

# OUT OF THE *Storm*

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# Chapter One

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*August 1830*

Laura Bryant whirled around the floor, letting the music propel her. The naval officer she danced with gazed at her attentively, his face flushed as he took only quick glances away to make sure they didn't crash into another couple. Laura wasn't sure she liked his fascination with her and kept her head turned to the side to avoid his searing gaze.

At least sixty people were crowded into the ballroom of the hotel, and the side doors were open wide to let in a sea breeze. Kingston, on the island of Jamaica, was beautiful, and a lovely place to hold a party, but in summer its heat hardly eased at sunset. With this many people in one room and the constant motion and excitement, Laura was roasting. The men must be stifling in their uniforms and formal jackets.

Her gown was the only one she'd brought along on the voyage, and it was two years old, but what did that matter? No one in Kingston had ever seen her wear it before. She'd thought it was modest, but now she wished the neckline was higher.

Her partner couldn't seem to stop making downward glances toward her bodice.

She spotted her father near the refreshment table, talking to their host, Captain Edwards. Both men owned merchant vessels. Edwards's ship was significantly larger than Bryant's schooner, but he held her father in high regard. She was glad they'd met up so far from home. Papa needed friends around him to ease the melancholy he'd carried since her mother died.

The music ended, and she stepped back from her partner and applauded, wishing they'd stopped closer to her father. She hoped she could escape the lieutenant.

"May I get you a glass of punch?" he asked.

"Oh, I—" She looked around desperately and was thankful to spot someone she knew passing by. "Mr. Dryden, I believe you owe me a dance." Her cheeks heated even more as she spoke, and she felt very forward, waylaying Edwards's second mate like that.

But he stepped up like the gentleman she knew he was.

"Miss Bryant. This is the perfect time for me, if it is for you."

"Delighted." She looked back at the lieutenant. "You'll excuse me, please."

He nodded but didn't look pleased.

"Thank you," she whispered, gazing up at Alexander Dryden as the music resumed and they glided away. "You've no idea how grateful I am."

His devastating smile put the finishing touches to his conquest of her heart, though she would never admit so much to a gentleman. Especially when she'd only met him twice before, as both the captains and their crews went about their business in port. He'd caught her interest on their first encounter.

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"It's my pleasure to assist you," he said. "I take it the company you were in wasn't enjoyable."

"Not in the least. He made me shudder every time he looked at me. I felt like a shark's next meal."

"Then let us think of more pleasant things. Has your father finished loading his cargo?"

"He hopes to get more coffee tomorrow. And your captain?"

"We sail with the morning tide. We're full up with sugar and coffee."

So she wouldn't see him again. What a pity. Her father would offload his cargo in Portland, Maine, but Captain Edwards sailed out of Boston. The old friends only met occasionally, and more often than not in a foreign port.

"So this is a farewell party."

"In a sense," Dryden said. "The captain wanted to gather his friends from the ships in port, and also some of the Kingston officials. It doesn't hurt to court the government men in a port where you frequently do business."

"Indeed." Captain Edwards must be doing very well for himself in his Caribbean trade to throw an event like this, Laura thought. Her father could never afford such an extravagant party. In fact, their comfort next winter depended heavily on their getting home safely with their load of finest coffee.

She observed the other women dancing as they flitted about. Her first impression of her dress was bolstered as she surveyed their fashions. Her neckline was indeed more modest than most.

"Are you looking for someone?" Dryden asked.

"Oh, no. Sorry. I was just taking note of the other dresses and wondering if mine was out of fashion."

"Your gown is lovely."

Her face was already warm from the warmth and exercise, but she felt her cheeks heat even more. "Thank you."

Their number together ended, and Dryden offered her refreshment, but she shook her head.

"I'd like to get back to Papa, Mr. Dryden, if you can see him."

Dryden, who was a good eight inches taller than her, glanced around and smiled. "He's yonder, talking to the governor's man and Captain Edwards."

He guided Laura swiftly through clusters of other guests to her father's side.

"Ah, there you are, Laura." Captain Bryant eyed her and Alex with satisfaction. "I wondered where you'd got to."

"She's been in good hands, if Dryden's been with her," Captain Edwards said.

