

Sea Scoundrel  
by  
Annette Blair

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SEA SCOUNDREL, (Lady Patience, the uncut version), Knave of Hearts, One of Four

Lady Patience Kendall crossed the sea to marry, but her intended died before she arrived. Only one way to get home: charge four hapless American Colonials to find them titled husbands in London. At the ship, she realized their mothers expected each to wed the elusive Marquess of Andover. Gad, she'd have to seek an introduction. At Sea, Captain Grant St. Benedict was anything but friendly, just because her girls caused a few mishaps? Grant had never met a woman more irritating, or more desirable, than the Lady Patience Kendall. But however dangerous his interest, he couldn't resist teaching the delicious distraction that independence was nothing to passion.

A history of SEA SCOUNDREL: In 1999, the book, LADY PATIENCE, needed to be cut in half to fit the Precious Gem Line for Kensington Publishing. Now, here in its full award-winning, uncut glory for the first time is the story of the Sea Captain and his Lady.

CAPTIVE SCOUNDREL, (Formerly Lady Faith.), Knave of Hearts, Book Two  
PROPER SCOUNDREL (Formerly Scoundrel in Disguise), Knave of Hearts, Book Three  
HOLY SCOUNDREL, Knave of Hearts, Book Four

Review Quotes for SEA SCOUNDREL:

“The love story between the Captain and his lady is simply marvelous. The dialogue is witty and the girls’ shipboard antics will have you laughing out loud. Don’t miss this one.” Suzanne Coleburn, *The Belles & Beaux of Romance*

“This lighthearted romance interlaced with humorous, zany, shipboard antics, charming repartee, matchmaking, and sensual love scenes, will delight any lover of historical romance.” Sofia, *Calico Trails Review*

“Ms. Blair's writing is as smooth as a fine Kentucky bourbon. Sexy ... fun ... top notch entertainment. ” Debbie, *Romance Reader at Heart*

Knave of Hearts, One  
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## Note to Reader

Surprisingly, there seems to be several schools of thought as to the length of the Regency Period. Purists say it lasted from 1811 to 1820, at the time George IV ruled as Regent during the well known “madness” of his father. Others say that the Prince Regent’s influence lasted beyond 1820, and not until William IV came to the throne, in 1830, did the Regency period finally come to an end. And still others place the Regency at 1811 to 1837, when Queen Victoria succeeded William IV. For this series, I have chosen the broadest Regency timeframe.

## Dedication

With a hundred Nana kisses  
And a world of love,  
To Kelsey Elizabeth Mullens,  
The best Thanksgiving gift ever.  
All ruffles and lace, a sweet smiling face,  
Lover of fairies and fashions, shoes with class,  
But earrings or socks must never be matched.  
She's a dancer, a gymnast, a beautiful lass.  
A veterinarian, she'll be, or an actress with sass.  
Emotions she'll express—no words need be said,  
As an artist and leader, she silently shines.  
A whirlwind so bright, she blows our minds.  
Watching her grow is a wonderful time.

SEA SCOUNDREL  
Knave of Hearts, Book One  
by  
Annette Blair

PROLOGUE

The Zebulon Fishkill Academy for Unruly Boys, 1805

“Blighted knave!” said Old Fishface as he tossed another boy, this one at least ten years younger than the oldest, by the scruff of his neck, into the heating stewpot of rotting hay, sweaty animals, and ripe manure that comprised the décor of the Academy’s stable. “Muck out a stall, and find yourself a place to sleep, like these scoundrels did,” the schoolmaster told the latest discard. “You keep the animals clean, groomed, and fed, you might fare half as well.”

He regarded the three who’d come first, spines straight, proud despite their punishments. “This one depends on a Lady’s charity for tuition,” Fishface said. “His Lady Bountiful is an aristocrat who does not want the vicar’s son sniffing around her girl. Well, Lord or pauper matters not to me. These are your quarters, the four of you. Make the best of it.” Fishface slammed the door and left them, boys of all ages, to their own devices.

“He set to kick us out of school?” the youngest, the vicar’s son asked.

