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Kyra Bauske

Creative Thesis for Honors in the Major

M. Forsythe

4/23/2018

### Reflection Paper: The Process of Writing *Maiden Voyage*

I spent my entire childhood telling my mother, “I don’t need to study English. I’m not going to be an English Major. I’m not going to write.” In light of this project and my work in the English Department at Rollins, I owe my mother an apology. It’s funny how life goes. You start off with an idea of who you are or what you want. You grow and collect experiences and pieces of yourself. Out of nowhere, you’re someone else.

My growth into a writer was slow. It started with a love of adventure. I devoured books, usually genre fiction and sci-fi, mostly about dragons. Meanwhile, my mother tried to get me to read historical books like Louisa May Alcott’s *Eight Cousins*. At eleven I informed her, “History is boring. I’ll never be interested in books about history.” It seems I owe her another apology. So back then I read adventure novels. Authors like J.K. Rowling, Tamora Pierce, and Garth Nix shaped my world of stories, and I became irrevocably attached to young-adult fiction. Even now, outside of my academic endeavors, I reach for child-friendly material .

Child-friendly fiction creates a sense of universality – there is something in it for everyone to relate to, and the stories rely on plot, character, and worldbuilding rather than shock value and aggression to catch their readers’ interests. But that isn’t why I wrote *Maiden Voyage*. I didn’t sit down and say: *Today, I’m going to write a book for children*. I sat down and said, as I

suspect many writers say: *I can't find a book that fits my specific desires in a novel. So, I guess I'll write it myself.*

*Maiden Voyage* is an adventure story. It didn't start out that way, but that's what it has become. The story follows a young woman who stumbles onto her father's secrets. Alexandra feels trapped in an 18<sup>th</sup> century English settlement on Nassau. Under her father's protection, Alexandra is expected to marry and remain on the island. When she discovers a letter in her father's office naming her as an "asset" she finds herself asking who her father really is. Who is the business associate who comes every month? Why does he really want her married to Lord Dewhurst? When her best friend, Andrew O'Hare, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, reveals he is leaving the island forever, Alexandra decides to search for answers on her own. She incurs the wrath of her father and his violent associate, John Ellond, and finds herself boxed in by expectations, responsibilities, and family secrets. Unwilling to live as any man's asset, Alexandra chooses to leave the shackles of Nassau and her childhood home. Disguised as a boy she boards the only safe vessel leaving port – Andrew's ship, The *HMS Saint George*, a Fourth-Rate Ship-of-the-Line.

While *Maiden Voyage* was always going to be a seafaring adventure, I initially wanted to write a romance. Alexandra and her Captain would fall in love over the course of her journey. However, when I began the first draft with this intention, I didn't realize that my other requirements for the story would push romance into the background. I wanted my novel to do several things: First, it had to have a female protagonist; Second, it had to be set in the same time period as my favorite adventure film, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, so it must be historical fiction; Third, it must, in the style of *Pride and Prejudice*, be such a slow romance, that the reader wouldn't know it was happening until it was complete.

Once I finished my first draft, a document that reached nearly 150,000 words without getting anywhere near the end of the story, I realized I was writing a trilogy and that the first novel, titled *Maiden Voyage*, was an adventure novel, not a romance. My intention for romance remained the same, but the slow-burn romance meant that my readers would have to wait until the second or even the third book to reach the romantic resolution. As a reader, I prefer the anticipation of slow romances, so I felt little reluctance at letting the romantic plotline fade into the background in *Maiden Voyage*.

My first influences for this story came from adventure films. However, unlike most girls my age, I wasn't in love with Johnny Depp and I didn't want to date Orlando Bloom; I wanted to *be* them. I wanted to *be* the pirate adventurer; It was much more exciting than being a maiden waiting for true love. However, girls are rarely written in the role of adventurer in young-adult fiction. Looking at my personal collection of young-adult adventure novels, I see only four series that include any female protagonists: *Fablehaven* by Brandon Mull which has two protagonists (one female); *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, which has female protagonists in four of the seven novels, and none of them are the *only* protagonist; the *Heroes of Olympus* series by Rick Riordan, which switches between narrators and has at least three that are female; and *The Gideon Trilogy* by Linda Buckley-Archer which has two protagonists (one female). Only two series on my shelf have *a single* female protagonist: *Dragon Slippers* by Jessica Day George and *Song of the Lioness* by Tamora Pierce. I was determined to change that.

My main character, Alexandra, starts as a typical 18<sup>th</sup> century maiden trussed up in frills and lace, and her journey leads her to what she always wanted to be: *in control of her own life*. Her adventurous nature, impulsive decisions, and outspoken personality were undesirable traits in young women of the period but were perfect when she decided to take on the role of a young

man. These are elements from the first draft that I was careful to highlight during the revision process.

The initial draft of this book was written without any concept of a plot. Instead I developed the chapters by adding what sounded fun, what felt right, and what was interesting at the time. I had the ending in mind, Alexandra's eventual arrival in England and her subsequent arrest; however, everything else in between was up in the air. Then, in the summer of 2017, I met with Dr. Forsythe and Dorothy Mays to discuss the first fifty pages of my novel. We identified two key weaknesses of the draft: plot and length. Length, we decided could be resolved with line editing and revisions, while with the plot weakness we found two key issues that required particular attention: a simplicity in the villains and an incomplete story arc. The first issue was a matter of revisions, and the second could only be solved by changing either my ending or my beginning. The ending was some of my stronger writing, and I needed to fix the plot problems of the villains and Alexandra's interactions already, so I opted for a full rewrite of the first half of the story.

The full re-write resulted in roughly 120 new pages of writing. In these pages, I split the original suitor, Mr. Skinner, into two separate characters: Lord Dewhurst and John Ellond. Lord Dewhurst retained Mr. Skinner's original role as Alexandra's suitor; however, I made his personality more likeable to make Alexandra's decision to turn him down more complex. His role ends once Alexandra leaves Nassau, but the other half of Mr. Skinner's character, John Ellond, will remain throughout the trilogy. Ellond is an expansion of the corrupted nature of Mr. Skinner, and he has been developed into one of the main villains of the series.

The question of Alexandra's character arc was harder to solve, and everything hinged on one piece of information: unbeknownst to her, Alexandra is not related to her father. In the

original draft, she discovered this information, and it served as the conflict that drove her into the navy. Her goal was to escape and find her real father; however, the novel ended without her completing that goal. Through discussions with Dr. Forsythe, we developed a new plot where Alexandra's birth remained a secret until the end of the novel. This called for a complete re-write of the opening chapters, as they all contained references, emotional reactions, and discussions based on the fact that Alexandra knew she wasn't related to the man who had raised her.

The main changes involved creating a new crisis to drive her to leave Nassua. I decided to highlight Alexandra's impulsive nature by having her find a letter naming her as an "asset" to incite her suspicion and lead her to investigate. I had Alexandra make a series of impulsive decisions: Searching her father's study, sneaking into Fort Nassau, and investigating John Ellond. These acts culminate in a violent altercation with her 'father.' While the secret of Alexandra's birth still drives the story forward, this information remains hidden to the readers and Alexandra except for small hints along the way. As I read in Steven King's *On Writing*, he suggests that hints are helpful, but the tension relies on not knowing. Therefore, I wove the secrets of her family line into the larger story arc that spans the trilogy.

One of these clues is introduced in the first few chapters: the trade bargain her "father" is involved in. Alexandra's step-father supplies a secret revolutionary force with goods via his merchant sailors. In return, he is offered protection from the pirates who are in league with the revolutionaries. These are elements that highlight the adventurous, swashbuckling nature of the story that will develop as Alexandra moves away from 'polite' society.

As adventure and Young Adult Fiction are the focus in *Maiden Voyage*, I looked at a number of works in the Young Adult Fiction genre for inspiration. These were informative in elements of style and syntax, specifically what language is appropriate for a young audience, but

not too simple for an older audience. However, I have found that their plot devices were less helpful to my writing process. Many Young Adult fiction authors rely on magical influences to drive their story, even those set in heavily researched historical periods. One example: *The Time Travelers* by Linda Buckley-Archer, is set in Colonial America and follows the adventures of two children in their country's past. However, as the title indicates, there is still some of the fantastical involved in this work where the children go back in time. This is not the only case. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, begins its story as a historical fiction set in London at the onset of World War II. The story quickly turns to a kind of escapism through the magical wardrobe-doorway to Narnia. While I do intend to create the illusion of fantasy with the "Ghost Pirate" myth circulating around Captain Thorne, one of the antagonists, I will not be following these works down the sci-fi/magic route.

In order to find stories without magic, I had to turn to my second genre of inspiration: True, Historical Fiction. Now, these books I found deeply informative for setting and character but especially for plot as well as for the linguistic style for the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In reading these, I discovered things I did not want to do with my own novel but many things that I will.

Works like Patrick O'Brien's *Master and Commander* or Beryl Bainbridge's *Every Man for Himself* both offer two different takes on naval life in historical fiction. The most useful to my own story was *Master and Commander*. The book focused on many details of naval life that I incorporated into my own plot, such as mustering the crew before sailing: "and presently the *Sophie's* deck between the mainmast and the fo'c'sle was dark with men, all her people, even the cook, wiping his hands on his apron, which he balled up and thrust into this shirt. They stood rather uncertainly, over to port, in the two watches, with the newcomers huddled vaguely between them, looking shabby, mean and bereft," (pg. 91). I used this particular scene for

inspiration when I wrote the scene where Alex is discovered aboard the *Saint George* by Andrew during the muster (pg. 152-155). This scene and many similar scenes in *Master and Commander* were integral to the plot and setting of *Maiden Voyage*. *Master and Commander* taught me key pieces of historical information as well. For example, I discovered that a “nine-pounder” referenced the size of the cannon shot, not the cannon itself. I also learned that a court martial takes place on the ship of the highest-ranking officer in port, something that I plan to use in the second book. However, what I learned most from O’Brien’s work was that the style of a true, “written for adults” historical fiction novel would not fit for *Maiden Voyage*’s young adult audience. The density of the prose made it nearly impossible for me to read without stopping to look up words. As I have a particular fascination with the workings of a navy ship, I didn’t mind. However, I suspect very few casual readers will feel the same. I wanted to have elements from the historical period and utilize select terms that my readers might not know, especially those that could be easily explained through context.

The goal of many Young Adult Fiction writers is to impart some new information to their reader. Here, I’m thinking specifically of Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympian*’s series. These novels, while not entirely true to the original mythology, teach their readers the basics of the Greek myths and the hierarchy of their early deities. My work, like Riordan but not O’Brien, must be accessible to all ages and reading levels.

One way to learn how to write accessible fiction, is to merely study the craft of fiction. Thus, I read a combination of two genres: books on craft and historical works of non-fiction to learn about the period. While craft may differ depending on genre and personal taste, there are still many skills set out in these books that benefitted *Maiden Voyage*. For example: Jerome Stern’s exercises on different ways to write dialogue



(indirect vs. direct) in *Making Shapely Fiction* are key to creating conversations that don't exclude the scenery. Direct is present in the majority of my novel and is recognized by quotation marks and dialogue tags. An example of this is when Alex is signing on to the *Saint George*. "Alex knew a moment of panic. "Don't tell Andrew about this!" "What, why?" the Lieutenant was astonished. "I...er...want to surprise him," she stuttered. She wanted to surprise him alright, by not telling him a word until after she jumped ship," (pg. 121).

