

The Sugar Sands

Lyle Garford

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Dedication

This one is for Richard and Tracey
and Shadow

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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Chapter One

Barbados

May/June 1772

The young British Royal Navy officer was standing at ease, staring out at the tranquil Caribbean waters of the broad sweep of Carlisle Bay, Barbados as it shimmered in the unseasonable heat of a late May afternoon. The deck of *HMS Wiltshire*, the small 28-gun Royal Navy frigate he was standing on, was rocking slightly from the light chop of the gentle waves rippling the surface of the bay, making a host of other Navy and merchant ships at anchor in the harbour do the same. In the distance he could make out tiny figures going about their business along the broad waterfront docks of Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados.

With little else to occupy him as he stood waiting, the officer's mind drifted to focus on the ongoing problem he faced in dealing with a pair of the more truculent members of his regular watch. The two men, Ralston and Hodges, were the newest and rawest members of the crew and neither of them wanted to be where they were. The Second Officer of *HMS Wiltshire* gave the barest shrug of acknowledgment when asked about their history.

“Not sure, Mr. Spence,” said the officer. “I think they were given a choice of sweating in whatever stinking jail they were in here in Barbados or joining us. In any case, they are in the Navy now.”

“I guessed as much, sir,” said Lieutenant Owen Spence, the twenty-year-old Third Officer of *HMS Wiltshire*. “They don’t seem to have any experience

with the sea, but I wanted to make sure of it. Well, we needed more men, and we take what we get. They will learn soon enough.”

How to go about teaching them what they needed to know was the issue. An all too easy solution was to simply beat both submission and knowledge into them, whether they wanted it or not. Both men had already tasted the bosun’s starter, a thick and stiff piece of rope with a chunk of lead embedded inside the tip to give added weight. The bosun’s usual practice was to whip it hard across whatever part of their bodies were to hand and several occasions to do so arose in the week since these new men joined the ship.

The two men had already also witnessed far worse punishment delivered by the same bosun as he applied the lash to the back of another miscreant strung up on a grating. The minimum twelve lashes delivered created a cross hatched pattern of deep, painful stripes on the sailor’s back. Both newcomers had watched the punishment in glowering silence.

None of this was new to Owen, for his family had sent him to sea when he was barely fourteen years old to serve in the Royal Navy as a midshipman. Having since served with a variety of different Royal Navy Officers above him, Owen long ago learned not everyone had the same style of leading their men. Many took the simple approach of using harsh discipline, even before any sign of trouble. On the opposite end of the spectrum a few actually strove to lead them willingly before resorting to the lash.

Owen thought of the latter approach as being

both firm and fair in his dealings with the men and he preferred it. This usually meant finding a way to reach an understanding with them, helping them to realize he really was trying to be fair and their own best interests lay in cooperating with him.

More than a few sailors in past made the mistake of viewing this as a sign of weakness, but they soon learned what a lack of compliance would bring, for Owen had no qualms about showing how firm he could be. He preferred minor punishments such as stopping a sailor's grog ration for a day, but the lash was always waiting to be used. Several of the more obstinate ones over the years ended up being flogged as punishment because Owen put them on report.

Owen knew he was fortunate many of the senior officers on the three different ships he served on since joining the Navy leaned toward using the firm but fair approach to varying degrees. Owen learned over time by watching how they handled a host of different situations the best approach was to take slow but firm steps toward reaching an understanding with raw newcomers to the ship. His dedication to learning the skills necessary to sail any ship afloat combined with the growing confidence he could truly lead the men under him led to passing his examination for Lieutenant six months ago.

With his future seeming bright and boundless, the mundane reality of dealing yet again with two more raw recruits was not about to faze him. He well knew he would find a way through to these two men, sooner or later. The hardest part was to make

the initial gain of mutual understanding, however small it might be.

But as he mused over how to do it with these two in particular, a slow trickle of sweat was running down the middle of his back from the warmth of the day and the heavy dress uniform coat he was wearing. The combination made him drowsy and it difficult to focus on how best to reach these two men. The distant thump of a ship's boat touching the side of the frigate brought him wide awake from his reverie, for the reason he was wearing his dress uniform was about to board the ship.

Both the old Captain and the First Officer of *HMS Wiltshire* were already gone, shifted to serve on other ships by the Admiral in Barbados in charge of The Leeward Islands Station, while the new ones were coming to take command. Owen was well aware new senior officers would have their own ways of commanding the men, but he was fully confident he would adapt to whatever those ways were. Both he and the Second Officer were frustrated no one had bothered to tell them who was coming to join the ship, but it no longer mattered, for the wait was now over.

Owen took one last, sweeping look about to ensure the sailors manning the side were at attention as the Second Officer had commanded and fully ready to welcome the new Captain to the ship with due honours. As the Captain's hat appeared at the railing the bosun immediately began to pipe him aboard, while the Second Officer ordered the salute. Following right behind the Captain was another Officer and a young, teenage midshipman.