Justin Devereux, future duke, chuckled. “Course not. He wants the money we bring in. If he had his way, he’d keep us forever. We grow up and break out is how we leave this place.”

The new rat in the stable raised his chin and regarded the speaker. “Your brother got you kicked in here with a lie. You know that, right?”

Justin gave a half nod. “The problem usually is my brother.”

The Marquess of Andover stepped toward the vicar’s boy. “Be ye knave or scoundrel?”

“Bit a’both, I’d say. Knave of hearts, maybe. He’s right about the girl with the title. I plan to have her.”

“Guess we’re knaves and scoundrels, then,” Andover said. “Each a knave of hearts, and scoundrels all.”

“Absolutely,” Fitzalan added, slapping the newest on the back. “But we have to make this count. Form a bond. Swear an oath.”

“As in ... be there, if we’re needed?” Andover confirmed. “We show our scoundrel faces to the world but call on each other in times of trouble, whatever life hands us?”

“I like that,” the vicar’s son said. “I might not be rich, but I’m strong. I can hold up my end. Whatever, as you say.”

“Till the end of our days,” Fitzalan cautioned. “We’ve bonded in our rebellion, anyway, and that’s a strong bond.”

So knaves of hearts and scoundrels all, lord and pauper alike, no matter their age, they sealed a lifetime oath, each raising a tin cup of brackish water.

And a fine deal they made of it.

# SEA SCOUNDREL

Annette Blair

Newport, Rhode Island

August 1822

## CHAPTER ONE

Fists opening and clenching at her sides, looking up one road and down the next, Patience Kendall strode in and out of the shadow of the ship bobbing in the water—the ship that would sail her home to England.

Filled with anticipation, even dread, her stride as uneven as the cobbles beneath her feet, one rude sailor burning a hole in her back with his bold interest, Patience stumbled. And the ground rose up to greet her.

Flat on her face, knowing the sailor witnessed her disgrace; Patience wished the waves battering the sea-wall would boil over and claim her. She heard them retreat instead.

Wishing she might vanish, aware she could not, Patience flexed a limb, tested another, surprised to note that nothing hurt. She found the sun-warmed cobbles against her cheek smooth, soothing. Before her eyes, an ant, arms akimbo, stood atop a purple shell fragment examining her ... probably wondering how in Hades he would scale so large an object.

Patience knew exactly how the little fellow felt.

Pressing the flat of her hands against the stones, Patience raised her head and looked about. As Gulls calmed and returned to earth, the sound of a man's laughter grew.

She could be injured, or even dead,—would that she had been so lucky—so if he were coming to her rescue, he was taking his sweet time about it.

Tangled in her petticoats, Patience struggled awkwardly to her knees as a chuckling sailor stopped before her.

She looked up, way up, the reflection of the sun masking his features.

He offered a strong, bronzed hand.

She ignored it.

Swathed in dignity, she rose unaided ... and caught her heel in her skirt.

Scrambling for a handhold, she grasped the sailor's shirt—to the cost of three bone buttons—and stood herself erect, the top of her head nearly reaching his chin.

For a moment, he stared at his shirt, then, brows raised, he regarded her with astonishment. Despite his pirate's jaw covered with dark stubble, long wind-blown hair, and thick unmatched brows, a look of wry amusement softened his angular features. Was he her bold watcher?

Holding his gaze, Patience attempted a discreet search for her missing slipper with the toes of her unshod foot.

Her rescuer bowed. "Allow me." He bent on his haunches to find it.

Patience groaned inwardly, and squeaked when he took her foot in his palm, his touch disconcerting but gentle, his cradling hold nearly a caress.

When he replaced the slipper, her balance wavered and Patience found her hands wrist-deep in the dark silk of his hair. She teetered, and pulled his head forward with the strength of her grasp, until she smothered him, neck-deep, in two skirts and three petticoats.

At his muffled chuckle, she squealed and released him.



The scoundrel stood, grin broad, hair charmingly mussed.

The heat in her face threatened to ignite, and despite an odd physical reaction to his throaty chuckle—or perhaps because of it—Patience had the remarkable urge to erase his smile with the flat of her hand. “That wasn’t the least amusing,” she said. “I might have been injured.”

