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THE DESTINED DUKE

by

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BA in English Literature, University of Missouri, Saint Louis
2001

Presented in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
in Humanities

Hollins University
Roanoke, Virginia
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Director of Essay: _____
Professor Amanda Cockrell

Department: English

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work of fiction to my loving parents, Thomas and JoAnn Cosgrove. Your love for each other taught me what love is from an early age and I have always known and recognized what a blessing it is to be the child of such a happy union. As I grew and survived my share of heartbreaks, it was your example that helped me continue to hope and believe that I too could find love.

Travis Glover, thank you for loving and marrying me! You made an indelible impression on me at age eleven when you asked me out in front of a cafeteria of children and again as an adult when we reconnected. You opened my heart to love again by being a man of your word and made me believe again that there are good men with integrity in our generation – no small feat! It is your love that has provided me with the renewed strength and desire to finish my graduate project.

Suzanne Kracke and Barbara Delgado, thank you for being my friends and for always encouraging me. I cannot thank you both enough for taking the time from your families to read and provide feedback on my writing. You are both the dearest of friends any woman could have!

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Introduction

The idea for what would become this fiction piece, *The Destined Duke*, occurred to me during my first graduate writing class at Hollins University with Professor Amanda Cockrell. I remember the first question she asked of us, her students, was in regard to what genre we loved to read and what we may be interested in writing. As I sat at the large class table about two-thirds around, I awaited my turn, listening to my fellow classmates and trying to determine if I was brave enough in a graduate writing class to admit that I love to read romance novels and historical fiction – both genres that some of my “literary” friends grimaced at and proclaimed to be “chick lit” – and, certainly not worthy to be considered literature. However, the more I sat and listened to my classmates and considered what I may like to write, I knew that I was going to be in trouble if I tried to say anything other than the truth – for working during the day as a technical writer for an engineering company and free-lance writing and editing pharmaceutical monographs pretty much left me spent and I knew in my heart that I just didn’t have it in me to spend any more time writing something that I couldn’t completely enjoy. So, when it was my turn to share my favorite genre, I trepidatiously found my voice and admitted that I loved romance novels and historical fiction. To my amazement, Professor Cockrell didn’t grimace or reject either as literature and even shared that she too enjoyed the genre. I knew that very moment that I was at the correct university, in the right class, and with the best professor for me. From that instant, I have never turned back, although I will say my characters and plot have evolved dramatically from where I started to where I now conclude my graduate project for submission. And while, my MALS essay is concluding, my efforts to improve my writing, as well as complete my novel, will continue – all thanks to Professor Cockrell, who has taught me that writing is a craft that takes a lifetime to develop and hopefully perfect.

So, without further ado, I present the first chapters of *The Destined Duke*, a fiction piece that centers on the life of Nicholas Pierce, The Duke of Hastings, and Isabella Marie Wells.

Kingston, Jamaica

New Year's Eve 1853

Chapter 1

Captain Nicholas Pierce, affectionately known to his crew and friends as Nick, sat at the mahogany table of the nicest tavern in downtown Kingston, Jamaica studying the scene around him. The aroma of sea salt and the musky stench of a room full of seafaring men permeated the air, mixed with rum and the evening's fare of fish, lobster, crab, and the New Year's Eve special, Beef Wellington. As Nick surveyed the room, it was evident that his crew and fellow pirates were enjoying the free flowing rum and the bounty of the scantily clad buxom wenches – a view they freely offered to all in the hope of more. At least his men were enjoying the New Year celebrations, Nick thought. A life at sea was a lonely one and the least he could do as Captain was offer his crew an evening of entertainment, which they all seemed to be enjoying he thought, thankfully oblivious to his personal melancholy.

“What can I get ye, Love?” asked a feminine, sing-song voice.

“Do you have any English ale? I find myself tired of rum tonight,” Nicholas said as he looked down into his empty cup.

“Homesick are ye?” she asked, before scampering off to the bar for his order, not waiting for a reply.

Nick returned to taking in the scene around him and was relieved to realize that his crew in their current state of intoxication was oblivious to his melancholy. For he knew that should they take note of it, he wouldn't have a moment's peace and quiet. And yet, in spite of all the celebrating, he couldn't help thinking that his mood was befitting the tavern's environment, as it

was paneled in dark, mahogany wood and the dim light cast from the candles created shadows that seemed to mirror the haunting reflections of his mind.

“Here ye are, Love,” she said softly upon her return.

Momentarily drawn from his retrospection, Nick lifted his eyes to her face, curious to see if the bar wench’s pretty and youthful voice mirrored her countenance. Looking at her, he was surprised to recognize in her something that he hadn’t seen in years. For her eyes still reflected the brilliant blue of the Caribbean Sea and the lightness of edelweiss, yes, pure innocence, he thought as he looked upon her. “From where do you hale?” he asked.

“Scotland, Love,” she said in her native brogue, smiling as she noticed his interest in her.

“How did you come to reside in Jamaica?”

“A man I loved and who I thought loved me promised me a better life and I was silly enough to believe him – a common enough story so I have learned. So, here I am trying to survive and earn enough for passage home.”

“Sadly, I’m sure you are correct. Love is only for the poets - for it is a rare gem amongst the poor and even rarer amongst the nobility.”

“Tis sad but true. But, begging your pardon, you sound a bit woeful for it bein’ a holiday. If ye’d like,” she said timidly, realizing he wasn’t like most of the other pirates, “I’d be glad to keep your company in a wee bit.”

Holding her in his sight for a moment, he considered the option of allowing himself to enjoy her innocence for a night, before he realized it would ultimately make him feel worse.

“Thank you, tis’ a sweet offer. However, I prefer to sit here alone and drown my sorrows a bit longer. I find my mind yet too alert. Besides, when a man is missing his home and hearth, it can’t be resolved by one night’s company – no matter how pleasant the package.”

“Perhaps not,” she said understandingly, yet sad at the lost opportunity. “But, tis much better than being alone with ye thoughts. Should ye change your mind, my name is Clare,” she said before taking her leave.

Lifting his tankard, Nick swished it around and wondered how long it would take for her to return with his ale. It was a hell of a way to spend New Year’s Eve, attempting to drink away the dream of a home and family. Usually, he managed to stay busy enough with the crew and needs of the ship, but lately, it seemed he was having a harder time keeping such thoughts of home at bay. His life at sea had been good though and he truly had nothing to complain about. Besides he thought, his father, the drunk, had ruined any chance he ever had for a normal life like other young noblemen. Then, cursing himself out loud, he said, “Bloody hell, why am I thinking of my father, home, and England? It must be the holidays and reflections of what may have been.”

The sudden sound of a group of rabble rousers laughing boisterously raised his attention as they entered the bar bringing with them the fresh scent of the sea air. Nick lifted his eyes and followed them as they sat at a table a few feet away from him. As they began to share stories of England and Europe, he became absorbed in their gregarious talk of the latest political affairs, tales of the sea, and the loved ones they left behind.

Within a few moments, he was so engrossed in their stories from home that he didn’t even notice the gentleman in the dark cloak enter the bar a few minutes behind them. Thus, when the very same figure came to stand directly to the right of him, he was startled and surprised that he had let his guard down so in a port such as Kingston. After all, Kingston was a pirate’s pleasure cove and lawlessness was its best asset. One could never be too careful and Nick was usually cautious to a fault. He never drank himself senseless. An agile mind and good reasoning

skills were essential, as one always needed to be cautious of any enemies that might try to take the opportunity to surprise.

