

# The Sugar Storm

Lyle Garford

## Dedication

This one is for Clive and Nancy

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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Published by:  
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ISBN 978-1-7772783-8-0

Cover photo by Drew McArthur/Shutterstock.com

Book Design by Lyle Garford  
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First Edition 2024  
Print Edition available on Amazon and other retailers.

## Prologue

Oranjestad, St. Eustatius

July 1775

The Governor wiped a bead of sweat from his brow as he stood contemplating the commanding view of the ocean from the massive, grand bastion of Fort Oranje. The Fort was well placed to defend the broad sweep of the main harbour of St. Eustatius. The large and busy array of docks and warehouses in the Lower Town area all enjoyed the safety it afforded, for its perch on the bluff above Lower Town Oranjestad was perfect for the task.

He had stepped outside to give himself a break from the increasingly endless paperwork which came with his position and to catch what little breeze might be available. He found no relief awaiting him, for the sea was so calm he couldn't see even the tiniest of ripples. A glance at the flag of The Netherlands flying from the peak of the Fort confirmed he was out of luck, for it showed no sign of wind either.

"Well, at least the damn mosquitos are never up here," said the Governor.

"Sir?" said his clerk, who had followed him outside.

"Nothing. It was nothing, Jan. I was talking to myself. You are dismissed for the day. My visitors will be here soon."

The Governor sighed and wiped away another small rivulet of sweat as his clerk nodded and walked back inside in silence. While the day was unseasonably warm, even for July in the Caribbean, the heat was not the only thing making the Governor sweaty and nervous.

No one was surprised when Johannes De Graaff was appointed Governor of St. Eustatius and its Caribbean neighbours, the Dutch islands of Saba and St. Maarten. Born on

St. Eustatius to one of the leading families on the island, educated in The Netherlands, and having served in the military made him an obvious, logical choice for the position. But his appointment came at an unquestionably challenging time for the entire Caribbean and St. Eustatius in particular.

Business on the island was brisk and profitable. Even better, it all seemed to be growing faster than anyone had thought possible. Everyone with any connection whatsoever to the business of trade on St. Eustatius was making ever greater profits to an astonishing degree. The Netherlands government was all too happy to see the flow of wealth coming their way from the island as a result. The symptom of it all was the pile of paperwork on his desk, which undeniably was bigger every day, despite his best efforts to keep it under control. Still, this was all to the good, except for one thing.

Governor De Graaff was certain the bill for the island's good fortune was about to come due and this was the real reason he was nervous.

The Governor's suspicions about it arose the second word came the two men on their way to see him had requested a meeting. On the surface no one would question why they were visiting the Governor, as like everyone else on St. Eustatius they too were businessmen. At least, they appeared that way on the surface. But the Governor well knew they were much more than this. And as the voice of his servant came from behind him to interrupt his thoughts, the wait to learn what the price would be was over.

"Sir? Your guests have arrived."

"Thank you. Open the bottle I showed you earlier and bring a glass for each of us."

The Governor steeled himself, wiping his brow one last time, and stepped inside to the large meeting room serving as his office to greet the two men now standing in front of his desk and awaiting his arrival. Both men appeared strong and fit, despite obvious signs revealing both shared a similar age, likely their late thirties. Their weathered, tanned faces were typical of ship captains working out of St. Eustatius, as were their serviceable, but high quality, durable clothes. The Governor pointed to his meeting table and they all took seats around it. The three men kept the conversation pleasant and general while the servant brought cooled wine for all of them. Once the servant left Governor De Graaff plastered a smile on his face and began the conversation.

"Well, gentlemen. I took the liberty of opening one of my best French white wines for you. Far too hot here to drink anything else. So, now we have some refreshment, what can I do for you today?"

The two visitors looked at each other and the man known to everyone as American nodded silently in the direction of the other, who the Governor knew was French. The Frenchman stirred, giving the Governor his own smile as he spoke.

"First of all, thank you for making the time to see us, Governor. You must be a busy man these days. It took us three days to get an appointment with you."

The Governor grimaced and waved at the pile of paperwork on his desk.

"I am sorry about that, gentlemen. Had I been aware it was you seeking an audience I would have made other arrangements. It is true, I have been rather swamped lately. And there appears to be no relief on the horizon from it all."

