

Captain Wentworth's Persuasion (aka *Wayward Love*)

Chapter 1

*By day or night, in weal or woe,
That heart, no longer free,
Must bear the love it cannot show,
And silent ache for thee.
—Lord Byron, "On Parting"*

"I have you, Captain!" the midshipman cried. "I need help over here!" the youth screamed over the turmoil on the deck, as he tried to support the weight of the slumped-over officer, who clung to his exhausted frame.

Captain Frederick Wentworth recognized the danger of pursuing the retreating French sloop, but he also recognized the need to keep the French from reaching reinforcements and from taking English secrets straight back to Bonaparte. He made the decision to take the French vessel despite the fact his wife traveled aboard *The Resolve* with him and his crew. He ordered his men to take the enemy craft. "If necessary, her crew cannot escape," he instructed them; the British had no reason to allow the French to live if they put up resistance. The countries, after all, were at war.

For two days, Wentworth's ship chased the French craft. In truth, he admired how the smaller French ship skimmed the water, trying to evade his own ship's best efforts to overtake the ketch. Frederick initiated his favorite maneuver in stopping his enemy—full broadsides, a lesson he learned from the tales of the infamous Blackbeard. *The Resolve* caught the French ship during the night. Dawn brought his enemy the knowledge it faced the full force of the British Navy, one of the finest to sail the seas.

Now, Anne gazed at her husband as he ordered her below deck, trying to protect her from the worst of the battle. Frederick Wentworth possessed a natural charisma; his men would follow him anywhere. A strong, formidable man, his intense eyes told the world he would tolerate nothing less than success. He made few errors in his choices, reasoning things out carefully before he made a decision. He lived for the adventure of the sea, but he was *her* Frederick, a practical man who had accomplished his dreams by organizing the chaos of his mind. She touched the weathered lines of his face with her fingertips before lightly brushing his lips with hers.

"You will be safe, my Love," he said as he cupped her chin in the palm of one large hand.

"Of course, I am safe," Anne insisted, realizing he feared for her comfort. "You are the captain of *The Resolve*; we are all safe under your command." She took his hand in hers, kissing the palm before releasing him. "Now, do what you must do, Frederick. I will be well." With that, she left him. She took a look back and shivered when she saw him load his gun, knowing the strong possibility of hand-to-hand combat when the British boarded the sloop.

Wentworth glanced at her retreating form as she headed for the protection of the lower levels of the ship. He had loved her from the first time he saw her face; only her countenance brought him peace. In that moment long ago, he had set his sights on *his* Anne. It had taken

nearly nine years for him to win her. Anne Elliot Wentworth epitomized the things to which Frederick Wentworth aspired: acceptance and love. Anne had overlooked his common origins; she had seen the man he was. He had sworn to prove to her aristocratic world she had not taken a step down with her choice of a husband. She symbolized why he fought this war against the French emperor.

He hoped to purchase a medium-sized estate close to the shoreline for her. They would live there when he finally cashed in his commission from the service or at the end of the war. Anne, the daughter of a baronet, deserved the best he could give her. Frederick had lost her once, when youth demanded they make decisions not their own. Anne belonged to him now; he loved her beyond reason. Soon they could take their place in society and start a family. He smiled briefly as the image played before him. Then he turned his attention to the other ship and prepared to strike at his enemy.

Wentworth felt the distant vibration as *The Resolve* ran out its guns. The ship readied itself for an assault. When he placed a spyglass to his eye, he saw the French scrambling to respond to the surprise. Older seamen shouted orders, but Frederick recognized the confusion and the dismay upon the younger sailors' faces. His men, on the other hand, stood their positions on the deck, awaiting the inevitable. His crew had kept a determined silent vigil throughout the night, using the darkness to overtake the French.

With a nod of his head, Captain Wentworth ordered his men to attack. The gun ports were all pointed directly at the French warship, and shots rang out. He watched with satisfaction as the enemy's sails crashed to the deck. As the smoke cleared, he could readily see the gaping hole in the enemy's starboard tack. But the French powder magazines did not explode. "What the devil?" he muttered. The sloop's mizzenmast lay in multiple pieces on the deck. With the longboats in the water, Wentworth knew the French would fight, but he also knew he had managed another capture. Along with it would come the financial reward that would secure his future with Anne. Everything he had ever wanted was within his grasp.

Beside him, a sailor called to his partner, "We'll not be waiting!"

"They'll not surrender peacefully," a lieutenant cautioned his men.

"They're daft!" a man with a knife held tightly between his teeth hissed to the others gathering on the deck. A fierce curse sounded from the crow's nest above his head as Wentworth placed a rolled-up map in his assistant's hand.