“You know, for a man who likes to keep his enemies guessing, you have become damn predictable. Thank God for that though ol’ friend, otherwise I might have been at the mercy of the devil himself trying to find you.”

Startled to hear his old friend’s voice, Nick nearly fell out of his seat and in an effort to find his footing, knocked his chair onto the planked wood floor. To his amazement upon standing upright, he found himself standing eye to eye with his childhood friend and was suddenly so happy that he found himself embracing his old friend and patting him on the back, as he said, “Willy?” Willy? Aye, tis’ really you!”

“That it is old friend! For some reason, the crown doesn’t realize that the sea is a bloody big place to find a man who doesn’t want to be found. Needle in a haystack if you ask me. Luckily, I remembered that there was a tavern here in Kingston that served traditional British fare at the holidays and remembered you had a soft spot for it. So, I thought why not try Kingston first – though I never expected to succeed. I almost couldn’t believe my eyes when I spotted your ship in port. As soon as we were tied up and secure, I came directly here hoping to find you,” Willy said.

“Sit down, won’t you? What would you like to drink?”

Sitting, Willy said, “Do they serve ale?”

“Aye, they do!” Nick said still standing and boisterously yelled across to the bar, “Clare, an English ale for my friend here too!” Then, he sat himself down across from his friend, truly delighted for the first time in weeks.

“What’s this business about that has you looking for me and what in God’s teeth are you doing here in Kingston – on New Year’s Eve of all nights? Last time we spoke you said you were heading home to England permanently. I thought you of all men would be too busy enjoying your family and estate to still have the sea as a mistress. Aye, I certainly didn’t expect to see you again so soon, if not forever.”

“Well, tis an odd thing to be true. And, the truth is I certainly didn’t expect to be back in these waters anytime soon myself. I actually planned on spending the Christmas and New Year holidays at home with my family. You must remember how my mother and siblings can be from our childhood – and let me just say that not much has changed in all this time. As matter of fact, my acute absence for so many years has made them worse! They absolutely loved the idea of all of us being together for the first time in years. But, as your ol’ friend and servant to the crown, I’ve come looking for you. Honestly, I hope you’ll still be happy to see me after I share with you my news from home,” Willy said with concern in his eyes.

“Aye, I am so happy to be seeing you that I can’t imagine anything you say could dampen me spirits.”

“Tis a relief to hear you say that after the way we last departed to be sure. But, I’m afraid this news may affect your current livelihood and open old wounds for you.”

“What’s this you speak of? Nothing you say could affect me so.”

“Aye, friend. But, the news I am about to share may indeed - and, in more than one way.”

“Here ye are,” Clare said, “I thought I would bring two fresh pints of ale, as I thought you may want to celebrate.”

“Thank you, for that was thoughtful,” Nick said as she took her leave.

“Well, I’ve got my good British ale in hand. So, if you are set on sharing news that may upset me, you best be doing it before I finish it,” Nick said.

“Which do you prefer first, the bad news or the worse news?”

“If you’re putting it that way, you might as well get on with it and give me the worst of it first.”

Pondering Nick’s words, Willy lifted his drink and almost swallowed the whole pint in one gulp as if summoning liquid courage. Sitting the tankard down firmly, he said, “It regards the Duke of Hastings.”

“Nothing about that man concerns me.”

“Nick, I don’t know how to tell you this. But, you are now the Duke of Hastings. Not your father - no longer anyway.”

Momentarily shocked and stunned by his friend’s choice of words, Nick said, “No longer...?” And as the news sunk in, he asked, “Is he dead?”

“Aye,” was all Willy could say.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Nick mumbled as he looked down at his tankard of ale suddenly at a loss for words. “Are you positive?” Nick asked... not sure if he should be sad or relieved. Could it truly be that the man who had always seemed so invincible to him as a child was truly dead? Nick took another long swig of his ale, pondering his father’s death. Finally after several minutes, he said, “Nothing about that bloody bastard regards me now. I haven’t had any contact with him for over 16 years.”

“Nick, he’s dead.”

“So...” And again, Nick took a long sip of his ale and as he swallowed, looked hard into Willy’s eyes. “Ironic, I haven’t been able to get the bugger off my mind for weeks. I guess his death explains it.”

“As his first-born and only legitimate son, you’re to inherit the title, estates, land, and all of his assets. Unfortunately though, I cannot say that his estate is in order. The reality of the situation is that it’s a bloody mess - almost a complete state of utter chaos and disaster. As you know, your dad, the former Duke of Hastings, was a profligate drunk and although he was very good at making money with his underhanded schemes, his love of the drink took a toll on his affairs. To make matters worse, he was apparently in poor health for some years before his death and the estate has been left a muck.”

“Not surprising, the wastrel. But, I still don’t see why the crown would take the trouble to have you come find me. You could have sent word via a letter or courier.”

“Don’t be mad, mate! When I heard the news of your father’s death, I went to the Queen myself. I let her know you were alive and well. To my surprise, the crown already knew. Somehow, she and her advisors also knew that I would know how to locate and inform you. Apparently, we weren’t as lucky as we thought all those times we escaped the notice and query of the British Navy. They know exactly which pirates are working on their behalf here in the Caribbean, but have chosen to leave us alone as long as our work serves their purposes too. There are things they know that would shock you... I know they did me. The crown is summoning you home via me. They want you to return home to England, to take your rightful place amid the nobility. The Queen said, should you refuse she will be forced to declare you an outlaw pirate. A prize will be placed upon your head - dead or alive – and, the estate and all your father’s assets will revert to the crown.”

Instantly infuriated, Nick jumped up from his seat and slammed his fist on the table. Blackmail is it? Well, to hell with the crown then! I have been loyal to it for sixteen years and have only aided her in her causes, but watch me now!”

“Tis true, I know.”

“Then why even bring me this news? You know I don’t take threats lightly.”

“Aye, I do and I am sorry, Nick. But, if you’ll listen to reason, I can explain that this may be profound destiny.”

“What the hell are you going on about now, Willy?” Nick said, returning to his seat.

“Well, it brings me to the bad news actually. Rumor has it that the crown is negotiating with France and Spain to outlaw privateering. With most of the new world now discovered, the crown no longer feels that having so many patriots operating independently is beneficial.”

“There has been such talk for a century.”

“True. But, this time I think they plan to make it binding. A treaty is to be signed.”

“Surely, you jest.”

“Certainly not.” Pausing to take a swig of his ale, Willy continued, “Listen Nick. I knew this news would come as a shock for you. But, I have known you since your days at Eton. I alone know how successful you have managed to be despite the abuse of the man who sired you. I alone know the boy you once were and your dream to see your family’s estate returned to its former splendor. I alone know that should you allow yourself time to admit it, you desire more than any of us a happy home with a loving wife and babes to bounce on your knee. And, if you can’t do it for your own dreams, then do it for your ancestors.”

Reflecting on all that his friend had just said, Nick once again took a long swallow of his ale and sat the tankard down with a thud. His mind was racing with the old dreams Willy had just re-evoked, intertwined with images of his boyhood home.

Standing to depart, Willy said, “Promise me you will at least think about it, Nick. The crown has given you six months time to return to England to accept your duties. They want this matter resolved, as they are tiring of the constant embarrassment of noblemen who do not take care of the properties gifted to them by the crown. Listen, I know this feels like blackmail, friend, and I aptly agree. But, maybe the crown knows more about your life than you realize and in time you will find this a mixed blessing of sorts. They are offering you a fresh start with the title and lands you are entitled to by birthright. And we both know that there is a part of you that has wanted this for some time. Just think about it, would you? There isn’t much more to accomplish down here. You’ve already made a fine name for yourself and you’re richer than King Midas now.”

