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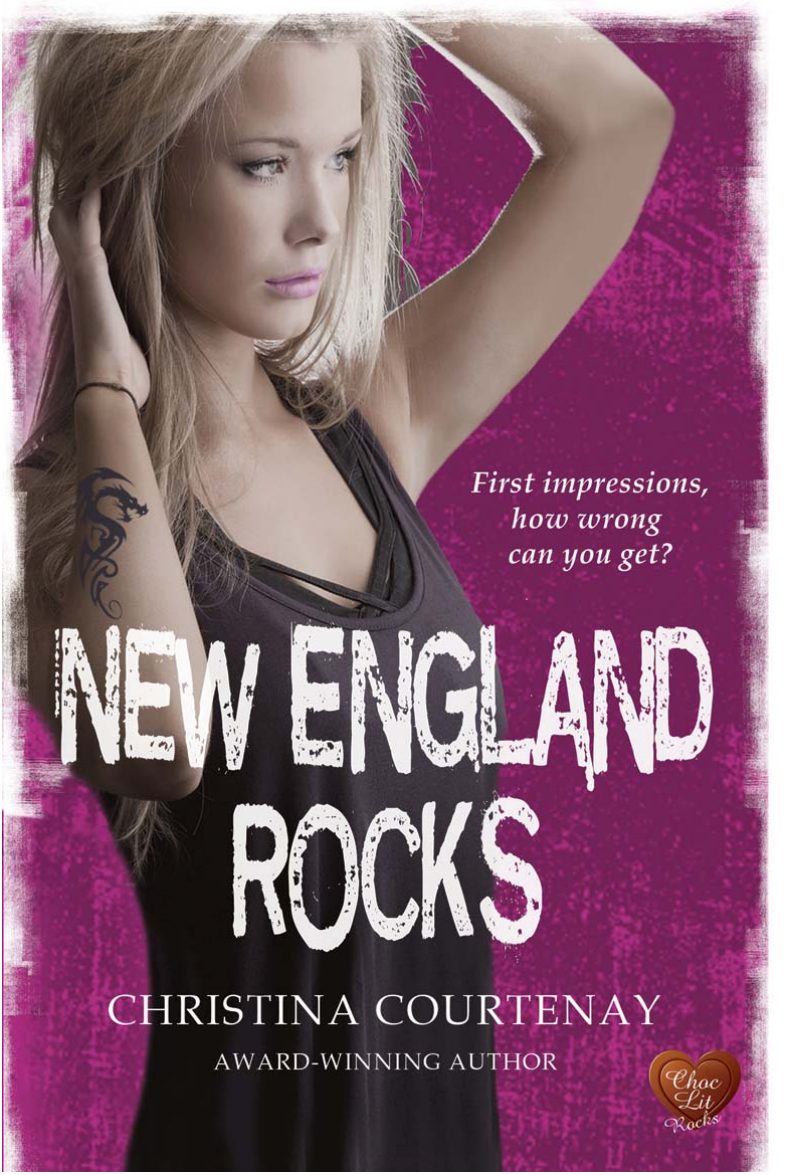
New England Rocks

Written by Christina Courtenay

Published by Choc Lit

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First impressions, how wrong can you get?
NEW ENGLAND ROCKS
CHRISTINA COURTENAY
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
Choc Lit Rocks

New England Rocks

Christina Courtenay



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Prologue

Rain Mackenzie became aware of the angry voices long before she opened her eyes. They buzzed in and out of her consciousness like wasps, stinging her with their murmured accusations, which she couldn't quite understand. She wanted to shout at them to shut up because the shrill tones were hurting her head. Stabbing it like a knife, in fact, every blow more painful than the last. She couldn't remember ever having a headache this bad before and she wished she could just sink back into oblivion again.

Deciding to do just that, she sighed and snuggled up to the warm body next to her. It felt solid and comforting and she could hear a heartbeat that was soothing to her poor head. She was just about to drift off to sleep again when a disturbing thought hit her, ruining any chance of a rest. *Body? What body?*

Come to think of it, why did the room smell like a distillery? The alcohol fumes suddenly made her gag and she drew in a sharp breath.

'It's an outrage! It simply can *not* be tolerated. She'll have to go. They'll both have to leave, although I would put the blame squarely on the Mackenzie girl myself.'

Rain's fuzzy brain vaguely registered her own name and she frowned. But it wasn't until she finally blinked her eyelids open a fraction that she saw there was a virtual sea of faces staring down at her with accusing glares. One belonged to the headmaster of Blakeborough, the English boarding school Rain was attending, and one to her form tutor, Miss Dalrymple. She couldn't make out the others because the light was too bright. With a groan she attempted to sit up. She swayed with dizziness and put up her hands to hold onto her head in order to stop the world from spinning.