Owen stared at the three new arrivals, feeling a mild sense of foreboding steal over him without understanding why. The Captain had a fleshy, slightly overweight look to his face which matched the rest of his body. Combined with his greying hair the overall picture was of someone who had long since given up on exercise in any form. Owen judged him to be perhaps in his mid to late forties, while the First Officer standing beside him was half his age at best. In a flash of insight Owen saw the clear resemblance between the two men. A quick glance at the young midshipman joining them confirmed his own resemblance with the two more senior officers, making it obvious all three were from the same family.

To find a midshipman related to a ship's Captain was in no way unusual, for to be sponsored by a family member was a convenient way to find a career for second or third sons who weren't expected to inherit a title or relatives from an officer's extended family in a similar situation. Having a First Officer with a familial connection was much more uncommon and enough to raise eyebrows, but not unheard of. With the nation not at war, openings on warships were at a premium, and Owen knew it was all too likely the Captain had been granted a favour.

The growing sense of unease remained. As Owen focused on it, he realized what he was feeling was due to the odd sense the Captain himself was somehow familiar. The realization of who the new Captain was finally struck home hard as the Second Officer stepped forward to greet the man and

introduce himself. The shock was enough to rock Owen back slightly on his feet before recovering himself. The surprise of the man's appearance here and now was an icy stab to the heart, for Owen had not seen him for over eight years. The Captain glanced briefly at Owen on seeing the unexpected movement, but he turned his attention back to the Second Officer now speaking to him.

“Captain, permit me to welcome you and your First Officer aboard *HMS Wiltshire*. I am Second Officer Lieutenant George Strand. You have the better of us as to who you are, as all we received was word our new Captain and a new First Officer would be coming today.”

The Captain shook the proffered hand of the Second Officer perfunctorily before speaking.

“I am Captain John Smithe. This is your new First Officer, Lieutenant Harold Smithe and, yes, he is one of my sons. The midshipman with us is my nephew, Francis Smithe.”

“I am honoured to meet you, sirs. Permit me also to introduce our Third Officer Lieutenant Owen Spence, Captain.”

Owen saluted and stepped forward, offering his hand in welcome also.

“Captain, I am honoured as well. Welcome aboard, sirs.”

The Captain glanced briefly down at the extended hand before looking up with an icy, frigid stare at Owen's face without saying anything. Owen left his hand outstretched for an awkward moment before pulling it back with a sinking feeling in his heart, for he was certain Captain Smithe now

realized who he was.

“Lieutenant Owen Spence, is it? That would be Owen Spence, one of the younger sons of Richard Spence of Torquay, wouldn’t it? Yes, of course you are. I can see the family resemblance. I was not aware you were aboard. I trust you understand your presence here wouldn’t have been my choice, but no matter. You are here now.”

The Captain turned back to the Second Officer, who was standing in open-mouthed surprise at the affront the Captain had given to Owen and was clearly still trying to digest the implications of what had occurred. The Captain scowled as he spoke.

“Well? Let’s be about it, shall we?”

“Uh, sir?” said the Second Lieutenant, still looking confused and not understanding his meaning.

“Good Lord,” said the Captain, turning for a brief aside to his First Officer. “You’ve got some work to do with this lot.”

Shaking his head, the Captain turned again to the Second Officer, speaking with slow emphasis as if he were talking to an errant child.

“Mr. Strand, I live in hope somewhere in your head is the knowledge of what a Captain does when first joining a new ship?”

The Second Officer stiffened at the obvious rebuke as he responded.

“Sir, yes, sir. You need to read yourself in. I shall muster the men.”

Close to ten minutes later the entire crew had finally made their way from wherever they were to the waist of the ship and been assembled into

something resembling a state of order to hear the Captain read his orders aloud from the quarterdeck. Aside from the standard language of all such orders to assume command of a ship the only real point of interest to the crew and the officers was the news *HMS Wiltshire* was being transferred to the command of the Admiral of Jamaica Station for active duty. The Captain was ordered to take on sufficient stores for the journey and to shepherd a small convoy of British merchant ships to Kingston when they were ready to depart.

As he finished reading his orders the Captain folded them up and returned them to his pocket. Now officially in full command, every man aboard knew the Captain wielded absolute power over all aspects of their lives. The critical question now was how he would go about it. He glared about at the sea of faces with an ominous, dark look on his visage before speaking.

“Right. All of you need to understand I expect obedience to myself and my officers above all. The Articles of War are there for a reason. You ignore them at your peril. I will not hesitate to order discipline when I deem it necessary. I also expect efficiency and, I must tell you, I am not impressed with what I have already seen. When you are ordered to do something, you do it instantly and not when you bloody feel like it. I simply cannot believe how long it took you all to gather to hear me read myself in. This will improve or the bosun will be paying attention to you with his starter more than you would like. Or worse. The choice is yours.”

The Captain fell silent for a moment, glaring

about as if daring anyone to speak. No one did, for even newcomers to the ship like Ralston and Hodges were well aware of the power conveyed to the Captain by The Articles of War, a stringent set of rules covering a host of behaviours forbidden to those serving on Royal Navy warships. Little room for forgiveness or mercy was in them.

“So, you have been told. I want this to be the most orderly, efficient, well run ship in the entire Royal Navy and it shall be. You are dismissed.”