However, indirect dialogue or summarized dialogue is distinguished as dialogue summarized in prose. An example of this is when Alexandra is leaving her home with Lord Dewhurst: "All the while, Alexandra's father called out instructions: Be home before nightfall, stay with Lord Dewhurst, and do not stray too near the garrison! Alexandra examined the red velvet curtains closely until the door was shut and they left Everard Lington watching from within a cloud of dust," (pg. 70). Dr. Fosrythe, in particular, pushed me to increase the amount of indirect dialogue throughout the novel. This would improve my writing in two ways: it would quicken the pace of the plot, and keep the word count down.

Another method I used to keep the word count down was with my historical research. The books offered hundreds of naval terms, facts, and figures, but I only utilized those that were the most important to the plot, like the points of sail I use on pages 182- 186. In the realm of historical biography, I specifically found Angus Kostam's *Naval Miscellany* and *Horatio Nelson* to be useful to my research. Kostam's book details the proper way to tie sailors' knots, historical sea shanties, and even the mechanics of sailing. One passage in particular was fascinating: "Most of the time a sail acts as an aerofoil, generating power (or lift). This is then transferred through

the spars to the hull. The shape of the boat and the resistance of the water along its hull and against its keel all contribute to turning this power into forward motion,” (pg. 216). These books offered me the whys and hows of the sailing world.

There is a great deal more to writing a novel than doing research, however. Understanding your own writing is integral to the process. For example: I now know that I have a tendency to describe light more than any other visual aspect of a scene. Through my readings, meetings with Dr. Forsythe, and various revisions, I discovered two key things about my own writing: I create tension with the nature of Alexandra’s secret, but I also need more outside tension to keep the story moving, and I discovered that my favorite things about fiction are interpersonal relationships (especially trios) and action scenes.

The tension in *Maiden Voyage* is imbedded in the secret of her femininity. This is different from many stories which rely on romance as the source of tension. For example, Elizabeth Camden’s *Into the Whirlwind* focuses on romantic tension following a heightened sense of tension during the crisis of the Chicago fire. However, unlike Camden’s work, I use the question, “Will Alex’s secret be discovered?” to keep the readers hanging on rather than use romantic tension. The tension in *Maiden Voyage* is similar to the tension in *Every man for Himself* by Beryl Bainbridge. The plot of *Every Man for Himself* relies on the reader’s knowledge that the *RMS Titanic* will sink. Throughout the story, there is an understanding that this story must end in disaster. Likewise, in *Maiden Voyage*, there is an understanding that Alex’s situation is precarious at best. The knowledge that if she is discovered she could be killed creates tension in every interaction Alex has. For example, on Alex’s first day on deck, she interacts with the captain for the first time: “Captain Trowbridge sneered down at her. “Midshipman,”

he hissed, his voice filled with something cold and powerful. “You do not give your superiors their due respect; and you do not even have the mental capacity to accustom yourself to the rolling of a ship’s deck. I think, Mister Creswell, that perhaps the Navy was not your calling,” (pg. 170). In this scene, Trowbridge perceives Alex’s inexperience at sea, one of the many weaknesses that could reveal the truth: She is not a male. In *Every Man for Himself*, we see the narrator interact with different characters. Each time the narrator talks to someone, the reader asks, “Will this one die, or will he survive?” In both my novel and Bainbridge’s, the tension centers on survival and interaction between characters.

Since some of tension of *Maiden Voyage* is centered on social interactions, I emphasize the dialogue between different characters. I have found that I am especially fond of writing trios, larger groups, and, to a lesser extent, duos. These groups allow for a unique dynamic where natural conversation occurs. Characters cut each other off or carry on more than one conversation at a time, and since the novel is written from a limited omniscient perspective (Alex’s), I find having two people around her allows me space to develop characters without Alex speaking constantly.

An example of this is when Alex and Tye meet Midshipman Dryden below decks (pg. 218):

“Creswell and Emsworth. Fancy meeting the two of you down here.”

Alex whipped around so fast her neck cracked and she felt a burst of warm pain splash up her skull. Her eyes found a figure in the dark. The blonde boy,

Dryden. She'd completely forgotten he was on board. She hadn't seen him since their last lesson with Pullman.

Dryden's pointed face was tilted down toward her with a strange expression. It was friendly, open, but she didn't believe it, not for a second. She watched Dryden's gaze flick up to Tye.

"Yes, imagine meeting a fellow shipmate, below decks, on a ship. How extraordinary," Tye said. His voice had an edge to it that Alex wasn't used to. It didn't fit Tye's easy manner.

Alex and Tye make up two members of a trio of midshipmen: one of many trios in the novel. Then there is the Flag Rank Trio -- Captain James Trowbridge, Lieutenant Theodore Harding, and Lieutenant Andrew O'Hare -- but this grouping is often reduced to the duo of Harding and O'Hare. I have a trio of people who know about Alex (excluding Alex herself): O'Hare, Harding, and Montague Bishop. When this trio in particular is together, it greatly increases the tension in the story. As Alex's journey progresses, more sailors discover her secret. It begins with Andrew, then Theo, then Monty. Once they know the truth, they are complicit in her crimes. An example of this tension is in a scene with Monty and Alex after she's been injured: "We're not so different, you and me." Monty said with a sigh. "Let me put it this way: If you live, I live. That's pretty decent incentive to save your life."

"I'm not pirate! I'm not like you." Alex hissed. She had had enough pirates for a lifetime. Thorne's gold-tipped smile swam in front of her eyes.

"We are both hiding from Captain James Trowbridge. Though, I pride myself on knowing that'd I've been at it a great deal longer than you," (pg. 311).

Beyond trios and duos, I also split my characters into larger groups to manage them. Some of these groups are standard naval protocol: The Ordinary Seamen, the Able Seamen, the Midshipmen, and the higher-ranking officers (Lieutenants, Lieutenant Commanders, and Captain). These separations create tension for my protagonist but also between background characters to create a sense of reality on the ship. An example of this is when Alex discovers a lower-ranking seaman doesn't like her. This is a chance for me to touch on naval hierarchies. "That was Able Seaman Pierce, he told her. Alex thought her nickname was better. So, Weasel-Man he would remain. He was known for his quick temper and his steady hands. She should keep away from him, Andrew said. He liked to start trouble. What could Pierce have against her? She had only been aboard a few days! Andrew shook his head. He was in line for the Midshipman spot before she came. He's not a fan of any of the midshipmen, he told her," (pg. 224). Naval hierarchies are key to creating a believable historical setting. The captain never has direct contact with the lower ranking men. Everything must follow the chain of command; however, older men are often under the charge of young boys.

The larger groups were necessary to keep track of the sheer number of men on a naval vessel. As I learned from Kostam in *The Naval Miscellany*, there can be between 850 to 1000 men on a First Rate Ship-of-the-Line. I named the *HMS Saint George* as a 4<sup>th</sup> rate ship-of-the-line, an older, lesser used model that was often sent to the West Indies. Therefore, there would be somewhere between 200 and 400 men aboard. As I couldn't name and have Alex interact with each and every one of them, I found the groupings to be helpful in controlling the number of characters. While, in reality, a sailor might get to know every man on his ship, it would be impossible to write a novel at 120,000 words or

less and also have Alex interact with every sailor. Grouping sailors and picking out four or five men that Alex recognized on a regular basis was more conducive to the constraints of fiction.

The craft of fiction takes time, and I will always be able to find new things to add to *Maiden Voyage* that help the story grow, but I must end this draft somewhere. I know *Maiden Voyage* has several more revisions to go through before it is a finished product. Therefore, over the summer I intend to address some of the other revisions that I couldn't complete during the semester. I want to complete two rounds of revisions: one content-based revision and one for editing. The content-based revision will focus on fixing plot holes and increasing my scenic descriptions and indirect dialogue. Of these two aspects, the plot holes will be the most time consuming. There are several plot points that have changed due to the new beginning that remain unresolved in this draft. Monty was originally written out of the novel once the *Saint George* made port in St. Kitts; however, this draft makes it clear that Monty is a central character, and it would make more sense for him to remain until the end of the novel. The character Midshipman Dryden has also changed roles slightly. Originally, he was an antagonist for Alex on Nassau and didn't come back until St. Kitts. However, in this draft I moved him onto the *Saint George* so he has a more continuous role. These changes are reflected in the new beginning of the book, but conflict with some of the older writing at the end.

While character based plot holes are the most time consuming, I definitely recognize that *Maiden Voyage* needs more descriptions of places and scenery to make the world feel fully realized. Part of this comes from my fixation on direct dialogue. There isn't a lot of space to stop and describe a room when the page is filled with back-and-forth dialogue. I also know that when I add in more indirect dialogue, there will be more space to use on describing the inside of the

*HMS Saint George*. Since I use many descriptions of light in this draft, I intend to focus my descriptions on other aspects of the world. I want to focus on texture: How does the wood grain look on a ship close up? Can Alex see the tar between the planks of the deck? I want to focus on sound: What are the loudest sounds on the ship? What stands out to her? What sounds become normal background noise? I want to focus on smell: What does the open-aired top deck smell like compared to the closed air in the lower decks? Does the kitchen smell any nicer than the other rooms on the ship? What do the men smell like as the voyage progresses?

These additions may seem to work against my last goal, keeping the novel under 120,000 words, but with the content cuts, I feel I should have abundant space to include indirect dialogue and scenic descriptions. I intend to improve the length of the novel during my second revision: the line editing phase. This is where I will simplify my language, decide what is necessary and unnecessary at the sentence level, and make major cuts to the prose.

Overall, I enjoyed the process of working on this thesis. I took some great steps forward in the revision process. I rewrote the entire beginning with 120 document pages of new material. I took a 140,000 word document and cut unnecessary material until I got it down to 120,000 words. I revised my older writing and created a connection between old and new writing. Of the revisions I made this year, I am most excited by two scenes: The final confrontation with Alex's father from pages 92-97, which is the event that kick-starts her adventure; and I adore action sequences like the one in chapter 25 where Alex saves Captain Trowbridge's life. I know there's a lot of work left, but I started this thesis to meet the goals for my book, and I have completed them. I wanted a female protagonist, and I have one. I wanted a story set believably in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Age of Sail, and I have achieved that. I wanted a slow romance, and this draft reflects the beginnings of one: Alex's introduction to her future husband. As this story has so many secrets,

family ties, and adventures, I know I could keep revising forever, but the semester has come to a close. Please enjoy my thesis project, *Maiden Voyage* a Young Adult Historical Adventure set on the high seas.

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# Maiden Voyage

By Kyra E. Bauske

Honors in the Major Thesis

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Prelude:

The boys were exempt from the official festivities of the Governor's picnic. It was hosted with great fanfare, drinks, and picnic baskets on the grassy hill near Dewitt's Point. Everyone of consequence attended, but the boys played their game of naval warfare, happy to escape the drudgery of "grown-up" conversation.

Alexandra Lington watched them from her father's side. She longed to run down to the beach and shove her toes in the sand. Mother used to let her do that.

