



Ice King

GEOFF WOODLAND

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By

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Prologue

The masthead of the *Margaret Rose* was bathed in the ghostly blue glow of St Elmo's fire. The light danced and sizzled as First Mate, William King, breathed a sigh of relief. The eerie light was a sign that the storm was abating.

Within the hour, the wild movement of the *Margaret Rose* eased. The blackness of night gradually surrendered to the dull grey of first light.

A perceptible change in the vessel's movement told him the seabed was shallowing. William sensed they had entered Liverpool Bay.

Captain Loper had insisted on sailing from Dublin on the evening tide. His eagerness to return to Liverpool with the *Margaret Rose* crammed with Irish immigrants had cost him his life. The storm, when it hit, was worse than anyone anticipated.

It was during the fight to keep the ship's bow facing the oncoming sea that William witnessed his Captain washed overboard. There was nothing he could have done to help. It would have endangered the lives of all on board to attempt to put the *Margaret Rose* about.

The cry 'Land ho!' brought staggering, ashen-faced passengers on deck. After many hours suffering below, the promise of dry land was a welcome reprieve from the tortuous journey.

- CHAPTER ONE -

Father's House

*Commissioned.
Liverpool June 1804*

William pushed open the front door of his home on Tythe Barn Street and dashed upstairs to the first floor, where his father, George, ran the family business; King Shipping.

George King leaned forward over the sideboard to check the chafing dishes of hot food. Studying the older man as if it was the first time he had really seen him, William noticed the thinning dark hair and white streaks on top of his father's head. His rounded face denoted success, a success that allowed him to indulge in drink. ('After all', his father would say, 'haven't I earned a little extra?') His face showed thin red lines where the alcohol had taken hold. He was also, even as a large man, running slightly to fat—but then one expected a little extra weight on a successful businessman.

The lack of hair on his father's head did not stop the growth of his facial hair. His upper lip was bare, but thick side-whiskers extended from just in front of his ears to just below his chin. George was wearing a long black coat with matching knee

britches. A silk shirt and silk stockings proclaimed the final touches to the uniform of a successful Liverpool trader who controlled his own shipping company.

‘Good morning, William.’

‘Good Morning, Sir.’

‘Shall we talk over breakfast?’

‘If that is your wish.’

‘Sit. Sit down. What would you like? Can I get you something?’

He waved his hand towards the food on the sideboard.

William sat midway down the long dining table and felt like a schoolboy again. He steeled himself for the coming argument. He knew the request he was about to make would not be granted but he had to ask nonetheless.

‘Just coffee, thank you.’

His father would take the seat at the head of the table. William couldn’t remember when this had not been the case. Seated there, his father could see everything that went on in the room. The long sideboard behind the chair held food only at breakfast time.

‘Should eat more, William,’ said George as he placed a cup of coffee in front of his son.

‘Thank you,’ said William.

The clang from the covers on the chafing dishes was the only sound as George King scooped fried potatoes, beef and eggs onto his plate before sitting in his chair at the head of the table.

William glanced down at his coffee and realised he was more nervous than he originally thought.

His mother had died giving birth. George, never having remarried, had dominated William’s life. Tired of being overshadowed and having his wishes ignored, William decided,

as he entered his teens, to be his own man.

In his childhood so many different women had been hired to tutor and look after him, he'd lost count. No one had lasted long. When his father returned from sea, he either caused so much friction that the tutor left, or he dismissed her for some minor infringement.

Each time his father returned home he would always bring a gift, but all William ever wanted was his father's time. The few short weeks his father was home were usually spent conducting business as he prepared for another voyage. His father couldn't change from being a sea Captain with authority of life and death over his crew, to a loving father. William had a feeling that his father blamed him for his mother's death.

When William was twelve, he knew he would follow in his father's footsteps and go to sea. He hoped this would please his father, and perhaps they would then have something in common, other than his mother.

'Well, my boy,' boomed George as he cut into a large piece of fried beef.

'Well, Sir,' said William, sipping the hot black coffee, 'we have held this conversation before, but I just wanted to make sure nothing has changed.'