“What? Did you think I’d bite your leg?”

Her inner thigh, to be exact. Patience set her jaw, ignoring a new wash of warmth. “I mean that I might have been injured when I stumbled.”

“Fell flat on your face, more like.” One side of his sculpted mouth curved up as he combed a hand through his overlong hair, and made her think of a pup in a laundry basket—mussed and adorable.

Adorable? She must have hit her head.

“You weren’t in danger,” he said. “Not an inch of you took the least little blow. You went down like a gazelle.” He winked, causing an absurd jumble of flutters in her wayward breast. “You trip and fall in a most graceful manner,” said he, “though I’m afraid I cannot say the same for your method of rising again.” The knave’s smile grew, his chuckle swelling to full-bodied laughter.

“Go to the devil!” Patience snapped.

His black eyes twinkled and held a promise Patience did not understand, and chose to ignore. “At your service,” he said, sketching a bow worthy of a gallant in his lady’s chamber. Lord and what made her think of that? With a last, mocking grin, the handsome sailor turned on his heel and sauntered toward his ship, whistling a jaunty tune.

Patience searched the ground, itching to grab a stone and aim it in his general direction. How bloodthirsty of her. In the end, she counted to one hundred and twenty three, at which point, the urge to do him harm had nearly passed.

Rude man, acting as if going to the devil would be his pleasure, fawning like some ... mindless dandy, when his wits were every bit as sharp as ... what? She turned, walked a distance, and stopped. Did she care how sharp his wits? Certainly not.

Patience sat on her trunk in the midst of the bustling dock and attempted to turn her mind to her girls’ arrivals.

Despite an attempt to banish her rescuer from her thoughts, she could not. He had confused her so completely; she must appear clumsy and witless.

Patience groaned. Lord, she couldn’t stand on her own feet, how in holy Hannah was she to manage four naive, even spoiled, young ladies?

If Aunt Harriette ever heard that the man she’d sailed from England to wed had died two weeks before her arrival, her aunt would make Patience commit the Old Testament to memory, and all those begats would addle her brain.

Except that she was free of Aunt Harriette. Forever. She’d wanted her independence. And now she had it. By all that was holy, she’d become so independent, she had dependents.

Patience sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound, as Papa always said. She bit her lip. He usually said that in reference to his gambling and drinking, however. Oh dear. Perhaps she was more like Papa than she thought. She did suppose that finding titled English husbands for four flighty colonials might be considered a gamble, by some stretch of the imagination.

No. Those girls depended on her, and she would not fail them. No, it was Mama she was more like. Papa always said Mama could accomplish anything she set her pretty little head to do. So mama did. And so too would her daughter ... despite Aunt Harriette’s thoughts to the contrary.

Patience looked beyond looming masts and furled sails, toward a heaven rife with cotton

clouds in an azure sky.

Sighing, hoping her prayer had been heard, she smoothed the unruly wind-whipped curls from her face and gazed toward the ship, up and up higher, to the top of the tallest mast. And there he stood securing a sail, the knave who'd come to her rescue—if rescue it could be called—looking down at her with half a salute and a full, mocking smile.

Patience turned quickly away. A scoundrel, she confirmed, with a face chiseled by a master—just like her father. Succumbing to the charm of a man like that could be perilous.

Seagulls seemed to squawk louder and soar faster, as if in keeping with the wild new beat of her heart, and trepidation squeezed the breath from her chest with a mighty fist. Oh Lord, what had she got herself into?

In that turbulent moment, Patience wanted nothing more than to turn tail and run. But her practical nature took command and she reined in her panic. “No time for foolishness,” she told herself. “Well begun is nearly done.” She stood, straightened her spine and raised her chin, prepared to face whatever, whomever, she must for her girls.

The endless, silver sea before her made her smile, the scent of brine sharp, the breeze gentling. She inhaled deeply, once, twice, three slow times ... and calmed. She'd always found sea-air soothing, perhaps because of the times she and Papa walked the shore together. Right now, she could almost feel him squeeze her hand.

