

Ransome's Quest

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RANSOME'S QUEST

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Tierra Dulce Plantation
St. Catherine's Parish, Jamaica
September 1814

No moon. Wispy clouds hid most of the stars. He could not have asked for a more perfect night. Before him, the house glowed like a lantern atop the hill. Behind him, his men waited for his command.

Julia Witherington was back in Jamaica. Finally. The pirate paused a moment, trying to count the years—the ages, the epochs—he had been on the quest to strike back at Admiral Sir Edward Witherington.

Julia was married, and she had brought her husband here with her. The inimitable Commodore William Ransome. The admiral's favorite; the man he'd taken publicly in hand as a son long before Ransome married the admiral's daughter. The one man in the world the pirate hated almost as much as the admiral.

He smiled. The commodore would ensure word reached Sir Edward of his daughter's abduction.

Movement caught his attention and honed his focus on the house. He turned, maintaining his crouched position. "Remember, men, no killing—especially the navy officer. The woman is mine. No one is to harm her. Is that understood?"

"Aye, Cap'n," his men whispered back.

The pirate turned to face the house again. It seemed he had awaited this moment his entire life. The rules of engagement were about to change.



“There is one thing you are forgetting.”

Ned Cochrane pressed himself farther into the shadows at the man’s voice. He didn’t mean to eavesdrop. He meant only to protect the reputation—and person—of Charlotte Ransome.

“What is that?” Charlotte’s voice fluttered toward him on the breeze.

“This.”

At her slight whimper of protest, Ned stepped forward. Henry Winchester, steward of the *Tierra Dulce* sugar plantation, held Charlotte by the shoulders, his mouth crushed against hers. She was unsuccessfully pushing against the man’s chest.

But before Ned could make his presence known, Charlotte stopped struggling. Winchester’s grasp loosened. Charlotte brought her heel down on Winchester’s foot and then sent her fist into his midsection.

Winchester groaned and staggered back, arms around his stomach, hopping on one foot. “What was that for?”

Charlotte swiped the back of her hand across her mouth. “For taking liberties that are not yours to take.”

Ned took that as his cue to step into the situation. He fought to keep his expression stern and his tone serious, wanting to smile over Charlotte’s ability to handle herself in any situation. “Is everything all right here?”

The dim light coming down the wide porch that circumnavigated the large house illuminated Charlotte’s face. She smiled broadly at him. “Aye—yes, Captain Cochrane. Mr. Winchester and I were clearing up a little misunderstanding.” She stepped toward Henry Winchester. “I am going to take you up on your promise to release me from our engagement, Mr. Winchester. I have had a change of heart.” She glanced over her shoulder at Ned. “In fact, I love someone else and wish to marry him.”

Ned’s heart swelled in his chest, filling his throat and pounding into his head. Charlotte loved him. She wanted to marry him. It was all he could do not to break into the jig the sailing master aboard *Audacious* demonstrated every evening during the crew’s free time.

Winchester stopped groaning and hopping. His expression hardened

as he looked first at Ned and then back at Charlotte. "We shall see about that. You agreed to marry me, Miss Ransome, which means your legacy is mine for the claiming."

Charlotte rubbed her lips together and then cocked her head. "You are more than welcome to take your case to my brother. It is he who controls my dowry, and it is he who never had knowledge of nor gave permission for our ill-advised engagement. I am certain he will be happy to come to terms with you. But, pray, do not plague me with your attentions any longer. I know you do not love me and want only my money. Therefore, we have nothing further to say to each other."

Henry gave them one more malevolent look and then stalked off into the darkness.

"Now I understand." Ned leaned against the porch railing and crossed his arms. As she was the one backlit, Ned could not make out her expression. He tried to keep his own face neutral, inscrutable—the way her brother, his commanding officer, did so well. He was almost certain he failed at it.

"Understand what?" Charlotte moved closer, tension radiating from the set of her shoulders and her twisting hands.

"How you made an enemy of Midshipman Kent and lived to tell the tale." He shook his head and stood, wanting to both shake her and embrace her. "Have you *no* common sense? Do you not know better than to taunt a hungry shark?"

