susan. You're looking well."

Her reddish-blond curls bounced when she stepped back to look at him. "Why didn't you send word you were coming? I'd have held dinner for you. Shall I ring for a tray?" She started for the bell cords near the door.

"No, but thank you. I have already eaten."

"So—tell me everything. When did you arrive? Why has it been two months since your last letter?" Susan sounded more like the girl of fifteen he'd met a dozen years ago than the long-married wife of his best friend. She regained her seat and gazed up at him in expectation.

He sat in an overstuffed chair and started to relax for the first time in weeks. "Where is Collin? Last I heard, he returned home more than a month ago."

"The admiral asked for men to sail south to ferry troops home and naturally my dear Collin volunteered—anything to be at sea. He is supposed to be back within the week." She handed him a delicate china cup filled with steaming black coffee. "Now, on to your news."

"No news, in all honesty. I've been doing the same as Collin—returning soldiers and sailors home. I assumed I would be back in Portsmouth weeks ago or I would have written."

"But you're here now. For how long?"

"Five weeks. The admiral has a new assignment for *Alexandra*, but we are released for home leave for three weeks until we prepare to sail west."

"And your crew is not to be decommissioned in the meantime?" Susan asked.

"No. I believe the admiral understands my desire to keep my crew together. They have been with me for two years and need no training."

"Understands?" Susan let out a soft laugh. "Is not he the one who taught you the importance of an experienced crew?"

William sipped the coffee—not nearly as strong as his steward made it. "Yes, I suppose Collin and I did learn that from him . . . along with everything else we know about commanding a ship."

"Oh!" Susan jumped to her feet and crossed to the bell cords, then to a small desk where she took quill to paper and hastily scribbled a note.

A young woman knocked, then opened the door. "Yes, Missus?"

"Agatha, have Peyton take this note to Lady Dalrymple's with my apologies."

The maid curtseyed and departed to do her mistress's bidding.

"I'm terribly sorry, William. I just remembered the viscountess had invited me to a card party tonight."

"Please, do not let me keep you—"

Susan poured herself another cup of coffee. "Believe me, the company here is much more entertaining. Card parties have become all the fashion lately. If it weren't for Julia, I would probably decline every invitation."

“Julia—not Julia Witherington?” William set his cup down on the reading table beside him. The memory of the child climbing the shrouds . . .

“Yes. She returned to England about eight months ago and has become the darling of Portsmouth society, even if they do whisper about her being a ‘right old maid’ behind her back. Although, Julia’s presence almost always means Lady Witherington is also in attendance, so she doesn’t receive as many invitations as she probably would otherwise.”

From the bitter tone of Susan’s voice, William had a feeling Sir Edward’s wife had not changed much in the score of years since the last time William had encountered the woman. “Does the admiral attend many functions?”

“About half those his wife and daughter attend. Julia says she would attend fewer if she thought her mother would allow. Imagine, being nine-and-twenty and still having to do her mother’s bidding instead of making her own plans.”

“Have you come to know the Witheringtons well, then?” While eager to become reacquainted with the admiral, William wasn’t sure he wanted to renew any connection with the man’s wife, who’d alienated practically every member of her husband’s crew the summer of 1795 when she and her children sailed on then-Captain Witherington’s ship to take up residence in Jamaica. Miss Julia, though, captured his curiosity. Was she truly as beautiful and as headstrong as the gossipmongers throughout the Royal Navy reported?

“I was introduced to Miss Witherington at a ball Lord Fairfax held for them after their arrival in December. When the baron discovered my husband had served under Sir Edward, he arranged the introduction. I do not think I am flattering myself when I say we have become quite intimate friends—Miss Witherington and I, that is.”

William stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and paced the length of the room. “And what manner of person is she?”

“Oh, William, wait until you meet her. She tells the most fascinating tales of life in Jamaica—she runs her father’s sugar plantation there. Collin couldn’t keep up with her in a discussion of politics. She knows everything about the Royal Navy—but of course she would, as the daughter of an admiral.”