As the men shuffled back to their duties the Captain called to Owen and the Second Officer to remain where they were as he stalked over to stand in front of them. The First Officer and their new midshipman came to stand behind the Captain.

“Gentlemen, that was bloody appalling. I cannot believe how lax they were in following orders. This speaks directly to the kind of leadership you two display. Or perhaps it is the obvious lack of leadership. Lieutenant Smithe, I will be in my cabin. I want this ship set to rights immediately and I want to be underway to Jamaica by the first week of June. I leave the task and these two for you to deal with.”

As the Captain turned and marched aft toward his new cabin the First Officer stepped forward, but he looked first at the new midshipman still standing to the side.

“Francis, go muster a party to have our kit brought aboard. Make sure the Captain’s belongings are first. He is already disappointed, and it won’t do to make it worse.”

After watching him salute and leave, the First

Officer returned his attention to the two officers.

“Well, you heard him. He has high expectations and so do I. Mr. Strand, you will now give me a tour of the entire ship. Along the way you can introduce me to the warrant officers. What is our complement of Marines, sir?”

“Lieutenant, we have a dozen Marines and one Sergeant. I will introduce you to him on the tour.”

“Very good. Mr. Spence, while we are doing this you will gather the ship’s logs for the past three months for inspection. You will also prepare a detailed inventory of all stores, including ordnance for my review. I also want an understanding of how your watches are organized and who is doing what. The tour will not take long, so have this ready within the hour. You are dismissed.”

“Sir,” said Owen, saluting before he turned to go. As soon as he was free, he went as fast as he could to find the gunner and the purser, for he knew he would have to rely on their intimate knowledge to meet the demands placed on him. He swore to himself as he went, for the trickle of sweat running down his back had turned to a river and it wasn’t because he was left with no time to get out of his heavy dress uniform.

Three days later Owen was supervising a group of men loading more stores into the hold in the stifling heat of the afternoon. Ralston and Hodges were in the party, as they were the rawest members of the crew fit for little other than heavy, physical work such as this. As they finished wrestling yet another barrel over to be slung into the hold, they

both wiped their brows and went across the deck toward a small, open cask of water with a dipper attached for drinking. Owen was bent over peering into the hold at the men below and hadn't seen them leave until he straightened up. He scowled when he saw them.

“Ralston! Hodges! Get back here. Now, damn you!”

“Sir, we are thirsty,” said Ralston, as Hodges took a quick gulp from the cask before handing the dipper to Ralston. He quickly did the same and both men returned at the double back to their positions.

“You bloody fools. You don't do anything unless I tell you to. Everyone is thirsty, but we get the job done first. In future you wait your turn.”

“It's only because it's so hot, sir,” said Hodges, a resentful look on his face.

Owen rolled his eyes. “You think I don't know this, you jackass? You don't see the other men wandering off doing whatever they want whenever they feel like it, do you? For God's sake, just shut up and get back to work. We'll have no more of this or you'll both be facing punishment, you hear?”

As Owen turned back to the task at hand, he saw the new midshipman Francis Smithe had appeared and was standing nearby. The young man had obviously watched the scene and now wore an odd look on his face. Owen glared at him in response.

“Well? Do you need me for something or are you just dawdling about?”

The young man stiffened and saluted as he responded, an aggrieved look on his face.

“No sir, I am on my way to see the First Officer

with a report he wanted.”

Owen couldn't help scowling. “So why are you standing here? Get on with it.”

Owen's work party had finished the job an hour later and he was dismissing the men when the First Officer came looking for him. As the men dispersed Lieutenant Smithe drew him to the side, folding his arms as he glared at Owen.

“Mr. Spence. I have a report some of the men were straying from their duties and then arguing with you about it. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Sir?”

Lieutenant Smithe sighed in an obvious display his patience was being tried and shook his head.

“Midshipman Smithe reports two of your men were derelict and gave you back talk today. I want to know what happened and what you did about it. Now, sir.”

Owen groaned inwardly as he explained the situation and tried for a hopeful conclusion.

“Lieutenant Spence, these men are the rawest of our recent recruits and know little of our ways. Between the bosun with his starter and myself, we have made progress. I am confident we will have them in line in future, sir. I made it clear to them any more such displays will bring swift punishment.”

He was hoping the way he had dealt with the men would meet with approval as he finished speaking, but the icy look on the First Officer's face dashed the notion.

“Really, Mr. Spence? I think we had better see if

the Captain has confidence your approach is best for all concerned.”

The sickening, meaty sounding slash of the latest stroke of the cat across the sailor's back was different than the first few already delivered. These had seemed like a quick, sharp cracking sound to Owen, but as the red stripes continued appearing, etching deeper and deeper into the man's flesh, the sound became a muffled, wet slap muted by the blood now being spattered widely across the deck. The bosun's hands were red with gore as he applied the last few lashes to the second of the two men receiving punishment.