Alexandra and her father looked out of place at the picnic in their mourning clothes. Strictly speaking, they weren't supposed to attend parties, but on the island, so far from the strict society of England, allowances were made for the most successful merchantman and his nine-year-old daughter. Everard Lington stood near the patchwork of blankets with ladies in fine gowns. He was deep in a conversation with the Admiral and an older man, Lord Dewhurst. They talked of money and of prize ships and sipped punch from the governor's china. Alexandra didn't care for any of it.

She tugged gently on her father's arm when there was a lull in conversation. "Papa, may I go down to the seaside?"

He took a moment to turn to her, enough time for her to tug again, more insistently. His hand clamped on her shoulder, a silent reprimand. "Alexandra, you're being rude. You know you can't go down to the ocean. You will get pulled out in a tide and drown. Stay here by me where you're safe."

Alexandra pouted, and her eyes grew damp. Mama wouldn't have forced her to stay. Who cared about the stupid grownups and their stupid punch? The boys had all the fun, running

and calling in the waves. It looked like a scene from one of the novels her mother used to read. Alexandra longed to be a part of it.

A deep, gravelly voice roused her from her petulance. Her least favorite person had joined their group. He was tall, lanky and frightening, with dark hair and a scar across his neck. The scar was mostly hidden by his cravat, but Alexandra knew it was there. He visited papa sometimes, and mama hadn't liked it. She never told Alex why.

Her father smiled and said, "Mr. Ellond! I didn't know you'd be back for the picnic!" Her father's restraining hand left her.

Alexandra didn't wait to hear the scar-man's throaty reply. She hiked up her skirts and slipped down the grassy hillside until her little black shoes met the sand. The warzone boys were splashing left and right, shouting words she didn't understand. It looked exciting.

Their game consisted of three teams: the French, the pirates, and the Navy. The last group standing would win, and for Andrew O'Hare, a newly minted Midshipman, the game was going exceedingly well. He had just downed a pair of Frenchies and was one step closer to the grand prize – forfeit of night watch, a round of drinks at the local tavern, and Andrew's favorite: two weeks' worth of bread rations. Andrew led his men to shore where they recovered from the last battle.

"Alright. I want Edwards and Hollingford on the starboard and Stafford and Rowling on the port. We'll run the gauntlet and take out both groups at once." Andrew jammed his fingers into his pockets as he stood up straight.

“If it’s one against two, won’t you just die?” a loud, unfamiliar voice called from the edge of their cluster.

Andrew scowled, and his crew cleared a path to the belligerent stranger. “What’s your name, sailor – so I can send you to the brig for insubordination?”

Who was stupid enough to defy the elected captain?

“My name is Alexandra Lington, and I don’t want to go to the brig. I want to play with you, but you’re doing it wrong.”

Andrew’s mouth fell open in horror. A little girl stood at the edge of their group. She couldn’t be more than eight judging by her size. She was all wide eyes and stubby limbs. Her dress looked like something out of a gothic cake shop, hardly suitable for naval warfare.

Andrew blocked her way to the water. “You can’t play with us. You’re a *girl*.”

“And why not! I can run and shout just like you can!”

Andrew glanced at his men for support. “Well, you...you can’t swim! If you play you’ll drown.” The boys nodded. That seemed a logical answer.

Alexandra pouted. “I won’t drown! I know how swimming works.”

The group laughed, and the girl’s color rose. “I do!”

Andrew suddenly felt terribly clever. He picked some sand from under his thumbnail and feigned thoughtfulness. “Well, I suppose you could join...” Andrew pointed toward the line of rocks that extended from the beach to the drop off. “See those rocks?”

The girl bobbed her head.

“Go sit on them, and pretend to be a Siren.”

A chuckle circled the group, but the girl frowned and folded her little arms. “That sounds stupid.”

“You want to play or not?”

“Yes.”

“Then go be a siren.’

The girl stomped off with a scowl, and the game resumed.

Alexandra was bored. It wasn't fair that she couldn't join. That red-haired boy didn't think she was smart, but she'd already figured out he was losing – badly. The warm water lapped at her feet as she watched the three groups.

The French group had bunkered down on the sand bar and teamed with the Pirates using her rocks as a base. When the Navy charged, they were repulsed on two sides. One by one, the Navy team members were taken to the little makeshift prison – the little reef where the prisoners were kept. Waves dashed on the coral jutting out of the water. The only way out there was to swim or hop across the rocks.

Waiting to be noticed wasn't working. Alex stood from her siren's perch and balanced between the crags. The wind pulled at her hair and dress pulling her back toward the island even as she tip-toed further away. She slipped across the rocks, her small feet finding purchase in little divots and crags where larger boys might slip.

“What’re you doing here, eh? You’re supposed to be watching.” The prisoners turned to the girl crouching at the edge of their reef.

“I want to help.” She ducked as a wave crashed on the reef, dousing them all, and smiled mischievously as the sea spray rolled down her face. “I can help you win.”

The boys watched her dubiously. Andrew O’Hare hadn’t wanted her in. Girls were bad luck. “What do you know about sailing? You’re just a girl.”

“You could kill the pirates if you attacked from behind,” she whispered.

One of the boys cursed, and the leader shoved him underwater before turning back to Alexandra. “We’re in prison. We can’t attack anyone!”

She wrinkled her nose. “Why not?”

“Because that’s the rules!”

“The rules don’t apply to Sirens, As a Siren, I say that you can go free.”

“But I thought sirens stole sailors away!”

Alexandra pondered this. It was true: according to the legends, Sirens were cruel, cold, killers. “If I release you, you have one chance to bring me another boy in your place. If you come back empty handed, I steal you away for good.”

There was a quiet deliberation among the sailors. The consensus was that she, being an undefined member of the game, would indeed need a function and releasing prisoners could be a part of that function. The boys muttered until a decision was reached. “It sounds fair.”

“Let’s call it The Siren’s Accord,” Alexandra said. “Climb out on the rocks and bring me some pirates! You are released by the Siren!”

Andrew O’Hare couldn’t believe his eyes. His men, the prisoners, were leaping from the rocks onto their adversaries. It wasn’t good form! In fact, it was downright piratical – except, they were winning. But the Navy men weren’t just cutting down the pirates; they were kidnapping them. Each man took a prisoner and pulled him back to the coral, where a slight girl in a damp dress stood grinning from ear to ear.

“What the bloody hell is she doing?” he growled at one of the released prisoners.

The boys slogged through the seawater up to their commander. “We’re calling it the Siren Accord, sir. New player means new rules!”

Andrew jammed his hand into his pocket in aggravation as his subordinates explained their new advantage. The white flag was raised, and the other teams were told. If they could bribe the Siren to release them, they would either pay their debt or die for good. It applied to any sailor, but the Navy already had the advantage.

As the sun sunk lower and lower, the Navy grew stronger and stronger, relying on the position of the prison to give them the flank advantage. Now, sailors who had failed to pay their Siren’s debt watched from the shore – and many more pirates and French than Navy sat out.

Until Andrew was captured.

“Good afternoon,” Alexandra greeted him with a beaming smile.

The redhead scowled. “What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing, changing the rules of our game like that?” He snapped at her he walked along the reef. He was gangly and freckled, and his Irish accent became more pronounced as his irritation rose.

Alexandra folded her arms. “I’m helping you win! You should be grateful!”

“Grateful? Ha! You are out here risking your life for a game you weren’t invited to.” He stood in the tide pool, shifting his feet to find a comfortable spot on the craggy coral. “Now, whose fault will it be if you’re hurt? Me. I don’t fancy getting a flogging for letting the merchant’s daughter drown.”

Alexandra glared at him and planted her feet. “It doesn’t matter who my father is. I’m not going to drown.” Andrew was a good head taller than she was, but looked prepared to fight him.

Andrew opened his mouth to reply, but it was instantly filled with a rush of salt water. He coughed and spluttered, and when he opened his eyes the young Miss Lington was *laughing* at him.

He spit a mouthful of salt water back into the sea. “You see, this is why you should go in. The sea is getting too rough,” he responded hoarsely.

“You seem more wet than me. Maybe *you* should go in.”

Andrew planted his hands on his hips. “I’m a man. I can handle—“ he broke off. He began digging through his pockets with vigour. First one, then the other.

“What is it?” Alexandra asked. She leaned down to peer into the water for the missing treasure.



Andrew's color drained from his face. "It's...it's gone! My rosary!" He looked around in the tide pool. He couldn't lose it. It was all he had left of his father after he died. It was his good luck charm.

"Is it black?"

Andrew glanced at the girl. The evening was darkening. Soon there would be no chance of finding the black beads in the dark sea. "Aye."

The girl drew in deep breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and jumped.

Andrew called out and moved to follow, but the sea rushed to meet him and he was blinded by the salty spray. He thought he heard a cry, but the sound was faint against the roar of the waves. Another wave pounded against his back, dousing him a second time. He rubbed the water from his eyes and whipped his head around.

The long line of rocks that led back to shore were empty. They split the beach clean in two, and Alex had jumped away from their picnic to the other side where the sea was deeper. The sea roiled with foam, but there was no black mourning dress in sight.

"THERE!" One of the boys called. "Two points to the lee of the rocks!"

Andrew followed the direction and there was the sodden brown hair of the girl bobbing above the waves. He wasted no time, throwing off coat and belt and diving into the sea.

Andrew struck out to the floating mass of silk and was surprised that the girl's head was above the water. She was kicking furiously, her fighting the water as her dress ballooned around her thin legs trying to pull her down. He reached her and hauled her up on his back. He told her to hold on, and received no argument as he struck out for shore. She kicked with all her might

tangling with his legs, making it harder to keep them both afloat. Andrew was sure he would have bruises from her knobby knees.

Finally, as the burning in Andrew's arms become unbearable, he felt the sand beneath his toes. The officers waded out to help the boy to his feet. The girl on his back clung there like a heavy silken barnacle. Andrew let her down and they crawled to shore together. Andrew glanced at the sodden girl, and she didn't look any worse for wear. Only soaked. She wasn't even coughing.

By now, a group of officers had been called to arms. The lads were smart enough for that. Ladies followed down the beach line, screaming and wailing. The girl was pulled to her feet by her furious father. He whispered something in her ear, and she hung her head. Her father wrapped an overlarge quilt around her shoulders.

Andrew didn't take his eyes off her as he stood. "Are...you alright?"

"She'll be fine, boy," her father assured. He wrapped a protective arm like iron around her shoulders.

"You're lucky. You could have lost her," someone said.

Lington was stone faced. "Come. We're going home before you catch your death."

Alexandra wriggled in her father's grasp and held out a fistful of black beads to her rescuer. "You forgot your rosary."

Andrew stared in awe as the string of black beads settled into his hand. "I...I can't...believe..."

Lington watched the boy. “You will come for tea when the admiral can spare you. We must give you our thanks.”

The surrounding ladies cooed their approval.

Andrew bowed, keeping his eyes on Alexandra, who walked away wrapped in her quilt.