Nick could only nod his head yes in return. He then stood, embraced Willy, and said as he stepped away, “Thank you ol’ friend. I shall think hard on all that you have said.”

“God’s speed, Nick! I am off with the high tide tomorrow to return home to England. There is a particular young lady I hope to make my wife! I hope you can make the wedding.”

Momentarily stunned by Willy’s departing words, Nick could only look after his boyhood friend as he exited the tavern. Truly, Willy married – what a thought. She must be quite the lady to capture Willy’s affection, for he never expected him to succumb to the dull confines of marriage.

“Clare, another ale and keep them coming!” Nick said, as she appeared at his table.

That evening as the boat swayed to the waves crashing against the pier, Nicholas fell into a fitful sleep with thoughts from long ago coursing through his mind.

Down and down he fell to the hardwood floor as the full effect of the pain from the man's final punch radiated through his right cheek and eye, momentarily stunning his young body. Instinctively he curled into the fetal position to protect his vital organs, awaiting the kicks to his side that were sure to follow.

The man looming above him was seething with anger and spat, "You filthy, stealing, little brat!" Then, rather than the traditional kicking, he chose to lift his glossy, black Hessian.

"Pleeeeee!" the young boy begged, covering his face with his hands to hide his tears.

But the man, too intoxicated to notice or care, stomped on the child's ribs that faced upward, screaming, "You are just like your mother – fucking worthless to me!"

The sound of a young branch breaking filled the air, which was simultaneously met with the sharp inhale of the child on the floor followed but a gut wrenching scream that ended in silence.

Momentarily stunned by the intensity of the pain, the child fainted only to awaken moments later. His torturer was there squatted on the floor next to him, holding his jaw, and forcing him to face him. Their faces were mere inches apart, as the stench of the man's breath fully awakened his senses.

"Keep your eyes open you fucking little brat!" the man yelled, slapping his face. "God damn it, I said keep your eyes open! Open your fucking eyes."

Conscious, the child fought to keep his tears at bay as he slowly lifted his eleven-year-old eyes that were filled with pain and wisdom beyond his years to meet those of the man looming above him, "Fa...Fa..Father, p... p... please, I beg your pardon, but I p... p... promise." Ice gray

eyes captured his as a single tear escaped the already swollen and bruised eye and rolled down to the hardened hand of his torturer. "I didn't t... t... touch your prized liquor."

The man seethed, "Still... you risk lying?" Then, as abruptly as the torture had begun, he dropped the child's face and rose to tower above him once again, completely immune to the pain he caused. "Remember this my son, your mother meant nothing to me and you mean even less!" Then, he turned and strode out the door as abruptly as he had entered.

Nick awoke in a panic, covered in perspiration. God damn that man, he thought. This time he will not win, he told himself. He won't intimidate me from the grave. I will return home and claim my birth right.

London, England
April 7, 1854

Chapter 2

Isabella Marie stood outside her father's study, pacing back and forth as she awaited the clock's strike of 10 am to meet with him as requested the morning after her return home. She hadn't seen her father in three years' time and while she was overcome with emotion and excitement to see him and share stories with him, she felt as if this time she was awaiting a life sentencing and was living on borrowed time. Why did waiting to enter her father's study have to make her feel like a little girl again, she thought.

So much had happened in the last three years. She had so much she wanted to share with him. She was no longer a naïve young girl. She had seen and experienced more than most would in a lifetime from her time at the Institute of Protestant Deaconesses at Kaiserwerth. But, at 21 years of age, she knew that time wasn't on her side. It wasn't that she thought her father would ever hurt her intentionally or send her in harm's way. Exactly the opposite truly, for she knew he loved her deeply and had indulged her far more than the fathers of most girls – and, for that she was grateful. Yet, was she ready for the fate she knew he was going to insist she finally meet – to perform her family obligation to marry and have children? She knew her father had been more than patient with her, allowing her to pursue her dreams and medical pursuits – much more so than most of her girlfriends, who were already married with children of their own. Yet, this was why she was hesitant to return home from Germany this time; she didn't know if she was ready. She loved her time with the sisters learning and felt that nursing was her calling – so much so that she had seriously considered becoming a nun herself. In the end though, she couldn't accept the idea of never having a child of her own to love, nurture, and watch grow. But, was she ready to marry, much less marry a man she didn't love? No, she thought, biting her lower lip with

worry. That she could never do. She knew she would never be one to settle. Life was far too precious and fleeting, and she refused to share her life with someone she couldn't love with her entire heart and soul! But surely, her father had to know that and would never expect her to marry a man she didn't love, especially after the love he shared with her mother. But, she also knew that if she didn't fall in love and find someone to marry herself and soon that her father could very well lose patience with her and force the issue.

“Isabella,” her father called from inside his office, “are you going to stand out there pacing all day lost in thought or are you going to come in here and join me?”

How did he know, she thought, smoothing her skirt nervously – for I was as quiet as a mouse? Then, taking a deep breath in and standing tall, she opened the large door with all the confidence she could muster and entered the study of the man she adored above all else.

“Isabella!” he said, standing and walking around his forebodingly large desk to greet her, arms out stretched for a hug.

“Dad!” she said, seeing him and catching her breath before she skipped to meet him in a hug.

After what seemed like a good long while, he stepped back still holding on to her forearms, “Let me look at my girl! My God girl, you remind more now of your mother than you ever have,” he said, as he looked past Isabella to the portrait of his wife hanging above the fireplace. “You take my breath away just as she always did,” he said, tears forming in his eyes.

“Thank you, Dad! That is the grandest complement I could ever be paid! I know how much you loved Mum and miss her still.”

“Every day my dear girl... every moment of every day! I know it must sound odd for me to say after all these years, but I still feel like she is with me, especially when I think and talk to her about you. We are both so proud of the young woman you have become.”

Isabella’s heart swelled and as a tear slipped out from the corner of her eye, she began to lift her hand to wipe it away. But before she could even raise her hand in response, her father pulled out his monogrammed handkerchief and dabbed at it for her.

“There, there my girl! I didn’t mean to make you cry first thing!”

“Oh, Dad! Don’t you think I know that? We just both love her and miss her so still and that is a very good thing.”

“Indeed, it is! She lives on through you and our love. Now, please make yourself comfortable,” he said, gesturing towards the well-worn tufted leather chairs in front of his desk. “I shall ring Carson and ask him to bring us some mid-morning tea and pastries to snack on as we talk. I asked your Aunt Henny to ensure that the cook made your favorite for your first morning back home, scones with fresh strawberries and cream.”

“Dad, you always think of everything! Thank you!”

“That is a parent’s job, My Izzy Missy. Besides, if I can’t spoil my own daughter once in a while, then who can I? Now... where did Carson get off to this time? I swear everyone in the house is getting as old and feeble as me,” he said chuckling, as he exited the study’s doors to see if he could locate him or a maid.

Isabella sat in awe and wondered. How did he always manage to make her feel so very loved and special? He always remembered the smallest details about her likes and dislikes – far more than any other parent she knew - and went to great lengths to see to her happiness. Yes, she reflected, no matter what was going on in life, her Dad always made her feel like she was his

most important priority. It made her sad to realize how selfish her thoughts had been before she saw him. How could she have ever considered leaving him and her home here behind for life as a nun? No, she thought, her place was here with him. He had aged quite a bit since she'd seen him last and it worried her. His hair was now as white as fine downy snow and she could see in his eyes how tired he was. She knew now without a doubt that she would never return to Germany and the sisters. Thanks to him, she had been able to pursue her dream of studying nursing, an experience most in life would never have, but now her place was here – home with him. She wouldn't let her Dad grow old alone any longer. It was her turn to help take care of him.