Little time was wasted to summon the crew to hear The Articles of War read aloud and for the Captain to announce his decision. Both Ralston and Hodges were sentenced by the Captain to twenty-four lashes each. Hodges's muffled screams ceased as he went limp and lost consciousness soon after the first twelve were delivered, but Ralston had borne the punishment better. Even so, he was groaning aloud in agony by time the last few strokes were applied.

Owen supervised the working party tasked with cleaning up after the crew was dismissed. Ralston gave him a frozen look of mute anger mixed with pain as he was cut down from the grating he was tied to and a sailor stepped forward to offer him help to go below. Owen made certain none of the other officers were close enough to hear him as he spoke under his breath to the man.

“You can't say I didn't warn you.”

Ralston gave him one last quick glance conveying a mixture of both despair and hatred at the same time, before he winced and began moving on. Midshipman Smithe came over and saluted as the blood was rinsed away over the side and a party of men began holystoning the deck to clean the stains.

“The Captain wants to see you, sir. I am to assume charge of the working party.”

Owen glared at him in silence for a few long moments before turning away. The temptation to ask if he was satisfied with the outcome of what he had done was strong, but Owen knew it would only land him in yet more trouble. The Marine standing guard outside the Captain’s cabin saluted and announced him as a visitor. From within came the muffled order to enter.

Owen resisted the urge to look about as he came in, for this was the first time he had come aft to see the Captain. In itself, this was unusual, for most new Captains always hosted a dinner for the officers of the ship soon after taking command as a way to know them better. Captain Smithe had extended invitations to his son and his nephew every night since joining the ship, but none to either Owen or the Second Officer Strand. Owen saluted and focused on the Captain seated at his desk, with the First Officer standing off to the side. The Captain wasted no time, frowning as he spoke.

“Mr. Spence. I am sorely disappointed in you. I expect you believe the punishment I ordered today was excessive, as it was more than the usual minimum punishment. As far as I am concerned, the

men need a clear understanding I mean what I say. As for you, I am sad to say there are many more like you out there who believe in coddling the men. Well, I made myself clear when I came aboard, did I not? I simply won't have any of it. The Navy is built on discipline, sir. You will change your ways in dealing with the men or you will suffer the consequences, sir. The Articles of War apply to you, too. I told you what I wanted and as far as I am concerned, you have disobeyed me. I will be generous this time and merely offer you a warning.”

The Captain sat back in his chair and stared at Owen for a long moment.

“Well, have you anything to say?”

“I understand, Captain. I appreciate your generosity, sir.”

“Do you, now? I expect you are wondering why I am even being generous given our history, aren't you? No, don't answer that. You know I am being magnanimous. Your father deserved everything which happened, and I regret nothing. But I am not such an ogre I would hold his son to account, too. As I told you when you came aboard, this situation is not my choice. But make no mistake, if you are going to serve me you will do so on my terms or not at all. There is nothing further to say. You are dismissed.”

“Sir,” said Owen, saluting as he turned and left. His once seemingly bright and boundless future was now shrouded in darkness. Worse, the ship around him felt like a cage.

In the short space of less than two weeks the

atmosphere of *HMS Wiltshire* changed from being a normal Royal Navy ship to one far more muted and fearful. No one could be heard laughing, even when off duty. The men had simply hunkered down to wait for the situation to change, which inevitably it would. The problem was the day when it might happen was nowhere in sight and likely wouldn't be for a very long time. Fortunately, the small convoy the *Wiltshire* was to shepherd to Jamaica was finally ready to depart, muting the growing frustration of the Captain at their delays. The crew could forget their problems with the work at hand.

Second Officer Strand finally found time to talk to Owen without others to listen in two days out on the journey. The Captain was unhappy with the way the ship was sailing and sent both of them to look at the contents of the hold to see if anything could be shifted to improve the situation. Strand looked all directions to make doubly sure no one was nearby before he spoke.

"Mr. Spence, we find ourselves in an interesting situation, don't you think?"

Owen eyed the man warily, before glancing about himself and responding. While the two men had served together for over five months now, Owen couldn't claim to know him well.

"I expect one could describe it this way, sir."

"Indeed. Mr. Spence, I confess I am rather taken aback at how the Captain is dealing with us, and you in particular. Can I rely on your discretion here, sir?"

"Sir, you can."

"Understanding our situation a little better might

help both of us, although I don't know there is much either of us can do about it. You obviously have some history with him. What can you share with me?"

Owen sighed. "Sir, it is a long story, but I will try to condense it. In case you are not aware, the Smithe family is large and very wealthy. The family has several sugar plantations of various sizes throughout the Caribbean and several properties back home. The Captain's uncle is in the House of Lords. I think the Captain himself has plantations out here, but where my family comes into the picture is with his properties in England. My father was involved with him in some small land transactions together and the relationship soured. I met the Captain long ago when I was barely twelve years old, before it all went wrong. I don't know much of the details, since I was just a child. What was relevant to me, you see, was my family nowhere near as wealthy or connected and this is still the case."

"I do see. Go on."