"Well, I think we'd all like to keep it that way, Governor," said the American. "Which is why we wanted to have a conversation with you today."

"Indeed," said the Frenchman. "We are all men of business, aren't we? And nothing makes a businessman happier than when business is good. But we all know there are plenty of things which can interfere with that, correct? Like, for example, politics."

The Governor grimaced in acknowledgement, but said nothing, sensing the conversation would go in the exact direction he feared it would.

"So, Governor," said the Frenchman, leaning forward after a sip of his wine. He paused a moment to look at the glass appreciatively and take an even larger taste of it.

"Very nice wine, thank you. Governor, what we came to talk with you about is the position of The Netherlands government these days. You know what I mean. It seems a bit unclear to us. The world is a complicated place and growing ever more so every day. Clarity would be helpful."

Governor De Graaff gave a non-committal shrug as he responded.

"Business, gentlemen. It is all about business for us, which I'm sure you know. We think the more freedom everyone has to trade with each other the better. We have no problem trading with anyone."

"Ah, but you do have problems, don't you? You know what I am talking about. The British are insisting on these incredibly restrictive trade policies and piling ridiculous taxation measures on top of them to make matters worse. And while your government and the Prince of Orange is supportive of the

British, the vast majority of your businessmen are not. So where do you stand on all of this, Governor?"

The Governor sighed. "Well, where I stand personally is very simple. I support both my government and our businessmen. We all know the Dutch Republic is a small nation living in difficult times. We survive because of trade. But my opinion is not relevant to this conversation. I suspect you are referring to The Patriots movement back home, of course. It is no secret they are agitating for reforms, while our Prince is indeed supportive of the British. The nation is divided severely on this matter. Gentlemen, I am not aware of any change in the situation and I don't think I am telling you anything you don't already know. It remains an open matter of debate and likely will for some time. Overall we do not support war. Facilitating trade and business to make things better for everyone is a far better policy."

The American looked aside at the French visitor for a moment before turning back to the Governor, with a wry looking cast to his face.

"Yes, yes, Governor. I think we are all in agreement with that thought. But the key issue here is British policy. We all know it is total nonsense. However, your small island has been very helpful to counter this. And let's face it. The help you have provided to us has filled your government coffers and that of your business owners lately far more than they had dreamed possible."

The Governor shrugged. "Indeed. As I said, we all know business has been good. We do appreciate being able to help."

"Excellent," said the American, leaning forward with a smile. "The thing is, we would like to keep it that way and maybe even grow it further. A lot. But we need more than just



your trade. As my friend here said, politics has a way of complicating things. Your island is well placed, Governor, but we need friends that are willing to help with the politics, too. We are in a real scrap with the damned British, Governor. For us, it is very important to know who our true friends are, you understand. And we need tangible help."

"I see. Yes, I understand, in general. You want something tangible, though? I will consider doing what I can, but what does this entail?"

This time both of the Governor's visitors smiled, while the Frenchman responded.

"Ah, well, we haven't decided that yet. We believe there may be a few ways you could be of great help, but we need more time to contemplate the situation. The purpose of today's conversation was simply to gauge whether you had interest in the concept."

The Governor licked his lips and downed a large portion of the wine in his glass to buy himself time. Wishing he could wipe away the sweat he knew was once again glistening on his brow, he replied as cautiously as he could, knowing he was on dangerous ground.

"Well, of course. I expect it will depend on what you seek of us. I may have to consult with my superiors back home, but that can be arranged."

The Frenchman frowned. "Come, Governor, you are here and they are not. You have the power to make decisions using your own good judgement, do you not? This is what is expected of people in your position."

The Governor sighed. "Yes. Very true. Well, all I can say is I will do what I can. I agree it is in the interest of The Netherlands to work together with you. Within reason. If I can

find a way to ensure whatever you need dovetails with our interests while not creating havoc with anything else, then I will make it happen."

"Governor, I am glad to hear that," said the American. "A new world order is coming, you understand? You know this, of course. The British are powerful, but the American people have had enough. The British are going to lose this war and we will remember who our friends are when the time comes."

"Well, this has been helpful," said the Frenchman. "Governor, we understand our request may make your life somewhat difficult. We would like to aid you in smoothing over any complications you may encounter. Please accept this as a small token of our appreciation. It's something—tangible, to help with difficulties that may arise."