'Ah, about time too.' Miss Dalrymple took a step forward. 'If you're awake, you can come with me this instant, young lady.'

'What?' The word came out as a hoarse whisper because Rain's

mouth was drier than the Kalahari Desert. She tried to swallow down the foul taste on her tongue, but that made her feel more nauseous. Fighting the queasiness with another deep breath, she blinked again. *What the hell is going on?*

'Get up, do.' Miss Dalrymple grabbed Rain's arm roughly and attempted to pull her out of bed. 'Thank the Lord you're wearing *something* at least,' she muttered.

Rain looked down at her PJs – regulation knee-length cotton trousers and the short-sleeved top buttoned up securely at the front. Why wouldn't she be wearing it? she wondered. 'But what …?' she started to protest, but the form tutor interrupted her.

'Come away now and leave that poor boy to sleep it off. It will be hours before he surfaces, I shouldn't wonder. It's a miracle you didn't both get alcohol poisoning.' Miss Dalrymple nodded in the direction of a nearby table, where four empty tequila bottles stood in mute witness to what had happened the night before.

Of course, the tequila! Rain had a light bulb moment. No wonder her head was fit to burst. She shuddered as she remembered the strong alcohol mixed with lime and salt, hitting her stomach with fiery power over and over again. She stared at the bottles. She was sure she hadn't drunk all that by herself. *Four bottles? No way.* Besides, there had been other people there too. She remembered her room mate Annabelle, for one, and Rupert and Alastair and who else?

'Milo.' She said the word out loud and finally turned to stare at the body that lay next to her. He wasn't a pretty sight this morning, lying on his back, snoring with his mouth open, dead to the world. She suddenly wondered why she had fancied him rotten the night before. It must have been the tequila that had addled her brain, because there was nothing appealing about him now.

'*Urgh*,' she muttered and turned away, making a face.

Then another unwelcome thought hit her. She and Milo had

been sharing a bed, all night, and it wasn't even hers. It was his. She was in the boy's dormitory, which was strictly off limits, and she was only wearing her PJs. *Oh, shit!*

She was in serious trouble.

Chapter One

Just over a week later, Rain found herself outside the local high school in Northbrooke, a tiny New England town a couple of hours north of Boston in the United States. Since this was where her parents currently lived, attending this lowly establishment was to be her punishment for getting herself expelled from Blakeborough. Judging by the exterior, a punishment it would surely be, she thought.

'Why can't you just find me another boarding school?' she had demanded of her father, Sir Anthony Mackenzie, when he told her she was moving. It wasn't as if he couldn't afford it – he was director of a UK banking corporation and currently working in Boston, but even if he hadn't been earning a massive salary that way, he'd inherited a fortune at an early age. Money had never been an issue. 'I'm sorry for what happened, but it was just a prank that got a bit out of hand and you're paying them like squillions each term. Surely they can overlook what I've done and give me another chance?'

'Possibly, but here's the rub,' he'd replied. 'I'm not prepared to shell out "squillions", as you put it, on your education if you're not going to take it seriously. This wasn't the first time the headmaster has had cause to complain of your behaviour. I'm becoming rather bored with hearing about your exploits, you know. The fact is you had your chance and you blew it, basically. Now you have to accept the consequences of your actions.'

Rain thought he was being unnecessarily harsh and hoped to change his mind soon, but in the meantime, this was where she had to stay. Purgatory, by the look of it.

Northbrooke High couldn't have been more different from Blakeborough if it had tried. Where her former school consisted of a collection of beautiful old red brick buildings in the classical style, this one was all modern, squat and, in her opinion, dead

ugly. She sighed and stomped off in the direction of the entrance. After all, it made no difference what it looked like.

There were hordes of teenagers everywhere – in the parking lot, on the front steps and inside the building – but she totally ignored them even though everyone seemed to be staring at her. She had no intention of talking to any of them. *What's the point?* She wasn't planning on staying long. Besides, she didn't want any friends. Not if they were going to behave the way her so-called friends at Blakeborough had. *Selfish bunch of tossers who ...* She balled her fists and stopped the thought right there. She refused to even think about them now.

Just inside the main doors, she bumped into someone coming the other way. She raised her eyes to glare at whoever it was, but blinked instead when she realised she'd collided with one of the hottest guys she'd ever seen.

'Whoa, take it easy, babe.' He put out a hand to steady her, but she shook it off.