Owen shrugged. "My father reached a point where he understood he was being undercut and he was in clear danger of losing everything. I didn't know at the time, of course. Being as young as I was, I only knew my parents were very worried. The problem the family faced is my father was an honest man. I think once he became involved, he realized there were some elements of very questionable dealings going on and he was not happy about it. He couldn't disentangle himself, and it became so acrimonious he called Captain Smithe

out and challenged him. The Captain refused, preferring to settle the matter in court. As I said, they have far more resources than us."

"And your father lost everything."

"Most everything. He was crushed, sir. With what little influence he had left he found me a posting as a midshipman and here I am. I received word some months after sailing I would never see him again. He was found at the base of a cliff, smashed on the rocks. I was told the official story is he was out walking, likely slipped, and fell. I think the truth is he fell into depression at being unable to provide for the family. My mother was equally crushed by this. She had health problems and, I think, simply lost heart and the will to live. She is gone, too."

"And now you have no family left?"

"My younger sister was sent to live with a distant aunt and uncle. I have an older brother in the Army somewhere. I do have other aunts and uncles out there, but I have not seen any of them in years. The Navy has become my family."

"I see. Well, the Captain seems to be bent on maintaining a harsher discipline than either you or I are used to, sir. And his son appears to be of the same mind. No surprise, I guess. I will think on it and your situation in particular, but I see no easy answers to changing this. I don't know, Mr. Spence. Right now, the only way out I can see is to request a transfer or to somehow be invalided off the ship. Both of those courses of action are fraught with obvious problems. Who do you think the Admiral on station is going to listen to, us or the Captain?"

You could maybe feign an illness, but when would you get another posting? In any case, thank you for your confidence. Of course, this conversation never happened, you understand."

"I understand, sir, and I appreciate your concern."

"Right. Let's get back to business."

When he came off watch later in the evening Owen ate his dinner with little enthusiasm. The Marine Sergeant in the officer's wardroom, a gregarious man named Thomas Dawes, tried engaging him in conversation, but let the attempt go on seeing Owen had no interest in being social. The fact the midshipmen at the table included the Captain's nephew was an inhibiting element for everyone.

Owen had deliberately minimized his interactions with him since the incident with Ralston and Hodges. The young midshipman responded by walking a fine line, offering a knowing smile whenever they did interact which could be interpreted in different ways. He was careful not to give obvious offence, but Owen had little doubt the younger Smithe was all too ready to use his relationship with the Captain and the First Officer to maximum advantage.

The rest of the officers and crew quickly learned the same lesson. Despite being junior to the three other midshipmen the ship was carrying Smithe soon began ruling them with an iron fist. One had already been caned severely by the bosun for a minor misdemeanour while another was

mastheaded by the First Officer as punishment for a similar offence. Both punishments were the direct result of Midshipman Smithe bringing the transgressions to the attention of the First Officer.

Owen relented and apologized to the Sergeant, feigning being tired before retiring to the miniscule quarters set aside for him alone. This consisted of a small bunk bed with space underneath for his duffel bag, a tiny desk with a chair and a lockable drawer to keep the little money he had on hand safe, and a hook on the wall to hang his uniforms on. The space was framed by thin wooden screens on either end which could be removed if needed. A sheet pulled across the length of his quarters gave a small measure of privacy. As small as it was, it seemed a welcome refuge where he could let his guard down and be himself.

The problem was he felt as wooden in his small haven as he had come to feel every time he was on duty. The simple joy of being young and proud of having achieved the skills to sail and command a massive Royal Navy frigate was gone. Being forced to constantly present a bland, stiff face to the others on the ship without ever being able to let his guard down was completely foreign.

The worst part was he could do nothing about it and his earlier conversation with Lieutenant Strand had sent him even further to the depths of despair. As he had told the Lieutenant, the Navy was his family and, in fact, his life. He had no one at hand to fall back on if he was forced to leave, and he had few resources to see him through if he did.

His parents gave him a small sum to see him off

in his new life when he left home for the Navy, but he had no room for luxuries. Little was left of his meagre pay as a Lieutenant after paying his regular wardroom expenses. Even purchasing new uniforms on being promoted Lieutenant had dwindled his resources alarmingly. As the nation was at peace, he had no prospect of earning more by sharing in the reward of captured enemy ships bought by the prize courts into the Navy.

Owen gave a small sigh as he lay stretched out on his bunk. Realizing how tense he felt he deliberately focused on trying to let it drain away. He knew nothing could be done for now and his only remedy was to stay the course, hoping for a change in fortune. The release he sought from the tension took a long time to come.

"Lieutenant Smithe, what in God's name are they doing on that bloody scow?" said the Captain, an angry look etched on his face as he focused his glass on the last of the six merchant ships following well behind HMS Wiltshire. The Captain had ordered the frigate to tack on hearing a hail from their lookout advising one of their charges was slipping well behind the others.

The First Officer was doing the same as his father, except he was wearing a confused frown on his face. He finally brought his own glass down and turned to Lieutenant Strand. A frustrated tone was obvious in his voice as he spoke.

"Lieutenant, signal those bastards they are to make more sail immediately. Have the gunner fire a gun to make sure they are paying attention. Captain,

I don't know what to make of this. I could understand having issues maybe once or twice, but this is the third time today."