As he finished speaking he pulled out a small bag and put it on the table in front of him. The unmistakable clink of heavy coins made it obvious what filled the bag. He leaned forward and slid it across the table to rest in front of the Governor. The Governor eyed the bag stony faced, while inwardly struggling with an unbidden thought in his mind that the bag in reality contained only poisonous vipers. The Frenchman smiled.

"Of course, if you run into further difficulties, there could be more gold to help out. You need but give us details of what your situation is and ask."

The Governor paused a long moment before finally reaching out to pull the bag closer and respond.

"Yes, I—you are right, there may well be unexpected problems. I will take this and keep it safe. I can always return it if no expenses arise."

"Well, if nothing else your time is worthwhile, Governor," said the American, unable to hide the smirk on his face. "You

can always consider this payment for the added demands on your time. It is up to you."

"Indeed," said the Frenchman. "By the way, we heard you lost your wife a few months back. Very sorry about that. Have you someone new in your life?"

"Ah, no, actually. Thank you for your kind thoughts, but I am sadly accustomed to being alone now."

"Well. Governor, you do not look like a monk to me. You are still young and full of life. Perhaps I can help. You may have noticed St. Eustatius has a growing population of desperate refugees. I have the means to send one your way if you are interested. Or perhaps a young black woman? Discreetly, of course. We have plenty of new arrivals to choose from. We all understand that men have needs."

The Governor groaned inwardly. Rumours of the skill and prowess of his visitors in conducting the business of their secret profession were true.

## Chapter One

### Barbados

November 1775

Captain Owen Spence let out a sigh of relief loud enough to be heard by the men around him on the quarterdeck of *The Sea Trader*. The lines from the ship to the dock in the Careenage area of Bridgetown were now at last secured and the ship was finally safe. No one looked surprised the Captain was happy to be back on the island of Barbados, for the rest of crew all felt the same way. Owen rubbed at the stubble on his face, wishing he could simply make his way aft to his quarters and collapse for

the rest denied to him for the last several days. But the needs of the ship and crew had to be met before anything else could happen.

At first everyone thought the storm looked like a minor squall coming their way on their return journey from Jamaica with a load of desperately needed foodstuffs for Barbados. Owen wasn't concerned, ordering a course change which should have taken them well away from it. But while in fact this was a squall and not a hurricane, the storm was by no means minor. What Owen could not have predicted was the intensity, speed, and unpredictability of it. The course change proved woefully insufficient to escape the squall's wrath. When the truth of their situation finally became obvious, Owen had turned to his first officer, John Tate, in disbelief.

"Good God! John, have you ever seen anything like this?"

John only shook his head, his face showing the same stunned astonishment mirrored on the visages of the rest of the crew. In desperation Owen had bellowed a stream of orders which turned *The Sea Trader* into something akin to a hive of angry hornets, as men rushed to haul in the sails. They were almost finished, attempting to leave only one small sail to steer with, when the squall hit the ship.

Despite Owen ensuring they met the storm head on, for a moment which seemed endless he feared his efforts were all in vain. The ship rocked from the initial hammer blow of the wind, throwing two members of the crew off their feet to slide down the deck out of control. An instant later the first of the storm's waves hit hard, making the ship shiver, while a blast of stinging rain lashed the exposed skin of the crew. In that wild moment the ship was rocked over far enough Owen himself lost his

balance and fell to his knees hard, before to his relief it righted itself once again.

And now, a week later, they had safely made it to Barbados, but only after struggling through the nerve-wracking remainder of the journey. When the storm finally released the ship from its grasp less than thirty minutes after it struck, everyone knew *The Sea Trader* and her people had taken a significant beating from the storm. Several of the men were sporting bruises, while one had broken an arm due to being slammed awkwardly into one of the ship's guns. The deck was a tangled mass of rigging and spars which had crashed down along with the canvas the men were unable to furl in time. Owen himself was still limping as the knee which bore the brunt of fall was still badly bruised and sore.

To add to the crew's misery, something had struck them hard midship with enough force to punch a small hole in their side at the height of the storm. Owen surmised a large piece of driftwood had hit them, which the storm had launched with force similar to that a cannon would provide at the exact right angle to do the damage. The hole was also low enough that water was coming in with every passing wave.