'If you're talking about being appointed to your own ship as Captain then nothing *has* changed. I appreciate you brought home the *Margaret Rose* safely, after the death of Captain Loper, but you must be aware the French are attacking English merchant ships in the Mediterranean and we can't obtain insurance at the right price. You're also aware times are not good, not as they have been, but at least we're able to trade to the west and use the *Margaret Rose* on the Irish emigrant trade instead of the

Mediterranean——’

‘But——’

‘Keep silent, Sir! I am speaking. You have just completed a year as first mate on the *Margaret Rose* with emigrants from Ireland and we have turned a nice profit. Not a lot, but at least we are not in danger of being sunk.’

William opened his mouth to speak but his father stopped him with his hand held palm out. In a more reasonable voice, George said, ‘Let me finish, William, after which I will listen to your thoughts on the matter. It is my wish that you spend more time as first mate and also time in the office. You need more experience.’

A silence fell while George cut another large piece of meat, smothered it in mustard, and pushed it into his mouth. He wiped the fat that dripped from his lips with a flourish of his napkin. He signalled to William that he had finished speaking and silently chewed his food.

‘I was afraid you’d not have changed your mind and that the reason you’d give for not giving me command would be that I lacked experience.’

George nodded his head and swallowed. He attacked the meat again.

‘Taking this into account, I am pleased to inform you I have taken steps to gain much more experience in the future than I have gained on the *Margaret Rose*.’

George stopped chewing. With his knife and fork gripped in his hands, he asked in a quiet voice, ‘How so?’

‘Yesterday I was commissioned Lieutenant in His Majesty’s navy.’

‘What! Commissioned! What nonsense is this?’

He watched his father's face turn a bright red and then a dull purple. Scraps of food sprayed from George's mouth as he made a supreme effort to get his words out.

'You will resign immediately – tell them it was all a mistake.'

'I will not resign, and there is nothing you can do to make me.'

'Isn't there, by God. We will see about that. I am your father and you will do as you are told!'

William rose slowly from his seat, placed his hands on the table and leaned towards his father.

'I am doing as I am told, Father,' he said softly. 'Our King, our Sovereign, has commissioned me to join the fleet. Not even you can go against the King. He is not someone who can be bullied. I hoped I'd receive your blessing and you'd be pleased your son is ready to fight for his country.'

'Fight for his country? You have done this to spite me!'

'Spite you? You are the one who said I needed more experience. You made me, Father, and you have moulded me, so don't be surprised that I have made my own decisions. Do I have your blessing?'

'No! You, you, you, I'll see you damned first.'

William straightened himself and returned his chair to the correct position. With sadness in his heart and a small lump in his throat, he faced his father and said, 'If that is your last word, Sir, then there is nothing to keep me from attending the Admiralty in London. I bid you, good day.'

He stared at his father, whose eyes became bright with tears, although his lips were set in a hard line. This was a look William couldn't remember seeing before. Nothing in the past could match the look he now saw on his father's face.

William walked to the dining room door and could sense his father's eyes following him. He opened the door and stepped through into the hall and closed the door gently.

November 1804-HMS Belleisle off the French coast

Lieutenant King blew on his hands as he gazed across the spume-flecked water at the coastline of France. It had been some months since he had reported to Captain Whitby of HMS *Belleisle*, the day before they sailed for blockade duty off the French coast. For weeks they had sailed close into the French shore at dawn and back out to the safety of the ocean at twilight. Captain Whitby would not allow himself to get caught on a lee shore in the dark. The French were as bored watching the *Belleisle* sail up and down their coast as the crew of the *Belleisle* were, watching their shoreline.

Only a year ago, William had cursed the lack of support from the Navy. He had sailed the Mediterranean on his own or in company of one or two other traders, but never with a Navy escort. Now he realised that the Navy completely lacked the vessels to offer support. Merchant vessels had to take their chances while they relied upon the Navy to bottle-up the French ships in their homeports. He was uncomfortably aware some French ships did occasionally break out in the Mediterranean and make a dash for an unescorted and undefended British merchant vessel. It did not matter what the merchantman carried, everything was valuable to the blockaded French.



William's hands were still cold. Winter had come early this year. As the weeks became months on blockade duty, he knew

conditions on the *Belleisle* would get worse. Unless they received fresh orders, Christmas 1804 would be a cold celebration off the enemy coast.

‘Watch your heading,’ said William curtly, standing behind the helmsman to check the compass.

‘Aye, Aye, Sir.’

William was tired and knew that he shouldn’t have been so sharp with the helmsman. Hands behind his back, he resumed his steady tread in an effort to keep warm.

‘Mr King, if you please.’

