

The Sugar Winds

Lyle Garford

Dedication

This one is for all our cruise friends and family who enjoy travelling to the Caribbean and beyond with us.

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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Prologue
December 1779
Jamaica

The Governor tapped his finger with authority on the large map spread on the meeting room table, smiling at the other two men in the room as he spoke.

"So to summarize, gentlemen, this is the ultimate goal of your mission. Take this city and we will have hamstrung the Spanish in a host of different ways in one stroke. We create havoc with their economy by cutting their trade routes and we draw Spanish resources away from interfering in our affairs elsewhere. We will have a clear path through to the Pacific and we can expand our business interests accordingly. The damn Spanish do not have some God given right to all the wealth they are plundering from The Spanish Main."

The Governor paused a moment, nodding his head with obvious conviction.

"Think of it, sirs. Some of this could be ours. The mines of the Spanish Americas have produced literally millions in silver and gold coinage for their economy. The value of other resources such as sugar and logwood they produce is also staggering. The government will be most grateful if we can disrupt the Spanish and claim a portion for our side. And obviously, the three of us will undoubtedly enrich ourselves with more money than we know what to do with in the process."

The Governor paused a second time, giving a probing look at each of the men with him, before stepping back from the table and taking a seat in his chair. The two men with him both remained standing, staring in silence at the map before them, before almost as one they too took their seats.

"Well, gentlemen. Now you have the full picture, what do you think? Do either of you have questions or concerns?"

Captain Horatio Nelson rubbed his chin in thought without speaking. A host of questions were indeed clamouring for answers in his mind, but most involved logistical matters which would not be a concern to Sir John Dalling, Governor of Jamaica. Being in overall command of the British Royal Navy forces dedicated to this mission meant Nelson would have plenty to do dealing with it all in preparing for the successful completion of the task before him. As he continued thinking about it one concern kept coming to the fore in his mind, but before he could raise the issue with the Governor the other attendee at the meeting stirred and spoke.

"So I just want to ensure my understanding, Governor. I am in sole command of the military forces for this mission? Captain Nelson here is in a support role?"

"Correct, Captain Polson. Captain Nelson's mission is to get you and your men to the destination and effectively watch your back once you are on land, which is your domain. You will naturally defer to Captain Nelson on all strictly naval matters. Captain Nelson will provide sailors to form part of the raiding parties, but if they are on land, they are taking orders from you. You and your men from the local Regiments have the lead role."

"I see. And Captain Lawrie?"

"Captain Lawrie has already been advised you are in command. He is busy recruiting among the local Indians and settlers on The Main as we speak. He claims he can recruit thousands of volunteers."

Nelson couldn't stop himself from raising an eyebrow. From the corner of his eye he saw Captain Polson had done the

same, but to his surprise his colleague didn't question the optimism inherent in the claim.

"Indeed," said Captain Polson. "I confess you have touched on my major concern, sir. Even with the reinforcements Captain Nelson brought from England, we will still number barely a thousand men."

"Captain Nelson has at least that number he can spare from the ships," said the Governor. "And we are already recruiting locally for Jamaica volunteers. Given the possibility of shares in whatever valuables you capture, we will not have a problem finding several hundred more men. I also have confidence in Captain Lawrie. Lastly, it is possible a more senior officer may join the expedition in progress with even more men to reinforce you."

"That would indeed be helpful. Well, then. We have much work to do, Governor. At the moment, I have nothing further. Other concerns may arise as Captain Nelson and I work on planning, but we can address them then."

"Excellent," said the Governor. "And you, Captain Nelson?"

"I agree with Captain Polson. I am confident the two of us can build the necessary plan. I do have one concern, though. I confess I have no experience with The Spanish Main and what the conditions are like. I have heard most of it is thick jungle, hosting all manner of dangerous wildlife along with the risk of disease. I have also been warned tempests can appear with little warning and disappear with equal speed. So my question is do either of you have anyone with direct experience of these conditions? I am wondering if there is something we can do to mitigate these in advance."

Captain Polson was quick to respond with a shake of his head.

"I am sorry, Captain Nelson. I have no experience with The Spanish Main, but I too have heard of this. But I expect we shall find a way to muddle through."