She settled her hands on her hips. "It is the shark who should not taunt *me*. Have I not proven I am capable of surviving anything that comes my way? Have I not shown that I can do what a man can do as well as a man can do it? Have I not demonstrated—"

Unable to resist her any longer, he kissed her, reveling in the softness of her lips. She grabbed the lapels of his coat and swayed as if about to swoon. He supported her weight with one arm around the small of her back. With the other, he pulled off her mobcap and caressed the back of her head.

He ended the kiss and held Charlotte close, his fingers stroking her short, silky hair. "Aye, you have proven all those things."

"I was a good midshipman, was I not?"

After everything she'd been through, he could not believe she doubted her adequacy as a midshipman. "Yes. One of the best I have had the pleasure to serve with. But it makes me worry."

She pushed against his chest to look into his eyes. "Worry?"

Fear—not worry—nearly clogged his throat. But had she not said...? "Aye. Will you be content to give up your prospects for further promotion in the navy to become merely the wife of an officer?"

Charlotte swallowed before answering. "Aye, sir. It would make me most content to be the wife of Captain Ned Cochrane."

He kissed her again, joy making his legs weak and nearly capsizing both of them. "You have made me the happiest of men." He once again tucked her into his embrace, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

She stiffened. "What was that? Did you hear—"

He shushed her. Then the hairs at the back of his neck tingled. He released her, wishing he'd thought to bring his pistol with him when he had followed Charlotte and Winchester out here.

The noise came again. Not quite a rustling, not quite a scratching. More like the shuffling-scraping sound made by sailors' bare feet on a ship's deck.

"Stay behind me," Ned whispered, pulling Charlotte behind his back. "We'd best go inside."

"I concur, wholeheartedly." Her hands settled on his waist.

Without turning, he walked backward toward the warm glow of light from the open windows and doors at the other end of the too-long porch. Why hadn't he taken Charlotte inside immediately after Winchester's departure?

A thud behind them. Charlotte gasped and her hands dropped away from his waist.

Ned turned—and the side of his head exploded with a searing, bright white pain before contracting into darkness. More pain shot through his legs as his knees hit the porch decking.

Rustling noises...sounds of a struggle? Ned tried to stay upright, but he needed to lie down—no, he needed to help Charlotte. Where was she?

He rubbed his eyes against the darkness. His left hand came away wet, sticky. The side of his head throbbed.

“Ned!”

Panic drove him to his feet. “Ch—”

Fresh pain at the back of his head. Stars bloomed before his eyes and he fell forward, knees, chest, and chin hitting the floor. He rolled to his back.

A dark figure crouched over him. “Tell Admiral Sir Edward Witherington it is time for him to pay for the sins of his past. Until he does, the woman’s survival depends on the mercy of a pirate.”

Ned reached for the man’s throat, desperate for any means to stop him, but the pirate shoved his hands aside. Ned tried to pull himself up, but darkness swirled around him, drowning him. He fell back to the porch.

When he opened his eyes, all was silent. No movement, no rustle, no harsh breathing.

His head ached and spun. Something warm trickled down his cheek.

He pushed himself into a kneeling position. Taking hold of the porch railing, he hoisted himself up, no better than a hulled ship bobbing in a stormy sea. After a few wobbly steps, he found his sea legs.

“Charlotte?” He could muster only a whisper. No response came.

Finding the nearest open door, he staggered into the house, not knowing whose bedroom he entered. In the hallway, he turned around three times before taking a deep breath and getting his bearings. There, two doors down.

He barreled into his bedroom and ran right into the bench at the end of the bed. On it was his small traveling bag, as yet unpacked. He rummaged in it and finally wrapped his hand around the smooth butt of his pistol.

The door scraped farther open, and light flooded the room. Ned leveled the pistol at it.