A high-pitched voice reciting ships’ ratings echoed in William’s memory and he couldn’t suppress a slight smile. She’d probably known more about the navy at age ten than most life-long sailors.

“I have met her before. But that was quite a few years ago.”

“I’d forgotten—you and Collin served on the *Indomitable* at the same time. He could remember her twin brother, Michael, but had no real memories of her. She said her mother kept her confined to the cabin most of the voyage.”

Only when the young miss couldn’t slip out dressed in her brother’s clothes. After a public dressing-down when her mother caught her on deck about a week into the journey, William had only encountered Miss Julia a few other times, and then usually in the company of her mother whose cold glares made him give her a wide berth. Sir Edward had been wise in insisting the women stay to their cabin, ensuring as little disruption to the crew as possible.

“William?”

He snapped out of his reverie and returned to his seat. “My apologies, Susan. This talk of Sir Edward’s family brings back memories. Did Collin ever tell you how competitive we were with each other? Always trying to out-do the other in our studies or in our duty assignments.” He recalled a few anecdotes for his best friend’s wife, much safer mooring than thinking about the young lass with the cascade of coppery hair he hadn’t been able to forget after almost twenty years.



Julia searched the small crowd of guests milling about the receiving room at Lady Dalrymple's. Susan said she would be here tonight, but the diminutive blonde was nowhere to be seen. Julia had counted on her friend's presence to make the evening bearable. Mixing with strangers made her anxious and she loathed the tedium of the constant talk of fashion, London society, and those not present.

At least tonight her father had come with them. He would seek an escape for them as soon as he thought he could do so without appearing rude.

Many of the young men she'd met at these functions since her return to England approached to speak to her, requesting she sit at their particular tables—a few titled aristocrats, a few gentry, all of whom knew about the thirty thousand pounds she would inherit upon her marriage, as well as her being the heiress of her father's considerable wealth and Tierra Dulce, one of the largest sugar plantations in Jamaica.

She hadn't lived to the age of twenty-nine without learning a great deal about people, and she knew full well that each of the men who paid his address to her was more interested in her pecuniary value than in her person. She just wished they would be honest about it instead of trying to pretend they were in love with her.

"Julia, my dear." Her father led her across the room. "You remember, I'm certain, Admiral and Mrs. Hinds."

"Yes, of course." She curtsied to the couple—the man, many years younger and several inches taller than her father, the woman only a few years older than herself and nearly half a head shorter. "It is wonderful to see you again."

Mrs. Hinds hooked her arm through Julia's and steered her toward a table in the corner, away from the crowd of young people flirting and gossiping near the fireplace. "Miss Witherington, we thought you might like to make a fourth at our table."

"Yes, I'd love to."

Although not as lively as Susan Yates, Mrs. Hinds proved to be an interesting companion, supplying stories of her adventures living aboard her husband's ships as they played whist. After a few hours, with the excuse of needing an early night to be able to report for work in the morning, Admirals Witherington and Hinds called for their carriages.

Julia followed her father into the entry hall, settling her wrap around her shoulders.

"Where do you think you are going?"

She turned to see her mother marching toward her. "Home with Papa."

"I insist you stay. Several young men here have asked particularly that you attend them at their tables. And Lady Dalrymple will be offended if you leave so early." The deep lines etched into her mother's face emphasized her scowl.

"I don't seem to recall seeing a table with an empty seat." Julia's headache worsened with each passing moment. "I have already taken leave of Lady Dalrymple, and she did not seem in the least offended." She stepped toward her mother, placed her hands on her mother's shoulders, and kissed her cheek. "Good night."

The action stunned Lady Witherington into silence, allowing Julia to take her father's arm and walk out the door with no further objections. He gave orders to their driver to take them home and then return for Lady Witherington.