"Captain Nelson," said the Governor, as a frown appeared on his face. "I don't have direct experience with it either, but I am not daunted. You and our raiding parties will be spending most of the time on the San Juan river, not in the jungle. But if you have concerns, feel free to look into the question."

"Governor, you know Sir James Standish in Barbados, I believe? I met him on my way here. He impressed me with his knowledge of the Caribbean and he mentioned The Spanish Main was included in his domain. I didn't know we would be mounting a mission there, otherwise I would have spent some extra time to learn more of what he knows beyond the general briefing he gave me. Perhaps he could assist us?"

The frown remained in place on the Governor's face, but he shrugged and responded after a momentary pause.

"Well, yes, I do know Sir James, but I'm not sure what a bloody Foreign Office spy would know that could be of assistance in this. His true domain is the political and intelligence sphere and all the skulking about behind the scenes which comes with his role. This is a military mission, but it is your business to plan for its success. If you think it could help to consult him, then do so. For my part I am fully confident this mission can succeed regardless. The Spanish are weak, but we are not. Conceive of a bold plan and then get on with it is my thinking. I think I've done my part in coming up with the plan. Our masters in Whitehall saw fit to agree and approve this. So my question to you both is are you up to the task?"

Both officers stiffened in their chairs as one and they nodded in unison. Nelson gave Captain Polson a quick side look as he responded.

"Governor, I am quite confident we are. But I do believe preparation is critical and I will take help from wherever I can get it. I will write to Sir James immediately."

The Governor rose from his chair to signal an end to the meeting, but stopped a moment as he looked at Nelson.

"Do so, but please be cautious about what you impart in your letter. It is already obvious to everyone we are planning something because of our recruitment campaign, but we are not advertising what that might be. This is a major undertaking and I don't want word confirming what we are doing reaching the Spanish before we even leave harbour."

Nelson nodded. "I understand, Governor."

Chapter One
January 1780
Barbados and Jamaica

"What do you think, Owen? Does Sir James have something new for us to do? If he does, I sure hope it's something useful to help turn things around."

Captain Owen Spence only grunted an initial response as he walked down Broad Street in Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. The question had interrupted the train of thought he was lost in and it was not a coincidence it involved the very same topic on his mind. He focused in order to provide something better to John Tate, First Mate of *The Sea Trader*, the trading ship both men served on.

"Well, I think he does have a task, but whether it will do what you want remains to be seen. But I bloody hope it is, John. He rarely sends for us unless there is something afoot. We will find out soon enough."

"I don't know about you, Owen, but I'm getting tired of the constant bad news."

"I know. It was good to have some time off at Christmas and not think about any of this, but nothing has changed, has it?"

Owen wasn't expecting an answer to his question and John didn't offer one. The two men lapsed back into a frustrated silence as they made their way from their ship to the nondescript building housing the office of Sir James Standish. The first time Owen met Sir James he was surprised someone as important as the resident Foreign Office spymaster in charge of gathering intelligence regarding the entire Caribbean had such an unassuming, tiny office. But as Owen grew into his own dual role as Captain of a Caribbean trading ship while serving as an

agent for Sir James, he came to appreciate the subtle use of the cover of an obscure trading company no one had ever heard of along with such a humble office to remain anonymous.

The frustration of both men was shared with plenty of other people. Food shortages were now a fact of everyday life and everyone was rationed without exception. The war in America continued to grind on, with little in the way of positive news. In the Caribbean the British had managed to capture St. Lucia from the French in late 1778, but in July of 1779 French forces under Admiral The Comte D'Estaing had attacked and captured Grenada. The Royal Navy rose immediately to the challenge, but their attempt drive the French Navy out was a disastrous failure.

Spain chose the same moment to finally enter the war on the side of the French and the Americans. To the consternation of the British, a new flow of much needed money, weapons, and supplies was soon on the way to the Americans. Even worse, the Spanish opened a new front by attacking several British possessions from bases in Louisiana. The entire Mississippi river basin was soon in Spanish control, while Pensacola in western Florida suddenly found itself expecting to be the next in line. With yet another avenue of attack from the south to try against the Americans denied to the British forces, the situation was grim.