She'd adored the handsome devil. He'd smelled of spice, smoke and brandy—too much brandy, but he was a most wonderful father. He once said they'd made a grave error naming her Patience. It was a long time before she understood what he meant by that.

She was twelve when she lost him. He had gambled away their money, saw a way to win it back and bet on a horse he was to race. Riding drunk, Papa broke his neck.

A week later, her twin brothers were born. Next morning, nurse said Mama and her brothers had gone to be with papa. Patience wondered for a long time why they hadn't taken her. It still didn't bear thinking about.

Then she went to live with Aunt Harriette who said Papa had killed himself, and mama and her brothers as well. Patience would never forgive her aunt for that.

“Yoo-hoo! Patience! Patience Kendall!” Sophie, a vision in yellow, like an overturned buttercup, had finally arrived. Except for the fact that, unlike her, Sophie had a bosom, everything about her was petite, her height, her waist, and her delicate features. But what she lacked in size, Sophie made up for in enthusiasm.

But as if Sophie cast a spell, Patience's rescuer soon approached.

“Patience,” Sophie said eyes wide and eager. “I couldn't wait, so I came ahead.” She stood on her toes to scan the ship. “Where are the sailors?” She held her hat, looked up, and shaded her eyes. “I see some, Patience, in the rigging, and—”

“Sophie. Mind now, we are not looking to find sailors for husbands. Your mama would not appreciate—”

“There's Mama's carriage, now,” Sophie said, to interrupt the scold, and Patience's rescuer, sun-dark arms crossed, settled himself against a nearby piling.

Mrs. Kane heaved her imposing rose-silk and lace bosom through the carriage door first, and stepped down with a victorious smile. “My dear Patience,” she shouted. “The happy day at last!”

Mr. Kane must be deaf, Patience thought, or wish he was. His wife spoke like an actress on a stage. With the woman's embrace, Patience's face smothered in bosoms, she wondered what the scoundrel must think.

“Soon you will be back in your own beloved homeland,” the matron said, removing bank notes from her reticule. “Here is the money for your passage, rent on a house and wardrobes for you both. Don’t skimp now. It’s costly to make a good match.” She looked to the heavens. “To think, the Marquess of Andover might be my son-in-law! He’ll thank you for this, you know.”

Patience’s rescuer straightened so fast, he nearly distracted Patience from her dilemma; Mrs. Kane thought she knew the Marquess of Andover ... well enough to introduce Sophie? Patience heard about the man forever. He might be ninety; he might even be dead. But to address the misunderstanding now, when plans were made and money spent, would be useless. No, she would seek an introduction to the doddering rake when they arrived in London. He would be too old; the girls would lose interest. Everything would be fine.

Mrs. Kane beamed and clasped her hands in delight. “Don’t forget, a bonus if Sophie weds a title. The bigger the title, the bigger the bonus.”

“Hah!” came her rescuer’s singular comment.

Mrs. Kane wept upon departing as if she were leaving Sophie to the sodden earth for eternity.

The next of Patience’s charges arrived. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown dress ... Grace. Spectacles slipping down her nose, she clutched a basket to her breast, as if it held all her worldly possessions.

Patience had charged the same for each girl with the exception of Grace. Now the Parson named each expense, much as Sophie’s parent had done, and settled accounts. Patience consoled Grace’s father, and the girl followed a trunk-hauling seaman aboard, in complete control of her emotions.

Patience’s were in turmoil. Her rescuer’s interest infuriated her. She must send him on his way.

Brows rising, he unfolded his arms and straightened as she approached. “It would be nice if your captain put in an appearance, Mister...?”

He bowed. “St. Benedict.”

Warmth crept up her neck. “Not, Captain St. Benedict?”

He gave her the devil’s own smile. “At your service.”

Now, she understood his arrogance. “So, you are the Captain.”

“And you are a fraud, Miss Kendall.”

Patience looked about to see if anyone heard. “That’s Lady Patience to you,” she snapped.

Eyes ablaze, the man slapped the piling. “A bloody English Aristocrat. And haughty as all hell, to boot. I should have known.”

Patience’s own fire blazed. “And you are a rude colonial, not fit to associate with your own kind, much less mine.”

Stormy eyes dark, the captain angled his head. “As you say.”

