

Excerpt of Captain of Her Heart

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CHAPTER ONE

The Descendants

Plymouth, England

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It was a well-known fact that men loved a good chase.

Whether the thrill of victory, or the possibility of defeat, lured them, the male species could always be counted on to rise to the occasion when properly baited. As far as Lady Alexandra Seymour, Alex to her friends and family, was concerned, the same could be said of the fairer sex.

Because she pursued her man.

A fortnight had passed since she had last seen her connubial conquest, Captain Jason Collingwood, and his unmistakable indifference had left her reeling. Despite hopes to the contrary, he had not attended the family holiday gathering, although she had posted a personal invitation, and had neglected to send her a present, after she had dispatched a sumptuous new coat of Bath superfine, custom-made for the captain of her heart—she would take that up with him when next they met. As the hastily hired traveling coach rocked along the road and entered Plymouth proper, she sank into the squabs and gazed out the window.

By all accounts, Jason should have tracked her, but the damn fool refused to adhere to her expectations, which she thought quite reasonable and sound. Regardless of her good intentions, gift, and profuse expressions of remorse, she surmised he remained angry, in relation to a trivial matter of no consequence, which had occurred during the previous Little Season.

But I am for Plymouth. And you may go to the devil.

All right, perhaps the situation signified more than she had realized. She cautioned herself that the words her captain had chosen to bid her farewell on the docks at Deptford were born of injured pride, nothing more. Was it not past due for him to move beyond her minor error in judgment?

“Ho-hum.” With a sigh, she shook her head and frowned.

Last fall, she had enlisted Jason’s aid in a scheme of the heart. Cara Douglas, one of Alex’s oldest and dearest chums, had longed to capture the attention of Lance Prescott, another of Alex’s lifelong friends. Consistent with most men in similar circumstances, Lance had resisted Cara’s romantic endeavors, so Alex had recruited Jason to enact a mock-courtship, in an attempt to incite Lance and inspire him to admit his love.

But Alex had omitted a few key details when she secured Jason’s cooperation, such as the true identity of the suitor, in question, and the fact that Cara had rejected Lance’s initial offer of marriage. In Alex’s defense, there had been no nefarious motives involved, other than to bring a mulish male to his senses, as she honored Cara’s request for discretion. And although Cara had deviated from their original plan, in the end, love found a way, and Lance and Cara had married in December.

Now Alex could only pray her quest to help two friends to the altar had not cost her the captain of her heart. With a violent shudder, she recalled the first time she had set eyes on the handsome naval man. In the middle of a crowded ballroom at Richmond House, she had been summoned by Lady Rebecca Wentworth, as was.

“Lady Alexandra Seymour, may I present Captain Jason Collingwood of the Royal Navy.”

Standing over six feet, with guinea-gold hair and impossibly blue eyes, the man epitomized the blonde Adonis of her dreams. Festooned with braided epaulets, which marked his rank, only the exceedingly handsome male specimen surpassed the impressive regimentals. And an unfamiliar quiver blossomed in the pit of her belly, as the world pitched and rolled beneath her feet, when they locked gazes.

“My heavens, you are a captain?” Alex noted the gooseflesh shivering over her arms and extended her gloved hand. “And what ship do you command?”

“The Intrepid, and call me Jason, if I may be so bold.” He bowed with a flourish, which drew several audible sighs from nearby young ladies, before squeezing her fingers and brushing a chaste kiss to her covered knuckles. “I am honored to make your acquaintance, Lady Seymour. May I say that never have I seen anything so lovely as you in your red gown? Please know that both I and my vessel are at your service.”

Scandalous.

Alex inhaled a sharp breath, as pulse points ignited, and she feared she might swoon.

She should have been offended.

She should have been outraged.

Instead, she found him...intriguing, a point in fact of which she suspected he was well aware, given Jason surveyed her from top to toe, as if he knew how she looked in her chemise. Slowly, very slowly, he smiled a wicked smile—matched by hers, no doubt.

“Shall we dance?”

How Alex lamented the bittersweet memory, because what had followed his elementary request had been a full-scale assault on her faculties. When Jason had slipped his arm about her waist, and he held her close, Alex had been giddy with unfamiliar but enticing excitement. Imaginary bells had sounded a carillon in her ears, delicious fire had simmered beneath her skin, and she had trembled with each successive turn about the room. To her embarrassment, she had tripped more than once, as no man had ever affected her thus.

In that moment, Alex set her cap for Jason Collingwood.