## Chapter 1:

Alexandra had lived on Nassau for 17 years, and she hated island mornings. They could be beautiful, sometimes. The birds sang every morning, and if you had a good view of the sea, the golden hue of the water was worth an early start. But Alexandra couldn't see the sea from her window, only the heavy tropical foliage that covered much of the island. She could only see the ocean from two places: Fort Nassau, which her friend Andrew let her visit on occasion, and Lord Dewhurst's house. She had never been there, but she heard it had a breathtaking view. However, not even the sea could make up for the humidity and the rains. As summer loomed, the heavy air rested on Alexandra's shoulders, teasing her hair into a frizz that drove her ladies' maid mad. The sun peered up over the palms, almost apologetic for the heat it would bring in the coming hours.

"Lord, you'll never guess who's coming," Alexandra's maid crowed, startling her mistress. "I want it known I guessed it before Peterson," Alexandra's maid bustled around the room, laying out the petticoats and pouring water for her mistress' washbowl.

"Is it someone I like?" Alexandra reluctantly turned from the window. Her hair was up in a ratty bun, hopelessly tangled. Her sharp eyes followed her maid's movements. The blue dress. Someone important, then.

Lori let out a sharp laugh. "I'll give you a hint, dear. He's tall. He's rich. He's got eyebrows like great friendly caterpillars –"

"My God, Lord Dewhurst!" Alexandra laughed.

Lord Dewhurst was the richest man on the island with more land than the governor and twice the income. His trade was in tobacco and sugarcane which kept his purse full. He was genteel as could be expected from a man of his means, with just the right amount of condescension for the lower classes. Needless to say, every mother on the island hoped her daughter would marry him.

However, Alexandra's mother hadn't thought much of him when she was alive. Mother had preferred the London men to Islanders. She told stories of gentlemen in London, who had large country homes, sometimes their own ships that Alexandra would certainly be allowed on. She would have a life filled with the freedom to ride horses and have picnics. She imagined all the adventures she could have on a grand English estate. According to mother, in England, she would be free. After her death, Alexandra asked her father every year to be allowed to sail to England and find a husband and every year he turned her down.

"What the devil is Lord Dewhurst doing here?" Alexandra asked.

"Language, Miss! Can't be having 'devils' and what-have-you being said around such a man. He might have a heart attack – especially at his age!"

They both descended into a fit of giggles.

"Lori, you mustn't say such things! How am I to speak to him with a straight face?" Alexandra admonished. She stood to wash her face, watching her maid with mischievous smile.

“Well, miss, I expect your face to be quite serious when he proposes to you today.”

Alexandra inhaled a nose-full of water and spluttered into the washbowl. Lori pounded lightly on her back until she could breathe again. Her room suddenly felt too small. The carved four-poster bed loomed up behind her. The oriental rug seemed to tug at her feet and holds her in place. The mirror, showed her own reflection, damp and red from her coughing fit. She felt her chances of sailing for England slipping away.

Lori frowned at her mistress and placated Alexandra with soothing fingers, trying to guide her toward the layers of clothing that were spread on her bed. The master wouldn't be pleased if his daughter were late.

“I can't marry him. He's ancient!” Alexandra shrugged out of her maid's hands. “Last time I saw him at ball I swear he was going blind and that was almost a year ago!”

“Now, Miss, there's nothing wrong with his Lordship. He's rich and generous. You'll be well cared for.” Lori tried to coax her Mistress toward the gown once more.

Alexandra's sour expression didn't change. She threw herself into her vanity chair.

“Now, none of this, Miss Alexandra! What would your mother say?”

Alexandra felt the familiar pang of loss. “My mother wanted me to marry a man in England, not the West Indies.” She felt like a petulant child, but she couldn't muster any feeling but disgust.

A layer of creamy skirts fell over Alexandra's head and settled at her waist. Her corset and pockets followed. She thought about the Lord waiting downstairs as the pastel silk settled over her figure. "Do you think father would kill me if I turned him down? Perhaps if I explain again, about England..."

There was a pause as Lori tied the layers. Her silence answered more than her words could have. Alexandra watched her own reflection. She would belong to Dewhurst, a man she didn't love. At least she could still visit...

"Would you come with me? If father made me say yes...would you come too?"

"Sorry dear, you know how I care for you, but no amount of money or love could get me onto that man's property. He treats his workers something awful, if I've heard right. And those aren't even the slaves."

Alexandra felt sick. "You said he was kind! Kind men don't own slaves! How could father let me be married to such a man? I won't do it." She would be a cruel man's property. She couldn't do that. She would never do that. Father would have to see reason.

Lori tugged Alexandra back to the chair and started the daily fight with her wayward hair, which hadn't taken well to the Caribbean air over the years. "You'll do it because it's a smart match. Once he's dead, you'll be free and so will those poor people."

Alexandra stared at the floorboards. It was too much all at once. Marriage to Lord Dewhurst was nothing more than a prison sentence. He was well-established on the island and he had no plans to change that.

“You look lovely, Miss,” said Lori as she admired her young mistress and turned her toward the floor-length mirror.

Alexandra stared at herself with a critical eye. Her brown hair had been wrestled into a fontange style, her mother’s favorite, but even with the uncomfortably tight pins, strands hair were already springing from their bonds. Her skin was pale for an islander: she wasn’t allowed to spend much time outside because her father worried she would get sun poisoning. He seemed to think she could die from it. Her face was a pleasant shape with a patchwork of ordinary features that didn’t quite go with one another. Her mother’s slightly upturned nose, small chin, and gentle cheekbones, mixed with the slightly over thick brows and thin lips that could only come from her father’s side. Her eyes, an amber color – too pale to be brown, but not green enough to be hazel – were her favorite feature though they didn’t go with the rest of her any better than her nose or mouth. The thing she liked best about her reflection was her mother’s ruby ring. The gem sat between two animals engraved in gold, too worn to make out, and the ring fit perfectly on her middle finger. It made her feel less alone.

“I suppose we shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

Alexandra descended the long stone staircase, composing herself. She focused on the pressure of the corset against her ribs, the tapping sound her shoes made on the steps, the cold feel of the railing under her fingertips. The little details grounded her and kept her mind from drifting into a panic.

“Ah! Alexandra! You’ve finally decided to grace us with your presence,” her father called. “Women! Always need to make such grand entrances.” Everard Lington



winked at his guest. He seemed to be in an unusually good mood. He sat in her favorite room in the house: the one where mother used to play the pianoforte. It had three tall windows with a view of the sea if you peered through the trees, and Dewhurst was in her favorite spot, the blue French-style settee close to the small pianoforte that faced the windows.

Dewhurst smiled and grasped for his walking stick which leaned against the settee. His face was all crags and lines. He didn't look cruel. In fact, he looked friendly, but Alexandra couldn't imagine becoming his wife.

“Forgive me if I kept you waiting, Father.”

Dewhurst pulled himself from his seat and collapsed into a bow. “Miss Lington, It is a pleasure.” He held out a hand with a practiced air.

Alexandra dropped into a curtsey and placed her hand in his; she returned his practiced pleasantries with her own. Her mother had taught her manners. Alexandra wouldn't dishonor her memory with rudeness.

Dewhurst looked at her with a content smile and helped her into her seat, the white carved chair that wobbled between the rug and the marble floor. Alexandra felt a twinge of guilt. He wasn't handsome, by any means, but he could have been in his youth. The man lowered himself back into his own chair with a sigh.

She had never thought herself vain, but looking at Dewhurst, she had to admit she always hoped to find a handsome husband – and one of her choosing. Dewhurst's shoulders rounded forward and he slumped slightly in his chair. His knees seemed to

poke out of his breeches as if there was nothing between his skeleton and his clothes. She knew she would never love him. They had nothing in common. Dewhurst was older than her father and she had trouble enough with him.

“Lovely girl you’ve got, Lington. Said that the last time I spied her ‘cross the ballroom. Quite a vision to have on one’s arm, I’d expect. Not that I dance all that much, but it does me well to think on it from time to time.”

Everard Lington tilted his head courteously. “As you say, sir. As you say. My daughter is truly accomplished. She spends a great deal of her time indoors, caring for the household in her mother’s stead, along with practicing those delightful arts that only women can truly master. Alexandra, I hear you’ve been working on a new cross-stitch, yes?”

Alexandra dipped her head demurely. She replied in the quick affirmative; however, she couldn’t boast any great skill in the task. It seemed a dreadful waste of a day to sit around stitching patterns into fabric that would be forgotten somewhere in a cupboard when it was finished. She had no interest in such things. She’d much rather pester Andrew, and she did, whenever she had the chance.

“Capital, capital. Always preferred the London complexion, as it were. Your skin is white as a lily.”

Alexandra bobbed her head in agreement and forced a simper onto her face. Perhaps if she was insipid enough, Dewhurst would get bored. “Indeed, sir, it is. It used to be quite dark when I was young; however, one must consider that so much sun might

be unhealthy –my father has often told me such.” Alexandra shot a look at her father, and his brow creased slightly: a warning to behave.

Dewhurst, however, was undeterred. In fact, he was delighted. At every turn, he found some new feature of Alexandra’s to compliment: her expertly pinned curls (Alas, sir the credit must go to my maid), her delightfully shaped fingers, she must be a proficient musician (No, indeed, it was my mother who was proficient), and even her shape, unusually slim, but in a pleasing way, he assured her. There was certainly no want of interest, but more often than not Alexandra found she was left to her own thoughts. Her father was quite capable of singing her praises without her, and it seemed the gentlemen preferred it that way.

The tea and luncheon followed with a monotonous discussion of proper females and well-kept homes. It wasn’t until Alexandra caught the word ‘Dowry’ that she was pulled from her morose reflection.

“Forgive me! Father!” She stopped Lord Dewhurst mid-sentence.

The pair turned to her. Dewhurst looked politely surprised and her father politely mortified.

“What is this talk of dowries? I recall neither being made an offer nor accepting one.” Her father would forgive her, surely. He had to understand. It wasn’t fair to ship her off without even giving her a chance to make an answer.

She tried to catch her father’s eye, but he was checking his watch, checking the window, and then his watch again.

Dewhurst broke into a crooked grin. “That’s right, Miss Lington. We ought to do the thing properly. A direct girl, you have here, Everard. She’ll be good with the slaves, I’ll warrant.”

Alexandra blanched, “Oh, no, Lord Dewhurst. I assure you – ”

“Now, Alexandra,” her father said loudly. “Don’t look so nervous!”

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir,” The newest housemaid, Ellie was hovering in the doorway. Her hands twisted into her smock as she watched her master.

“Ah, yes. I have a business meeting. I hope you two will be alright for a few minutes? I’m sure I can trust you with my daughter?” Her father stood bowing slightly, and Alexandra shot him a scowl. He was doing this on purpose.

He raised an eyebrow in warning as he walked out. His meeting was with John Ellond, the scar man. Ellond came every third Tuesday at 2-o-clock. Father must have planned Dewhurst’s visit at the same time to give Alexandra and her suiter time alone. She shuddered.

The only sounds in the room were the rustle of fabric as Alexandra shifted in her seat and the laborious breathing of Lord Dewhurst. He was a rich man, for sure. The walking stick he turned in his hand was crusted with jewels and inlaid with gold.

Alexandra imagined herself as his wife, trussed up in fine London gowns, hair piled high and jewels dripping from her neck. It was a life any lady would dream of:

Riches, a fine home on the hill with a view of the sea... a view Alexandra could grow used to very quickly.