Owen and the crew struggled to temporarily patch over the hole and repair the damage on the deck as best they could. The problem was the sheer volume of repairs needed, combined with the fact Owen simply didn't have enough spare material on hand to deal with it all. Even worse, much of the cargo had shifted and smashed in the hold due to the violence of the storm. Several of the crew were forced to spend many hours clearing the mess and reorganizing it all back into a semblance of order. *The Sea Trader* was thus forced to limp along for the remainder of the journey, taking twice as long as it otherwise would have.

The fact the journey was now taking much longer normally wouldn't have concerned Owen. Once the basic repairs were made the issue was largely out of his hands, for he had done what he could and all they needed now was for the wind to take them home. The chances of encountering another storm were slim, but given the damage sustained the concern now was what else might happen which was keeping Owen awake at night.

Rumours had swirled for several months about the audacious Americans being tired of British dominance of the seas and making plans to do something about it. Owen's Uncle Alan Giles, owner of *The Sea Trader*, had confirmed before the ship left Barbados to make this trip that these were no longer rumours and that plans were well advanced, if not already brought to fruition.

Owen had no reason to question how he knew this, because his Uncle had quietly served as a spy for the Foreign Office for years before retiring from the sea. That his Uncle was also well connected to Sir James Standish, the resident Foreign Office spymaster in charge of the Caribbean helped. Although Owen knew American warships from what they apparently were calling The Continental Navy were unlikely to be this far south in The Caribbean so soon, anything was possible. The Americans would like nothing better than the easy capture of a disabled British merchant vessel with a full load of supplies.

Despite how weary and tired they all were, they had a couple of hours to offload at least some of their desperately needed cargo before the sun went down, so Owen rallied the men. A few of them groaned, but no one complained, for they all knew the situation. They were almost ready to finish work for the day when a cart pulled up on the dock beside the ship and two people stepped down from it. Owen saw them from the

corner of eye as they came aboard and made their way toward him, so he turned to greet them.

"Good God, Owen," said his Uncle Alan. "You look awful and you are limping. And the ship looks worse. What happened?"

"I agree, Uncle," said the young blonde girl standing beside him, a look of concern on her face. "Owen, you need some rest."

Owen gave them a rueful smile and reached out to take the girl's hand while sketching a brief bow to her.

"Yes, Elizabeth, I certainly do. I'm sure I look about as tired as I feel."

"Tired? You are positively haggard," said his Uncle. "I can't believe you are still on your feet."

Owen took a few minutes to brief his Uncle on the storm and its consequences. As he was finishing his first mate John came over to join them.

"Captain?" he said, unable to hide the weariness in his voice. "We've got a goodly portion offloaded, but the men are done. Permission to wind this down for today?"

"Granted. And tell them they can sleep in a little tomorrow. We can get most of the rest done tomorrow and they can have three days off. They all deserve it."

John gave Owen a tired smile and turned to go, before Uncle Alan stopped him.

"Owen? John? You both look terrible. As much as Sir James Standish and I need to talk to you both, rest is more important. See here, we will leave you to finish up and get some rest. But when you are ready, please send word. Matters are—developing elsewhere."

Owen sighed inwardly, but he knew it was simply a product of how weary he was. He nodded to John, who left to attend to the crew.

"We understand, Uncle Alan. If you could arrange for your shipwright to see me later today, I can at least discuss what needs to be done to *The Sea Trader* so we can set everything in motion to get the repairs done sooner than later. I know, you want me to rest, but I have enough energy left to do that at least."

"I know it is selfish of me, but I hope the repairs will take long enough you can find at least a little time for me," said Elizabeth. "Christmas is weeks away still."

Owen gave her a tired smile.

"I will do my best."

"I know," she said, and to Owen's surprise she stepped forward to give him a brief hug before turning away.

"Let's go, Uncle. The sooner we leave the sooner he can rest."

As Owen watched them walk off the ship he couldn't help being amazed at how his life had changed, and how the people in his life were doing the same. The girl was the niece of his Uncle, who had taken her under his wing when her parents passed away. For whatever reason she had set her sights on Owen at a very young age. Owen initially was amused and tolerated her infatuation, doing nothing to encourage her. But her determination to win him remained steadfast, despite Owen's frequent and long absences at sea. And each time he returned she was waiting there for him, seeming like a flower steadily growing to maturity. But having just turned fifteen she was still far too young to take seriously.