"What say you to planning a dinner party, my dear?" he asked as he handed Julia up into

the barouche. The carriage top was still up, although the rain had stopped and the moon and a few stars peeked through the retreating clouds.

“Mother does not like to give dinner parties—it’s all card parties in society now, you know that.”

Her father grimaced and unbuttoned his dark green tailcoat and sat on the seat facing her. “This isn’t a ‘society’ dinner I had in mind. I thought to invite Captain and Mrs. Yates, the Hinds, and a few other captains and admirals.”

“As you would if you were still in command of your own ship and they had just come into port, sir?” The darkness wouldn’t be able to hide her smile completely. With as much as Lady Witherington would like him to act more like “Sir Edward” and less like “Admiral Witherington,” even on land, her father couldn’t give up the traditions of the Royal Navy.

“Precisely. Hospitality and a well-cooked meal are still fashionable for naval officers.”

“Name the date and I shall work with Mrs. Stooksbury on the menu.”

“Is a week’s notice sufficient?” Moonlight sparkled in her father’s smiling eyes. “Captain Yates should return by then. It can be in honor of Captain Yates’s and Captain Ransome’s great success during the war and their safe return home.”

Julia forced the smile to remain on her face. Of course. She should have realized the dinner was an excuse to honor Captain Ransome. The happy prospect of an evening spent in company whose society and conversation did not make her nervous dissipated. To have to witness her father’s affection for Ransome personally, to see him treat Ransome as a son in public—Julia did not know if she would be able to bear it.

Her father mumbled to himself, listing names of his friends amongst the admiralty and officers. “Seventeen to invite for dinner, I believe. What think you, Julia?”

“I shall inform Mrs. Stooksbury to plan a dinner for twenty Thursday-next.” Perhaps with so large a party, she would be able to avoid watching her father’s interaction with his favorite.

She berated herself for thinking ill of Ransome—in their brief encounters aboard *Indomitable* so long ago, he had been nothing but kind to her. He had helped her on several occasions, even saving her from injury on deck during a storm, and never had he revealed her true identity to anyone when she managed to sneak out from under her mother’s watchful gaze disguised as her brother.

Even then, though, her father had shown his preference for William Ransome—the best student, the brightest candidate for lieutenantcy and future command . . . in short, the kind of son he wanted. Julia’s throat started to tighten. Michael had tried his best. She had studied alongside him, learning the texts by memory as Michael struggled to remember long lists of knots, ropes, sails, and armament; logarithms, geometry, navigational calculations, and astronomy; and the use of chronometer and sextant for determining distances and plotting accurate longitude. By the time he signed onto a ship at age twelve as a midshipman, Julia knew more than enough to have signed on herself.

The barouche rolled to a stop in front of 13 Willoughby Street. She bade her father goodnight in the entry before climbing two flights of stairs to her room. After Nancy helped her out of her dress and corset, Julia dismissed her chambermaid to complete her nighttime routine alone. She doused all lights but one lamp, and carried it along with a wooden box to her bedside table. Once comfortably propped up against several pillows, Julia picked up the box and set it on her lap. The mother of pearl inlay in the satiny rosewood showed the patina of years of handling, yet was in pristine condition. She flipped the latch open.

Resting in the red velvet interior lay a packet of letters tied with a blue ribbon. She untied

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it and ran her fingers across the faded, boyish script on the top envelope. Dear, sweet Michael. The only person in the world who had ever truly sympathized with her frustration of having been born a girl. She carefully unfolded the letter and angled it so the light fell upon the compact writing.