William turned quickly as he recognised the voice of the Captain. He hurried across the deck and touched his hat. ‘Sir.’

‘Mr King, according to the fishing boat we intercepted earlier today, a French brig is hidden behind Penmarch Rocks.’

William remained silent, though his spirits rose at the possibility of a battle against the French, and perhaps prize money.

‘All officers to my cabin in one hour, if you please, Mr King, and I wish you to attend, so arrange a relief.’

‘Sir.’ William touched his hat and turned to the young midshipman who shared his watch. ‘Midshipman of the watch, all officers to the Captain’s cabin in one hour.’



William entered the Captain’s cabin, removed his hat, and joined the other junior officers, who were trying to be attentive yet inconspicuous at the same time. He couldn’t help but compare this giant cabin of a ship of the line to the cabin of a small merchantman.

The *Belleisle* measured over 168 feet from bow to stern; the *Rose* had been 80 feet. In terms of weight the *Belleisle* displaced 1600 tons, eight times that of the *Rose*.

He glanced at the deckhead; unlike in the *Rose*, here in the Captain's cabin he could stand upright without trouble. Daylight from the large windows behind the captain's desk flooded the whole cabin, eliminating the need for oil lamps during the day.

The First Lieutenant saluted the Captain. 'All officers present and correct, Sir, except for two officers on watch.'

'Thank you, rest easy gentlemen. You know I received information about a French brig at anchor in waters behind Penmarch Rocks. It is my intention to cut her out.'

An air of excitement ran through the cabin, action at last.

'This is what I propose. The First Lieutenant will be in overall command and in charge of the launch. Mr King will be in charge of the pinnace and second in command.'

William felt pleasantly surprised at being given such an honour. The Captain continued, 'I don't normally explain why I so order, but in this case I will. Mr King has years of experience as First Mate on traders so if he gets lost he has a better chance than the other junior officers to find his way home.' A ripple of laughter ran around the junior officers. Perhaps it was their way to cover their disappointment at not being picked to be involved.

The pinnace had eight oars so if he double banked, he would have sixteen men plus the coxswain and himself.

'A midshipman will be in command of a cutter and will act in support in case the First Lieutenant or Mr King meet strong resistance. At dusk we will turn and sail away from the coast. The French have been watching us for months as we sail close in shore at daylight and out to sea as darkness falls. Tonight, however, when it is dark, we will sail back to the coast under reduced sail and drop the boats close in by the entrance to the Rocks. Any questions?'

Captain Whitby looked around his group of officers and waited for a question. All were silent.

‘It appears there are no questions so I will not delay you gentlemen. Make ready and pick your men but don’t let the French see any of your preparations. Good luck and God speed.’



The overcast sky threatened rain as the three boats clustered together a short distance from their mother ship.

William leaned forward to hear the whispered commands from the First Lieutenant in the launch.

‘We will aim for the shadow of the island’, and he indicated the darker area of the island, ‘that way we should be able to blend into the island and avoid any lookouts.’

William in the pinnace, and the young midshipman in the cutter, nodded. Their orders were not to speak unless in an emergency.

‘Mr King will take station astern of me and the midshipman will be in the rear. A shielded lantern shown intermittently astern from the forward boats will give some guidance to those behind. Give way together,’ ordered the First lieutenant to his boat’s crew.

William touched the shoulder of his coxswain. The men bent to their oars as the pinnace followed the launch. He glanced over his shoulder and was pleased to see the Midshipman’s boat keeping station behind.

Rounding the southern point of the island, William could just make out the French brig anchored ahead.

The First Lieutenant stood carefully in the stern of the launch and scanned the area for guard boats. William also stood and peered into the blackness ahead. He could see an area darker than the rest and realised that it must be a second ship anchored

near their original target. It was a two-masted schooner.

‘First Lieutenant’s boat is stopped, Sir,’ whispered William’s coxswain. William switched his gaze from the schooner to the first boat in their group. ‘Oars’, whispered William. His boat slid quietly to a stop near the First Lieutenant’s launch.

‘Mr King,’ whispered the First Lieutenant, ‘there is a second vessel at anchor. I believe she is a schooner. I want you to capture her and sail her out to meet the *Belleisle*.’