The point which galled both Owen and John was they had picked up rumours of it all in the course of their travels throughout the Caribbean. Both men thought what they learned were clear signs both of these actions against the British were looming on the horizon. Owen knew his reports were taken seriously by Sir James, but it remained an open question as to whether anyone else did the same.

Owen's main concern were the military authorities and specifically the Royal Navy. Being court martialled for theft and dismissed from the Royal Navy over six years ago still rankled, especially as the whole case against him was a total fabrication. While he knew many officers in the Navy to be the heroes they truly were, a small number were the exact opposite. Sir James had done much to dispel the false rumours and distrust of anything Owen said or did, but pockets of it still existed.

Unfortunately, some officers were also less than competent in their roles due to the pervasive presence of patronage and influence in appointments without regard to whether the necessary standards of skill for a given position were present. Owen didn't know the Admiral in charge of the British forces in the action involving Grenada, but he was fairly certain the disastrous outcome had everything to do with an abysmal failure to properly understand the size of the forces arrayed against him. But Sir James continued to assure them both their reports were valuable, so Owen and John had to accept this at face value. The galling fact the Navy had come to specifically rely on their reports and even clamour for them when the occasion suited was an irony few in the service comprehended.

They knocked on the door of the spymaster's office and entered after making their way to the second-floor office past an array of similar tiny offices housing real trading firms and other small businesses. Sir James was seated at his desk with several sheafs of papers spread across it, while on a side table a pile of obviously unopened correspondence awaited his attention. Sir James leaned back, rubbed his eyes, and pointed wordlessly to his side table where a decanter and glasses were sitting. After Owen and John had seated themselves with glasses of brandy in

hand Sir James downed a healthy swig of his own drink and grimaced.

"Bloody paperwork. Serves me right for taking extra time off over Christmas. Don't know how I became nothing more than a paper pusher, but there it is. I guess it comes with getting too old to climb a mast."

Despite the frustration in his voice Sir James laughed, while Owen and James just smiled as they knew he wasn't serious. The greying hair and lines on his face belied a man who paid attention to remaining fit, so much that both men were certain Sir James could still reach the top of any mast with little difficulty. Once a Royal Navy Captain, he had been lured to service with the Foreign Office on the premise his expertise would add value by bridging the gap between the diplomatic and military worlds.

"Well, gentlemen. I hope you both had a good break over Christmas. Wasn't a lot of good cheer about, was there? It's more than a little ironic you have both done so well financially, yet you don't really have much to spend it on, I expect."

Owen and John looked at each other, before Owen shrugged in response.

"Very true, Sir James. But we are both used to the rather spartan life aboard ship, so these past few weeks weren't difficult. And some day this war and the hard times will be over. We may be both old and grey whenever the day finally comes, but at least we will have resources to enjoy the better things in life by then."

"Yes, this will end at some point, although I can't honestly see when it may be. At least, not at the moment. Well, to business. You may be surprised to find I could be sending you back to St. Eustatius and Dominica for supplies some day in the

future. Perhaps sooner than you think. I know, it likely seems odd given what happened with the invasion of Dominica. But the French are still trying to recover from the hurricane which hit the island this year and they have their hands full. As for St. Eustatius, I am hearing rumours they are still very much open for business and I mean any business. So as much as some of their inhabitants may not like us and there are French warships about, they do enjoy taking our gold on both of those islands. However, I am still looking into confirming just how true this is. I will let you know. In the meantime, I have a task for you in Jamaica, which I suspect is also going involve the Spanish Main."

Both men raised an eyebrow at mention of The Main and Sir James smiled at their reaction.

"Yes, I know. The Spanish are no longer our friends in theory, if they ever were. But let me give you some details. I've received a request for assistance from a Royal Navy Captain named Horatio Nelson. He passed through Barbados a while back and is now stationed in Jamaica. I quite liked him. He has abundant energy and intelligence which is impossible to miss. I predict a bright future for him. Anyway, his letter specifically asked if I had any expertise regarding the Spanish Main, although he was rather vague about why. I was more than a little curious, because a man like him would only ask about it with reason. However, I have since learned more and, if I am correct, he will need all the help he can get."

Owen raised an eyebrow once again.

"Good Lord, Sir James. Are they contemplating an action against the Spanish?"