Patience turned away, amid confusion and regret. Why had she made such an appalling statement? Colonials were honest and refreshing. And in a way, she was a fraud. She only used her title because circumstances demanded it and threw it in his face because of his insult. She turned back. “Captain, please I—”

“Don’t bother to apologize, Lady Patience, your words mean less than nothing. For a child, though, you play at dangerous games. Perhaps someday, when you grow up a bit, you’ll realize —”

“Child? What a preposterous—”

“Oh, you play the adult well enough, but—”

“How old do you think I am?”

He examined her person, slowly, thoroughly, tangled curls to dusty slippers, his gaze a caress so alive, Patience shivered. “Not a day over sixteen,” he said.

“I’ll have you know I am four and twenty.”

Patience realized she’d stammered like the child he took her for and cringed.

The Captain’s skeptical gaze lowered, almost, but not quite, against his volition, to her nonexistent bosom. And he grinned. “I don’t believe you.”

“Oh! You are such a ... such a ... man! You think a woman’s brains are in her bosom!”

The Captain’s eyes widened and he laughed so hard, sailors on ship and dock stopped to watch.

Mortified, Patience turned away, but her tormentor stepped before her and she walked into his rock-hard chest.

He took her arms to steady her; someone on the ship whistled, and his devil’s eyes danced. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Patience’s urge to do him harm doubled, and she wondered at her bloodlust. His mocking smile returned, and her anger blazed anew. “Take your hands off me.”

He raised them to show they were no longer connected to her person. “I’m trying to apologize, Lady Patience.”

Drat him for that spark of sincerity. “You didn’t want to hear mine. Now I don’t want to hear yours.”

“Touché,” he whispered, leaning close. “But let me clear a misconception for you. I do not, nor does any man to my knowledge, think a woman’s brains are ... ah...” He glanced at her lack of endowment. “There.”

Patience fisted her hands to keep from slapping the smile off his face.

The knave cleared his throat, coughed, and leaned closer still. “Believe me, Lady Patience; men are more likely to think that the size of a woman’s brain decreases as the size of her bosom increases.”

“Then, why do men like women with large bosoms?” Patience slapped a hand to her mouth. As ever, words spilled from her mouth before her brain became engaged. It must be difficult to shock this pirate, but judging by the look on his face, she had just managed it.

A need to correct her blunder overtook her. “No doubt, that is one of the great mysteries of the universe.”

Interest lit his features. “A mystery I would be happy to solve for you when you grow up, Lady Kendall, should you wish it.”

“I tell you, I am four and twenty.”

The glint in his eyes leapt. “Then you wish it now?”

Waves lapped at pilings. A gull shrieked and swooped. The sun throbbed in the sky blistering Patience’s skin; she could feel the burn. “I do not believe this conversation is proper,” she said on a thready whisper, her words ridiculous in their tardiness.

“I did not open the subject,” said he.

Patience’s stomach fluttered with some new malady, like a swarm of butterflies trapped there, and she wished with every breath that it would stop. “Nor should you have continued it.” She stepped back.

He nodded, his eyes, his demeanor that of the brusque Captain once more. “Your pardon. Are you nearly ready to board? We sail with the tide.”

“All the girls have not arrived.”

“All? How many are you taking?”

“I settled arrangements with your agent. Why should you care? I am paying their fare.”

“Accommodations, for one thing. What do you mean you’re paying their fare? Or your own for that matter? I distinctly heard two people say they were paying yours.”

“Why do you care who pays? Your task is to see us safely across the ocean, nothing more. I trust that can be accomplished with as little personal contact as possible.”

The Captain combed a hand through his hair, adding to his disreputable appearance. “I’ll send my first mate, Shane, to escort the rest of you. As to personal contact, I heartily agree. Keep yourself and your sweet beauties away from me and my men. Good day, Lady Patience.”

Patience observed the strength in his strong hands and the play of muscles along his sun-bronzed arms as he grasped the rail and hauled himself up the plank in three long, graceful strides. Hot prickles assaulted her as he did. From the memory of his hands cradling her foot, she supposed, or her own foolish words.