Even more mystifying to Owen was how during some periods of his life it seemed as if his circumstances changed at a snail's pace, while during others he seemed to be living in something akin to the storm he had sailed through. He put the sensation down to the long gaps forced upon him by his time at sea. But through it all, change was the constant.

The pace of the change had accelerated the last four years of his life. As he looked seaward around him at the numerous ships anchored out in Carlisle Bay, the sight of several British Royal Navy warships brought back a flood of memories. They could hardly do otherwise, for Owen's original career had been as a Lieutenant in the service. To be a Royal Navy officer was all he ever wanted in life, but in Barbados in the summer of 1772 enough misfortune came his way to bring his career to an end.

Captain John Smithe assumed command of the frigate which the then twenty-three-year-old Owen was serving on in early June of that year and by the end of July Owen's career was finished, for Captain Smithe was a sworn enemy of Owen's family. Falsely accused of theft, the outcome of Owen's court martial was a foregone conclusion. Left to fend for himself in Kingston, Jamaica, Owen had little choice but to take whatever work he could to survive.

Aided by a local Spanish woman who had also been his lover, Owen found work as a merchant Captain for a Jamaican slave plantation owner. Disgusted by the treatment of the slaves he was forced to use, Owen was ready to leap at any chance he could find to do something different. Fortune finally smiled on him when by chance he encountered Alan Giles in Kingston right before Christmas 1772.

Owen's Uncle was a merchant Captain conducting trade using several ships for many years all over the Caribbean. He too saw the meeting with the nephew he had not seen for several years as fortuitous, for he was growing older with no children and no obvious heir to his trading business. That they both shared a distaste for the horrors of slavery helped forge a bond between the two men. Owen soon found himself working for his Uncle, learning the business of trade. Although there were days when the learning curve seemed steep, Owen persisted and met with his Uncle's approval.

What Owen had not expected was the secret role his Uncle performed as a Foreign Office spy. His Uncle began assessing Owen's suitability for the work long before confessing what he had in mind for his nephew. The chance to honourably serve his country, albeit in a less obvious way, proved irresistible to Owen once the opportunity became clear to him.

The need for covert service was growing exponentially. The British colonies in America were growing ever more restive with each passing day. Owen found himself sailing far and wide throughout the Caribbean in the two years since he had assumed command of *The Sea Trader*. From the Spanish Main to Jamaica to the Leeward Islands and ultimately as far north as Boston in America became his trading routes while using Barbados as his home base.

Through it all the beat of rebel war drums grew louder and louder and the dispute finally burst into open conflict between the sides in pitched battles. The French provided covert support in the fray on the side of the American rebels to counter the dominance of the British, creating a struggle of epic proportions. The fighting created havoc with trade and, in particular, food supplies everywhere in the Caribbean.

Until the troubles started, America had served as the primary source of basic foodstuffs for the entire region. Most of the arable land on the Caribbean islands, regardless of which foreign power owned them, was dedicated to the production of the sugar crop. With the conflict disrupting the now limited supplies of salt fish and the production of crops like corn from America, people were going hungry everywhere. The worst hit were the slaves. Although every island was doing what it could to catch fish or grow crops locally, what they produced wasn't enough to feed the massive numbers of slaves which had been imported.

Plantation owners who had not already made vast fortunes and left to return to England were faced with a difficult choice. In order to pay their bills they needed the revenue from the sugar production, but starving slaves weren't going to produce anywhere near what they otherwise might. Putting more of their arable land to crops which could feed their slaves reduced their income. Even worse, much of the land was not suitable to the growth of such crops.

As a result, Owen's trading services had become ever more critical to the survival of people in Barbados, although his intelligence gathering activity grew in importance, too. His French and American counterparts were also busy. Owen and his men had come close earlier in the year to putting a stop to a plot to steal a huge amount of gunpowder from British stores on the island of Bermuda, but despite best efforts they were too late through no fault of their own. With the help of American sympathizers in Bermuda, that gunpowder was now being used to kill British soldiers and Owen was still quietly furious about it. Both he and his first mate John, who was also doing his part

as a Foreign Office spy, had sworn vows to do better if another such situation came their way.