"Yes, and they are doing more than contemplating it. Some sort of a mission has been approved by London. I have not been

given details, nor was I consulted about it. Very strange. However, if we are asked to help, then we help. And this is where you two come in."

"Help, you say. So what does that mean in this situation, Sir James?" said John.

"It means sail to Jamaica and get details from Captain Nelson. He doesn't know you are coming, but on arrival put yourselves at his disposal. I have a letter of introduction ready for you to present. I suspect it will be a consultative role, but who knows? Once he realizes the depth of your experience with the Main I think it very likely he will want to use you as advance scouts or something similar. He may want you at his side for as long as he can arrange it. It's what I would do were I in his shoes. Anything is possible."

"Hmm," said Owen. "We haven't been back to The Main for a while. But knowing the Governor of Porto Bello as we do, I suspect our gold would smooth over any petty details like the fact we are at war with the Spanish now. It's a risk, but we are well armed enough and if we sail in under Dutch colours it should work. We have lots of contacts in other places along the coast, too. And we can hopefully purchase supplies in the process. So, yes, we can certainly do that."

"Yes, the thought of acquiring more supplies while you are helping him out crossed my mind. Heaven knows we could use whatever you can get, so it is the perfect cover. Look, take whatever time is necessary to help him in whatever way he wants, but come back as soon as you are able because I think it very possible St. Eustatius is indeed back in the picture. But I have some misgivings about what is going on with this mission and, as I said, I suspect Captain Nelson will need all the help he can get. By the way, your Uncle is aware of this mission. You

can leave whenever you are ready, but I expect he will want to see you before you go."

Sensing the meeting was over, both Owen and John downed the remainder of their drinks and rose from their seats.

"Of course, Sir James," said Owen. "The ship is ready for sea. I will send word to Uncle Alan."

"Thank you both. You know your service is invaluable," said Sir James as he too rose from his chair, passing Owen the sealed envelope for Nelson and shaking their hands.

"We appreciate your confidence in us, Sir James. Both John and I just want to make a difference if we can."

The crew were standing ready to pull up the boarding plank, cast off the lines, and depart for Jamaica, but what remained was for Owen to board *The Sea Trader*. He was lingering on the dock beside the ship with two other people, as the moment he knew would come had finally arrived for them all. Owen sighed, as for different reasons they were the two most important people in his life and parting from them was ever more difficult each time it happened.

The older, grey-haired male was his Uncle Alan Giles, who had done no less than change the entire trajectory of Owen's life. After being unfairly court martialled out of the Navy, Owen was forced to work for a slave owner to survive despite his distaste for it until he unexpectedly encountered his Uncle by sheer good fortune. Owen soon found himself serving as a trading ship Captain for his Uncle and as a spy for Sir James Standish, earning a material degree of wealth in subsequent years as a result. Uncle Alan also became the father Owen no longer had, as both of his parents had passed years ago and he was the only

family left. Owen enjoyed his company and valued his advice, both of which he always missed when he was away at sea.

The other person was a young, sandy blonde-haired woman of eighteen with piercing blue grey eyes named Elizabeth Giles, who had blossomed into a stunning beauty which was the envy of every other woman on the island. She was the niece of Alan Giles from his first wife's side of the family. They had adopted her long ago when her parents died and she took their surname. Now that his first wife was also gone, Uncle Alan was her only family. As a result the three of them had grown into a close-knit family. But over time Elizabeth became much more than another family member to Owen.

"Well, Owen, I guess we shouldn't keep them waiting any longer," said Uncle Alan, giving Owen a long hug before pulling back. He grasped Owen by both shoulders for one last brief moment before continuing.

"We look forward to the day you return safe to us. I fear this mission may carry more risk than we want, but we all know it has to be done. All of your voyages have great risk now. Thank you for all you are doing."

"I am not concerned about the risk, Uncle Alan. I will come back, but I will miss you every day."

"I will miss you, too. You simply must come back to me," said Elizabeth, as she stepped forward to give him a heartfelt and long, crushing hug.

As they finally stepped back from each other Owen struggled to speak, still holding both her hands in his. Elizabeth had made it clear long ago she had eyes only for Owen, even when she was much younger. The sense of loss he could see in her eyes over his leaving seemed more than he could bear, but he finally nodded.