“Sir, it’s me! Jeremiah.” The dark-skinned man held the lantern high, near his face. “I heard a commotion—”

“Come, I need your help.” Ned snatched the candle-filled lantern

from the plantation's overseer and hurried from the house. At the back he carefully descended the steps to the wide expanse of grassy lawn.

No moon. Almost complete blackness. He crossed the lawn toward the cane fields that surrounded the house. He'd seen a cut-through somewhere in this direction which appeared to lead to the inlet far below the hilltop-set house.

Rustling. Footsteps.

Ned stopped, raising the pistol. "Who goes there?"

"Commodore William Ransome. Identify yourself."

"Captain Ned Cochrane." He nearly collapsed with relief—and dread. He stopped and leaned over, his head pounding.

Jeremiah took the lantern from him.

"Jeremiah? What—?" Julia Ransome appeared from behind her husband's back.

Ned straightened. He had to tell the commodore and his wife about Charlotte.

Mrs. Ransome gasped and rushed forward, pressing a handkerchief to Ned's left temple. "What happened?"

Wincing at the pressure she put on the injury, he took the cloth from her and wiped the worst of the blood from his face.

"Pirates." He spat the word. "They attacked me from behind. The blow disoriented me. By the time I could see straight, they were gone."

Ned locked eyes with William. "They took Charlotte."



Chapter One

It is too dangerous.”

William Ransome snapped his cutlass into its scabbard and turned to face his wife. “The longer I delay, the farther away they take Charlotte.”

Dread froze his lungs, his stomach, his heart. Charlotte. His sister. Taken. “If anything happens to her...”

Julia wrapped her arms around her abdomen and leaned against one of the heavy posts at the end of the bed. “Why the message to my father? What has he to do with Charlotte?”

William double-checked the load of his pistol and tucked it under his belt. “Your father has publicly vowed—more than once—to rid the Caribbean of pirates and privateers for good. Charlotte was likely a target of opportunity, not purpose.”

“But if the man’s argument is with my father, it should have been me taken, not Charlotte.”

William could not disagree with her. Nor could he agree, as the very idea of Julia’s being taken by pirates nearly ripped his heart from his chest. “I should have put her on that ship in Barbados returning to England. If I had followed my conscience”—instead of listening to Julia’s and Charlotte’s emotional arguments—“she would have been well out of harm’s way by now.”

They both startled at a knock on the door.

“Come.”

The door opened at his command, revealing Jeremiah. “The horses are ready, Commodore.”

“Very good.” William took up his case and hat and moved toward the door.

Julia stepped in front of him, expression imploring. “Please, William, wait until dawn. The roads are treacherous enough in the full light of day. At night...and you do not know where you are going. What good will it do Charlotte if you become lost or...or something else happens to you or the horse? Or what if the pirates have laid a trap and done this to lure you from the safety of the house?”

A mirthless laugh expanded in his throat, but he stifled it. Safety of the house? Was the house safe when the brigands had snatched Charlotte from the porch almost directly outside this very room?

“I am sending Asher with him, Miss Julia,” Jeremiah said. “He knows the roads ’twixt here and Kingston better than anyone I know.”

William tore his gaze away from Julia’s anxious face. “Jeremiah, I am depending on you to protect Mrs. Ransome and ensure no harm comes to her while I am away.”

“I will protect her with my life, sir.”

He stepped around Julia and handed his bag and hat to Jeremiah. “Thank you. I shall join you in a moment.”

As he hoped, Jeremiah understood the dismissal. He gave a slight bow and left the room, closing the door behind him.

William took Julia by the shoulders and directed her to the chaise positioned at the end of their bed. He had to apply more pressure than he liked to make her sit. “You are to stay at Tierra Dulce. You will keep an escort with you at all times. I want armed guards posted near the house.”

She nodded, never blinking or breaking eye contact. “Yes, William.”

“If you hear any word from Charlotte or receive”—his voice caught in his throat—“a ransom demand from the pirate, you will send a messenger to Fort Charles. They will get word to me.”

“Yes, William.”

Heart tearing asunder at the necessity of leaving Julia behind, he bent over and pressed his forehead to hers. “Pray for Charlotte.”