“Thank you, Carson!” Lawrence said, returning to the office. “Yes, please set everything down right here on this table for us. We can see to serving ourselves.”

“Yes, sir,” Carson said. Then, turning to Isabella he said, “It is wonderful having you home with us once again, Miss Isabella.”

“Thank you, Carson. It is wonderful to be home.”

“Sir, if that will be all...”

“Yes, that will be all for now.” And with that, Carson bowed and took his leave.

“Some things don't change, Dad, do they?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Carson is just as formal as ever even when it is just you and me. I wanted to give him a hug. I remember how he use to play with me when no one else was around.”

“He is a butler through and through... Pride in his service, you know, and all that. Why don't you surprise him later and visit him and some of the staff in their area of the house? I think they would love the opportunity to hear about your time in Germany and some of your adventures.”

“Thank you, Dad. I think I will. And, while I am there, I might just have to give Carson a kiss on the cheek.”

“You’ll make the man blush, Izzy. But, I do think it would mean the world to him, as well as your Aunt Henny. Now... enough about Carson. How are you? I want to hear all about your time in Germany.”

“I want to hear all about you and the business too, Dad.”

Together the two sat for a couple hours, Izzy eager to share the stories of the places she had visited, the sisters she grew to love, and the patients she had taken care of and Lawrence the stories of their family, friends and acquaintances, including the now grown children of those who worked for his shipping business.

“You made some very close friendships in Germany, Izzy. I am sure it must have been difficult to say goodbye and leave them behind.”

“T’was very difficult. But, I am happy to be home now with you. I won’t be leaving you again anytime soon.”

“You don’t know how happy that makes me to hear, dear girl! But, yet, I don’t want you to feel tied to me here. You are young and you have your whole life ahead of you. I want to see you marry and have babes of your own. I want to bounce my grandchild on my knee while I still can and pass the shipping company on if possible.”

“I know you do, Dad. I want children too. It’s just the husband part I am unsure of. I have yet to fall in love with a man and I don’t want to settle for less. I want what you and Mum had. I want to be able to continue my nursing endeavors to help humanity and serve God. Do you know any nobleman who might be willing to let his wife pursue such undertakings with the less fortunate?”

“You just have to give the young lads a chance, Izzy. You are a beautiful girl! I think if a man truly loves you, he won’t want to keep you from doing the things you love. He may insist on you taking care of his home, but I believe he would support your desire to help your fellow man.”

“Perhaps. But, I am not positive, Dad. I don’t want to have to give up who I am and my dreams for a husband.”

“Let’s just focus on finding you a man you can love and marry first and then, we will deal with the latter. You must know that I could never be happy if you were unhappy, Izzy.”

“I do, Dad.”

“Then put a little trust in your ol’ Dad and believe me when I say there is a man out there for you, who is going to love everything about you.”

“I can try, Dad.”

“That is all I ask, Izzy. Now... I have a great idea! I think we should throw you a welcome home ball. I want you to rejoin society. I know they can be quite stuffy and I have been perhaps too remiss in not forcing you to attend more social engagements. But, you are the daughter of a Lady of the peerage and your mother would not have wished for you to forget. It is time you re-entered society and found a husband. I won’t push you to marry someone of my choosing at this time; however, it is time for you to start seriously looking for a husband. You are 21 years’ now, Izzy, and neither I nor your mother would have ever wished for you to spend your life alone. I am not going to be here forever to take care of you and I want to see you properly settled. Please promise me you will at least try to find someone you can love and marry, Izzy.”

“I promise to try, Dad, for you.”

“No, Izzy... for you.”

“May I at least find a doctor to assist, as well as hospital or charity where I may use my nursing skills? I don’t want to stop doing what I love.”

“Of course you can,” Lawrence said. “I don’t expect you to stop being the loving girl you are, Izzy. I just want you to also spend time attending social events, balls, and entertaining male attention. Can we agree to that?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Stupendous! In anticipation of your return, I visited with Lady Abigail Seymour a fortnight ago. Do you remember your mother’s best friend?”

“Of... of course, I do.” Isabella somehow managed to stutter in shock since her father and Lady Abigail never particularly liked each other and neither had any qualms letting the other know exactly how they felt given the opportunity. “So, how is Lady Abigail?”

“She is wonderful. Both her children are happily married and she has three grandchildren already. I spoke to her of you and she has agreed to help re-introduce you to society. She has several exciting social activities lined up already. Of course, I think a new wardrobe is first and foremost though. I told her that you would call on her tomorrow at 10 am. You two are to visit the French fashion modistes. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No. No, of course not, Dad,” Isabella said stunned.

“I want my girl to look her best, Izzy! Spare no expense. Lady Abigail is well aware and I don’t want you to be frugal or practical. You are out to catch a husband, dear girl, and I want you to have your pick. It is bad enough that you have a common merchant for a father. Some will judge you based upon that alone.”

“Dad, please don’t! Mum was never sorry for a moment that she married you! She loved you desperately. And, I wouldn’t not have you as my father for all the tea in China. Besides you

are a far cry from 'a common merchant' for you own one of the most successful shipping companies in all of England."

"I know all that, Izzy. But, that doesn't mean that I want the likes of the Earl of Suffolk or his sort to ever try to make you feel inferior because of my birth station, as they did your mother when she married beneath her. She believed in me and I want us to make her proud. So, I want you as well adorned as the queen herself, as well as this entire house for the season. I only want the absolute best for you. And, money is one thing I have plenty of to flaunt."

London, England
May 1854

Chapter 3

Isabella stepped out of the carriage and looked up at Lady Abigail Seymour's opulent turquoise townhouse with pearly swags of garland with roses above each window and unexpectedly lost her balance.

"Are you quite well, Miss?" her father's head coachman, Chester, asked, as he took her by the arm to help steady her.

"I find I am a little nervous is all. It has been quite a while since I have paid any social calls and I find that I am a little more comfortable these days with the sick and infirm."

"Shall I wait here for you?" Chester asked with concern in his voice.

"No, no, Chester, that won't be necessary. Please continue on as we arranged. I am sure Lady Seymour's coachman can see me home and Father will need you to take him to the docks, I expect."

"As you wish, Miss Isabella. However, I have no doubt that your father would want me to ensure you are well first."

"Thank you, Chester," Isabella said, "that is very good of you. But, I will be well, as soon as I get through with the initial re-introduction." Then, breathing deeply, Isabella stood and walked deliberately and confidently up the white Carrera marble steps and lifted the knocker on the grand front door.

"How may I help you?" a rather intimidatingly muscular and tall butler asked.

"Miss Isabella Wells," she said softly.

"Isabella, my darling girl! Is that you?" Lady Abigail called exuberantly. "Do show her directly in, Radford. I have been expecting her."

“This way, Miss,” Rockland indicated to the double French doors on the right as he walked forward and expected her to follow.

“Miss...”

“Rockland, please,” Lady Seymour said, “I know very well who is here to visit me this fine day. And, I refuse to stand on ceremony and proper etiquette when I haven’t seen my darling, best friend’s daughter in ages – for I have barely been able to control my excitement in anticipation for days. Now come here, my dear girl and hug me – for we aren’t strangers here!”