Aware of how unhappy the senior officers were, the Second Lieutenant ensured the orders were swiftly carried out. The Captain grunted his approval, but a scowl remained on his face as he replied to his son.

"Well, if they don't get going there won't be a fourth time, because we will fall back and put a shot through their sails to show them who is in charge here."

The bark of the signal gun firing made both men raise their glasses once again, straining to see if their message had any effect. Lieutenant Strand and Owen were standing nearby on the deck and both followed suit. Silence descended for a moment as everyone focused on the scene, before Owen called out a warning.

"Captain! There was puff of smoke mid ship just now. I think someone on the ship fired a swivel gun."

"Yes, I believe he is right," said the First Officer. "I—good God, what is happening on that bloody ship?"

All of the officers stood open-mouthed in shock as the merchant ship fell away from the little convoy in complete disarray, her sails shivering badly. Two of the yards were unable to bear the strain and snapped off, bringing a tangle of rigging crashing to the deck. The Captain let loose a stream of angry curses as he snapped his telescope shut. Finally mastering himself, he turned to the First

Officer.

"Bloody lubberly idiots. Lieutenant Smithe, bring us about. Signal the rest of the convoy to heave to while we run down and sort this mess out. So much for making good time to Jamaica. Lieutenant Spence, take Midshipman Smithe and find out what these incompetent bastards are doing. Take Sergeant Dawes and a party of his Marines with you as well. If they are busy shooting at each other, you may need to bash some heads. I'll be in my cabin."

The Captain turned and stalked away toward his cabin before stopping near the entrance. He turned back to glare at Owen.

"And Lieutenant Spence? When I say bash heads, I do mean you will bash heads. I am talking about the first sign of obstinance. I'll have none of your mollycoddling these fools and I don't care about the fact they are civilians. I want this convoy back underway immediately, you hear?"

"I understand, sir," said Owen, but the Captain was already marching back to his cabin.

Ten minutes later the Wiltshire was stationed a hundred yards off the starboard side of the badly wallowing merchant ship. Wary of what they might find, Owen made certain the boarding party was heavily armed and ready for anything. As they rowed closer Owen was able to study the ship better, having had little time to do so before the convoy sailed.

The ship was named *The Perfect Lady*, but up close she failed miserably at living up to her name. Even at a distance Owen was sceptical about how

well maintained this shabby looking old ship was. She was in dire need of fresh paint and, in Owen's experience, this was almost always a tell-tale sign of other problems to be found. Reaching the ship's side, Owen grabbed the rope ladder of the floundering ship with some difficulty. Once he had a firm grip, he barked out orders before he began making his way up the side.

"Right. Marines to follow me smartly. Everyone at the ready, please. God knows what we are going to find here."

Owen couldn't believe the scene before him once he made his way over the railing and steadied himself. The entire main deck was a muddled shamble of tangled rigging, broken spars, and torn sails. In the waist of the ship Owen could see four dead sailors lying in pools of their own blood, undoubtedly the result of a blast from the swivel gun set on a railing at the top of the stairs leading to the quarterdeck. Yet more dead men were strewn about on the quarterdeck itself.

The only living men in sight were sitting clustered around the mainmast. One of them eyed him with a bleary look as Owen approached. With effort he attempted to struggle to his feet. The sailor almost fell on his face as he did, as he was unwilling to let go of the half empty bottle of rum in one of his hands. Blood stained his clothes in several spots, but none of it appeared to be his own. A cutlass dark with drying blood on the blade lay near where he had been sitting. He looked down at the others lying on the deck.

"Avast, lads, thank God, for the Royal Navy is

here to save us. Get on your feet."

Finally steadying himself with one hand on the mast he took a quick swig from the bottle before turning to look at Owen, grinning innocently and slurring out a further few words.

"Aye, we've had a right bad time of it, Captain."

"You are drunk. Put the bottle down and listen to me. I am Lieutenant Spence of *HMS Wiltshire*. Who are you and what in God's name is going on here?"

While Owen was speaking a second man struggled to his feet and tried to take the bottle from the sailor Owen was talking to. Owen intervened, grasping the bottle himself and hurling it overboard. An outraged look appeared on the second sailor's face and he made to throw a punch at Owen, which was easily dodged. Owen kicked him hard in the groin and the sailor fell to the deck, vomiting profusely where he lay. With him out of the way Owen reached out and grabbed the first sailor by his shirt to pull him closer. The reek of sweat, stale breath, and the overpowering scent of cheap rum almost made Owen gag.

"Answer me, damn you, or you will be puking on the deck like him."

The sailor's eyes bulged in fear as he stammered out a response.

"Sir, I am able seaman John James. The Captain and the First Mate tried to murder us all, I swear it. You see for yourself the swivel gun set on the quarterdeck, right? They used it on those dead men over there. We had no choice but to defend ourselves. Sir, they were tyrants. This ship has been a living hell."

Owen was silent for a moment before shaking his head in dismay.

"You imbecile. You have just condemned yourself, because what you are talking about is called mutiny."