Julia’s hands slid around behind his neck, her fingers twining in

his hair. She angled her head and kissed him. "I promise. I will pray for you also, my love."

He kissed her again and then tore himself away from her embrace. "I must go. I promise I will return—and I *will* bring Charlotte with me."

Determined to not look back, he made for the door. He opened it and then hesitated. Without turning around, he said the words he needed to say, just in case they were the last he ever said to his wife. "I love you."

"I love you, William." Though softly spoken, her words acted as the command that loosed him from his mooring. He stepped through the door and closed it, leaving her on the other side.

Ned Cochrane paced the drive below the porch steps when William exited the house. He barely spared his former first officer a glance. Intellectually, he knew Ned had done his best, having been taken by surprise and set upon by several men. However, in his heart, he wanted to rail at the younger man for failing to protect Charlotte.

Though a horse was his least favorite mode of transportation, William easily swung himself up into the saddle. Once he was settled—and Ned appeared to be also—William nodded at Asher to lead the way.

Darkness enveloped them. Behind, the light from the house acted as a siren's call, beckoning him to turn, to look, to regret his decision to leave in the dead of night and wish he had taken Julia's advice and waited until dawn.

His neck ached from the effort of keeping his face forward instead of giving in to temptation and taking one last look at the house, hoping to catch a final glimpse of Julia.

He focused on the bumpy motion of the animal underneath him. He must leave all thoughts of—all worries about—Julia behind, just as he now left her home behind. Jeremiah had known Julia most of her life. He had been as much of a substitute father for Julia as her father, Admiral Witherington, had been for William.

No, he could not worry about Julia and her safety. Rescuing Charlotte must be his only focus, his only thought.

The monotonous rhythm of the horses' hooves, at a walk over the

dark, deeply rutted dirt roads, along with the necessity of keeping his eyes trained on the light shirt stretched across Asher's broad back, lulled William into a stupor.

Ahead lay his ship. The thought of boarding *Alexandra* and getting under sail chipped away at his anxiety. As soon as he was on the water, as soon as he stood on the quarterdeck and issued the command to weigh anchor, he would be that much closer to finding Charlotte and bringing her home.

The road widened, and Ned pulled up beside him.

"You are certain the man did not identify himself?"

"No, sir. He did not give his name. He only said her safety depended on the mercy of a pirate." Ned's voice came across flat and hoarse.

"What were you doing out on the porch, alone with her in the dark?" Even as William asked this, he reminded himself Ned was not at fault. But if Charlotte had been inside, perhaps...

"I followed them—Miss Ransome and Winchester—when they went for their walk. I did not trust Mrs. Ransome's steward to behave honorably." He paused. "I need not have worried. Char—Miss Ransome handled the situation admirably and dispatched Winchester, and their engagement, with aplomb."

"Winchester was with you when she was taken? Why did you not tell me this before?"

"No, sir. Miss Ransome dismissed him. He had been gone for... several minutes."

Could Winchester be involved? Dread sank like a cannonball in William's gut. Julia already suspected the steward of embezzling money from the plantation. And William had left her there with that man—

"I asked her to marry me."

If Winchester were involved, and this was a ploy to get William away from Tierra—he yanked the reins. The horse voiced its protest and jerked and swerved, nearly unseating William. "I beg your pardon?"

"After Charlotte broke her engagement with Winchester, we talked about our mutual regard. I proposed marriage to her, and she accepted."

Ned's words barely rose above the sounds of the horses' hooves on the hard-packed earth.

From a sinking ship into shark-infested waters. Could Charlotte not have waited even a full day after breaking one engagement before forming another—again, without her family's knowledge? "And if I refuse my permission?"

"Then we shall wait. We'll wait until you think I am worthy to marry her, sir."

Worthy to marry her. William did not have to think hard to remember standing before Julia's father twelve years ago and saying the same words. Sir Edward had graciously given him—a poor, threadbare lieutenant with no prospects and nothing to recommend him as husband or son-in-law—a father's blessing for William and Julia to marry based on nothing other than their love for each other. William had been the one to deem himself unworthy of her affections, and he had almost lost her forever.