“My dear Captain, we could have such a wonderful life, if only you would do your part,” she said to no one. “Must I do everything to further our relationship?”

The situation, as it stood, remained intolerable, as she had to make Jason understand they were destined for each other. And while his foul disposition, directed at her, of late, might prove useful when commanding his crew, he sometimes gave her a headache. So nagging uncertainty rested on her shoulders, as the weight of the world.

“I must be strong.” In that instant, she studied her quivering fingers and emitted a plaintive cry. “Oh, Jason. I would fight Napoleon, himself, to win your love.”

Determined to stay her course, Alex gave her attention to the snow-dusted landscape of the bustling seaport. Located in the county of Devon, and facing the western end of the Channel, Plymouth hosted a prominent naval base from which many expeditions launched against France, which seemed an appropriate place for her to wage a war of hearts.

And it was just around the corner, at Devonport, the main dockyard and shipbuilding facility of the British Navy, where Jason’s ship, the *Intrepid*, berthed for refitting and duty under letters of marque from the Lord High Admiral. The new commission completed the well-played ruse as Jason embarked on his first solo mission for the Brethren of the Coast, a mysterious band of mariners who served the Crown in secret.

It was Jason’s recent accomplishment that entrenched her belief that the hesitant captain was fated to be hers, because as a young girl Alex had often fantasized she was the wife of a knight from the famed order descended of the Templars, the warriors of the Crusades. Her father, God rest him, had once been counted among their esteemed ranks, but unlike Cara, Alex could never fathom marrying a member of the much-fabled nautionniers, because she considered them brothers. As a newcomer initiated into the order, Jason manifested the answer to her prayers.

If only he shared her perspective.

The coach came to an abrupt halt, which sent her tumbling to the floor, and she realized she had arrived at her destination. Before her breach in feminine deportment was discovered, she regained the bench and smoothed her skirts, just as the footman

opened the door.

As Alex stepped to the unpaved drive, she scrutinized the little thatched cottage, which nestled amid a copse of formidable oaks. A pebbled walkway led to the entry, which had been painted a vivid green and contrasted with whitewashed walls. At either side of the entrance loomed the thorny skeletons of rosebushes, which stood dormant in winter, and bare flowerbeds.

“Where should we leave your trunk, Miss Seymour?” The coachman addressed her informally, as she had not apprised him of her true identity.

“A moment, please, and I shall inquire.” Without fear or hesitation, Alex marched straight up the path, grabbed the knocker, and pounded hard on the door. And then nagging doubt nipped her heels.

Painful seconds ticked past, as she considered the tenor of her welcome. Would Jason express unbridled elation or toss her on her backside? Biting her lip, she spared a quick glance at her escort, just as the latch turned with a mighty creak, and the oak panel opened to reveal a very attractive young woman.

Even as Alex sank into a dark vortex of shock and misery, she splayed her arms for balance. “I am sorry to disturb you, but I must have the wrong address.”

“It is no trouble, ma’am.” Dressed in a worn gown of faded print muslin, with a disheveled braid draped over her shoulder, the fair-haired beauty blinked. “Are you looking for Captain Collingwood?”

“Yes.” As the world seemed to spin beyond her control, Alex thought she might revisit her breakfast. “Is this not his lodging?”

“Oh, the captain resides here, but he is at the yard.” The girl wiped her hands on a threadbare apron and nodded once. “I am Molly, the cook-maid. And how may I help you?”

“I am Miss Seymour—the captain’s sister.” The charwoman presented a snag Alex had not foreseen, and she had to think on her feet. “Has Jason not spoken of my visit?”

“Cap’n never mentioned a sister, ma’am. But then we do not converse much.” Molly sketched a half-curtsey. “So pleased to meet you.”

“I am certain my brother has more pressing matters, including the refitting of the *Intrepid*, or some such.” With renewed confidence, Alex waved to the footman, who hauled her trunk toward the cottage. “Daresay it slipped his mind.”

“Indeed, ma’am. I rarely see Cap’n Collingwood, as he is usually gone when I arrive, and I leave his dinner on the range before he returns. Not much time for talk.” And then Molly retreated. “Will you come inside?”

Tugging at her kidskin gloves, Alex crossed the threshold and surveyed the meager surroundings. “Why, it is charming.”

The main room was huge, with a high ceiling and exposed roof supports. The spartan furnishings consisted of an unmatched overstuffed chair and sofa, which were

clean but frayed about the edges. Twin side tables perched at either side of the sofa, the well-worn wood floor had nary a speck of dust or dirt, and two tattered wool rugs distinguished the living area from the kitchen.