He maneuvered *The Resolve* alongside the captured ship, readying to board her officially and claim her in the name of the Crown. Then—the unexpected, the unthinkable. A single shot rang out, and the heat seared through his side. Surprised, he touched the bloody opening in his jacket. *How?* he wondered as he slumped forward into the arms of the nearest midshipman. He was not close enough to the French ship for a French sailor to deliver such a blow. Instinctively, he raised his eyes to his attacker. The man, wearing a leather-fringed jacket and a floppy-brimmed hat, held a long rifle. Frederick recognized it as one American privateers used often to fight off personal attack. It had the distance the single-shot .60 musket that the British carried did not. "Give that to your good King George!" he heard the man's voice exclaim before British sailors surrounded him.

Frederick's pain came not from his French enemy but from an American assisting Bonaparte's Navy. He could hear the air gurgle in his throat as he sank to his knees. The pain and the fire radiated throughout his chest as he fell on his back, allowing his eyes to search the thin, smoky air for the blue sky with streaks of sunlight opening a new day. "Anne," he murmured as another midshipman cradled his captain's head for comfort.

“Help is on the way, Captain. Just stay with us,” the man gasped through clenched teeth, fear coursing through his body.

Shipmates rushed forward. Lifting the gigantic frame of Frederick Wentworth onto a net stretcher, they quickly carried him to his quarters. As they settled him on the bed, Laraby, the sawbones assigned to the ship, rushed in, hustling various sailors from the room. “Get me plenty of rum!” the doctor demanded.

“Yes, Sir,” one of the lieutenants snapped as he darted out the door.

Wentworth groaned deeply as another officer helped the doctor prop him up and remove his jacket. Then, as the officer kept the captain propped up, the physician cut the shirt away from the wound and began to clean away the seeping blood. “Easy, Captain,” the doctor cautioned him. “Let me see what we have here.”

The surgeon went through a mental checklist as he examined the captain’s wound. “The bullet tore a zigzag path through part of your lower abdomen, Sir. There is quite a bit of damage. The good news is the bullet exited out your side. I need to sew you up, but I do not need to do any cutting.”

Frederick finally got the words out, “Where is my wife?”

Another officer moved forward. “I will get her, Captain.” The sight of all the blood had taken its toll on the man.

“I am giving you some laudanum.” The doctor helped the first officer to ease Wentworth back onto the bed.

“Might I have some rum, too?” Wentworth’s mouth went dry as his head touched the pillows.

The doctor half grinned. “That is why I ordered it.” He supported Frederick’s head while the captain took a large swig of the brew.

Anne rushed into the room and made her way to her husband’s side. “Frederick,” she said, whispering his name close to his ear as she brushed the hair from his eyes. “I am here, my Love.” She interlaced her fingers with his.

With an effort, he squeezed her hand and opened his eyes to hers. “I need an angel watching over me,” he whispered as she lowered her mouth to brush his lips lightly.

“Nothing can keep us apart—nothing ever again. I am here, Frederick. Let the doctor do his work. ‘In sickness and in health,’” she murmured before kissing his temple.

Frederick made eye contact with the doctor and nodded his assent. Then his eyes rested again on Anne’s face. He felt the laudanum begin to take its effect. His lids closed, but Anne’s image remained with him.

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Commander Frederick Wentworth made his way across Somerset. The sway of the public carriage along the uneven roadway reminded him of the rolling motion of the sea; at least, it did as long as he kept his eyes closed. When he had opened them an hour or so earlier, the grandmotherly woman sitting across the way had questioned him about the war and about his prospects. He assumed she had an eligible woman somewhere in her family, but Frederick had no intention of pursuing the subject. When he chose a wife, it would be a woman with whom he could share his hopes and dreams—one who would recognize his potential. So he had closed his eyes again, feigning sleep and imagining that he strode the decks of his own ship.

Passing through Uppercross, he finally allowed himself the pleasure of looking at the rolling countryside, which was peppered with herds of sheep and Brinny cattle grazing in the fields. His brother Edward resided as the curate at Monkford, and Frederick planned to spend

part of his leave catching up with him. Quiet time was a pleasant prospect after the action he had seen of late. Of course, he had not been with his sister's husband, Benjamin Croft, and Nelson as they defeated Admiral Vileneuve at Trafalgar, but Frederick had seen his share of battles. Like Benjamin, he expected to use the war with the French emperor to make his fortune. Thoughts of his sister brought Frederick a pang of loneliness; Sophia and Benjamin shared a rare love. "Someday," he whispered to himself. "Someday, I will turn my head—"

The slowing of the horses interrupted his thoughts. "Uppercross!" the driver shouted. "Changing horses!"

Frederick disembarked from the carriage and looked around. People hurried back and forth at the posting inn. Knowing he had not much further to go, he chose only to stretch his legs in the inn yard rather than spend his money on libation inside the crowded tavern.

"How much time?" he inquired of the groom as the man unhitched the horses.

"More than a quarter hour—less than a half hour," the man responded. The driver leaned over the edge to take the mail pouch from the innkeeper.

Frederick looked at the village, which was a smattering of houses and shops. "I shall take a short walk," he told the driver as he started away toward the village.

The driver called to his retreating form, "We will not wait!"