"I too shall miss you, Elizabeth. More than you know."

A long moment of silence stretched out before Uncle Alan finally spoke, chuckling as he did.

"You know, Owen, I think it was—what, six years ago now, when I first introduced you two? I seem to recall offering a warning she would wrap you around her finger, did I not?"

Elizabeth freed one of her hands from Owen's grasp and gave her Uncle a playful slap on the arm before turning back to Owen.

"And despite the fact I am no longer a little girl he still teases me unmercifully," said Elizabeth with the same brilliant, wide smile which always melted Owen to the core.

Still speechless, Owen did the only thing left to him and he raised her hand to his lips to give it a kiss.

Elizabeth bit her lip briefly before speaking.

"Come back to me, Owen."

Owen was still brooding over the parting as *The Sea Trader* sailed into Kingston Harbour on a typically sunny, warm Jamaican day over a week later. When Elizabeth had first made her attraction to him clear Owen had dismissed it as a youthful infatuation likely to pass, as she was only twelve years old when they first met. To his amazement she was steadfast as the years passed by and she began to mature. She had even displayed a worldly understanding to a level far beyond her age, making it clear she knew how lonely his life was at sea and that other women were likely to be in his life before she came of age. Despite this, she made it clear she wanted him to make her his own when the time was right.

The problem was the war and his sense of duty. The need for his service seemed greater than ever, meaning he could see

no end in sight to a lonely life at sea. More importantly, there seemed no end to difficult partings from her. The sense of loss in her eyes and the fear he knew she felt over his dangerous work was ever present. That she would be absolutely crushed if one day something happened and he never came back was a hurt he didn't want her to have to bear.

Owen sighed to himself, for he didn't know what to do about it. She seemed certain their destiny was to be with each other and as she grew older he slowly realized he too felt the same way, but a world filled with danger and risk kept intruding. He could only hope their destiny was not to be star crossed. He shook his head, knowing he had little choice but to simply carry on and hope events would resolve the dilemma. As he did the realization someone was speaking to him came and he was forced to focus.

"Owen? Sorry to intrude," said John. "I am thinking we make our way a little further down the docks. Looks like an empty spot or two there. It's not too far from all these Navy ships at anchor and it's close to The Spanish Rose. And I think that ship nearby must be *HMS Hinchinbrook*, is it not? Appears to be a 28-gun frigate, which I believe was the one Sir James said this fellow Nelson is Captain of."

Owen squinted in the direction John was pointing and after studying the ship he nodded his head.

"Yes, this looks to be it. I think I can make out her name. So, yes, let's make for that spot. Put Wilson Jones in command and give the men some shore leave. I know you want to go see Isabella. I am going to my cabin to write a note to Captain Nelson."

An hour later Owen was aboard one of *The Sea Trader's* boats being rowed over to the *Hinchinbrook*. John had already

left to make his way to The Spanish Rose, where Owen agreed to meet him whenever he could. As expected, Owen was challenged as they got closer to the frigate, but was allowed to board.

He was met on deck by a stone-faced young Lieutenant who was obviously wondering what a civilian could possibly have to do with his Captain. The Captain was not on board, but after Owen explained he was there at Captain Nelson's request the Lieutenant agreed to pass the sealed message from Owen on to his Captain at the first opportunity to do so. Owen left smiling as the young officer was staring hard in obvious curiosity at the slim envelope, as if by doing so he could somehow learn its mysterious contents and more about this stranger who had appeared with no warning on his deck. The sealed letter from Sir James was enclosed within the outer envelope with Owen's simple note requesting a meeting.

On returning to *The Sea Trader* Owen made for his second in command, Wilson Jones. While he was a little shorter than most men in height, he was stocky and incredibly strong. He was also black and a former slave. Wilson Jones had proved a good choice, for the rest of the crew all respected how he had learned his new profession as well or better than any of them. They also knew he was well aware of all the tricks sailors used to smuggle extra rum on board. After ensuring Wilson had matters in hand Owen left to follow John to The Spanish Rose Inn.