Owen shoved the sailor away from him and he stumbled as he fell back, landing hard on the deck with a shocked look on his face. Owen turned to the men waiting behind him, focusing on the Marine Sergeant first.

"Sergeant Dawes, detail a couple of men to guard these fools. If they can find some chains to load them down with then by all means use them. The Captain will decide what to do with this lot. You and the rest of your men are to search the rest of the ship in case there are more of them. If you find more, bring them here and load them down with chains too. Mr. Smithe, have Midshipman Green in the cutter waiting below row back to the ship. He is to request the Captain send our carpenter and a working party to clean this mess up so we can get the ship underway. He can also tell him this appears to be a mutiny and we are still actively investigating. When you have done this you will join me in searching the Captain and First Mate's quarters to see if we can learn more."

As he was finishing speaking the sailor John James struggled back to his feet and made to grab his Owen's shoulder to talk to him again.

"Sir, it wasn't like that, I—"

One of the Marines saw him coming and smashed the butt of his weapon into the man's midriff to stop him. The sailor crumpled and fell to

the deck clutching his middle with a groan of agony. The men around Owen began dispersing in all directions. Owen gave the prisoners no more thought and strode over to mount the stairs to the small quarterdeck. He found yet more bloody carnage, as four additional dead bodies were strewn about the deck. All of them bore vicious slash wounds from cutlasses, although one had been run through by a much finer, bloodied sword still in the hand of the man Owen presumed was the dead Captain.

Owen sighed and looked back at the swivel gun pointing into the waist of the ship. These small, portable weapons could easily be mounted anywhere on a railing of a ship and their normal use was against external threats. Because this one was obviously placed to defend against an internal threat spoke volumes, but it changed nothing. Mutiny was mutiny. Midshipman Smithe came up and saluted as Owen was searching the pockets of the dead Captain. He found what he was looking for in the form of a small chain around the man's neck with a key.

"Mr. Green is on way back to the ship, Lieutenant. Orders?"

"Nothing we can do but try and learn more. I expect what this sailor told me will be enough to damn them all, but we must be thorough and do our job, Mr. Smithe. We need to search the cabins and see if we can find a log or a journal to tell us more. I am thinking this key may help. Let's go."

Going below they soon found what was clearly the First Mate's sparse quarters, while Owen was

certain the next cabin aft had to belong to the Captain. After a quick look around, he ordered Smithe to do a thorough search of the First Mate's quarters and then join him as he went onward.

Owen frowned when he found the Captain's cabin to be as bereft of belongings as the First Mate's, but he realized this would be in keeping with the poor condition of the ship itself. Owen surmised this was a man living on a knife edge, perhaps only a few steps away from life in a debtor's prison. A ship in such poor condition would be an obvious sign to all but the most desperate men the Captain would pay little, thus attracting the kind of men for the crew who would need harsh discipline to keep them in line.

Finding little of consequence in the man's few belongings Owen turned his attention to the small desk. Most of the drawers held nothing more than normal writing supplies, but the key unlocked one holding what Owen was looking for. He reached in and pulled out a book Owen was certain would be the ship's log, a second small notebook, and a small but heavy bag clinking with the sound of coins. Midshipman Smithe came in as Owen was studying the small notebook.

"Sir, there was nothing of consequence in the First Mate's cabin."

"Right, well, this is what the key unlocked for us. Have a look at the log to see if you can find anything while I deal with this."

"Is that a bag of coins, sir?" said Smithe as he began leafing through the log.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. I doubt there is much in it. This

notebook seems to be a personal diary, but he is a man of few words. I don't see anything in here raising alarm. Anything of interest in the log, Mr. Smithe?"

"No, sir," said Smithe, quickly leafing through the pages. "This looks to be just the usual navigational notes one would expect. No mention of problems with the crew or even punishment."

"Strange. Right, let's be off."

As he finished speaking a Marine stuck his head in the door.

"Lieutenant? The Sergeant is still below finishing the search, but he is almost done. I am to report a few other men were found below. They were passed out from the drink. They have been brought on deck with the others."

"Thank you. You can tell him I will meet on deck shortly if you see him."

"Shall we bring all of this with us, sir?" said Smithe as the Marine left.

Owen mulled it over for a brief moment. "No, we put it all back in the drawer. The Captain will want to decide what we are going to do."

Owen locked it all back in the drawer, leaving the key in the lock. As they left the cabin Owen looked at Smithe.

"Right. I'm going back on deck to sort this mess out. Find the Sergeant and have him post a Marine to guard the cabin, then report to me on deck."

"Sir," said Smithe, saluting as Owen carried on down the corridor and up the steps to the open deck.

By the time Owen made his way back to the deck the working party from the ship was climbing

aboard. Lieutenant Strand had joined the party at the Captain's request, a sign of unhappiness over what was being reported to him. The two officers were soon deep in discussion with the carpenter over what he was seeing. Almost thirty minutes later Lieutenant Strand shook his head and turned to Owen.

"Well, there's nothing for it. This is a bloody mess and I think it will take far too much time to make effective repairs at sea. We will have to take it in tow. You've done enough over here Mr. Spence. Take Mr. Smithe back with you and report to the Captain. I will stay here and supervise with Midshipman Green. It's going to be a slow voyage to Jamaica."