“Miss Lington, you have to understand a man of my age and standing *must* have a wife. It doesn't do to be a bachelor. It would increase my happiness and yours, I would imagine, to move forward with a courtship. Of course, you will have anything you want. Any room in the house. Money is no object, my dear.”

Money no object? What a thing to say. Alexandra had lived so long under her father's roof that it was hard to imagine a life where she could purchase what she pleased, go where she pleased, at any expense. Her father was not poor, certainly. She didn't want for food, and she had plenty of clothes, but her father couldn't abide waste. Every purchase was met with resistance. Even simple requests, like getting two flavors of jam instead of one, earned her a stern look and a reminder to only buy what she needed in town.

Dewhurst seemed earnest as he leaned forward. His face was open, weathered and lined, but his eyes were bright. Women had been married off to much worse men.

“I need a woman to run the house right and proper. A pretty young thing with some spirit – I can't have a wife that'll be pushed about by my slaves.”

All at once, her daydreams came screeching to her a halt. All the fine gowns and pretty views in the world couldn't disguise where the money really came from. Dewhurst's fields and trade empire were built on slaves. The thought of keeping slaves in a household she was meant to run made her sick.

“That and I am yet to produce an heir.”

Alexandra’s skin crawled. She couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t do it.

“But as my wife, you will be respected, loved even by the islanders. You will attend every ball, have everything you wish. You want your own carriage? I will order one. You want three horses? I will buy them for you. I want my new wife to be happy, you see.” Dewhurst heaved himself from his chair. His harsh breathing was suddenly close to her ear as rattled to the floor on one knee and took her hand.

His skin was like parchment, dried and crumpled. It scratched against her skin. “Miss Alexandra Lington, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Alexandra desperately fought to say something, anything, but the words were caught in her throat. The room was too hot, her dress was too tight, and she couldn’t *breathe*.

Several things happened at once. Dewhurst, thinking that silence was a stunned delight from his new bride, slid a cold, golden ring onto her finger. At the same time, sickened with panic, Alexandra levered herself out of her chair and tried to step around her kneeling suitor. She tripped on the rug and her hand, now elegantly adorned with her wedding-ring-shackle, reflexively gripped the front of Dewhurst’s waistcoat as she fell, tearing its buttons and toppling them both into an unruly mess onto the floor.

Dewhurst’s breath came out in a whoosh of air as Alexandra landed on her back. She laid, paralyzed, terrified for a moment as Dewhurst’s weight settled on her. In a

moment she was pushing on him, his frail rounded shoulder lifted under her hands. He rolled off her with a groaned apology.

Alexandra hastily pulled her skirts down over her ankles.

Lord Dewhurst heaved himself up from the floor and grasping at his open waistcoat. “It seems we’ve had a misunderstanding—“ He watched Alexandra with a level of shame and reached out to help her up.

She felt terrible as she pulled away. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. She pulled away from his comforting hands and fled the room.

## Chapter 2:

“God! I’ll never be able to go out into society again!”

“Don’t say such things! It can’t have been so very bad.” Lori frowned at her mistress. They were ensconced in the kitchen as Mrs. Tott, the cook, prepared a soothing tea.

Dewhurst had left hours ago, and Mr. Lington had quickly followed. His mortification was unbearable, but before he strode from the house, he informed Alexandra that she was bound to the house until she learned to ‘behave’.

“Lori, you didn’t see it! I completely lost my head. I couldn’t breathe and he shoved that ring on my finger and I tried to bolt – no better than one of father’s colts. We fell on the floor *together*, Lori. I was on *top* of him!”

Lori pressed the tea into her mistress’ hands. “Hush, now. You’re overreacting.”

“I knocked him over, and then I *ran*.” Alexandra moaned. “And father is so cross. Did you see his face?”

Lori waited for her mistress to fall silent. “All you can do is apologize...I’m sure it will all be set right. Your father will come around eventually.”

Alexandra couldn’t sit still. She hadn’t touched her tea. She couldn’t stomach anything at all. Her father had locked her away like a criminal. Certainly, she had handled it badly, but she couldn’t be blamed for rejecting Lord Dewhurst. Father wouldn’t want to



remarry someone his age. But, now she was never going to convince father she could go to England. Not when he thought her badly behaved.

The afternoon seemed to creep. The shadows stretched slowly from the palms and their creeping darkness spread into the house. Alexandra shut herself away in her room. Her mind was full of choices and completely devoid of answers. Her options were marriage to Dewhurst or life as an island spinster. She had considered it before – never marrying. She didn't like anyone well enough to attach herself to him for life. It wouldn't be so bad not to be married, except she would be her father's property as long as he lived. He wasn't a cruel man, but she wasn't sure she wanted to spend her life under his roof. She wanted to run in the sea and stay outside until she burned to a crisp. She wasn't sure if her sanity would survive if she stayed at home.

But if she didn't want to stay, she must marry Dewhurst. She hadn't received another offer from the other island men. The few bachelors on the island were either officers, who father loathed – something about a rivalry between the merchants and the Navy, or men 'of little means,' which Alexandra found ridiculous considering the men her father did business with on a regular basis. Though, she did concede that, unsupervised horse rides and trips to the seaside wouldn't be possible without money.

he made lists of her options until her hand was sore and her skin blotted with ink. She was trapped, unable to chose. Option one: Apologize to Dewhurst and marry him. She would be near Andrew, life near the ocean, and be mistress of her own house. But a rich house with slaves, was abhorrent. And then, there was Dewhurst's age. Option two: Throw herself on her father's mercy, and hope he would send her to England. Maybe find

a handsome Admiral who would teach her to sail or take her on adventures like Andrew used to. It was nearly impossible Father would agree. She scratched that option off the list. Option three: live on the island as a spinster. She would be her father's property. When he died, she might even be turned out of the house. She would be free, but unable to live. There was no way to please everyone and please herself.

Alexandra was lying on her bed when Lori appeared with her dinner. "You need to eat, miss. You can't be starving yourself, now. It won't do at all."

Alexandra barely lifted her head. "I'm too anxious to eat."

Lori shook her head and set out the morsels: Salted meats, fresh bread, and a warm pot of tea.

"How am I supposed to decide? Lori I can't abide living here for the rest of my life under *his* roof...but compared to the lives of many women it isn't so very bad. I feel guilty for wanting my own way, but I know if I chose Dewhurst...I won't ever be happy again."

Lori didn't say anything and Alexandra felt shame creep into her cheeks. She lifted her head off the mattress. "Sorry...I didn't mean—" Lori would likely never be married. She felt the weight of her words ringing in the air.

Lori's mouth was tight and she shrugged. "My place is to listen, miss. Not to judge."

Alexandra bit her lip and stared toward the dark window. If she listened she sometimes heard the sea, but it was quiet tonight.

“Why don’t you go visit your friend Lieutenant O’Hare? He’s a right smart man, and I suppose he might give you some advice you’d be comfortable hearing,” Lori said. She smoothed out a wrinkle in Alexandra’s bedding.

Alexandra’s turned to look at Lori with a wry smile. She knew all the servants thought she and Andrew were secretly courting. The idea seemed laughable before, but now, she would give anything to sail away with him. Though, imagining herself as her best friend’s wife was more than a little awkward. “Andrew? Well, I suppose he would have an opinion, wouldn’t he?” Alexandra frowned. “Would father let me considering all that happened?”

Lori smoothed down Alexandra’s hair. “Perhaps we can invite the good Lieutenant here.”

Alexandra picked at her food. She actually was hungry, and the bread disappeared along with the salted meats. “If only father hadn’t bound me to the house, I could go see him tonight!”

Lori sighed. “You know very well the fort closes at sunset. You can’t get in now unless you’re planning to scale the walls! Wait ‘till tomorrow and we’ll find a way.”

Lori stood and smoothed out her apron with a calm finality. “Now you finish that meal and I’ll be back for the tray in an hour. I hope to find you asleep by then. Staying up all night worrying won’t do you an ounce of good!”

Alexandra nodded and popped a bite of bread in her mouth. Then she was left alone with her thoughts.

She wished she was calmer. She had a plan, but it didn't help. An unshakable anxiety was pulsing through her veins. What if Andrew wasn't available tomorrow? What if he couldn't talk to her for weeks? Suppose they were shipping him out? She needed to see him. She needed his advice. If she waited too long to decide, her future would be chosen for her. She couldn't live like that. She just couldn't.

"Don't be stupid," she whispered pushing her tray off her lap. "The gates are closed. There's no way to get in."

But that wasn't true. On the western wall of Fort Nassau was a passage. Built during the pirate insurrection, it was once used for smuggling out gold. It was supposed to be a myth. Andrew had found it on accident, and he showed it to Alexandra on a dare. They had met there often enough, but never at night. She had never used it alone, either.

It was a ridiculous idea, but it stuck. Alexandra could already imagine the path through the dark city into the fort. She knew she could do it, but if her father found out...

"No. It simply isn't possible."

But what if it was? What if she made it inside? What if Andrew could hide her away? Perhaps he could find her a ship and send her to England in secret! She felt a thrill of excitement. Andrew could be the answer to all of her problems, not through marriage, but through his connections in the navy.

“You can’t go crawling through tunnels in a gown,” she admonished herself.

“You’re not a child anymore...”

How she wished she were, sometimes.

She breathed out sharply, and noticed a chance flutter outside her window. The maids had hung out the servant’s laundry to dry.

“If we took away the dress, I could make it. Andrew would understand, surely. And father...he won’t even miss me.”

Alexandra paced the length of her room then she pulled sharply on the ties of her gown. She peeled the layers down her pantaloons and corset. She shrugged on her dressing gown, tying it tightly over her impropriety, and she from her room with the silent step of her stockinged feet.

She couldn’t sit idly by and wait for her future to be decided. She would go to Andrew in disguise and escape the island in the dead of night.

She slipped past the kitchen and out the back door snatching a pair of boots and a hat from the mudroom. She collected what she needed from the laundry line: A pair of stable boy’s trousers, a loose-fitting shirt and the boots completed her disguise. She pushed her dressing gown into the hedge that rimmed the border of the yard.

Her hands shook a moment as she stared out into the dimly lit town. She could hear the tavern music from the hill at the edge of her father’s estate.

“I can make it,” she repeated as she set off into the night.

### Chapter 3

This was, by far, the stupidest thing she'd ever done. Alexandra berated herself as she skirted past a drunken marine, who called lewdly to a woman on the opposite side of the road.

The town's nightly festivities were in full swing. The screech of half-tuned fiddles and bawdy songs filled the night air and mixed with the reek of ale and rum and unwashed sailors. Ladies in low-cut dresses simpered and smiled at any man who looked their way. Red-coated Marines stood out from the weathered seamen milling about the town. There were nicer taverns, even a small gentleman's club up the rise, but near the docks, it was all madness. The governor's mansion stood as a sentinel above it all, and below, on the coast stood the fort, silent and stately.

A few houses were scattered along the outskirts along with storehouses for grains and sugarcane. One building was for the merchants, run by Alexandra's father. It stood dark and empty like all the rest.

Alexandra knew the dangers of wandering very far outside of town, but she didn't want to risk meeting someone she knew. The trip around the town was longer, but she could make it in time. She had to.