And, just like that, Isabella found herself in a warm and genuinely loving embrace with Lady Abigail. As she stood there hugging this lovely lady, she thought on what a ninny she had been to be worried. Lady Abigail was so genuinely jubilant to see her that she was suddenly completely at ease.

Coast of England
May 1854

Chapter 4

Repositioning himself on the port side of the *Rising Star*, Captain Nicholas Pierce looked through the spyglass to gain a better view of the English coast to assess the shore for navigation. The white caps of the waves crashed angrily along the rocks that made up the craggy coast and cliffs of the English Channel until finally lulling welcomingly into the mouth of the Thames River. Clipper ships, brigs, and schooners of several nationalities bobbed side to side dangerously as the force of the conflicting currents battered their heavy hulls, bulging with goods from around the world, as the captains and crews scurried carefully to navigate the dangerous waters and ready their ships for the London docks.

A mix of emotions coursed through his entire body, as he dropped his right hand holding the spyglass to his side and exhaled, and his discerning gray eyes mirrored the May sky just before a raging thunderstorm. God, but he had been away a long time. Unwanted memories from a lifetime ago returned as surely as the ship rolled with the waves closer to the shore and all that awaited.

Ian, his first mate, turned from the bow and could tell by Nick's expression that this voyage and return to England, home, were wreaking havoc on his Captain and friend's usually controlled demeanor.

For one quick moment, Nick turned, sensing Ian's stare, looked him in the eyes and nodded. It was the only sign Ian needed. Years at sea and of fighting countless enemies together had made the two like one in mind. Words were not needed for him to know what Nick's nod indicated.

Stepping into command, Ian yelled, “Catch the main sail, men! The winds are picking up as we get closer to the coast. Steady as we go.”

As if Neptune himself heard this very declaration, the god of the sea chose that exact moment to send a strong gust of wind, catching the main sail and ripping the line free. Suddenly, the ship accelerated as the bow rose up to meet the crest of the waves and precariously teetered side-to-side with the conflicting currents of the channel. Crewmates rushed for the line, slipping on the deck as waves threatened to wash over them. With his jaw set strong, Nick instantly leaped into action and thus, into command.

“Quickly men, assume positions for securing the line!” Nick yelled over the screeching wind, whipping line, and soaring sea.

Scrambling ensued, but on the next whip of the line, Nick nimbly grasped hold of it just as it struck his chest, easily ripping his shirt and marring the skin beneath. Quickly, Ian stepped up to help secure the line while the men rushed to tie it off. Sensing that Ian had all in control and wanting a few moments alone, Nick quietly turned, walked away, and deliberately climbed the topmast to gain a better view of the coast and the now damaged main sail.

As the gusts of wind and clips of waves were now pushing the ship closer and closer to the English coast, it was almost as if they were driving his thoughts. Memories of when he had last been in England and the boy he once was, coursed through his mind. Feelings of uneasiness mixed with reservation made him feel like the confused, unwanted, and scared boy who long ago fled England to escape his father’s grasp and control.

As if issuing a plea, Nick whispered into the wind, “God, help me!”

Lost in thought, he looked out at the coast and wondered if returning to England after so many years at sea was wise. He wasn’t even sure if he wanted such a life anymore. Once upon a

time when he was a young man, he dreamed of becoming the Duke of Hastings. But, now he wasn't so sure. The sea had been good to him. It had offered him an escape years ago and as the years went by, it granted him riches beyond his wildest dreams.

Even before Willy's news, he had started moving towards giving up privateering; it was as if privateering had lost the luster and excitement it once held. He wanted to build something more permanent, something he could watch grow and develop, a way to leave his mark on the world. This was why he had agreed to a lucrative contract to transport cargo and help provide protection for the ships of the Fair Winds Shipping Company. Honestly, at this stage in his life, he truly had no need for his father's estate and assets. Maybe he should have just told Willy to send word that he had been lost at sea. Now that was a thought. ... No, you are a man now, Nicholas, not a frightened child, and you will not run away again. You will return home and make your ancestors proud, he told himself.

But, how the bloody hell was he supposed to transition to the life of a nobleman after so many years at sea? The sea was as much a part of him now as England had ever been. His only hope to merge his lives was to convince Lawrence Wells, owner of the Fair Winds Shipping Company, that he needed him to continue to provide protection for his ships, but as a partner not a captain. It wouldn't do at all to work for a merchant as a nobleman, but a partnership would offer him the respect the crown would expect of him. He had come to care for Lawrence too much to become the old man's competition. After all, Lawrence was an agreeable man and surely would understand that his circumstances had changed and that he needed to be at home to access his father's estates rather than away at sea. His bartering chip was his crew, which was loyal to him and had sailed with him for several years. They knew the seas better than most and its natural dangers. His crew was trustworthy, knew who the enemy was, and how

to fight those said enemies. But, perhaps the biggest selling point was that his entire crew was educated thanks to him. He had taught them all to read and write, highly unusual for seamen.

Nick remembered that as a young boy, reading books provided him an escape from his abusive life with his father and that the subsequent good marks he earned at Eton was the only praise he ever received from his father. Then, as a cabin boy on ship, Nick was initially teased by the other crewmembers unmercifully for always having his nose between the pages of book; but as time passed, the captain and crew recognized his education, utilized it, and grew to respect him. Eventually, Nick even started teaching his crewmates in the evening by candlelight, at first how to read and write, but as their thirst for knowledge increased, he shared his knowledge of mathematics, Latin, Greek, and history as well. It wasn't long before the Captain took him under his wing and began educating Nick on matters of sea life, primarily navigation, astronomy, and fencing. Then, as his knowledge and understanding grew, the Captain began to consult him on decisions, particularly those related to generating profits. Within two years of going to sea, by age eighteen, Nick's ascent to Captain of his own vessel was complete. He had outsmarted a Spanish pirate Capitan and his crew who had taken him, his Captain, and the surviving crew as prisoners. Afterwards, the Captain of his vessel decided to retire to a Caribbean island and with the crew's unanimous support they voted to make Nicholas Captain of the vessel.

Yes, he intended to legitimize and establish the trusted members of his crew that had returned with him to England and to endow some as captains of their own ships with or without Lawrence's help. It would just be easier if it were with his help. Nick knew that starting a well-respected shipping business in England took more than funds and hard work; it took years of good business decisions and proven results to build a fleet of ships and win the trust of your

customers. Besides, if Willy was right and England and France were to sign an agreement soon that would make privateering illegal, all his men would be in need of a different line of work.

But, only a fool would believe that the seas would become safe overnight. No – as long as men sailed the seas with dreams of hidden treasures and great riches, pirates, legal or illegal, would exist. No, he needed the help of someone like Lawrence.

He had instinctively liked him when he met him in Bermuda six years earlier. Few men in his position treated their captains and crews as well as he did – not to mention that he took good care of his fleet. Nick knew his reputation and liked that about him before they even met; so, when approached by Lawrence to work for him by providing safe passage for key ships in the Devil’s Triangle and Caribbean, he did not think twice about accepting his proposal. He was forthright, intelligent, and had a reputation for a high level of integrity – not to mention that he built his shipping business from the ground up by himself – very respectable qualities indeed. Yes, he thought, over the last couple of years his relationship with Lawrence had developed and in many ways he had become like a father. Yes, continuing to work with Lawrence was essential.

Feeling more relaxed with his return, Nick climbed down the topmast and yelled over the wind to his crew, “Land ho! Lower the sails and prepare to enter the mouth of the Thames.”