A half hour later Owen was standing in the Captain's cabin making his report. As he finished the Captain slammed a fist on the desk in frustration.

"My God, civilians. You are certain we have no choice but to take them in tow, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, both myself and Lieutenant Strand agree with the carpenter's thinking. The merchant ship has no spare supplies. We would have to use our own stores to make temporary repairs. Even if we did, she would be limping along."

"Damn, damn, damn. Well, I shall make it clear to the Admiral where the fault lies for the delay in our arrival. And the bloody mutineers?"

"They are now in chains in the hold and awaiting your decision, sir."

"Much as I would love to string them up on what is left of their yards, we will leave it for the civilians

to decide. You are dismissed."

With *HMS Wiltshire* a hive of activity taking *The Perfect Lady* in tow, Owen had little time to focus on anything but the task at hand. He was about to go off watch for some much-needed rest after the job was done when the First Officer appeared beside him. Owen had come to recognize when the man was angered, and he sensed it immediately from the frozen look on his face.

"Mr. Spence. I have a disturbing report about you."

"Sir?"

"I confess I am having difficulty believing this about a Royal Navy officer, but I trust you understand when I am told an officer has stolen something which does not belong to him, I will investigate."

Owen's jaw dropped. "Stolen something? Sir, I have no idea what this is about."

"Mr. Spence, I am told there was a bag of coins in the Captain's cabin on that ship. It was in a small brown coin pouch with a draw string. I am further told you were observed pocketing this. Where is this bag and why did you not report it?"

Owen was shocked, but with effort recovered himself.

"Sir, it is true there was a small bag of coins in the drawer where the Captain kept his log and his diary, which I told the Captain I had examined. I mentioned to him we left everything where it was found. A Marine was posted to guard the cabin. I swear to you I did not take the money."

"Really. Well, if this is the case then you will not

object to a search of your belongings."

"Of course, sir. Please, let's proceed."

After making their way below Owen gestured at his meagre belongings in his bunk and stood to the side as Lieutenant Smithe worked his way through it all. The Lieutenant briefly examined the money in Owen's locked desk, but he soon left it for Owen's money was in a dark green bag. The last item he chose to search was the duffel bag. The Lieutenant stiffened as he reached the bottom and turned to look at Owen before pulling a bag out, holding it up for inspection. Owen stared open-mouthed, not believing what he saw, for this was the same bag from *The Perfect Lady*.

"Let's go, Mr. Spence. We will discuss this with the Captain."

Owen followed the First Officer aft and saw Midshipman Smithe standing off to the side on the quarterdeck, wearing the same knowing smile Owen had come to loathe. Owen was thinking furiously as they went and in a flash it all became clear. Unable to resist he stalked over to him, steaming with anger. In a grating, low voice Owen made certain only the Midshipman would hear him.

"You evil little shit. This is your doing. I swear to God, you will pay for this."

"Mr. Spence! Get back here this instant." barked Lieutenant Smithe, after suddenly realizing Owen was no longer behind him. "Now, sir!"

An hour later the breadth of the plot against Owen was laid bare. Midshipman Smithe testified to the Captain he saw Owen surreptitiously pocket

the bag before leaving the cabin without knowing he was being observed. The Marine who poked his head in the door confirmed the bag now sitting on the centre of the Captain's desk was the same one he had seen on *The Perfect Lady*. Midshipman Green affirmed he was off duty in the officer's quarters and thought he saw Owen dash in briefly to rummage in his belongings after returning from the merchant ship.

Owen had stared hard at Midshipman Green as he spoke, but the young man refused to look at him. Owen understood why, for he was the youngest and most timid of the midshipmen on board. A scenario where Midshipman Smithe had either bribed or more likely threatened him into saying what he did was all too possible to imagine. Even as young as he was, Midshipman Green knew well where the power lay on board *HMS Wiltshire*. All Owen could do was to testify to what he knew was the truth, but it wasn't good enough for the Captain.

"Well, Mr. Spence. I have heard all I need to here. I believe I pointed out to you once before The Articles of War apply to you. This kind of behaviour is a breach of so many of them I hardly know which one to apply first. But as you are an officer, this requires a court martial. We will undoubtedly find sufficient Captains in Jamaica to convene one. I cannot have you continuing to serve until this is resolved. Lieutenant Spence will have a separate space prepared for you, as I'll not have your taint in the wardroom any longer. You will confine yourself to whatever space is prepared for you until we reach Jamaica. Now get out of my

sight and await the Lieutenant on deck."

"Sir," said Owen, saluting perfunctorily before turning to leave. As he did, he saw Midshipman Smithe standing behind the two senior officers where they couldn't see him. The young man openly smirked with glee at Owen for the barest moment. And as Owen walked out of the cabin, he heard the Captain speaking once again.

"Harold, we have a gap to fill because of this. I will make Francis here acting Lieutenant to help out until we reach Jamaica. With any luck the Admiral will see fit to find a ship for your own and we can make Francis's acting permanent."

The Sugar Sands