Alexandra's stomach felt like someone had stuffed it with a piece of knotted rope and kept tugging it tighter and tighter. The instant she had left her father's grounds, she

had felt the anxiety coiling inside her. But it was too late to go back now. She didn't want to go back at all, she realized and she felt a pang for not saying goodbye to Lori.

Fort Nassau rose out of the gloom, and she followed the lanterns around to the western wall. She paused at the corner and held very still. No guards were in sight, but she knew they were about. The fort was surrounded by guards when she visited Andrew.

She started counting. "One, two, three..." The loose stone that covered the tunnel was exactly fifty paces from the corner. She stooped down at forty-nine, pushing at the stones. Finally, at fifty-five paces one of them gave beneath her hand.

"Who goes there?" The orange glow waved back and forth.

The night watch. Her heart wrenched in fear as she cursed her stupidity for counting aloud.

She slammed her back against the stones and crouched further, hoping the wall would shade her. The watchman was above, so if she was small enough, he might not see her pressed at the base. She gripped the stones with her fingers, holding herself against the cold stone as the flame from a torch passed over her head, illuminating patches of grass all around.

With a grinding sound that made her heart stop, one of the stones came loose in her hand and she tumbled forward. She hit the ground with a groan, the wind knocked from her chest.

"Oi! Lieutenant! Comere! I'm sure I heard something!"

“Eh? What’s that?”

Alex prayed to turn invisible on the spot. It had never worked before, but who knows?

“I hear something down there. Someone was talking!”

“That’s just the sea spirits haunting you, you blowhard! Now come inside before you fall asleep on watch again!”

The firelight hovered for a few seconds before it disappeared.

Alex rolled onto her back and breathed a sigh of relief. She waited a moment for her heart to stop thundering in her chest.

The stone that had fallen wasn’t part of the passage, just shoddy workmanship. Alexandra scowled and left it in the grass, crawling back to the wall to search for the proper stone. Her hands trailed down to the large slab at the bottom. It was an unusually large stone, and a perfect square. Pleading silently to herself, she sat, braced her feet against it and pushed.

She was really breaking into Fort Nassau. A brief bolt of panic to shot through her veins before she threw her weight against the stone. It wasn’t heavy, but stops set in the walls would give under a certain amount of pressure. It was a truly clever design. A less determined criminal might think the stone was a fluke after it caught the first time, but Alexandra had watched Andrew do it. She knew what to expect.



She strained, silently cursing the grinding sound of stone against stone. Every second felt like an eternity in which the guard might reappear to arrest her.

Finally, the stone reached the widened part of the tunnel and fell inward. All that was left was to go inside.

The passage was small. It would fit a grown man, if he crawled. Alexandra had been able to kneel comfortably as a child, but now she ducked her head down as she crawled into the blackness. As her hands padded through the cold, dusty dirt, she imagined what her mother might have said about all this.

Josephine Lington had been a fiery woman, all warmth and smiles. Alexandra remembered her as a fearless woman. She led Alexandra down to the beach when she was tiny and taught her to swim. Josephine had fought Alexandra's father until he had allowed their daughter to learn French. Alexandra didn't think her mother had been afraid of anything. Josephine had never feared moving from France to England and then from England to the West Indies. She hadn't been afraid to die.

A tightness in Alexandra's chest that grew to a slow burn. It would never stop hurting to think of her. The day her mother passed was the first time she had ever seen her father lose his temper, striking the doctor with enough force to knock the man on his backside.

Her father was so stricken by her mother's absence that he had never remarried. It hurt to imagine the pain her father endured each day. Living without one's deepest love must be even worse than living without one's mother. So, Alexandra never blamed him

for his protectiveness. Even when she felt stifled beyond all imagination, she knew it was because he was afraid. He was afraid to lose her like he lost Josephine. It had been an accident on the beach. Startled by a wave, her horse threw her. She hadn't died, but she caught an illness during her long recovery. Alexandra was forbidden from anything that could lead to an accident. She was lucky she met Andrew that day 8 years ago. Without his friendship she would have been stifled long ago.

Alexandra wiped her brow with the back of her hand. The ground beneath her started to incline. She was nearing the stairs. The fabric at her knees was damp and had started to tear. The pads of her hands were bleeding from the rocks she'd scraped as she felt her way along the walls.

She began to see light ahead, just cracks at first, emanating from the edges of the stone that covered the exit in the ceiling. Covered in spider webs, dirt, and sweat, her hair falling out of her ribbon, Alex pushed her way into the fort. This stone was lighter and easy to push up and away as she climbed out into the storeroom.

She glanced around as she replaced the stone.

Sacks of potatoes, cured meats, flour sacks, and some spices tied in bunches hung from the ceiling and crates towered in the corners. It was dark, and she cracked her toe against a barrel and bit down on her lip to keep a yelp from escaping. The heavy oak door wasn't locked, and it swung open on well-oiled hinges.

The fort was still. The moon sat lazily over the courtyard, illuminating the walls with a greyish glow. The grassy expanse seemed out of place amid the harsh stone and

the dark piles of cannon balls near the staircases. The barracks were situated somewhere along the sea wall, and the lieutenant's rooms were "at the end of a bloody hallway," according to Andrew.

She kept to the covered walkways and snuck between stone pillars to keep out of sight. The open courtyard was much too exposed. Even here, if a watchman looked down from the opposite rampart, he would see her darting toward the barracks.

"Oi! What're you up and about for, eh?"

The voice stopped Alexandra's feet as if someone had attached weights to them. tightness prevented any sound from escaping her throat.

"I asked you a question, boy!" A figure in red advanced toward Alexandra.

How had she missed him? She must have walked right past him in the dark. "I...I could ask you the same question!" Her voice cracked as she forced the words past the lump. They came out in a low, ragged whisper.

"Don't you talk like that to me, boy? Turn about and face me. And give me a straight answer!"

Alexandra couldn't think fast enough.

"Are you deaf?"

"What seems to be the problem, Sergeant Kirkpatrick?" A new officer, the lieutenant on watch, descended the stairs with a weary glance at the figures on the ground.

“This lout’s skulking about the fort. He won’t answer my questions, sir,”

Kirkpatrick snapped into a salute.

Alexandra kept her back to them both. The Lieutenant’s footsteps echoed in her ears, louder than the Marine’s breathing, louder than her own heartbeat. It was too much.

She bolted.

Her feet pounded on the stone walkway, twisting around another corner. Craning her neck behind her and, she could just make out a bobbing lantern and two shadowy figures quickly gaining. Her foot caught on a loose stone, and she hit the ground hard. For the second time that night, the wind was knocked from her chest.

As a pair of hands hauled her to her feet, her only thought was a prayer that they didn’t see her corset.

“Good God, what sort of vagabond is this?” The marine holding her pushed her toward the light.

“Can’t even see his face with all that mud,” the lieutenant replied.

Alexandra flushed under their scrutiny. “I’m not a vagabond!”

The lieutenant raised the lantern under her nose. “That’s what they all say, mate.” He nodded to the marine. “Bring him, Sergeant.”

“Aye, sir.”

Alexandra squirmed in the Sergeant's grip. "Let me go! I'm not a criminal! I'm here to see someone!"

Kirkpatrick pushed her forward toward the holding cells.

"Odd, then, that you're here at night, running from the authorities. Surely you know what a proper visit is?"

Alexandra scowled at him. "My unorthodox method does not make me a criminal. I was running because it's *urgent* business."

The lieutenant turned and put the lantern right under her nose. "Why not come to the front gate, then?"

"I...I hadn't thought I would be let in," she muttered.

The man let out a humph.

"Shall we put him in the cells, sir?" Kirkpatrick asked.

"No!" Alexandra cried, "I've got urgent business with an Officer of His Majesty's Royal Navy!"

Sergeant Kirkpatrick rolled his eyes. "With whom? The admiral is out—"

"No, not the Admiral!"

He glared. "With *whom*, then, if not the admiral?"

Alexandra bit the inside of her cheek. *Was it safe to tell them?*

“Andrew...O’Hare,” she muttered.

The lieutenant let out a guffaw. “*Andrew O’Hare?* Devil take it, boy. I don’t think Andrew O’Hare has ever done anything urgently in his life – except eat, perhaps. Are you sure you’ve got the right man?”

Alex was bewildered. “Yes I’ve got the right man! Andrew O’Hare, Lieutenant of the Royal Navy—“

“Lieutenant of the Royal Navy’s kitchen, perhaps.”

Alex felt her lips twitch in a smile. “I need to speak with him right away.”

“Ridiculous. Sir, we must arrest this boy,” Kirkpatrick snapped.

“Oh, we will, we will, but I want to see where this goes. He’s gone to all this trouble.”

“What?” Kirkpatrick tightened his grip on Alexandra’s arm.

The lieutenant ignored his question. “What time is it, Kirkpatrick?”

“Half-past eleven by my watch, sir.”

Alexandra felt cold. It was so late already.

“Too bloody late, is what it is. O’Hare has the morning watch, so he’s sleeping. Is the Cook still awake?”

“No, sir.”

The lieutenant turned back to Alex with a frown. “Unless it’s a death in the family I can’t risk it. I won’t wake up O’Hare if the cook isn’t up to make him a breakfast.”

Death in the family? She could work with that. “But I do have family news,” she said solemnly.

Suddenly the lantern was back under her nose. “What do you know of his family?” Kirkpatrick’s breath smelled terrible.

“His Aunt Caeisal sent me.”

The lieutenant motioned toward the barracks. “Bring him. O’Hare’s got to hear this.”

“But sir!”

“The boy can pronounce that blasted Irish name. He’s definitely family.”

## Chapter 4:

"Andrew, *please* just listen!" Alexandra implored. "You don't understand!"

She stood, hat in hand before a very sleepy Andrew O'Hare who was sitting in his nightclothes on his cot.

"What part don't I understand? The part where you snuck into the fort after dark and almost got yourself arrested, or the part where you lied to one of my fellow officers – family emergency, indeed! – just to tell me about your difficult afternoon? Bloody Hell, Alexandra! You're a woman, and it just isn't done!"

"Andrew—"

"You need to get out of here before someone realizes who you are and your reputation is destroyed completely!"

"But, Andrew—"

He kept his voice low, but there was no mistaking his fury. "If anyone ever knew you were here..."

"Andrew O'Hare, you listen to me right now!" Alexandra smacked her hand on his desk for emphasis. A pile of papers crumpled under her fingers. His desk was an abysmal mess, like the rest of his tiny room.

He waited for her to speak.



Alexandra scowled at her best friend. “You’re right. I am a woman. That seems to be the problem lately. Since I’ve been dressed like this, I haven’t been told I couldn’t do something. I haven’t been told it wasn’t proper. I haven’t been told to marry an old man with *slaves*. I came here for your advice and you’re just abusing me like all the rest! You’re my friend, Andrew!”

The weary lieutenant pinched the bridge of his nose. “Alexandra, I understand you’re upset, but things are the way they are. We can’t change them. You’ve got to make the best of being born a woman. But you can’t tell me that you think skulking around in trousers is proper!”

Alexandra scowled at him. “You know very well that my choice in clothing is not the problem I came here to discuss, Andrew.”

“You’re risking your reputation for *relationship advice*. That’s a little counter-productive, don’t you think?”