*HM Frigate Sparrow*

*15 May 1797*

*Dearest Julia,*

*I pray this letter finds you well and not grieving my absence too deeply. I know my going to sea will be hardest on you of all people. I miss you dreadfully and wish I could be at Tierra Dulce with you. I do desire so to please our father, yet I fear I do not have the ambition to become the sailor he wishes me to be.*

*Thanks to your help, I am far ahead of the other midshipmen my age and the ship's master has put me in charge of a gun crew, which on a frigate the size of Sparrow does not denote much, as there are only two other first year mids, and neither come from Naval families.*

*I try to press on with my advanced studies in hopes of earning a transfer to a larger ship, but without your tutelage, I find the information slips out of my brain as soon as I read it. Why did God see fit to make me the boy and you the girl?*

Why indeed? The question was one she and Michael had laughed about often, Michael even suggesting once Julia cut off all her hair, dress as a boy and take his place when the time came for him to go to sea.

She continued reading, smiling over her brother's comical descriptions of his messmates. On the thirty-six gun, fifth-rate frigate, Michael had come to know the crew of 250 intimately in a short amount of time as the small ship sailed about the Caribbean protecting British merchant ships and patrolling for pirates and privateers.

The letter continued onto the back of the folded page, surrounding the address.

*The launch boat is being prepared, so if this letter is to go into the post for you this week, I must close, dear sister. My love to Mother. And as you gaze at the stars tonight, find the North Star and pray for*

*Your loving brother,*

*Michael*

Julia climbed out of bed and crossed to the tall windows that overlooked the street below. Wrapped in her dressing gown against the evening chill, she opened the window and leaned out as far as she dared, searching the sky until she found the North Star.

"Almighty God, I still do not understand why You took Michael away from us at so tender an age. After so many years, I miss him as if he'd only departed for the sea yesterday. Why cannot Papa see how hard Michael tried to please him? Why did he close his heart toward his only son and let a stranger take Michael's place?" She dashed at the tears rolling down her cheeks. "Please help me meet Captain Ransome with grace and dignity. And, if You will it, please let our meetings be brief and few until he once again sets sail."

## Chapter Three

All throughout Spithead harbor, ships' bells rang out four couplets of chimes, marking midnight and the beginning of the middle watch. From the deck of a large, dark ship, a voice rang out, demanding the identity of the small boat approaching.

"Captain William Ransome for *Alexandra*," William called.

The familiar face of the third lieutenant, illuminated by a lantern, appeared over the gunwale balustrade. "Welcome back, Captain."

William paid the boys who'd rowed him out, then climbed the ladder built into *Alexandra's* side. Once on deck, Lieutenant Eastwick saluted by grasping the fore point of his hat.

William returned the gesture and turned to the midshipman holding the lantern. "Pass word for Lieutenant Cochrane to join me in my cabin."

"Aye, aye, Captain." The teen scrambled to obey.

"Carry on, Lieutenant Eastwick."

The man eight years William's junior bade him goodnight, unable to keep the tone of disappointment out of his voice.

William walked through the vacant wheelhouse and entered the doors beyond into the main room of his quarters. The long table surrounded by ten tall-back wooden chairs served as dining table and workspace. He passed through into the small chamber behind containing his hammock, desk, sea chest, and washstand—in addition to the large 32-pound cannon square in the middle, reminding him at all times he made his home on a ship of war. After every action *Alexandra* had taken part in, his chamber smelled of burned gunpowder for days.

The main cabin door opened and William's steward, Archibald Darling, a tall, rough-looking sailor with a wild tangle of dark hair, entered. "Welcome back, sir. I trust your visit to the Port Admiralty went well."

William stepped back into the main cabin, shrugged out of his sodden raincoat, and tossed it toward Darling. "As well as could be expected."

A brisk knock sounded. William nodded and Darling admitted the first lieutenant.

"That is all for now, Darling."

The steward knuckled his forehead in salute and latched the door behind him. Cochrane reported on the crew's activity since William's departure at eleven that morning.

While Cochrane gave his report, William paced around the table forcing himself to concentrate through his fatigue. When Cochrane finished, William stopped behind a chair at the middle of the table and rested his hands on the high back. His first officer and friend looked anxious. William held back a smile. After two long years at sea, everyone was eager for home leave,

but most aboard worried they'd come back to Portsmouth to be decommissioned.