A delightful hearth occupied the middle of the sidewall, with an old black stove situated to the left. A large washbasin inhabited one corner, and a square table and chairs for two hugged a window, which overlooked the drive.

“Where shall I deposit your trunk, Miss Seymour?” The footman paused in the entryway.

“My bedchamber will be fine.” Alex gazed at the charwoman. “Can you show me to my quarters, Molly?”

“I beg your pardon?” The young woman stammered, as she shuffled her feet. “Your quarters, ma’am?”

“Yes.” Alex clasped her hands, as her plan progressed to perfection. “Where do I sleep? And I should like to change from my traveling dress.”

“Perhaps your brother forgot to inform you this cottage has only one bedchamber.” The maid shifted her weight. “Do you suppose Cap’n intended for you to take a room at the inn?”

Alex had not anticipated that none too minor hiccup. In truth, she had not known what to expect of Jason’s rented accommodations, but she had envisioned the usual palatial dwelling—a grand house, with chambers aplenty and a dependable staff. While the miniscule abode possessed unvarnished appeal, it was rather rustic for her taste, and it was a vast deal less than she required.

Facing the concerted and perplexing stares of Molly and the footman, Alex sought a suitable rejoinder, as she had to rid herself of the meddlesome interlopers before Jason returned and found her waiting, because she was not half so assured of her welcome.

“My brother is quite the gentleman, so I am positive he would want me to have privacy, and Jason will sleep on the sofa.” Even as she uttered the pathetic claim, because it was obvious the piece of furniture could never support Jason’s outstretched frame, Alex braced for a lightning strike.

“If you say so, ma’am.” Casting a doubtful glance at the object in question, Molly walked to a rear door. “This way, please.”

A decent-sized bed laden with timeworn quilts and down pillows held pride of place in the adjoining suite, if she could call it that. A single night table sat just to the left, with a small wash area to the right. Yes, her captain was a fastidious sort. Beyond an arched doorway posited a dressing room, including a chest and an armoire.

With a smile, Alex entered the closet and claimed a coat from a wall peg. Fingering a mother-of-pearl button, she summoned heartwarming images from the past, when Jason had draped the frock over her shoulders, after she had been caught in the rain with Cara. With the wool pressed to her cheek, she closed her eyes and inhaled his signature sandalwood scent.

“Shall I unpack your trunk, Miss Seymour?” the charwoman asked in a small

voice.

“Please, do so.” Alex returned the garment to the peg and then peered from side to side. “Tell me, Molly, if there is only one bedchamber, where does the valet sleep?”

“The valet, ma’am?” Molly blinked.

“Indeed.” Alex noted the tattered rug at the footboard and decided it would have to be replaced. “You know, Jason’s manservant? Does he reside elsewhere?”

“I am sorry, Miss Seymour, but Cap’n has no valet.” Molly propped open the lid on the trunk. “I believe he tends himself.”

“Oh?” A chill of unease danced a merry jig down her spine. “So you are the sole servant Jason employs?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Molly bent to set a pair of slippers on the floor. “Cap’n hired me to clean the cottage, wash his clothes, and prepare his evening meal. To my knowledge, he takes care of everything else.”

Now that manifested another kink in her grand scheme. Given her hasty flight from London, and the deception upon which her plan relied, Alex had departed sans lady’s maid. Perhaps Jason could tie and untie her laces, as that might aid her campaign to win his heart.

So as Molly smoothed the wrinkles from various gowns, Alex escorted the footman to the door and bade him farewell, with instructions to return at her written summons. And then she waved to the driver, as the coach lurched forward and eventually disappeared in a cloud of dust.

As she reassessed her bucolic accommodations, for which she had been entirely unprepared, Alex supposed she could cry. Yet she recalled her married Brethren sisters had confronted similar, if not worse, circumstances when they wagered everything for love.

In an attempt to evade the parson’s noose, Caroline had stowed away aboard Dalton’s ship, whereupon Trevor mistook her for a courtesan and kidnapped her. Sabrina had spent a summer transforming herself into a true English lady to win Everett. And only last year, Cara had thrown caution to the wind and seduced Lance. At long last, Alex understood their motivation, carefully inscribed in the Brethren oath.

For love and comradeship we live.

In the end, each lady had married the man of her dreams, only after they had breached the limits of polite society, and Alex resolved to follow in their successful paths. So for her, there was no going back. For good or ill, she had crossed her Rubicon.