"We shall discuss this after we return Charlotte home."

"I pray that will be soon, sir."

"So do I, Ned. So do I."



Charlotte awoke with a gasp. Wooden planks formed the low ceiling above her. A canvas hammock conformed to her body and swung with the heave and haw of the ocean beneath the ship.

A ship?

Not possible. They had made port, hadn't they?

She stared at the underside of the deck above, trying to clear the haziness from her brain. Yes. They had made port. Left *Alexandra* and ridden in carriage across those horrible, rutted roads to Tierra Dulce, Julia's sugar plantation. The low, sprawling white house with the deep porch that wrapped all the way around and the white draperies billowing through the open windows.

The porch. She blinked rapidly. The porch. At night. In the dark. Henry Winchester and...and Ned.

She bolted upright and then flung her torso over the side of the hammock as her stomach heaved.

Why should she be sick? She hadn't experienced a moment of seasickness on the crossing from England to Jamaica. She climbed out of the hammock, skirt and petticoats hindering her progress until she hoisted them above her knees, and made for the small table with a glass and pitcher.

Wan light from the stern windows sparkled through the glass, revealing a residue of white powder in the bottom of it. She set the glass back on the stand. Last night the pirate had made her drink from the glass, and then everything had gone hazy. But before that...

She buried her face in her hands. Being torn away from Ned. She prayed they had not killed him. She'd heard no gunshot, but as their raid had been one of stealth, they would more likely have used a blade to end Ned's life.

A sob ripped at her throat, but she forced it to stay contained. She would not give the pirates the satisfaction of seeing her upset. And she must, and would, find a means of escape.

Thirst got the better of her, and she lifted the china pitcher of water and rinsed her mouth before drinking deeply the brackish liquid. She then turned and surveyed the cabin. Obviously the pirate captain's quarters. Though smaller than Ned's aboard *Audacious*, which was in turn smaller than William's aboard *Alexandra*, the room was neatly kept, with serviceable furnishings, whitewashed walls and ceiling, and plain floors. Nothing to exhibit the extravagance or wealth she'd expected to see in a pirate's private lair.

The desk. Perhaps something there would tell her more about her captor. She crossed to it, rather surprised by the empty work surface. No stacks of the papers or books like the ones resting on William's or Ned's worktables. Her fingers itched to open the drawer under the desktop and the small doors and drawers along the high back of it, but Mama had taught her better than that.

Two miniatures hanging above the desk caught her eye. One showed a woman, probably a few years older than Charlotte, with dark hair and angular features. Too plain to be called pretty, but not ugly either. The green backdrop of the second painting contrasted vividly with the reddish-brown hair of a pretty girl and matched her vibrant green eyes.

Mahogany hair and green eyes—just like Julia. Why would a pirate have a portrait of Julia hanging in his cabin? But, she corrected herself, the painting was of a girl no older than thirteen or fourteen. Surely the resemblance to Julia was merely coincidental.

“She was lovely, was she not?”

Charlotte gasped and whirled. A dark-haired man dressed in a blue coat that resembled a commodore’s or admiral’s—complete with prodigious amounts of gold braid about the cuffs, collar, and lapels—stood in the doorway of the cabin.

He tossed a bicorne hat—also similar to a navy officer’s—onto the oblong table in the middle of the cabin, clasped his hands behind his back, and sauntered toward her, his eyes on the portrait.

“What do you want with me?”

“I am sorry for the manner of your coming here, Miss...?” He cocked one eyebrow at her.

“Ransome. Charlotte Ransome. My brother is Commodore William Ransome. He will hunt you down. And when he finds you—”

“When he finds me,” the pirate said, sighing, “I am certain the encounter shall be quite violent and bloody. Is that what you were going to say?”

Charlotte ground her teeth together. The man stood there, serene as a vicar on the Sabbath, acting as if they stood in a drawing room in Liverpool discussing the weather. “What do you want with me?”