"I spoke at length with Admiral Sir Edward Witherington this afternoon." William kept his voice stern. The practical joker amongst the officers, Cochrane deserved to squirm a bit. "Tomorrow morning, I would like you to call the entire crew to order at six bells in the morning watch. I know seven o'clock is an hour early, but we only have until noon to clear everything and all personnel from the ship."

Cochrane swallowed hard. "Aye, aye, sir."

"Darling!" William called, knowing the steward would be within earshot.

The door opened immediately. "Aye, sir?"

"Go to the wardroom and inform the officers—the lieutenants and petty officers—they are to assemble here in five minutes. Full dress is not necessary. Let Lieutenant Eastwick know as well."

Darling saluted and let the door slam behind him as he hurried away.

William sat at the head of the table and started looking through the pile of correspondence which had arrived in his absence.

"You're going to make me wait for the others, aren't you?" Cochrane, now pacing, asked.

William looked at him over the top of a letter from a former commander. "Why shouldn't I? You might as well have a seat, Ned."

"Just tell me! Are we being turned out or not?"

The muscles in William's cheeks ached with the effort to hold back his smile. He skimmed through a few more letters. "May I remind you, Mr. Cochrane, at this moment, I am still captain of this ship and your superior officer. You might try to remember that fact when addressing me."

Cochrane flopped into one of the chairs with a huff. Within the five minute timeframe, the other five lieutenants along with the petty officers filled the cabin, each in varying states of dress, most in their shirtsleeves, a few with trousers hastily pulled on over their nightshirts.

Once assured all were present, William dismissed Darling—who no doubt pressed his ear to the crack between the double doors as soon as they latched—and rose, clasping his hands behind his back.

"I know every man aboard is anxious to hear what orders Admiral Witherington has for us." He paused and looked around the room at each of his officers. "The entire crew must vacate by noon tomorrow. All personal belongings left behind will become the salvage of the dockyard crew."

The officers shifted and murmured at the word "salvage," and William had never seen a darker scowl on Cochrane's face. William schooled his own features before continuing. "*Alexandra* will be turned over to the dock master at noon tomorrow and—"

"Not decommissioned!"

"Sir! Turned over?"

"They canna' scrap her, sir!"

"She's still a sound ship, even if she is patched up, sir!"

"Did you tell the Admiral—"

"Silence." William barely had to raise his voice for the assemblage to come back to order. "As I was saying, *Alexandra* will be given over to the dock master tomorrow . . . for a complete refitting in preparation for our next assignment."

Excitement rolled over the officers like a tidal wave hitting the shore, but this time they waited for William to finish.

"The crew and officers are, as of noon tomorrow, at liberty. Officers will report back to me

at the Admiralty on 11 August; crew are to report back two days later. We will have less than a fortnight to fit up and supply her before we weigh anchor 26 August.”

Expressions of relief, of gratitude, filled the room and the atmosphere changed from tense to celebratory.

Above the noise, Cochrane made himself heard. “Where will we be going, sir?”

“Gentlemen, the war with America continues, and more ships are needed to patrol the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico for blockade runners.” Now William let his smile show.

The men exclaimed over their good luck of spending the winter in the balmy climate most of them had only ever heard about.

“Sir, some of the men who came to us pressed two years ago—what if they don’t come back from leave?” the boatswain asked.

“Matthews, any man of the crew who decides he does not want to sign-on for our new assignment may stay behind. Replacements will be easy to find. I have ten requests for positions here,” William held up the stack of letters, “from highly qualified sailors and officers desperate for a ship.”

Each man in the room had friends who’d been turned out on half-pay weeks or months ago. The expressions on their faces showed they acknowledged the blessing of continued assignment.