London, England
May 1854

Chapter 5

St. Katherine's Dock was bustling as Nick took a good look around from his position on the deck of the *Rising Star*. From what he could discern, the docks hadn't changed much in the last fourteen years. Men were moving things on and off ships as some arrived and others prepared to depart. Perpendicularly aligned to the docks were businesses that catered to every ship and sailor's need, from dry goods and ale to the comfort of a lady of the night. To the West sat the Tower Bridge and slightly further afar the foreboding London Tower with its years of duty to the crown. Directly quayside sat one of many of the Fair Winds Shipping Company's warehouses and for as far as his eyes could discern, warehouses lined the dock and wharf. Men worked laboriously as they quickly loaded and unloaded vessels as they came in and out of dock, for most captains didn't want to pay more than the pound it cost to unload in a day's time.

Once astern to the pier, several of the crewmembers jumped on to the wood planking while those still on deck threw down the lines. Aptly the lines from the ship were tied to the pier, as other crewmembers climbed the rigging to secure the sails and others worked to drop the anchor. Once the ship was secure, Nick stepped up on the bridge.

"I want to thank each of you for your years of hard work and loyalty. It has been a privilege to sail and fight our countless adversities along each and every one of you."

"Hear, Hear!" the crew bellowed back.

"Know now, that although my role here in England will change, I remain loyal to all of you. I hope to establish each of you in new positions in short time. Until then, I expect each man to fulfill his watch as assigned, which is enclosed in these envelopes along with your pay and with what I believe is a handsome bonus, for all our years of hard work at sea. Let's plan to

meet in one month's time exactly at The Tavern Inn to discuss the future. Should you need me before then, leave word here at the ship, as I will be checking in periodically myself."

The excitement and good cheer that ensued as the crew opened their pay and bonuses were heart warming for Nick to see. Every man was smiling and talking about what they planned to do as they awaited further orders. It was as if he had given them the world on an oyster and the opportunity to build lives they never before would have dreamed possible.

As Nick watched the crew's good cheer, he couldn't help but worry about securing their future happiness. He owed most of his men his life and they owed him theirs. It was a lot of responsibility, something he wasn't new to as Captain; but this was different, and he didn't want to let them down. Life as a seaman or dockhand was hard and one that Nick had become all too familiar with. Feast or famine was far too often the case, as one's livelihood was based on the mercy of the ships that ran with the wind and tides of the sea. All too often, these men and their families went hungry. So, when work was plentiful, most men worked themselves to the bone in an attempt to earn a few extra shillings each day to purchase those goods that a family and growing children needed, a new pair of shoes, a warm winter coat, perhaps a better cut of meat for the family dinner table to plump them up and ward off hunger in the sparse months ahead. If a permanent laborer fell ill or was injured, there were plenty of the irregularly employed who would be happy to fill his position.

Poverty was the way of life for these men and their families, Nick thought as he looked around, and few had any hope of ever overcoming that condition. He remembered all too well the time he had spent on the streets of London and the horrible feeling of constantly being hungry, cold, and afraid.

He was 16 years old when he finally had enough of his father's drinking and anger and mustered the courage one school break to simply not return home. Initially, his school friend, Willy, tried to hide him in his parents' London townhouse, but as the time for school to begin neared, both knew time was running out. Even returning to school wasn't an option, although not one Nick had foreseen. The decision was forced by circumstances. One afternoon about two weeks after his father realized he was missing, Willy had overheard his father, the Earl of Pemberly, in his study one day being questioned by a man sent by Nick's father. Apparently Eton's headmaster took no time at all to succumb to the Duke of Hastings' fury and identified Willy as Nick's best mate. And, as if, that wasn't bad enough, Willy overheard that Nick's father had apparently threatened physical harm to any who might be harboring or assisting his son. His father was irate. Somehow he instinctively knew that Nick chose to run away rather than deal with his anger and abuse anymore. So, staying out of sight was crucial to not being discovered and returned to his father.

Ultimately, Nick ended up on the streets. Willy had given him what little money he had available, but unfortunately it didn't sustain him naught a fortnight. It was on a cold and rainy March night that Liam found him huddled in a ball after a particularly bad fight with some local street kids. He had been stabbed for the remaining money he had. Liam quickly picked him up, realizing that something about him didn't quite belong on the East London streets, and took him to his sister, Mary's home. She was kind enough to take him in when Liam brought him home to her and she quickly cleaned and sutured his wound. But Nick soon realized what that decision had meant for her and her family. Times were thin in the household and often, he knew that Mary would not eat during that winter as she nursed him back to health. She had made him a makeshift cot in the kitchen to keep him closest to the fire for warmth. As his strength grew

week after week, he saw how she would save the best piece of meat for Liam. Once when he asked her why she didn't partake of some herself, she said that it was more important for Liam to have it for strength, as he worked so hard on the docks. The remainder of it she would divide between Ian, her nephew, and Nick, "since they were growing boys," she would say. Hence, all she ever ate herself was broth from the bare bones. It was a terrible thing and once the damp cold of the winter arrived, the kind woman had succumbed to the influenza within a few days. The woman was a saint, he thought, she worked herself to death, scrimping and doing without – never once complaining. His presence on their family had only made it harder for them, but especially her. But, she and their family were far too kind and their hearts were bigger and deeper than their pockets. She would always ward off his concerns by saying, "Nonsense now, houses filled with love have elastic walls." But, Nick knew better than that even as a young man - for they had provided him with the only true home he had ever known, he thought, a place of love and safety.

If only there was something he could do to make things better now. And, for the first time ever, it occurred to him that perhaps his time away from his father was actually a blessing from God -for how often did one get to experience a life different from that in which they were born. Maybe now that he would have some power and influence, he could do something to make life in East London a little less dreadful for its poor inhabitants, particularly the children, infirm, and elderly.

"By George, I thought that was you and your vessel, Nick!" Lawrence Wells bellowed cheerfully as he crossed the deck towards him in a few long, quick strides. "But, then I thought my eyes must be playing a trick on me for you would of had to crossed the Atlantic in record

time. For it was but two fortnight ago that I received your letter telling me of your plan to return,” he continued on as he kindly shook Nick’s hand and clasped him on the back.

The good will in Lawrence’s voice brought Nick out of his thoughts and he asked, a bit concerned, “My early return doesn’t pose a problem for you, does it?”

“Not at all my dear boy, I’m just surprised to see you so soon is all.”

“That is a relief. For I am not at all sure where I would place my goods if not in your warehouse. I’m afraid that I am relying all too much on your kindness, Lawrence!”

“Now you are being ridiculous – after all that you have done for me, hum bug. I told you before that if there was anything I could ever do for you that I would be happy to oblige. And, if you had received the letter I sent, you would know that I reiterated the use of my warehouse and dock for your use in it! But alas, upon seeing you here, I am sure you left before it made its way to you,” Lawrence said through a chuckle.

“Well, once I made my mind up to return to England, I was anxious to depart, and fortunately the seas and winds obliged. I must thank you for your kindness, Lawrence! It is truly appreciated.”

“True enough,” Liam interjected as he joined them in their conversation. “For once Nick made up his mind, it was as if the Devil himself was chasing him out of the Caribbean.”

“Well, I may be slow in making a decision at times; but once I know what I want, I move quickly,” Nick said.

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” Lawrence said. “Well, why don’t you have your men start unloading the hull of this great vessel and I’ll send some of my men to assist your crew. When you feel ready, make your way to my office here at the docks. It is on the ground floor of

the building closest. There are a few things I'd like to discuss with you regarding our future working relationship."