Owen shook his head to get out of the grip of his memories, for he had work to be done. In particular, his Uncle's mention of Sir James Standish was forewarning yet more sub rosa work was likely coming Owen's way. Sir James was the senior Foreign Office representative in the Caribbean and the man both Owen and his Uncle reported to. A retired British Royal Navy Captain, Sir James had made the Caribbean his domain for anything and everything secret. His wealth of knowledge of both the Royal Navy, the most dominant British military force in the area, and of sub rosa diplomatic work made him invaluable.

But for him to be this way, he needed people like Owen and that need seemed to increase with every passing day. Owen knew an undercurrent of quiet desperation was everywhere, but he also knew he both needed and wanted to make a difference. Drawing on reserves of energy he didn't realize he had, Owen stepped forward to greet the master shipwright who was stepping aboard *The Sea Trader* and already peering about to apprise himself of what needed to be done.

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Five days later repair work on *The Sea Trader* had progressed to a point the end was in sight. Through it all Owen and his men had worked at a steady, but manageable pace, with enough of a break for them all to recover from their ordeal at sea. Owen was standing with John beside a tub filled with drinking water and after drinking their fill, Owen called the rest of the men over for opportunity to do the same. As the grateful men stopped what they were doing and shuffled over, Owen pulled one of them aside. The sailor was a huge black man, not tall, but thickly built and heavily muscled.

"Wilson?" said Owen, loud enough for the rest of the crew to hear what he was saying. "Mr. Tate and I are going to meet my Uncle. We will likely be gone the rest of the afternoon. I'm leaving you in charge. You know what needs to be done. Keep at it till the end of the day and then issue a tot of rum to each of them."

The black sailor appeared momentarily surprised, but recovered himself quickly.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You will be fine."

"Uh, yes, sir. I can do that."

Owen smiled and turned to the rest of the crew.

"Listen, you men. I trust you will obey Mr. Jones here as you would either myself or Mr. Tate. You all know how important it is for the people of Barbados that we get this ship set to rights and back to sea, so keep at it. And if that isn't reward enough, Mr. Jones will give you a double ration of rum when you are done today. If you behave, that is."

"Oh, they will behave, Captain," said Wilson Jones, rubbing his huge hands together and glaring about at the now grinning crew.

As Owen and John left the ship and began walking down the dock toward the centre of town John turned to Owen.

"Well, do you think they will actually do it?"

"Why not? If you were one of the crew would you even consider crossing Wilson Jones? He's bigger than any two of them combined. And Wilson isn't stupid, either. We need to give him more responsibility and bring him along. What if one of us isn't able to do our job for whatever reason? We've got to have a fallback."

John slowly nodded. "All good points and he certainly deserves it. I give him credit, he has quietly learned a lot in a relatively short time. I can teach him more, too. Only issue is how white people not part of the crew might deal with him."

"True. But that will be their problem. They don't like it, too bad. It will be interesting to see how Wilson deals with it if someone ever tries to give him a hard time."

John gave an unfeigned laugh as he obviously took a moment to picture such a scene in his mind, before lapsing into silence as they continued. Owen hadn't bothered to talk to John about what he was going to do, although their relationship had reached a point where on almost every matter of importance he did consult his First Mate. Owen had reached the conclusion long ago that Wilson could handle the racism which might come his way and Owen was certain John would agree. The silence greeting him proved he was correct, for they had come to know each other well in the three years they had sailed about the Caribbean together and Owen was well aware John always spoke his mind. John was an excellent First Mate, but had no real desire to serve as a Captain. His claim was he had no patience for fools, which wouldn't make him a good choice to serve as a leader.

John also had a bad attitude toward his former homeland. He had been born in America and his family were Loyalists, forced out by people they thought were friends when the troubles began. John had not forgotten the roughshod treatment his family endured and the anger still smouldered inside, despite the passage of several years since they relocated to Barbados. Despite this, he and Owen made an effective team. John wasn't afraid to dive into unpleasant situations when they were trawling

for information, while Owen had grown adept at dealing with people in positions of power.

Their destination today was The Boatyard Inn, a place to lodge and have meals with a fine terrace overlooking The Carenage area in the centre of Bridgetown. From the exterior it seemed a relatively nondescript establishment, but inside was another matter. A tall, fit looking black concierge waited right inside the entrance. Although casually dressed, his clothes had a subtle look of quality about them. Owen was also certain an array of weapons would be found at hand under the desk the man was sitting at. Rough, ordinary sailors weren't welcome upstairs, but Owen and John were both well known. The concierge flashed them a brief smile before turning back to the newspaper he was reading.