“With you? Nothing.” He flicked an invisible speck of dust from the oval frame. “My business is with her.”

“With her?” Charlotte nodded toward the painting. “Is that...?”

“Julia Witherington—or Julia Ransome, as I have lately learned. Empress of the Tierra Dulce sugar empire.”

The strange lilt in his voice when he said Julia's name sent a chill down Charlotte's spine. "Yes, she is married. To my brother."

"The famous Commodore Ransome." The pirate turned and ambled toward the dining table. "His reputation precedes him."

Worry riddled Charlotte at the pirate's lack of worry over the thought of William's hunting him down and blowing him and his crew out of the water. After Charlotte escaped, naturally.

"You were not part of my plan, little Charlotte Ransome." He turned, leaned against the edge of the table, and crossed his arms. The coat pulled across his broad chest and muscular shoulders. A lock of dark hair fell over his forehead, softening the way his heavy black brows hooded his eyes. His nose had been aquiline once, but now it sported a bump about halfway down from whence the rest of the appendage angled slightly to his left. A scar stretched across his forehead and down into his left eyebrow. On first sight he could have passed for Spanish, but his accent marked him as an Englishman.

If he weren't a no-good, dastardly, cowardly, kidnapping pirate, she might consider him handsome.

"Did you kill him?" The question squeezed past her throat unbidden. "Him?"

"Ned—Captain Cochrane. The man with me on the porch." She schooled her emotions as best she could, pretending the man standing before her was none other than Kent, her nemesis during her days aboard *Audacious* as a midshipman.

"If he is dead, it is through no work of me or my men. We do not kill for sport, only for defense."

"Ha!" The mirthless laugh popped out before she could stop it. "Morality from a *pirate*? Someone who spends his life pillaging and thieving and destroying and killing and...and..." Heat flooded her face.

"And?" The pirate stood and stalked toward her, an odd gleam in his dark eyes. "And ravishing young women? Is that what you were going to say?"

Charlotte backed away, right into the edge of the desk. She gripped it hard. "N-no."

The pirate leaned over her, hands on either side of her atop the desk, trapping her. "Do not try to lie to me, little Charlotte Ransome. You have no talent for it."

Stays digging into her waist, she bent as far back as she could. "Yes, then. Ravishing." Not that he would get a chance to ravish her. A fork. A penknife. Anything with a sharp edge or point. Once she had something like that in her possession, she would be able to defend herself against him.

Up close, the pirate's brown eyes held chips of gold and green. A hint of dark whiskers lay just beneath the skin of his jaw and above his upper lip.

He blinked when someone knocked on the door but didn't move. "Come!"

"Captain, Lau and Declan are back."

"Very good. I shall meet with them in the wheelhouse momentarily to hear their report. Dismissed."

Charlotte wanted to cry out to stop the other man from leaving, but she knew she deluded herself. She was no safer with any man on this ship than with their captain.

Would Ned still want her—even be able to look at her—after the pirates were finished with her?

"What's this?" The pirate reached up and touched Charlotte's cheek. "Tears?"

She shook her head, more to dislodge his hand than in denial.

With another sigh he straightened and then handed her a handkerchief. "Calm yourself, Miss Ransome. I have no intention of ravishing you. Nor of allowing anyone else to ravish you. While you are aboard my ship, you are under my protection."

He crossed to the table and retrieved his hat. "You, however, must stay to this cabin at all times. Though my men know my rules of conduct, a few of them might give in to the temptation of their baser desires should they see you about on deck."

Charlotte leaned heavily against the desk. The handkerchief in her hand was of the finest lawn, embroidered white-on-white with a

Greek-key design around the edge. She frowned at the bit of cloth. Why would a pirate carry something so delicate?

He settled the bicorne on his dark head, points fore-and-aft, the same way the officers of the Royal Navy wore theirs.

“Who are you?”

He touched the fore tip of the hat and then flourished a bow. “I am called El Salvador, and you are aboard my ship, *Vengeance*. Welcome to my home, Miss Ransome.”