‘Aye, Aye, Sir,’ replied William in a low voice. ‘Coxswain, aim for a point ahead of the bow of the French brig.’ William eased himself to the bow of the pinnacle to determine the schooner’s exact position. ‘We’ll go over the bows, men,’ whispered William. ‘Coxswain, cut her anchor cable as soon as you board.’ He pointed to the first two oarsmen. ‘You two make sail when the cable is cut. If the French feel the ship under way, I hope they’ll become disheartened and not cause us too much trouble. Coxswain, when the cable’s gone, you take the wheel.’

‘Right, lads, time for the armbands, but keep it quiet.’

Each of his crew produced a small strip of white cloth in the shape of a circle and pulled it up their left arm. ‘Remember, lads, anyone with a white armband is a *Belleisle*. No white band means he’s French! I don’t want any pistol cocked until you’re on board. An accident will be the end of us all.’

The boat slipped quietly through the black water, the oars dipping rhythmically. A sudden flash of lightning from the forbidding sky lit the anchorage for a split second. The crew stopped rowing. William caught a glimpse of the schooner but could not see any guards. ‘Give way together. Steer for her anchor cable,’ he whispered to the coxswain.

A deep rumble of thunder shook the air.

That will hide any noise we make, thought William, as he glanced at the sky and hoped the rain would hold off until after they had boarded the schooner.

The boat gently nudged the schooner's mooring cable and eager hands grabbed the rope to steady the pinnacle. William signalled to the bowman who grasped the cable and began to climb. To ease the strain on his arms, the bowman wrapped his feet around the slippery rope and pushed his body higher. When the bowman reached the hawse pipe, William grasped the rope and began to climb. He wished he were as agile as the sailor before him. His arms ached with the effort of pulling himself up the mooring rope as his sword flapped against his left leg. A final heave and he was over the gunwale and collapsed on the deck. His heart thudded with the unaccustomed effort.

He peered around to check if his noisy arrival had alarmed the French. All appeared quiet. Then he saw, suddenly, a body dressed as a French sailor next to him. The Frenchman's throat had been slit. The pinnacle's bowman sat calmly, a few feet away, wiping his bloody knife on a piece of cloth cut from the Frenchman's shirt. William started to rise as two more of his crew dropped gently onto the deck. Keeping low, they ran towards the schooner's stern.

Each minute saw two more of his boat's crew drop to the deck and silently take their positions.

'Ready, Sir,' whispered the coxswain, his axe held high over the anchor cable. 'Ship's boat secured alongside in case we have to make a run for it.'

'Thank you, coxswain. Hold off cutting until I give the word. It is a lot quieter than I expected.'

'Johnny Crap-ards don't like to get wet, Sir, and it feels

like rain.'

William smiled. 'Crapaud, in French, is pronounced krap-o, Coxswain, so if you wish to insult a French sailor, make sure you pronounce it correctly or he won't realise you're insulting him,' whispered William in return.

He knew his little speech about the mispronunciation of a British sailor's name for a French sailor, Johnny Crapaud or Johnny Toad, was due to his nervousness.

'Aye, Sir,' answered the Coxswain.

William watched the man's face.

It was obvious that the man didn't know what William was talking about.

William left the coxswain and joined the rest of his crew, who waited near the foremast for orders. 'Sails ready?' he whispered.

'Aye, Sir,' said one of the two men designated to deal with the sails after the cable parted.

As William turned to speak to the rest of the men, the peace of the night was broken by the sound of shots from the brig.

'That's it for silence, Coxswain. Now!' he shouted as he drew his sword.

A dull thud of the axe signalled the cable had parted.

'Haul those sails. Coxswain, take the wheel,' shouted William.

The sound of running feet and the noise of the French crew as they poured from below put an end to any further speech. The French and the British were now in a bloody hand-to-hand fight. William sensed the vessel begin to list as the wind caught her sails. He could hear the sound of pistols discharging, and hoped they were British and not French.

A large Frenchman swinging a two handed axe charged through the knot of British sailors. William ducked and felt the

wind from the blade as it passed close above his head. The man grunted and tried to correct the momentum of his swing as William thrust upward. He felt the blade slide under the man's arm and into his side. Though wounded, the Frenchman was not finished and swung the axe back at William in an attempt to cut him in half. William stepped back as the axe brushed his chest and embedded itself in the mast. As the French sailor tugged to free the axe, William thrust his sword at the man's chest and ran him through.

The sound of steel on steel, oaths, grunts and the occasional scream rang across the small ship as the enemies fought for control of the vessel.