Straight black hair, fashionably spiky, above intense blue eyes. Chiselled cheekbones and jaw, perfect nose and mouth, and an eyebrow piercing. Rain was a sucker for those. *Yep, seriously fit.* She almost gasped, especially since she had bounced off his substantial chest. She looked up at him, noticing how big he was at close quarters. Not just tall, but broad-shouldered with nicely defined biceps and arms that were covered in dragon tattoos all the way down to his wrists. The sleeveless T-shirt he wore showed these off to perfection and she couldn't seem to drag her gaze away.

'Like what you see?' he asked in a lazy voice, his blue eyes twinkling with teasing laughter when she looked up again.

'No,' she said curtly, but felt herself blush, which made her furious. He chuckled and she knew he probably hadn't been fooled. She *had* liked what she'd seen, very much so, and she wished it wasn't so obvious. *Damn him*, she thought. He must get that reaction all the time. Well, too bad, she wasn't going to fall

for him, wicked blue eyes or not. She wasn't falling for anyone ever again.

He seemed to like what he was looking at too and she had to swallow a curse of outrage when she saw the direction of his gaze. He was so tall he could see straight down her top to her lacy lilac bra, as his next words confirmed. 'Purple, huh?' he commented with raised eyebrows. 'Nice.'

'It's lilac, actually, not that it's any of your business.' She swept past him with her head held high and made a mental note not to wear such low cut tops in future. At five foot ten, she was usually on the same level as most boys, but she'd obviously have to be more careful around this guy. He had to be six foot two at the very least, so even with heels on, she was shorter than him.

'Whatever,' she muttered, annoyed with herself for even caring. What did it matter? She wasn't staying long and their paths probably wouldn't cross much in any case.

Finding her way round Northbrooke High didn't prove too difficult and Rain was soon standing before the principal's secretary. She'd entered the room without knocking and waited with arms crossed until the woman stopped talking on the phone to someone.

'Yes, can I help you?' The woman's expression was wary.

'I'm Rain Mackenzie. Apparently I'm starting at this school today.' Rain didn't bother to hide her annoyance. She couldn't care less what anyone here thought. If she wasn't going to sit her A-level exams in the UK this year, she'd have to go back to do them at a crammer school or something. So whatever she did or didn't do here was irrelevant. In fact, she could go the whole year without doing any homework whatsoever because she'd have to do it all again next year. That made her feel even angrier than before. *What a bloody waste of time!*

'Ah, yes, your father rang me on Friday, right?'

Rain nodded.

'Just hang on a sec and I'll see if Dr□A has time to see you.'

'Dr A?'

'That's right, *Dr* Allburn, the principal. He has a PhD in child psychology, you know.'

Rain rolled her eyes. *Like I care?*

'Wait here, please.' The woman went to knock on the door to an inner office and disappeared for a short while, then came back. 'Okay, you can go in now.'

Rain wasn't sure what she'd expected, but Dr Allburn certainly didn't fit her image of a principal. The ones she'd had in England had either been of the stern old lady type or doddery professor lookalikes, all of them with distinguished features and an air of dusty academics. Dr Allburn was nothing like that. He was tall and built like a brick wall, and deeply suntanned with a wide smile of impossibly white teeth. His thick hair, although slicked back neatly from his face, was tied into a small ponytail at the back. Rain tried not to stare.

'Hi there, welcome to Northbrooke High.' He had a booming voice that suited his large frame and he shook her hand vigorously. 'I'm Dr Allburn, but the kids all call me Dr A so I hope you will too. Have a seat, please.'

Slightly shell-shocked, Rain sat on the chair he indicated while he seated himself behind his huge desk and smiled at her again. 'So, you've come to join us for a while, huh?'

'Looks that way,' Rain said. *Talk about stating the obvious.*

He grinned. 'I understand this is your first time in the US.'

'Yes, yes it is. My parents only just moved over here.'

'Well, it's not so different to the UK. You'll soon catch on, don't you worry about that.'

'I'm not worried at all, and just so you know, I'm not here of my own free will.'

'Right. Good to get that point cleared up.' She narrowed her eyes at him, not sure if he was making fun of her or not, but he continued blandly. 'So I hear you had a small problem back at your boarding school. That right?'

She snorted. ‘You could say that. I don’t know what Dad told you, but whatever it was, it’s not true. Well, the tequila part is, but not the rest. And I was so not the ringleader, or any kind of leader, and it wasn’t my idea, no matter what that ratbag Milo told everyone. He’s just a scaredy-cat little shit who’s afraid of his dad and blamed it all on me. Very convenient.’

‘Hey, hey!’ Dr A held up his hands as if to stop her torrent of words. ‘We don’t blame anyone here for any past misdemeanours, so keep your hat on, okay? You’ll be judged on what you do from now on, maybe you could keep that in mind.’