"Yes, he rescued me after the last dance but one, from a rather boring partner," she said. Her father would worry if he knew one of her dance partners had shown wolfish tendencies.

"Laura, this is Mr. James. Sir, my daughter."

The government official bowed. "It is an honor, Miss Bryant."

She smiled and gave a little curtsy.

"I'm surprised you're pulling anchor tomorrow," her father said, turning back to Edwards and his interrupted conversation. "I heard there are pirates lurking about outside the harbor."

"Can't dawdle about in port for long," Edwards replied. "We'll be fine. We're well armed."

Laura glanced at Alex, but his expression remained impassive. He must not be worried either. Perhaps her father was overly cautious, since he had his only daughter aboard the *Arundel*. This was her first voyage with him.

"It's the storms you should worry about," said James. "I

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think we're due for a big one in a few days. They hit hard this time of year."

"We'll get ahead of it," Captain Edwards said. His confidence reassured Laura. With his swift ship, he probably would outrun the tropical storms, and likely any pirates in the vicinity as well.

Alex leaned down close to her ear. "Would you care to dance again?"

She gave him a wide smile. "I'd love to." The concerns of the journey left her as he led her back onto the floor. She faced him and placed her hand on the shoulder of his broadcloth jacket, no doubt his Sunday best. In Alex Dryden's arms, a sailor's problems were the farthest things from her mind. If only his ship wasn't leaving for Boston tomorrow.

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ALEX LEFT the hotel whistling the tune he'd danced to last with Laura. By the end of it, they'd established that they should use first names with each other. That was also when Alex had decided he was at least five fathoms deep in love.

Overhead, the stars glittered. The fresh sea breeze cooled him down a bit, but he'd have endured the overheated ballroom longer if he'd been able to stay with her. Meeting Laura was easily the highlight of this voyage.

He loved his job on the ship under Captain Edwards, but now could imagine a future life on land with ... a woman like her. He smiled as the fragrant breeze from the harbor rippled his hair. A few more voyages with Captain Edwards, and he'd have enough to start his own business. Then he'd stay on dry land.

He turned toward the dock. The captain and his first mate had stayed behind at the party, but Alex had to relieve the man

on watch. Their vessel was anchored between Bryant's schooner and a brigantine, and the crews were sociable, mingling in their off hours when they weren't loading and unloading cargo. Maybe he'd catch another glimpse of Laura in the morning before they weighed anchor.

Two men sprang out of the shadows in front of him. Alex stopped short, his heart racing. He ought to have been more aware of his surroundings. The crew had all been warned that the harbor held some evil men and they should be wary.

One of the roughnecks was bigger than him, and both looked bound for mischief. The shorter man was easily twice Alex's age, but he had the air of a hardened seadog. The large man smiled at him. Alex flinched when he saw the man's upraised knife. His companion held a revolver, aimed straight at Alex's chest.

"What do you want?" he managed to choke out, though he thought he knew.

"Just come along easy with us, lad," said the older man. "We've need of you on the *Herring*."

Alex wondered if he had any chance of fighting them off. Not a very large chance, he decided, but it was worth a try. If only he could distract them somehow.

"I'm already employed," he said hastily. "I'm signed with Captain Edwards."

"Aye, we've heard of him," said the big fellow. "And of you. You're handy with a hammer, they say. We've a few bits need fixin' on the *Herring*."

"Look, Captain Edwards needs me. I don't have much, but I've got a couple of Spanish dollars in my pocket." Alex reached slowly toward his side. "If you—"

Something hit Alex on the back of the head. He sucked in a breath, but the stars and the thugs' faces grew hazy.

## About Susan Page Davis



Susan Page Davis is the author of more than one hundred books. Her books include Christian novels and novellas in the historical romance, mystery, and romantic suspense genres. Her work has won several awards, including the Carol Award, two Will Rogers Medallions, and two Faith, Hope, & Love Reader's Choice Awards. She has also been a finalist in the WILLA Literary Awards and a multi-time finalist in the Carol Awards. A Maine native, Susan has lived in Oregon and now resides in western Kentucky with her husband Jim, a retired news editor. They are the parents of six and grandparents of eleven. Visit her website at: <https://susanpagedavis.com>.