“Lieutenant Eastwick, you may inform the crew currently on watch. Mr. Cochrane, please inform the midshipmen. If there are no further questions, men . . .?”

To a man, everyone murmured, “No sir.”

“Dismissed. I have some packing to do.” William joined their laughter and called for Darling.

The burly sailor pushed his way into the cabin through the outflow of officers. “Should I wake Cook, sir? He’ll need extra help packing up his pots and pans, and the purser—well he were here, weren’t he?”

William really should say something to Darling about listening at the door, but as he wasn’t prone to gossip . . . he watched the steward bustle around both cabins mumbling about the work needing doing before vacating tomorrow.

Darling had been an ordinary seaman until William’s previous steward had been killed in an action off the coast of Spain about a year ago. Since experienced stewards weren’t to be had and every other skilled member of his crew had been needed where he was, William took a volunteer.

Now would be an opportune time to find one of those many experienced men with no current employment and have a steward who did not have to constantly be reminded of his duties. If he could find another place for Darling—if perhaps one of the petty officers’ mates did not come back . . . Darling had put forth a colossal effort to learn the job and had become a decent steward—nothing like the experienced men of which his friends could boast, but competent.

William crossed to his desk and began to sort through the neat stacks of papers atop it, much of which he would need in the next week as he finalized his logs and reported on his ship’s activities since the last time he’d done so two years ago.

Darling grew quiet and William turned to see if he’d left the cabin. The steward stood in the door between the cabin and sleeping quarters, worrying one of the brass buttons on his uniform coat.

“What is it, Darling?”

“Well, sir . . . it’s just that . . . you see . . .” Darling’s gaze never lifted from the floor.

“Spit it out, man. You know you can tell me anything.”

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"Aye, sir." Darling cleared his throat. "Sir, could I . . . what I mean to say is . . . would you . . .?"

William crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows.

Darling released his breath in a low growl. "You see, sir, the truth is . . . I have nowhere to go on land. That's why I came to the navy as a lad—no family, no home. So what I want to ask is if you might take me with you."

Very few things in life could surprise William. No words immediately came to mind.

"I mean," Darling quickly added, "I'll work—work as your valet or in the kitchens or wherever I can be of use, sir. But I can't afford to stay in a hotel or boarding house for three weeks, sir."

Darling, working as his valet? William nearly laughed at the image. Susan Yates had not just invited but insisted William stay with them until *Alexandra* was habitable once again. Perhaps experience working with a well-trained household staff would be helpful. William could well afford to cover the extra expense to Collin and Susan's household and maybe Fawkes could be convinced to take Darling under his care and train the man in the areas where he lacked the most grace, tact, and diplomacy.

"Very well. If you would like, I could use a valet."



After breakfast with her father, Julia returned to bed, slipping into a deep, dreamless sleep. She awoke several hours later, light streaming into her eastern-facing windows.

She pulled the bell cord beside her bed to call for Nancy. Stretching her arms over her head, she climbed out of bed and crossed to sit at her vanity. She pulled her nearly waist-length hair out of the single long braid.

Nancy handed Julia a steaming cup of coffee and a scone and took over working on Julia's hair. The young maid chattered about the rest of the household staff, the gossip she'd heard at the market that morning—after all, Mrs. Stooksbury couldn't possibly carry everything herself, could she?—and Lady Witherington's plans for the day.

The small clock on the mantle chimed eleven times. In two hours, her mother would be leaving to make her calls. "Nancy, I believe I am going to make a call myself today." Susan's absence last night worried her. It hadn't been very long since Susan lost a baby after only a couple months of pregnancy. The doctor had warned Susan she could experience complications weeks or months afterward.

While Julia washed her face and sponged off with the warm water Nancy had brought up, the maid pulled out an appropriate dress and requisite undergarments. Julia glared at the corset with narrowed eyes. After eight months in England, she still hadn't gotten used to wearing the contraption every day. Each night, she ached to rip the thing off so she could move and take a deep breath without it digging painfully into her ribs. To fit into the high-waisted dresses with narrow skirts, Julia required corseting to flatten the curves of her figure. She missed the plain cotton blouses and linen skirts she could wear around the plantation.