This was either going to be the longest month of her life, or it would be the death of her.

\* \* \*

Captain Grant St. Benedict cursed his luck as he circled the deck. Patience. Her parents had, of course, meant the name as warning. Anyone coming in contact with the termagant must need patience aplenty.

From the first, he’d watched her, pacing in nervous agitation, her long auburn hair flying in the breeze, her skirts whipping about her slender ankles. Once, when some inner demon seemed to beset her, she’d puffed out her nonexistent chest as if waiting to have a medal pinned there. Perhaps he’d pin one there himself.

The Captain shook his head. Dangerous thought, that.

He was glad she was as old as she claimed because ... she’d had an ... effect on him, God help him. A scrapper, a schemer, he’d best remember. Charging them all for the same things, promising introductions to the Marquess of Andover.

He’d like to see that happen!

Well she’d follow his rules, or he’d take her over his knee— Now that could be quite the sport. He shook himself against temptation. The safest sport to share with Lady Patience Kendall would be no sport at all.

The double meaning intrigued him. Did he mean he should stay away from her? Or did he mean, deep down, that life would be no fun unless he took a few sporting chances where she was concerned?

He meant, he told himself with firm resolve, that he should steer clear of her.

No. She should steer clear of him, by God! And if she made a wrong move, just one....

When a knot of sailors broke into raucous laughter, Grant approached, grateful to take his thoughts from—

“That feisty red-haired wench could surely warm a man’s cockles,” said a salty-voiced sailor.

Grant fisted his hands. “You no-account, lazy water rats, get your sun-dried carcasses over here, on the double.”

His tars moved with amazing speed for being taken by surprise.

They stood alert, wary as he examined them. “Jasper, where are the two young ladies who came aboard earlier?”

“Cabin deck, Cap’n.”

“Good. Now hear this. Several members of the fair sex will be traveling with us this trip.”

Grant strolled beside the line of mangy tars, hands behind his back. “Women aboard are unusual, but not unheard-of.” He stopped, examined each in turn. “You may carry water for them, offer a word of advice, and see they come to no harm. You may even befriend them.” He took a breath, prepared to snap them into awareness. “But you will mind your manners! You will mind your language! And most of all, you will mind your hands!”

Sven smoothed his beard. Paddy shuffled.

“And if you so much as pull your Jonny-ready from your trousers within twenty feet of one, you will discover it is no longer a prized member of the ‘cockles’ that wanted warming.” He looked at each in turn. God, they were a scurvy lot. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Aye Cap’n.”

“Yes Sir.”

“This will be a long voyage. Fail to heed my warning, and you’re shark bait.” As their Captain, he nodded his dismissal. “Prepare to haul anchor.”

Moments later, an angry, grumbling hoard approached him. What now?

“Don’t want no women sailin’ with us, Cap’n. Women’s bad luck ‘board ship.”

Superstitious jack-tars. “Those women are paying premium prices to sail,” he said. “Don’t forget that on my ship, the bigger the purse, the bigger your cuts.” He waited, watched them consider his words. A couple nodded, but they were nowhere near satisfied. Though quiet for the moment, he knew he’d hear more about this in the days to come. Damn. “Double time, men. Make ready to harness wind.”

Within minutes, rigging creaked and wheels turned; his vessel was coming to life.

Which, he had to admit, held a certain budding promise this morning, given his zesty anticipation. He hadn’t heard a word he said, Grant thought, as he leaned on the rail to observe the source of that zest while testing the stubble on his chin. There she stood, a brazen saucepot with auburn hair and green eyes, waiting for her chicks and charming his shiftless sailors without trying. Stubborn and quarrelsome, that red-head. And the very tendency in her made him want to respond in kind, to see how far she’d go—which could be downright hazardous to his peace.

As Captain St. Benedict, he shouted orders toward the dock, and watched his men scatter.

Rag-mannered, crusty tars he’d dispatched in a trice, but how to manage a bold vixen, who smelled of wildflowers and questioned the attraction of the male animal to large bosoms?

## CHAPTER TWO

Angelique arrived carrying a pup in blue flannel, her parents trailing behind. “I don’t want to go to gloomy old London. I want to stay and marry Dickon,” came her greeting, or lack, thereof.