Owen's Uncle Alan and Sir James Standish were already waiting for them upstairs. They rose from the shady table where they were seated, well away from other diners, which Owen knew would be deliberate. The four men all knew each other well and after brief greetings they took their seats. Sir James waved over a server, who soon had drinks for everyone. After he left the conversation shifted from general discussion about the horrendous storm they had sailed through to the business at hand.

"Well, gentlemen, I know we have asked much of you the last two years, but I'm afraid I see no end in sight. And we have more to ask today."

"We understand, Sir James," said Owen. "Uncle Alan here hinted at events developing elsewhere when I last spoke to him. What is happening, sir?"

Sir James ran a hand through his rapidly greying hair as he forced a grim smile. Owen thought it his imagination, but the

sPYmaster seemed a little careworn, more so than the last time they had met. Although Sir James was now approaching his fiftieth year, he had always seemed capable of dealing with anything. Owen filed the concern away in the back of his mind to consider later.

"There is plenty happening out there, Owen. More than we would all like and not all of it good. In any case, what I am interested in today is St. Eustatius. Are either of you familiar with the island?"

Both Owen and John turned to look at each other. Owen quickly saw John was wearing the same look of mild surprise and puzzlement on his face which Owen knew was on his own. Owen shook his head in response to Sir James before speaking.

"Yes, that's one of the small Dutch islands. I'm not sure about John, but I am not familiar with it, at least in the sense I suspect you mean. We have sailed past it, of course."

"As I thought. No surprise, really. A small island, with little apparent worth to anyone. Until now."

"Really?" said John. "Well, in truth, I actually was there briefly—hmm, maybe ten years ago. I was surprised people were making a living there because it was a bit of a sleepy little place. I think there were a number of the usual small plantations. Not many people on the island, except for the slaves, of course. It seemed to me the main business they conducted was as a transit point for the sale of as many slaves as possible to whoever wanted to buy them."

"Neither of us have ever been there," said Uncle Alan, with a nod at Sir James. "But what you say would tally with our understanding of the place. Until now."

"Indeed," said Sir James, after sipping briefly at his drink. "We have been hearing rumours that the island is no longer



sleepy. Instead, it has become a very busy place this past year and in particular the last six months or so. And not just for the business of buying or selling slaves. We have heard enough to know there has to be basis for the rumours and what we need you to do is find out what exactly is going on there. I'm sure you have figured out by now we are talking about weapons and supplies to the rebels in America."

"So the Dutch are openly selling arms to the rebels, Sir James?" said Owen. "Isn't dealing with that a job for the Royal Navy?"

"They are beginning to pay attention, certainly, and it may yet come to a direct intervention some day in future, but it is a bit more complicated than that. Officially we are friends with the Dutch and, in particular, with the Prince of Orange. He is related to our Sovereign. However, there is a large party of rebel sympathizers within The Netherlands known as The Patriots. We have known for some time that these people, many of whom are Dutch businessmen, have been supporting the Americans in any way they could. The rumour is the relatively limited trickle of weapons and powder they have been supplying them with has turned to a flood. And we fear St. Eustatius has become the focal point of it all."

"So the Dutch are trying to have it both ways?"

Sir James shrugged. "The business of trade has been a way of life in the Netherlands for centuries. As a relatively small country they have little choice to be otherwise. But to answer your question, I'm not sure it is deliberate policy on the part of their government. This simply reflects the fact they are as divided a nation as the rest of us. We live in difficult times."

"But while this all goes on the weapons keep coming and they keep making piles of money, I expect."

"It's an open question as to just how motivated they would really be if piles of money weren't involved, but it matters not. The point is it is happening. So, your next mission is to St. Eustatius. We need you to validate just how real these rumours are. We hear it isn't just weapons on sale, though. The word is food from America is available for purchase, too. If so, get whatever you can with the funds your Uncle will provide. You both know the situation. With the measures we have taken to control supplies we are holding our own, but it is still rather precarious. The problem is the sugar economy of all of the Caribbean islands and the lives of thousands of people are in jeopardy if the storm of war in America cuts off supplies of food long term. What is more, if starvation becomes widespread, badly needed revenue will dry up. People at home in England are at risk, too."