Half an hour later, she stood in front of the portrait mirror. She looked just like the marble busts of the women from ancient Greece, so she must be acceptable.

Creighton, the butler, met her at the bottom of the stairs in the front foyer. "Shall I call for some refreshment to be taken upstairs to the sitting room for you, Miss?"

She checked her smile over his thinly veiled hint at where he thought she should be.

“Don’t trouble, Creighton. I thought I’d pay Mrs. Stooksbury a visit before I leave for my call in a little while.”

“What time shall I have Elton bring up the barouche?”

“Papa’s barouche?”

Creighton cocked his sandy head slightly. “Yes, Miss. Lady Witherington has already ordered the chaise for her own use today. Unless you wanted to ride with her . . .”

“The barouche will be fine, thank you. Twelve forty-five.”

In the rear of the townhouse, she descended another half set of stairs and followed a brick-walled passageway to the kitchen. She visited with the cook over a steaming cup of tea and discussed ideas for her father’s dinner next week, taking notes so Mrs. Stooksbury, busy with the day’s baking, would not have to try to remember it all.

In the midst of debating the popularity of venison or pork amongst sailors, Creighton entered and cleared his throat.

Julia looked at the watch pinned to her wide yellow ribbon sash. “Goodness.” She drained her teacup. “Mrs. Stooksbury, we shall continue this later. I am going to win this point yet.”

“Foo. Off with you now.” The Irishwoman shooed Julia and Creighton out of her domain.

Ahead of her in the passage, she could hear Creighton mumbling under his breath about “ladies who won’t keep to their rightful places.”

Oh, if only he could see her on a typical day at Tierra Dulce. He would know then how little stock she put in being a “lady.” Only a few years older than she, he was far too young to be so unbending in his ideas.

Creighton opened the front door for her with a flourish, and her father’s driver met her at the bottom of the steps.

“Where to this fine morning, Miss?” Elton asked, assisting her up into the open-top carriage.

“Thank you, Elton. I’m calling on Mrs. Susan Yates this morning.”

“Very good, Miss.” He touched the brim of his tall black hat and climbed up into the box.

A quarter hour later, after he handed Julia down, Elton escorted her to the front door and knocked for her. “Shall I wait for you, Miss?”

“Let me find out if she is in, first.”

After a few moments, just as Elton raised his hand to knock again, the door swung open to reveal Fawkes, impeccably dressed as always. “Good morning, Miss Witherington. Please do, come in.”

“Thank you.” She turned to Elton. “Return for me at two o’clock, please.”

“No need, Miss. Our driver can see you home when you’re ready,” Fawkes offered.

She argued, but Fawkes carried the point and Julia sent Elton home, then followed the butler into the black and white marbled foyer.

“The missus is upstairs in the sitting room.” Fawkes motioned toward the stairs. “I apologize for not escorting you, Miss, but . . .”

“No, no. I believe I can find my way.” Climbing up and down the several flights of stairs in the townhouse must be hard on the elderly man’s joints. She climbed the stairs with ease. The double doors near the first floor landing stood open and Julia could hear Susan humming. She knocked on one of the open doors. “Susan?”

“Julia! What a pleasant surprise.” Susan Yates crossed the room and hugged her. “I’m so glad you came by. Can you stay for a while?”

“All day if you can bear my presence so long.” Julia rested her hands on the shorter

woman's shoulders and held her at arms' length. "Are you well? I was worried when you did not come to Lady Dalrymple's last night."

"Oh, that. I sent a note making my apologies, but obviously word did not make it to you. I had a surprise visitor last night—a friend I have not seen in nearly two years." Susan squeezed Julia's wrists. "Come, I've bought a new hat for church Sunday, but I think it needs something."