As he walked into dark interior of the Inn a flood of memories came back to him. Little appeared to have changed. The Inn was where he had found himself in the depth of despair after his court martial, with no apparent future or means to provide for himself. The owner of the Inn had befriended him

and helped to find him work as Captain of a local trading vessel for one of the Jamaican plantation owners. The work gave him purpose and money, but Owen had no wish to be part of the harsh system of slavery at the heart of the operation. Meeting his Uncle Alan had freed him to leave and Owen was grateful every day to his Uncle for it.

The one drawback of being freed to leave Jamaica was it meant leaving Isabella Martinez, the owner of The Spanish Rose Inn. She had become his lover during his time on the island despite being fourteen years older than him. She was a widower and, like him, had need for solace in the arms of someone. But she understood he was a sailor and needed to be at sea, while she had family on Jamaica and knew she would never leave. They had parted knowing doing so was best for each other, but they both held a spot in their hearts for each other. And Isabella made it clear nothing had changed as she rushed over to clutch him in her embrace even as he was still struggling to adjust his eyes to the dim light of the interior.

"Owen! It is so good to see you again."

Owen revelled in the feel of her body once again after so long, as even more memories of their nights together flooded back. He didn't want to let go, but knew he must. They made their way over to where John was already seated and as he sat down Isabella's server dropped a mug of cool ale on the table in front of Owen, knowing from long before what Owen preferred.

"Owen, John tells me you may be here a while. This is wonderful news!"

"Ah, well, he may be optimistic. We shall see. We have—reason to be here, but it is a bit unclear about how long it could be. But you are looking lovely as always. How are you?"

The only significant issue for Isabella was the fact her second husband was still alive. After Owen had left she met and married an older local man whose hidden purpose was to take her money. The marriage had never been consummated, as he preferred the company of other men. Isabella was left to expend considerable effort fending off constant demands from his creditors and save herself from financial ruin. She had succeeded to this point, with help from John and Owen whenever they were in port.

Isabella had not remarried or taken a new lover. Because her spouse was also sick with a terminal disease acquired as a result of his licentious behaviour she had chosen to await the inevitable outcome. He was still alive, but in very poor health. After giving him a brief summary of events since he last saw her, Isabella paused a moment before continuing.

"John is here and has promised to help me once again if he can. Yes, it is another long story. But enough of me, Owen. Have you made an offer to your lady in Barbados yet?"

"Um, no," said Owen, feeling at a loss for how to explain it.

Isabella simply stared at him for a long moment before she reached out to take his hand.

"You must someday, you know. You cannot remain lonely the rest of your life."

She released his hand and looked over at John.

"Well, that is for another day. So John here tells me you both have interest in setting up a warehouse in Jamaica. Will this be soon?"

"Hmm, well, I think this is mostly John's idea, although I will certainly invest in it if he decides he wants to pursue this."

John shrugged and spoke for the first time.

"We did well enough with the St. Eustatius operation. I don't know why we can't make something similar work here, too. May take some effort."

The three of them spent the next two hours talking of the future and reminiscing about the past. Owen felt a little wistful to see how Isabella was showing more subtle signs of her age since his last visit, but he knew the same was likely happening to him. After staying long enough to have a meal Owen and John both left, rather the worse for having downed several drinks in the process. They wanted to stay longer, but both knew they had to get back to see to the needs of the ship and the crew. Isabella gave both of them heartfelt hugs before letting them go.

"I am so glad the two of you are back again. I know it is unrealistic to expect my two favourite men will be here long, but I promise I will enjoy every minute you are here. Come back any time."

The two men were silent as they made their way back to *The Sea Trader*. Owen's thoughts were filled with memories and thoughts of how much he missed his time with her. But he knew their relationship was over a long time ago and nothing would change this. As they boarded the ship Wilson Jones came over with a sealed envelope in his hand.

"This came while you were gone, Captain. Believe it or not, a Royal Navy Lieutenant came to deliver it."

"Indeed," said Owen, tearing open the envelope and reading the contents.

"I have to say, that officer couldn't have been any more curious. He made a point of taking in every detail once he got on deck. I'm certain he was struggling hard to stop himself from asking questions about us and *The Sea Trader*."

Owen smiled. "He is just curious as to why his Captain would have anything to do with a dull bunch like us. John, we will need coffee to clear our heads tomorrow morning, for we are invited to join the Captain on his ship."