“Don’t be a goose, Angel,” her mama scolded. “Dickon is nothing but a fisherman. Now stop your pouting. You will go to London with Lady Patience and marry that rich Marquess.”

Patience winced. While she hoped she could be as stern with Angel, mention of the Marquess diluted her pleasure in the lesson.

The mother kissed her ‘Angel’ as the scowling Captain joined them. Patience would think his glower natural, if she hadn’t been blinded by his earlier smile. “Here is Captain St. Benedict,” she said.

The Captain nodded. “Give your pup back, so you may board.”

Crocodile tears. “But Dickon gave him to me. Surely you don’t expect me to part with Dickon and Wellington, too?”

Patience knew if the Captain would be gentle, but firm, with Angel, he might convince her to leave the dog. “Captain, please,” she said, in an effort to warn him. “May I—”

Angel’s mother poked her husband. The man blustered. “I say, Captain. Let the chit take the beastie. Won’t be a bother. Angel’ll take care of it, won’t you puddin?”

“Of course, Papa.” She batted her lashes.

The Captain’s eyes narrowed. “Lady Patience, may I have a word with you?”

He seemed calm, but fury lay beneath his composure. Curious that she noticed, in view of their short acquaintance. Patience turned to Angel’s parents. “If you will excuse us.”

At their nod, she followed a short distance away, prepared to warn him. “Captain, don’t...”

He leaned so close, Patience saw each long lash shading eyes darker than a midnight sea. The crinkle lines at the corners of those eyes said he smiled often, which was not the case at this moment.

“Here are my rules,” he said, snapping her back to the issue at hand. “I am holding you personally responsible. You will keep the beast in the cabin at all times—” He snarled. Snarled! “Except for once a day when I allow it on deck. Then, you will clean up after it. Do I make myself clear?”

“Don’t make the mistake of letting—”

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Captain, are you always so unpleasant?”

“Yes.”

Patience scowled as good as she got. “Perhaps that’s why you do it so well.”

The Captain’s eyes widened, a smile breaking, despite his effort to stifle it.

He went to address Angel’s father, then Patience watched Angel’s family follow him to their carriage, where he unloaded Angel’s bags.

The Captain returned to her. “I’m anxious to get under way, Lady Patience. I’ll send Shane right down.”

“You said that before, but you came back, instead.”

“I had a near-mutiny to handle. Some of my men don’t want women aboard.”

“Oh? I’m surprised. Most men would enjoy a pretty woman.”

“The rest of them want to do exactly that.”

Patience felt her face warm, but didn't know precisely why. She wished Aunt Harriette hadn't been so secretive about men and marriage. She was certain there were things she should know, especially with husband-hunting in her future. Patience sighed in frustration. Other than the fact that no man would want her flat-chested self—and in Aunt Harriette's opinion, she should be glad of it—her aunt had said nothing of what happened between a man and a woman.

The Captain examined her expression with a shake of his head. "You really don't understand a thing of what I just said, do you? And I'll bet you wouldn't know a leer from a smile. Damn. Well, take my word; this isn't going to be a picnic in Hyde Park, Lady Patience. We're going to be together for weeks. The men have hardly been ashore this time 'round. That means it's been ... Never mind. Just keep yourself and the rest of your beauties the hell away from my men."

"Certainly, Captain."

He ran his hand through his hair. "'Certainly Captain', she says, as if it were the easiest task in the world. Damned if I'm not stuck with a flock of innocents." He narrowed his eyes. "Well, innocent in some ways. Why didn't these poor wretches give you money like the rest?"

Angel's fee had been settled in advance. "That's my affair," she said. "It has nothing to do with you."

"You're right. Your affairs are not my concern, thank the stars. I hope you realize, though, what a huge responsibility you take on."

"Don't worry, Captain St. Benedict, I'll take care of everything."

"I don't believe it for a minute. Bloody hell." He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Jasper!"

A sailor in the rigging looked down. "Yo, Cap'n."

"Find Shane."

Jasper saluted. "Aye, Aye."