Rain shrugged. She had no intention of doing anything much here at all, but he didn’t need to know that right now.

‘I’d better get someone to show you around and—’

‘That’s not necessary,’ Rain cut in rudely. ‘I can find my own way, thanks. If you just give me my locker number and a class list, I’ll take it from there.’

‘Ooh-kaaay.’ He drew out the word as if he was thinking about it. ‘What classes are you taking?’

‘How should I know? Whatever I have to, I guess.’

‘Well, you’re in the Senior year so you can pretty much choose for yourself.’ He handed over a piece of paper. ‘Here’s a list of subjects. You’ll have to do one English course of some sort and a math one, but other than that, it’s up to you. Minimum six subjects.’

Rain studied the list and quickly made her choices. *This is going to be a doddle.* ‘Fine. I’ll do Futuristic Literature for English …’ *Futuristic Lit?* She almost laughed as such a subject would never have been taught at Blakeborough, only boring old classics. The list said it consisted of reading sci-fi books and writing a few reports on them, so that should be easy. *That’s what I read for fun!* ‘… uhm, geometry for math …’ She’d done that before, so that would be easy too. ‘… French and Spanish …’ She was fairly fluent in both from the many holidays spent in the South of France and the Costa Blanca with her parents.

'… typing …' *Typing? Doesn't everyone know how to do that these days?* '… and maybe Home Ed? Is that, like, cooking?'

'Sure is, honey.'

'That's it, then.'

'Great. If you go back out to Mrs Langan and tell her your choices, she'll draw up a schedule for you and you can head straight to your homeroom.'

'Homeroom?'

'First class of the day starts with roll call, announcements, that sort of thing. Doesn't take long.'

Rain stood up and turned for the door. She knew she was being impolite, but she didn't care. Dr□A might be a nice man, but she still didn't want to be at his poncey old school, so she didn't give a toss what he thought of her. Just as she reached for the handle, however, he spoke again.

'Oh, I almost forgot. We have a new policy this year – all the Seniors have to participate in an extracurricular activity after school, like team sports or helping out with the Yearbook and stuff. Your choice again, here's a list.' He held out another piece of paper and she walked over to take it reluctantly.

Great, so now I'll be forced to spend even more time in this place every day. Just what she needed. 'Whatever. I'll do football,' she said, after a cursory glance at the sheet.

'Huh? No, that's too violent for girls. You could get seriously hurt.' His eyebrows had risen halfway to his hairline, which looked kind of comical, but Rain suppressed the smile she almost gave him. She didn't want to smile. Not now. Maybe not ever.

'No, I mean football as in soccer.' Rain clarified.

'Oh, right, of course, sorry.' He laughed. 'I forgot that's what you guys call it.'

'Good, then I'll do that, like I said.'

'You sure 'bout that? The thing is, we don't have a girls' team this year. There weren't enough of them interested, so you'd have to try out for the boys' one.'

She shrugged again. ‘So? I’ve played before, at Blakeborough. I was better than some of the boys there, plus I run pretty fast. Or is it a problem? I mean, are girls not allowed or something? Because, you know, that’s kind of sexist.’ Rain crossed her arms over her chest and adopted a challenging stance, ready to fight her corner. If there was one thing she hated, it was when girls weren’t allowed to do something the boys were. She’d always been a tomboy and knew she was just as good as any boy at most things.

‘No, no, I don’t think there are any rules against having girls on the team. I just thought you might like to know, that’s all. Don’t be upset if the coach doesn’t pick you for the team.’

‘Well, it doesn’t bother me.’

‘Fine, you go right ahead, then. Tell Coach Rivers I said it was okay. Practice sessions are Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays after school, out back on the playing field. You can go try out this afternoon.’

She nodded and headed for the door again. ‘Bye,’ she said, then added grudgingly, ‘Thanks.’

‘No problem.’ She could almost hear the smile in his voice, but didn’t want to see it, so she didn’t look at him again.

To be continued ….

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About the Author



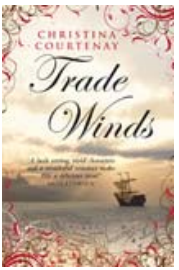
Christina Courtenay lives in Herefordshire and is married with two children. Although born in England she has a Swedish mother and was brought up in Sweden. In her teens, the family moved to Japan where she had the opportunity to travel extensively in the Far East.