"I'd be much obliged, Lawrence, as there are some things I need to discuss with you as well," Nick replied.

"In a bit then," and with that Lawrence took his leave.

"I wonder what he wants to talk to you about," Ian said.

"Honestly, I am unsure myself, but I need to talk to him as well. I want him to hear from me about my change in circumstances, before he hears it from elsewhere. And, there are some business related matters that I hope to work out with him. I hope to continue to work with him for some time to come. He has years of knowledge beyond me about running a shipping business and his friendship is important to me and all of our futures."

"I see your mind's been hard at work. Now, don't go worry ye self until you have something to worry about. The gentleman obviously respects you," Liam interjected.

"I know he respects and trusts me, but if he will want to work with the Duke of Hastings remains to be seen."

Turning to face his crew, Nick could see they were anticipating his orders, so he set the men to the task at hand. Within a half-hour's time, the crane was set up astern the *Rising Star* and all the men were efficiently unloading the hull of the ship of its many dry goods. Crates of shells, pearls, mahogany, rum, sugar, and spices, as well as rich silks, were sorted and recorded in Nick's ledger as they were stacked in the warehouse. Before long the men had unloaded the hull of the ship, as well as Nick's personal possessions, which were secured to a couple of buggies to be driven across town to his family's old townhouse – should it still be there.

Shortly thereafter most of the crew took their leave, anxious to start their new lives, as they gave parting thanks to Nick for their hearty pay and bonuses, as well as sharing their dreams for the days ahead. It was one, if not all, of his men that desired a night of drinking to their good fortune, a warm meal, and the company of a woman. And some even shared their desire to meet a good woman and settle down to a more peaceful life with a family of their own someday, confident that Nick would provide employment and sufficient earnings for them and their future families.

Once the final goodbyes were said to the crew and directions given to the first watch, Nick called Ian and Liam near, as the two were loyal to a fault and never left him alone until they were positive that nothing further was needed. “Could the two of you please ensure that my personal goods are delivered to my father’s, I mean, my family’s townhouse in Kensington?”

“Aye, aye,” Ian said, as Liam nodded in agreement.

“Give my father’s butler, Saunders, this note and the funds enclosed from me. It should explain the situation to him and I expect he should be able to supply hands to assist you in unloading my things, as well as provide you both with rooms to stay in. Just don’t be surprised if the old man is a bit shocked. After all, he hasn’t seen or heard from me in over a decade. He may even think I’m dead.”

“Nick, do you mean to have us stay with you?” Liam asked. Wide smiles appeared on both men’s faces as they first looked at each other and then Nick.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Nick said. “We’re family, right?”

“Aye that we are!” Ian and Liam said in unison.

“But, maybe, it’d be best if we stay on the ship a wee longer. Just until you know, you have time to find your land legs,” Ian said.

“Deserting me are you both now? Well, I can’t say I am happy about it. But, if your minds are made up, I won’t fight you about it yet. Go on then! Off with you both!”

London, England
May 1854

Chapter 6

The sound of yelling greeted Nick as he entered the lobby of Lawrence's shipping office. Unsure if he should intrude further and offer his assistance to his older friend or wait for the inhabitant of the empty desk in the lobby to return, he decided the best course of action was to stay close by and listen to ensure Lawrence didn't need his assistance. He didn't know who was so angry, but it was someone educated, Nick could tell as he listened.

"The likes of you are not entitled to bid on and receive a contract for work from the War Office! You are a low-life commoner who has had more luck than one person rightfully deserves."

"I am sorry you feel that way," Lawrence said, as he looked at the gentleman standing directly before him in the eyes. "And, it certainly wasn't what you were saying these last several weeks. Are you sure your new found anger doesn't have anything to do with my daughter?"

Unbelievable, Lawrence thought. He must have finally realized he would never succeed and win Isabella's affections for him to be sputtering such anger. Randolph Potts Hamilton, the 6th Earl of Suffolk, had taken a renewed interest in her since her return from abroad this last spring and his constant gifts of flowers and chocolates were sickening to him. Not to mention, Hamilton's father, the former Earl, always had catered to the boy's fits and was more concerned with befriending him, than raising him to be a man. It was no wonder that this grown man standing before him now was acting like a spoiled child and throwing a tantrum right in his office. Thank God, Izzy had refused him.

"That contract was rightfully mine and you know it! I demand to know, what was your bid?" the Earl of Suffolk yelled, slamming his fist down into his other hand.

Calmly, Lawrence said, “The bids were sealed and therefore, I am under no obligation to share that information with you.”

“The only reason you could have been awarded such a contract is if you undercut my bid or participated in something illegal! And, believe me Lawrence; your days are numbered! If it is the last thing I do, I will see you and your company buried. And, as for your daughter, I will ensure she will be sorry she has refused me.”

Finally having had enough of his threats, Lawrence said with a dismissive tone, “I don’t have time for such unfounded accusations and threats. Furthermore, I will only say this to you once out of respect for your deceased father and his years of business, but if you intend to be a successful businessman, you had better learn to control your emotions rather than them controlling you, otherwise you will only gain the reputation of a fool. Now, if you will excuse me, I am expecting a visitor soon.” With that he walked around his large oak desk and opened the door of his office to usher out his unwanted visitor and found himself looking directly into the face of Nicholas.

“Lawrence – should I come back another time?” Nick said, as he glanced over his shoulder to give the disgruntled visitor a look of warning.

“I was just leaving,” the Earl of Suffolk said, seething with anger, looking Nick up and down. “Don’t think this conversation is over, Lawrence. I want answers!” he continued, brushing Nick’s arm as he stomped out of the office and down the hallway, slamming the building’s main door upon his exit.

“Can you believe the gall of that man?” Lawrence asked.

“Poor sport?” Nick asked.

“Randolph Potts Hamilton, the 6th Earl of Suffolk, otherwise known as my major competitor.”

“Pompous ass, I would say.”

“Well, yes, that he is to be sure,” Lawrence said, shaking his head in approval and letting out a chuckle. Then, crossing the room towards a secretary in the corner, he continued, “He was an over indulged child and now a short-tempered man, who is wielding the power of his new title.” He opened the secretary’s front panel, to reveal the contents of a well-stocked liquor cupboard and lifted up a decanter, “Scotch, Nick?”

“Single or double malt?”

“Need you ask?” Lawrence replied, a little surprised, pouring two glasses of the warm amber and stepping forward to offer Nick a glass.

With Lawrence standing directly before him, Nick couldn’t help but notice the beads of sweat across his forehead and the trembling of his outstretched hand. Not wanting to draw attention to Lawrence’s state, Nick continued, slightly embarrassed, “It has just been a while since I’ve had the pleasure of this drink.”

“Of course, of course, excuse me. It is just that I find your vocabulary so superior in comparison to most seamen that I quite forget the fact that you have been at sea for so many years,” Lawrence said, making his way to the well-worn leather chair. Turning to sit, he suddenly gasped for breath as he fell into the chair.

“Lawrence, are you fit? Should I call for a doctor?” Nick said, standing out of concern.

“No, ...no, ...I am quite fit. I just need a moment to catch my breath. Please – sit down. That young arse just wears me out.”

Worried, but willing to oblige his request, Nick once again sat and waited, carefully watching Lawrence to ensure that he was indeed all right.

After a few minutes passed, Lawrence continued, “I find that that man always manages to upset my nerves. Maybe I am just going soft in my old age, for I don’t seem to manage the stress as well as I used to.”

“Used to?”