“Oh, *hang* my reputation, Andrew—don’t look at me like that—my problem is my father. He wishes me to marry Lord Dewhurst. But I do not wish it. I need help.”

She didn’t miss the little wrinkle of Andrew’s nose when she said Dewhurst’s name. Finally, someone on her side.

She recounted to him the whole of the proposal, scandal and all, and waited.

She found Andrew’s room especially comforting. It felt so familiar, though he’d never allowed her in before. It was a small square space with no windows. He had a cot

situated against the wall with his door. Across from that was a bookshelf that sported different novels, some which Alexandra recognized, and some that Andrew hadn't let her borrow yet. He had a small desk opposite his bed, where she leaned comfortably. The room was littered with plates from his snacks and the basket of bread she'd brought him the previous week sat empty in the corner behind his little desk.

"Well," Andrew said after a long silence.

"Well, what?"

"Well, Alexandra, I don't know why this is such a problem. I'm sure you can still say yes to Lord Dewhurst?"

Alexandra's last hope shattered on the floor of the fort. "But I don't *want* to marry him! You don't understand. As much as I love my father, I need something else. I need to see more than just Nassau Island. And marriage to Dewhurst would mean being bound to his estate on this island for the rest of my life!"

Andrew frowned. "Now, see here, Alexandra. You couldn't go anywhere even if you didn't marry him. If you are not under Dewhurst's watch, then you are under your father's, and he's not about to let you sail away. You're just being irrational. There's nothing wrong with Dewhurst, really—"

"He's *old*, Andrew!" How could he do this to her? He was supposed to be on her side. She hated him more because everything he said was true.

"Then you'll be free of him all the sooner!"

“He wants an heir, Andrew. He want’s children!”

Andrew leaned back on his bed, recoiling from the very idea. “Blast. I don’t think the world could handle more of you. You were handful enough as a child.”

“Andrew this is serious!”

The Irish Lieutenant rolled his eyes. “Alexandra, my dear, dear friend. If you want some modicum of freedom, you must marry Dewhurst. I may have said it in jest, but it is a very real possibility that he will die, then you would be left with your own house to do with as you please. You must be rational.”

Alexandra folded her arms. “It’s not fair! None of this is fair! If I was a boy –

“Well, you’re not! No amount of wishing can change that. You must marry and the old codger is as good a catch as you can hope for on this island.”

“I don’t *want* to stay on the island!” she shouted.

“Quiet! If the officers find you here, you’ll be arrested.”

Stupid, useless Andrew. This wasn’t what she came here for.

“Besides, someone has to take care of you when I’m gone,” Andrew said, softer than before. He sat up in his bed, his elbows on his knees and watched her.

It scared her. It was a look she hadn’t seen since her mother’s funeral. The pitying one with furrowed brows. “Gone?”

Andrew rubbed the back of his neck, his fingers curling nervously into his unruly red hair. “I...well...I meant to tell you.”

“Tell me *what*, Andrew!” Alexandra hated how her voice squeaked out. Her throat was tight and she could feel her pulse lurch into a rapid patter of anxious beats.

“The ‘*George* – that is – all of us are being shipped out. We’ve received orders to escort a convoy of trade ships to leeward isles. I...don’t know when we’ll be back.”

“You...You’re leaving!” Alexandra felt strange, her body was numb but her heart was on fire. How could he? He was like *family*. He couldn’t leave.

“Now, you must understand, I don’t have any control over where I’m sent. James is the best captain we’ve got, and they’re sending him to escort a convoy.—oh, Alexandra don’t *look at me like that*.”

She felt the hot tears overflowing onto her face. “You can’t leave!” She moaned.

Alexandra knew it wasn’t Andrew’s fault. He didn’t want to go, but the idea of living here alone, friendless, was too much to bear.

“Now, crying won’t help...” he tried feebly. “Perhaps you’d like something to eat on the way home?”

Alexandra looked up at him with a blotchy tearstained face. “You tell me to get married, tell me you’re leaving, and you think *food* will solve everything?” Her throat wasn’t so tight from her tears that it came out as a whiny croak instead.

Andrew moved to her side. He was much taller, his chin cleared the top of her head. She wondered how he didn't feel cramped in the small room.

“Alexandra, it's not about solving. It's about making the right decision. You're safe here on the island. Marry Dewhurst. Keep your own house. There's nowhere else to go, and maybe your father is right to be worried about leaving. God knows, you might not even survive a sea voyage. They are quite dangerous – and uncomfortable if you're not used to them. I'm sorry. Truly, I am, but you'd make a lovely housewife, I'm sure.”

Alexandra felt heavy: her chest was compressed and her limbs felt like lead. “I should go.”

“Alexandra –”

“No, Andrew...you're right. I'm being stupid.”

Andrew frowned. “Now, I didn't say that.”

Alexandra shook her head. “I'll tell father tomorrow that I'll marry Dewhurst. Then you will be satisfied, father will be satisfied, and Dewhurst will be satisfied.”

She turned for the door tucking her hair firmly into her hat. “...were you even planning to say goodbye?”

Andrew grasped for something to say. “I...of course. I wouldn't leave without seeing you.”

She nodded once, took a deep breath, and walked out the door. Her throat was tight and her head pounded as she fought back the wracking sobs. This would be the last time she ever set foot in Andrew's office. From now on, she was alone.

## Chapter 5:

The trip back was twice as long as the trip in. When the trap door to the storage room closed over her head, she curled deep in the tunnels where no one could hear her cry. It was better to get it out now, she reasoned, as she wiped her runny nose on the stable boy's shirt. All that effort -- and for what? To be told what she knew already? Why couldn't she come to terms with her future? Why couldn't she just accept it and move on? Andrew was right. Women got married to older men every day. So what was wrong with her?

When she finally coaxed her body out of a fetal position, she crawled through the tunnel until she saw the square of light at the end. It took Alexandra a good five minutes to pry the stone covering off the floor of the tunnel and twist it back into position. She made a promise, as she crawled out onto the grass, not to shed any more tears over Lord Dewhurst.

Alex wandered through town, keeping to the edge of the street. Her feet found a path her mind was too busy to remember. She heard the rattle of carts rolling out for the day's work and the warm smells of the bakery wafted through the air. No one paid too much attention to the waif in boy's clothes skirting through the streets.

"Oof!" A man exclaimed as she walked right into him.

"Excuse me," she muttered. She rubbed her shoulder and tipped her head further down.

“Best be careful, eh? Wouldn’t want to attract too much attention.” The voice was soft and warm, oddly cultured for the island, but when Alexandra worked up the courage to see his face, he was gone. She peered around furtively, but no one matched the well-bred voice. There were only some urchins and a lost looking clerk with spectacles on her side of the street and some Regulars across the way.

His words left a strange thrill in her, like there was a secret they both shared, but she was sure she’d never heard the voice before.

It took her an hour get back to her father’s house on the hill. She was exhausted. Once the adrenaline had worn off, it had left her tired and achy. The house stood silent against the chirping birds and the quiet rushing of the sea. It looked the same as always, white-pillared with the dark shutters framing glass that shone like gold as the sun peeked out at them from the horizon. It was home, but soon enough it wouldn’t be. She would marry Dewhurst, move to the opposite side of the island. Perhaps after Dewhurst was dead she could sell the plantation and move to England? Certainly, a young widow could re-marry.

As she crept around to the servant’s entrance, she was bombarded by the activity. As the sun rose, so did the servants. They came rushing in and out of the kitchen and through the yard. Alexandra saw Lori and the new girl, Emma, taking down the laundry. She felt a twinge of guilt. There would be a stable boy missing his clean clothes this morning.

It took her twenty minutes to creep through the hall and past the kitchen unseen.



“MISS LINGTON!” Perhaps not so unseen.

“Miss Lington, where have you been! The house has been in an uproar, we have never seen Mr. Lington so upset!” Mrs. Tott snagged Alexandra’s arm and brandished a dripping spoon in her face. “And what are these? What are you wearing?”

Alexandra stuttered for an answer.

Tott didn’t wait for one. “Lilly, fetch Lori! And tell Peterson, we found her!”

Alexandra was horrified. Her father was supposed to be asleep. No one was supposed to see. If it got around that she visited Andrew, it would be over for them both.

“Oh thank goodness!” Lori cried as she ran into the kitchen. She pulled her mistress into an embrace, rescuing her from the cook’s piercing gaze. “Let’s get you out of these clothes before your father sees you.”

Alexandra ran after her maid. They used the servants’ corridor and slipped into Alexandra’s room. Surrounded by the soft pastels, she felt her heart slow down.

“You going to tell me where you were or am I going to guess.” Lori folded her arms across her chest. Her eyes narrowed to slits, fixing her mistress with a disappointed stare.

“I...well, I went to see Andrew, of course,” Alexandra said. Her voice hitched a little. “He told me to get married too, if that makes you happy.”

Lori ran a hand over her face. “Lord, girl. You’re going to be the death of me. I was worried sick! Next time you plan to run off, you tell me.”

“Well, if father knows about this...I won't be leaving until I'm married. So, you have nothing to worry about,” Alexandra said bitterly.

Lori quickly pulled her mistress's nicest dress out. “Too right you are, missy. And this time, I don't think I blame him.”

Alexandra pulled off her disguise and kicked them behind her changing screen. “I...I couldn't just marry Dewhurst without asking Andrew, Lori. He's my best friend.”

Lori shook her head and helped her mistress into the many layers. “Word of advice, miss: Try a different story on your father. He won't take to you seeing that officer in the dead of night.”

Alexandra closed her eyes as she felt tears prick. “He won't have to worry about Andrew any more. He's leaving.”

Lori patted Alexandra's shoulder. “I'm so sorry, Miss.”

She sounded sincere, but Alexandra didn't want to talk to anyone anymore. She wanted to curl up in her bed and sleep. But instead, she was dressed, her hair was done, and the anxious knot in her stomach wormed its way into her throat.

“Let's head down for breakfast, dear.”

“I...I don't think I can eat. I should talk to father first.”

Lori sighed. “Might be best to get it over with,” she agreed. “Perhaps it will cool his temper when you tell him about your decision to marry Dewhurst.”

It was the most Alexandra could hope for. She lifted her chin and went down the staircase to her father's study. Lori trailed behind, twisting her hands in her apron. Alexandra took a deep breath and knocked. The door, slightly ajar, creaked on old hinges. Firelight spilled out into the hallway and splashed onto Alexandra's shoes.

"Papa?"

The crackle of the fire answered and then silence. Alexandra wandered in. *'I'll just wait for him,'* she thought. She looked back at Lori and gave her a wave, and Lori departed with a pitying look.

The old Cherrywood desk sat in the center of the room. It was a hulking piece of furniture that Mother had always hated. It didn't fit their island home, she said. Alexandra loved it. It made her think of the snowy evenings it must have seen in London before her father brought it here. She could picture it in a house with warm ornate color, servants in cloaks bustling in from the snow, a fire in the hearth that didn't make her feel faint from the heat, it was just warm enough.

Alexandra sighed and fanned herself. Why her father kept a fire going in July was a mystery to everyone. Peterson, the butler, once imagined that Everard Lington wanted to overheat his clients to make them nervous, to guarantee a quick sale.