Christina is chairman of the Romantic Novelists' Association. In 2011, Christina's first novel *Trade Winds* was short listed for The Romantic Novelists' Association's Award for Best Historical Fiction. Her second novel, *The Scarlet Kimono*, won the Big Red Reads' Best Historical Fiction Award. In 2012, *Highland Storms* won the RoNA for Best Historical Romantic Novel of the year. And *The Silent Touch of Shadows*, Christina's fourth novel, won the award for Best Historical Read at the Festival of Romance.

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Short-listed for the Romantic Novelists' Association's Pure Passion Award for Best Historical Fiction 2011

Marriage of convenience – or a love for life?

It's 1732 in Gothenburg, Sweden, and strong-willed Jess van Sandt knows only too well that it's a man's world. She believes she's being swindled out of her inheritance by her stepfather – and she's determined to stop it.

When help appears in the unlikely form of handsome Scotsman Killian Kinross, himself disinherited by his grandfather, Jess finds herself both intrigued and infuriated by him. In an attempt to recover her fortune, she proposes a marriage of convenience. Then Killian is offered the chance of a lifetime with the Swedish East India Company's Expedition and he's determined that nothing will stand in his way, not even his new bride.

He sets sail on a daring voyage to the Far East, believing he's put his feelings and past behind him. But the journey doesn't quite work out as he expects …

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Winner of the 2012 Best Historical Romantic Novel of the year

Who can you trust?

Betrayed by his brother and his childhood love, Brice Kinross needs a fresh start. So he welcomes the opportunity to leave Sweden for the Scottish Highlands to take over the family estate.

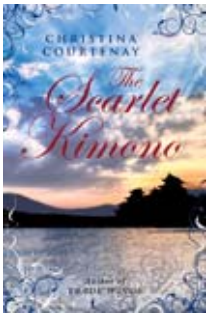
But there's trouble afoot at Rosyth in 1754 and Brice finds himself unwelcome. The estate's in ruin and money is disappearing. He discovers an ally in Marsaili Buchanan, the beautiful redheaded housekeeper, but can he trust her?

Marsaili is determined to build a good life. She works hard at being a housekeeper and harder still at avoiding men who want to take advantage of her. But she's irresistibly drawn to the new clan chief, even though he's made it plain he doesn't want to be shackled to anyone.

And the young laird has more than romance on his mind. His investigations are stirring up an enemy. Someone who will stop at nothing to get what he wants – including Marsaili – even if that means destroying Brice's life forever …

Sequel to Trade Winds.

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Abducted by a Samurai warlord in 17th-century Japan – what happens when fear turns to love?

England, 1611, and young Hannah Marston envies her brother's adventurous life. But when she stows away on his merchant ship, her powers of endurance are stretched to their limit. Then they reach Japan and all her suffering seems worthwhile – until she is abducted by Taro Kumashiro's warriors.

In the far north of the country, warlord Kumashiro is waiting to see the girl who he has been warned about by a seer. When at last they meet, it's a clash of cultures and wills, but they're also fighting an instant attraction to each other.

With her brother desperate to find her and the jealous Lady Reiko equally desperate to kill her, Hannah faces the greatest adventure of her life. And Kumashiro has to choose between love and honour …

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How do you start a new life, leaving behind all you love?

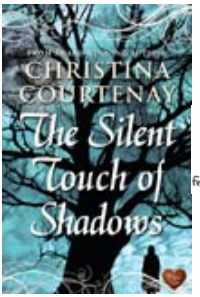
It's 1641, and when Midori Kumashiro, the orphaned daughter of a warlord, is told she has to leave Japan or die, she has no choice but to flee to England. Midori is trained in the arts of war, but is that enough to help her survive a journey, with a lecherous crew and an attractive captain she doesn't trust?

Having come to Nagasaki to trade, the last thing Captain Nico Noordholt wants is a female passenger, especially a beautiful one. How can he protect her from his crew when he can't keep his own eyes off her?

During their journey, Nico and Midori form a tentative bond, but they both have secrets that can change everything. When they arrive in England, a civil war is brewing, and only by standing together can they hope to survive …

Sequel to The Scarlet Kimono.

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Winner of the 2012 Best Historical Read from the Festival of Romance

What will it take to put the past to rest?

Professional genealogist Melissa Grantham receives an invitation to visit her family's ancestral home, Ashleigh Manor. From the moment she arrives, life-like dreams and visions haunt her. The spiritual connection to a medieval young woman and her forbidden lover have her questioning her sanity, but Melissa is determined to solve the mystery.

Jake Precy, owner of a nearby cottage, has disturbing dreams too, but it's not until he meets Melissa that they begin to make sense. He hires her to research his family's history, unaware their lives are already entwined. Is the mutual attraction real or the result of ghostly interference?

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