"I will be in touch with you to provide the funds and a detailed list of specific items to focus on if they are available," said Uncle Alan. "Owen, we can't emphasize enough how important this mission is. We need supplies, badly. And the war isn't going well. If a flood of weapons really is moving through this port we need to know, so something can be done about it."

Sir James nodded agreement and frowned as he added one last bit of information.

"I know this isn't much to go on and I wish I could offer you better intelligence about the place than this. There is one contact I can provide for you, although exactly how useful he could be is open to question. The Foreign Office maintains a diplomatic presence there in the form of a local lawyer who is paid to represent us should the need arise. The man's name is Willem Marten. Until now, I'm told he has done very little to justify his pay. I suppose you could say that isn't his fault since

we've had so little interest in the place, but my contacts seem to have a rather low opinion of the man, nonetheless. The few times they have needed him it seems the effort he put into meeting our needs has been limited. In any case, he could be a starting point for information. This is his address. Any questions for us?"

Owen reached out to take the slip of paper Sir James passed across the table. He studied it briefly before downing the remainder of his drink. He turned and raised an eyebrow at John, who simply shook his head in response.

"No questions, Sir James. I think the sooner we are off the better. We know how great the need is. We will try to depart the day after tomorrow."

"Excellent. Owen, I don't want to burden you too much with my fears, but my intuition tells me this could be a very important mission. I suspect the Americans and their French friends are already deeply involved here. I fear the day is coming when the French will step into this conflict directly and it may well be St. Eustatius will be the nexus of it all. If they do enter the war, what's at stake may be our entire future both here and elsewhere. The more we know about when they will strike and where it will be is absolutely critical. Knowledge will help to find a way to stop them if we can."

Owen and John both looked at each other in grim silence, before Owen turned back to Sir James and nodded solemnly.

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Two days later Uncle Alan and Elizabeth pulled up in their cart on the dock beside the ship. Owen was moments away from ordering the crew to pull up the boarding plank and cast off the lines, but on seeing them he strode off the ship to greet them.

"Thank heaven we caught you, Owen. I have one other side mission for you. I just received word from an old friend in Dominica that he is willing to help a little with our dire need for food. He is the owner of a small plantation. I am hoping you could stop in on your way back from St. Eustatius to see him and find out what he has to offer."

"Certainly, Uncle Alan. Where do I find him?"

"He is a little out of the way. His plantation is just south of Rosalie on the eastern coast of the island."

"The east coast?" said Owen, raising an eyebrow in question. "That would be the windward side of the island."

"Indeed. He assures me there is safe harbour to be found in a few spots. A ship can anchor safely off the coast in Rosalie Bay, although it can be a bit rough sometimes. The type of food he could offer may be somewhat eclectic, but we will take whatever we can get. He also has several friends in the area who also have small plantations. I suspect because he is so remote this could also be his way of drumming up some extra business for himself. Whatever, I am not particular about how we get what we need or what people's motivations may be at this point. Combined together they may be able to make a stop there worth your while."

As he finished speaking Owen's uncle held out an envelope for Owen to take.

"This is a letter for him from me. His name is on the envelope."

"Interesting. All right, Uncle Alan. We will do our best. By leaving now I hope we can be back here in time for Christmas. I'm not sure how long we will be in St. Eustatius, but I think we have enough room to manoeuvre even with stopping in

Dominica that it will be fine. The men need the break to be home with their families."

"I couldn't agree more," said Elizabeth, with some heat to her voice, before blushing at the sudden scrutiny of the two older men.

Owen and his Uncle turned to each other and laughed, before relenting on seeing how mortified Elizabeth was.

"Elizabeth," said Owen, with a rueful smile. "I will do everything I can to be back with the men."

"I know you will. I look forward to Christmas. I love it as a holiday. I understand, we are living in hard times, but Uncle is right that everyone needs a break and everyone needs time to spend with family."

The two men said nothing as they looked at each other once again, both remaining silent on finally turning back to stare at Elizabeth in response. She began to blush yet again, putting her hands on her hips in frustration.

"What?" she said. "Have I said something silly?"

This time they both laughed and her Uncle Alan responded.

"No, you have not, my love. You are right, and we are perhaps teasing you when we shouldn't."

"I agree," said Owen. "Elizabeth, we will do our best."