Julia laughed at the mountain of ribbons and silk flowers piled on the low table in front of the gold and ivory striped settee. The new hat turned out to be a straw bonnet with a wide brim lined in blue silk that would frame Susan's cherubic face and emphasize her azure eyes.

"You just missed Lady Dalrymple. She called half an hour ago—also to check on me. She suspected I might be 'in the family way'—the only reason she could think of for why I would miss one of her parties."

"She must have been disappointed when you explained otherwise." Julia was relieved by Susan's good cheer. "What news did she bring?"

Susan launched into the gossip of new romances between young couples formed because of Lady Dalrymple's "shrewdness in planning the invitations." Apparently at least one engagement had been entered into in the last few months because of the viscountess's parties. "She was so disappointed you left early last night. She was certain you and Lord someone-or-another would make a great match."

"Yes, she and my mother probably planned it together. Mama would like nothing better than to see me married to some Englishman and settled on an estate in the country with a townhouse in London . . . so she can stay there with me."

"Now, Julia," Susan chided.

"I know. But if I'm going to marry an Englishman, it'll be one who will let me go home—back to Jamaica."

"You say that now. But when you fall in love . . ." Susan bit her bottom lip.

"You know my thoughts on love, my dear friend."

"Ah, yes. Let me see if I remember correctly. 'Falling in love is a choice, not fate nor something predetermined by God.' And I will say again, you know not of what you speak. When you good and truly fall in love, you will discover there is no choice. The only thing you can think of is being with him, no matter where in the world he may be."

Julia kept her smile plastered on her face. She was tired of people telling her what her life would be like once she fell in love. She had given up on love long ago. Tierra Dulce was her true love; a husband was merely a necessity. She wanted to make a good choice of husband, but falling in love did not figure into her plans. "Tell me all about the matches Lady Dalrymple supposedly made last night."

Julia's lap became a repository for the ribbons and flowers Susan rejected as she merrily repeated the viscountess's stories of love matches made and broken, some all in the course of the evening.

Julia enjoyed spending time with Susan Yates. The other woman was completely different from anyone she had ever known. Susan enjoyed talking about anything—her husband said she talked just to hear the sound of her own voice—and required nothing but an occasional one- or two-word response from Julia to know she was still listening. Half the time, Julia wasn't sure what Susan was saying. On several occasions, though, Susan had opened her heart to Julia, sharing her desire to have a baby, her pain at having lost several pregnancies; before the war ended, she'd confided her concerns for Collin's safety, and asked Julia to pray with her for his return.

In many ways—from her seemingly constant good humor, to her forgetfulness, to her love

of talking—Susan reminded Julia of Michael. If she'd had a sister—

A knock on the front door echoed through the house. The only notice Susan took was to say, "I wonder who that might be," and then continue with her story.

Brisk footsteps sounded on the stairs, yet Susan continued talking, tossing more ribbons and flowers at Julia. With her back to the open doors, Julia could feel, but not see, the guest enter the room.

Susan finally looked up. "Gracious! Is it past two already?" In response, the grandfather clock in the hall chimed once for half-past.

Julia shoved the pile of accoutrements from her lap and stood to greet her friend's guest properly. Framed in the doorway stood a navy captain, his crisp blue uniform showing his strong-but-slim build to perfection. His dark hair curled a bit over the high collar, and his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled due to years of squinting against the wind and sun.

Her heart gave a little flutter when the handsome officer smiled down at Susan as she took his hand in greeting. Susan pulled him into the room and Julia turned as they made their way toward her, making sure not to lose sight of the man. When he stood just a few paces from her, he smiled directly at her and she could see his eyes were a clear sky-blue. A clear sky-blue just like—

A sudden chill washed over Julia as she remembered where she'd seen those eyes before.

"Miss Julia Witherington, may I present Captain William Ransome?"