“Old blood – he, and his father before him. Individually and together they have been trying to undermine and destroy my good name in business for years. They’ve never understood that if you treat your business and employees like family that people actually want to do business with you because they respect and trust you.”

“Aye, it is sad what members of the nobility do to their own - much less to those they consider outsiders to their rank.”

Catching a glimpse of pain in Nick’s eyes, Lawrence said, “You speak with a wisdom beyond your years there, young man.”

Not sure yet what he wanted to disclose or how, Nick just nodded his head in agreement.

“I hope you don’t mind me listening in to your conversation; but when I heard the raised voice, I thought I would stay close by in case it sounded like you could use some assistance.”

“I don’t mind at all. But, Lord it does bring me right to the crux of what I wanted to discuss with you, as it involves Hamilton.”

Intrigued that the business Lawrence wanted to discuss with him somehow involved the gentleman who had just left, Nick focused on the conversation at hand.

“Have you heard that England is at war in the Crimea?”

“I heard last New Year’s Eve that a war was brewing. Conflict with Russia over the Holy Land, I understand.”

“Well, the war proper didn’t really start until March, and as is sometimes the nature of war, the British troops have been hit hard. New reports arriving from Florence Nightingale, a nurse recently sent to improve conditions for the wounded in Scutari, as well as the War Office, indicate that supplies aren’t making it to the troops. Some ships have apparently sunk due to poor navigation; others have been hit by enemy fire; and still others are just not locating the correct port. Regardless of the reason, it appears that our young men are dying at catastrophic rates and that immediate changes are necessary.”

“Sobering news to be sure. But, what does this have to do with you and the Earl of Suffolk?” Nick asked.

“I was just awarded a contract from the War Office to transport supplies for the British Army. The Earl of Suffolk is irate because he wanted the contract. He believes that since he is of the British nobility that he is more entitled to work for the War Office, whereas I am just a commoner who has built a successful shipping company. Which brings me to what I want to ask of you, Nick?”

“You know I am loyal to you, Lawrence. All you need do is ask and I will do my best to help.”

“I’d like to ask you to join me in this endeavor. I don’t like the idea of young men suffering because supplies aren’t getting through and the Earl of Suffolk is promising to wreck havoc on my ships and crew. Now that you are here and more of a physical threat, being closer in age, perhaps he will back off. I am getting older, as my physician has informed me recently,

and my heart can't take the stress as well as it used to. Of course, I will split any revenue from this endeavor with you, details I am willing to discuss further, should you accept my offer."

"Lawrence, I don't know what to say."

"Just consider it, please?"

"You misunderstand me. What you are offering is exactly what I hoped for in order to transition my crew into legitimate seamen here in England. I never anticipated these exact circumstances, but merging mine and my seamen's skills with your shipping enterprises is ideal."

"Is that a yes then?" Lawrence asked, hopeful.

"Yes, it is a yes, Lawrence! My crew and I would be honored to join you in your business venture." Nick stood to shake his hand and seal the arrangement.

"Oh, my dear boy! You don't know what a relief you have provided my soul. The Earl of Suffolk used to be just a nuisance, but lately I suspect darker forces at work in the man. With you and your men's skills, I am confident we can successfully perform the task at hand for the crown and War office, while warding off any harm from the likes of that man."

"I am positive of it! Don't give it another thought. I have dealt with far worse than his kind in the Caribbean."

"Yes, but he has the power of the land on his side – nobility you know. They have an entirely different view on morality – right and wrong. They believe men are entitled through their birth lines – not because of their own hard work and countenance."

"Aye, I do remember that; albeit, from a child's perspective." Then after a few moments had passed, Nick said, "In a roundabout way, it is what I wanted to talk to you about, Lawrence."

"Please go on then," Lawrence said, intrigued.

Feeling slightly relieved and more assured from Lawrence's offer, Nick continued, "What I want to share with you now may change the way you feel about doing business with me. But, before I tell you what I must, I want you to know that I respect you and by no means have I ever intended to be less than honest with you. However, there are certain things about my past that I have kept secret and not shared with anyone for a very long time. If you choose not to do business with me as a result, I will respect your decision; although, I will be disappointed."

"Come now, Nick, for surely there is nothing you can tell me that can be that terrible."

"This news is and may even come as a shock."

"Well, just tell me then. All this hemming and hawing is just making me more apprehensive."

Taking another sip of his Scotch and looking Lawrence directly in the eyes, Nick continued. "Sixteen years ago, I ran away from home and took a life upon the sea to escape my father."

"Alright then, well then, that's not so terrible. I'd say I probably would have done the very same thing myself."

"Lawrence please... let me finish as that is not the whole of it."

"Right, right, well, do go on then."

"Lawrence, my father was the Duke of Hastings."

Lawrence sat looking at Nick for a moment, stunned, while his mind was trying to recollect what he knew of the Duke of Hastings. Descriptive words entered his thoughts... drunk, cruel, nasty bugger, and then, dead.

As Nick saw the significance of his words alight in Lawrence's eyes, he continued, "I have returned to England to claim my birthright. However, I am as much a pirate and seafaring

man as a nobleman now. Two sides of the coin I have lived. I don't want to give up what I have built upon these many years, but rather want to legitimize my ship and crew; hopefully, with your help."

For a few moments, both men sat in silence allowing memories of the past to linger as they sipped their scotch and thought introspectively. After he finished his, Lawrence cleared his throat as if suddenly trying not to laugh and then to Nick's relief, he smiled, looking completely refreshed. In a sudden burst of energy, he stood up, clapped his hands together, and said, "Well, is that the whole of it? Is that the news you were worried to tell me? Well, I'll be. That is the best damn news I have heard in a very long time." And, laughing aloud said, "I think I'll have another glass of Scotch. How about you?"

"Certainly," Nick said genuinely relieved and happy to see Lawrence's sudden burst of energy and laughter.

"Young man, you have my help!" Lawrence continued as he was pouring the Scotch, shaking his head still in disbelief and smiling. Turning, he passed Nick his glass, saying as he returned to his seat, "As my late Annabelle would have said, The Lord works in mysterious ways. I must say your news has made my day!" Raising his glass, Lawrence said, "To us and our new arrangement!"

"To us!" Nick said in agreement and then swallowed the remainder of his drink.

"Now that we are business partners once again, what do you say to joining me for dinner at my club?"

"I've always wondered what went on in a proper gentleman's club."

"Join me then?"

"I would be glad too!"

“Let me grab my hat and lock up a few papers here first and we can be on our way. Johnson!” Lawrence yelled.

"Did you call, sir?"

“Indeed, I would like to introduce you to Captain Nicholas Pierce --- oh excuse me --- I mean the Duke of Hastings.”

Bowing, Johnson said, “It is an honor, Your Grace, to make your acquaintance.”

“Your Grace, Mr. Johnson has been my assistant here for the last thirty years and loyal to the core,” Lawrence said.

“Then, it is my honor to meet such a loyal man,” Nick replied.

Pleased, Lawrence continued, saying to Johnson, “The Duke of Hastings is going to be my business partner in this new contract with the War Office; so, he will be around frequently. Therefore, please assist him with anything he needs.”

“It would be my pleasure, sir,” Johnson said.

“I’m off to the club for the night. Please lock up and feel free to get yourself home to your family. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Lawrence said.

Across the street in gray and white shadows stood a cloaked figure hidden by the thick fog slowly rolling in off of the Thames. As the two men stepped outside and into Lawrence’s carriage, he listened as they gave the coachmen orders to drive them to The Gresham Club before hailing a hack to follow them.

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