William looked around for any indication of the Captain or an officer but couldn't see anyone in such a uniform. His heart beat fast as he parried a wild stroke from one of his own crew.

'Pay attention, damn your eyes.'

The wild eyes of the crewman told William the man had lost control and would hack at anybody who got in his way. Before William could do anything about him the crewman turned and charged back into the fight.

The motion of the schooner told him they had reached the open sea. Spray now splattered across the deck and she buried her bow into the Atlantic waves. The fighting was diminishing as his crew gained control.

William trying to avoid further and unnecessary bloodshed, shouted 'Capituler, capituler' to the French. The only word he could think of and hoped he pronounced it correctly.

The fighting eventually stopped. William could make out a small group of about fifteen Frenchmen gathered aft of the mainmast. The schooner's Captain must have allowed half of his

crew to go ashore but each second meant the ship was sailing further from the shores of France.

His boat's crew, gasping for breath, threatened the Frenchmen from a few feet away.

'Capituler,' shouted William again.

First one and then another Frenchman dropped his weapon, until eventually all surrendered. Not until the final weapon had dropped did his heart begin to slow. He sheathed his sword and waited while his crew pushed the prisoners into some order. They were a sorry sight. His emotions stirred as he realised, but for his good fortune, the roles might easily have been reversed and he might have become a prisoner of the French.

A voice broke his reverie.

'*Belleisle* on the starboard bow, Sir.'

'Thank you, Coxswain, come under her lee if you would.'

'Aye, Aye, Sir.'

'Davenport, search the prisoners.'

Davenport pushed the French prisoners as he began his search.

'Search a vois, search a vois,' he shouted and patted various prisoners for hidden weapons.

The pinnace's crew laughed, being aware of what Davenport meant. The consternation on the faces of the French, and their lack of response, brought further laughter. The prisoners stood in a huddle and watched Davenport as they tried to work out his question.

William stood behind Davenport and studied the prisoners. He wished to find out who was in charge.

Davenport pushed a young man against the gunwale and bent to tap his pockets and waistband for a weapon. William

finished inspecting the prisoner's faces and began to turn away. He would never know why he turned back, but as he did, he saw the flash of a knife. The young Frenchman had drawn his hand back and plunged a short knife into Davenport's throat.

Davenport screamed until the knife cut his voice. William pulled out his pistol, aimed, and shot the Frenchman in the face. The Frenchman dropped to the deck, a bloody hole where his nose had been and half his head missing, much of which had splattered on Davenport's now collapsed body. William felt aghast; this was the first time he had shot a man in cold blood. Strangely, he didn't feel any sorrow. The man's attack after he had surrendered, in William's mind, sealed his own fate.

The remainder of the French prisoners moaned and dropped to the deck and covered.

'Bind their hands,' William ordered.

Indicating the dead Frenchman, he addressed two of his boat crew. 'Throw that piece of rubbish overboard.'

Two sailors grabbed the dead man and heaved him over the side.

William knelt beside Davenport and checked for signs of life.

The Frenchman's knife had severed an artery. Davenport was dead.

'Pick up our shipmate,' said William, as he stood, 'and we'll take him back to the *Belleisle* and give him a decent burial.'



The Captain's plan had worked with great success. The captured brig, *Le Tigre*, and the schooner, *Desiree*, would be sold into the British Navy on their return to England.

Captain Whitby was in high spirits. Although the money received for the two French vessels would be split amongst the

officers and crew of the *Belleisle*, the majority would go to him.

‘A fine episode, Mr King, and we all benefit from it.’

‘Aye, Sir, we will.’

‘In the meantime I will use the *Le Tigre* to scout for us while you, Mr King, will command the schooner and take my dispatches back to England.’

William was overjoyed at being given his first command. If the action was gazetted, would his father be pleased at seeing his son’s name in the newspapers or would he still be angry?



In 1804, Liverpool was the largest slave trading port in Great Britain, yet her influential traders felt threatened by the success, in Parliament, of the anti-slavery movement.

Few, in Liverpool, condemned the 'Trade'.

William King, son of a Liverpool slave trader, sickened by what he experienced aboard a Spanish slaver, was one of the few who did speak out against the Trade.

This epic, set during the dying days of this despicable practice, has generational change, moral wickedness, greed, romance and the fortunes of war woven through the lives of a father and son caught up in the turmoil that preceded the implementation of the British Trade Act of 1807, which would end Britain's involvement in the slave trade.