Papa, where are you? The longer she had to wait, the more she could imagine how upset he would be. He couldn't have gone far. He almost never left his desk when he was home.

She roamed the room, trying to expend her nervous energy. The desk was surrounded by cherry wood shelves. They were covered in books and interspersed with cabinets. She used to love sitting in here at night. Her father would read stories to her by the fire. She stroked the spine of an old favorite – sailor tales with mermaids and krakens and pirates. Perhaps she could take it with her when she was married.

Alexandra pulled out the book. She missed the nights when her mother would bring tea and they would sit on the Indian carpet and listen to the summer rains outside. Sometimes the cook would make up pastries. There were still jelly-covered fingerprints on the pages.

She replaced it on the shelf with a pang of sadness and wandered on. The massive desk was covered in papers. Most of them were bills of sale and receipts or shipping manifests. Perhaps she could ask her father to teach her about running a plantation. It might smooth his ruffled feathers. She would need to know how to file bills of sale and trade once Dewhurst died.

Oh, but all those numbers looked so boring. A housewife and a scribe? There was no adventure.

She sighed deeply. It was going to be her life. It was always meant to be. She flopped into the chair usually reserved for business guests. It wasn't ladylike to flop, but who was here to see? She slid down morosely until her nose was level with the papers. She glared at them and the ink glared back, shining gold and black from the fire. She did a double take. Her own name was carefully printed on one of the pages.

Alexandra sat up abruptly. The page was upside-down, but she could make out a few words: “*asset, Miss Alexandra.*”

She shot a glance at the open door. She wasn't supposed to touch father's papers, but she could just have a peek. It was probably about the dowry or even from her father's lawyer, but now she was too curious to leave it. Her fingers pinched the paper and gave it a tug.

“Alexandra!”

She jerked her hand with a gasp and the whole stack of papers toppled across the desk. Alexandra didn't know what to do. Where was the letter?

“In here, papa!” she called. She shuffled the papers, stacking them back up as best she could.

“Alexandra, what are you doing?” The door swung open with a soft creak.

“Papa! They fell over! I'm sorry!”

He shook his head. His weathered face was pulled into a frown. She remembered how he used to look, reddish hair and bright grey eyes. Both were dull, tired, and his hair had streaks of silver mixed with the bronze. “How many times do I have to tell you not to touch my papers?”

He stalked over and scooped them up in one go. Fleetinglly, Alexandra saw the letter, *her* letter disappear into the middle of the stack. He turned and bustled in a cabinet

behind the desk. She strained to see past his body, but then he was done. The cabinets were closed.

Her father settled himself into his old creaky desk chair and steepled his fingers. “Now, you owe me an explanation, Alexandra.”

Alexandra wasn't listening. She was eyeing the cabinets with that word ‘asset’ floating through her mind. What could it mean? Was it from Dewhurst? It must be. Or maybe father was sending it? In any case, she deserved to know what was being said about her.

“Alexandra!”

“Yes, papa?” Her eyes snapped to her father.

His scowl deepened. “Where. Were. You. Last. Night?”

She had the decency to flush. “I...went out early for a walk. I...went to see mama.” She wasn't sure what made her think of it. Maybe it was the jam fingerprints or the Indian carpet.

Her father's eyes went wide.

“I wanted to tell her what was happening -- to tell her that I decided to marry Dewhurst.”

Her father's whole stance changed. The chair creaked in protest as he settled back. His hands fell gently to his lap. “You have?”

She took a deep breath. This was it. There was no going back. “Yes, papa.” But she wanted to know what that letter said, first.

“I’m very pleased to hear that, Alexandra. I’m very pleased. You’ve made me very happy indeed.”

Alex felt a warm glow. He was so rarely pleased with her.

“--but that doesn’t change that you left the house without permission.”

Now, it was Alexandra’s turn to frown. She’d given him everything he wanted. Why couldn’t he just let it go?

“Don’t you look at me like that, young lady. You could have been kidnapped! Or worse! And then where would you be? You must stay here, indoors, until your wedding. We can’t take any chances, do you understand?”

“Papa! That’s unreasonable and you know it!” Alexandra blurted. The wedding could be months away.

The scowl was back on his face. “While you live in my house you live by my rules. You know how I feel about your going outside. You will burn your skin and get sick or fall like your mother did.”

Alexandra turned toward the fire. The mantle was taller than she was. It could have been frightening, but the fire’s dance was soothing for her nerves. “I wouldn’t do that, Papa. I’m careful.” Her eyes fell on the cabinet again. She didn’t want to talk anymore. She wanted him to leave the house. She wanted to see what was in that letter.

He moved, blocking her view of the cabinet with his brown coat. “You will stay here. You will not leave this house. I cannot spend every waking minute worried about you.”

She knew the best way to get him out, would be to agree to stay in. Once again, Papa got his way. “Fine. I’m going to my room, if that’s *allowed*. And I don’t intend to come down for dinner.”

“Alexandra, don’t be ridiculous.” Her father growled.

“Good afternoon, Father.”

The waiting was the worst part. Alexandra couldn’t bear the monotony. She sat at her window, then sat at her vanity. She redid her hair and paced the length of her pastel blue room. She counted the number of flowers that were printed on the walls from floor to ceiling (fourteen from ceiling to floor). Then she collapsed under the white canopy of her bed. There was nothing else to do, but wait for her father to leave. He always went out drinking when they’d had a row. She was counting that he trusted Peterson to keep her locked up.

All afternoon she thought of the letter. What could the word ‘asset’ mean? tried to come up with a sentence that might end: ‘asset – comma – Miss Alexandra.’



A growing number of pages in her little diary were filled with the options. Her current favorite was from Lord Dewhurst: “Though I know she would be an asset, Miss Alexandra is far too impetuous.”

It would make sense that Dewhurst might retract his offer, especially considering how she fell on him the day before. Perhaps that was why her father was so surprised?

Her other contenders were mixtures of nonsense and compliments. One imagined her father’s lawyer: “Though a dowry would be an asset, Miss Alexandra has no need of such monetary incentives to catch Lord Dewhurst’s eye.” Alexandra didn’t think herself vain, but it was the most desirable line. Especially now that she had decided to be married. It wouldn’t do to be rejected herself.

She heard the door to the house as the sun was nearly touching the sea. It was well after dinner: Her father must have finally given up hope. She felt a prick of guilt for her poor behavior – until she remembered that he was free to leave. She wasn’t.

Alexandra slipped on her robe and took a candle. The shadows grew quickly in the dark wood and heavy carpets of the old house. She didn’t want to poke around in the dark.

She would have about two hours. After he got his horse and rode into town, he would spend about an hour at the tavern. She expected him back by nine, plenty of time to find the letter.

She crept down the stairs to her father’s office, which was situated off the front hall and had a lovely view of the front yard from its wide window. She would be able to

see her father leave and come back. She set her candle on the floor by the cabinet. She didn't need it now, but it would get dark soon.

She held her breath for a moment. Her eyes fell on the cabinet and then glanced at the window. She had an overwhelming feeling of being watched, so she crossed to the window and loosed the curtains from their ties. After they fell across the window and she was left with the orange, dancing light of the fire. It was dangerous, but she was sure she could hear him come home. She wouldn't be in there two hours, anyway.

Alexandra turned to the cabinet and knelt, her nightgown pooling around her. She pulled open the door and found little cubbies made of wood, like at the post office in town. Each little cubby had folded papers and, unlike the brass-plated bookshelves, there was no marking or signifier to tell Alexandra where her letter might be.

She cast a furtive glance over her shoulder, reminded herself that her father wasn't home, and stuck her hand into the first cubby, pulling all of the papers out. She unfolded them one by one, checking for her name. She didn't know anything else about the letter. It could be multiple pages or just one. It could have a business seal on it or just a signature at the bottom. Every piece of paper was a possibility.

*Financial Report: January –*

*Ship: Cybil*

*Carrying: Sugar, 20 tonnes, Gunpowder, 30 tonnes...*

Alexandra sighed and folded the paper back up. Definitely not that one. On to the next box. And the next. And the next.

A soft sound, like a laugh jerked her from her search. Alexandra turned around. Her ears strained for another sound, another sign, but there was nothing. She could have sworn –

She shook her head. Don't be silly. You're just being paranoid, she told herself.

She pulled out another stack of papers and rifled through them. She was getting better at recognizing the financial reports. The letter wouldn't be in one of those. She shoved paper after paper back into the cubbies. She opened the second to last one in the stack and paused. It was different, with a seal of a lion and a gryphon rearing at one another emblazoned at the top. She pressed it flat and scanned down the page.

“Come on, come on, please...,” she whispered.

*To J. L. Lington, Merchant Marine – Nassau,*

*My dear sir,*

*You will find the usual sum of 2,000 Pounds enclosed. Through our mutual friend, Mr. Ellond, I understand that the asset, Miss Alexandra, is to be –*

What was that supposed to mean? It was certainly her name and the letter, but what right did this stranger have to call her an ‘asset,’ as if she were some object to be traded?

“The usual sum of 2,000 pounds,” she whispered.

She searched for a little more light. The handwriting was miniscule, so she crouched by her candle and continued.

*... the asset, Miss Alexandra, is to be married to a Landed Gentleman of some status. I am excessively pleased with this development. As per our agreement, you will continue to receive the allotted monthly stipend whether or not the asset resides in your home. I look forward our continued acquaintance.*

A thump came from the hall and Alexandra knocked over the candle. She put it out quickly, before a fire started, and she listened intently for another sound. It might have been the door or a servant moving a table. She glanced at the clock. Another hour yet. She berated herself for being ridiculous, and turned back to the letter.

*Oh, by the by, you might be interested to know that your investment in our new fund is earning back exponential amounts, I hope to have a more concrete...*

“Yes, yes let’s just step into my office a moment.”

Alexandra nearly fell into the fire. She wrenched up her nightgown and stuffed the letter into her stocking. Her father’s riding boots sounded outside the door.

She had no choice but to dive behind the curtains and climb onto the window ledge. The letter made an obnoxious crinkle as she moved. Her feet clung to the wooden sill and one hand rested on the glass while the other stilled the curtain. Her body was completely hidden, and not a moment too soon.

“I thought you had left the island already!” Alexandra’s father hissed.

“I’m not here just to hand over the cash, you know.” A gravelly voice spoke from near the fire. “My orders are to make sure everything runs smoothly. And your shipments are *not*.”

Alexandra bit her lip. She knew that voice; It was her father’s work associate, John Ellond from a trading company in London. Hadn’t he visited the day before? What could be so urgent?

“Look, John, I’m losing money. I can’t ship out free goods to your people all the time. It’s not good for business! The money his Lordship sends isn’t enough to cover the costs –”

John Ellond moved across the room, his footfalls heavy and uneven. “You and I both know that the money his Lordship sends is a separate transaction. Don’t play stupid with me, Everard. I’ve been doing this far too long.”

“This is outrageous. If you do not pay for goods, you don’t get them!”

Alexandra heard the flap of fabric as John Ellond spoke again. “Flags are such strange things, you know. One day it keeps you safe, another day... well, you might find yourself at the wrong end of a pirate’s cannons. Your choice.”

“That’s the deal then?” her father choked out.

“That’s the deal. You’ve got two trades with his Lordship – remember that. The money is for the girl, nothing else.