The Captain blew out a frustrated breath. "I'll draw and quarter the bloody agent who booked this fare," he said to no one in particular. His look, when it finally settled on her, made Patience feel like a fly in his pudding. "I'm setting sail in fifteen minutes," he said, and walked away.

A sandy haired sailor arrived shortly. "I'm to escort the ladies aboard," he said with boyish charm. "Name's Shane."

Pleased there would be a friendly face among the crew, Patience turned to Angel. "Shane will take you aboard now."

Shane offered his arm, which Angel took.

"The last passenger should arrive any minute, Shane," Patience shouted after them.

"Be right back ma'am."

The Captain wasn't pleased at how easily his brother had charmed the vixen. "She's a lady, Shane," he said when Shane stepped on deck.

"I can tell," Shane said.

"No, I mean she really is a lady," the Captain said. "As in 'The Lady Patience.' Don't call her ma'am."

Shane raised a brow. "The hell you say?"

"Shane," Grant warned. "There's a lady present."

Shane looked smug. "A lady? Or ... a lady?"

The Captain bit back his curse. "Call her, 'Lady Patience.'"

"Aye, aye Cap'n." Shane saluted and walked away laughing.



Grant tightened a backstay rope with an angry stroke. First mates who think they're smart, a ship full of lusty, superstitious tars, and one redheaded siren. A voyage to remember in the making!"

Patience's relief at Rose's arrival vanished when a woman, whose scowl could curdle milk, threw the carriage door open and pushed Rose out. "Get thee gone, daughter of Satan!"

Patience stepped forward, but Rose rallied. "Please, Mama. Please let me stay. Don't make me leave my—"

"Slut," the woman spat, pushing her daughter away.

Rose crumpled to the ground as wheels of her mother's departing carriage ran over her skirt.

Shane lifted Rose, supporting the weeping girl as Patience dusted shell fragments from her dress.

Rose composed herself. "Thank you, both of you." Then she saw people watching and buried her face in Shane's shirt.

"Have you nothing better to do than gape at a woman in distress?" Patience shouted, scattering the watchers. She followed Shane, his arm around Rose, and stopped to look up, beyond spiked masts and circling gulls. You did this on purpose, didn't You? I'm to be taught a lesson, aren't I? But you've thrown me worse than this, you know. She took a step, saw the captain waiting, cross-armed, at the top of the plank, and anticipation shot through her, rare and unrestrained. And her heart leapt.

Soon enough, cries of, "Hoist away," and "Set sail," turned to the moans and creaks as sails unfurled, snapped and billowed, and Patience followed her girls toward the ladder to the low-ceilinged cabin deck.

"Watch your step, ladies," the Captain said, taking hands as the girls stepped down. "It'll get easier with practice."

As Patience prepared to descend, she knew he was waiting for her to fall, again, so when he made to take her hand, she snatched it back ... and fell against him, every soft inch of her against every hard inch of him.

His eyes were so intense, warmth stole over her. This was worse than his hand caressing her foot. Her breasts nuzzled his stomach; her stomach met his ... oh, much worse.

She tried to extract herself gracefully, but he held her tight, the twinkle in those eyes belying his innocence. The brute was enjoying this. She pushed him. "Let me go, you rogue. I should realize by now, not to expect anything but insolence from you."

He let go. "My Lady, you wound me."

She stepped back. "I'd like to. I really would. But I haven't a weapon to hand."

His chuckle followed her down the companionway.

The girls' bickering permeated the heat of Patience's ire. "Mama wants me to marry him," Angel said. "Lord Andover will want an original. He's bound to pick me."

Sophie, looking wounded, stared at her friend. "How can you say such a thing when you know very well that my mama has her heart set on the Marquess for me? This whole trip was her idea."

Patience bristled at their childish display. "Hush, girls. I think Lord Andover is too elderly to want any of you. He was an old rakehell when I was a babe."

The only sound that could be heard was the Captain's ill-mannered snigger. Patience turned, surprised to find him behind her. "Captain St. Benedict, will it be a practice of yours to be

present for every awkward moment this entire trip? I feel as if some ancient curse has befallen me. Surely you have other duties that call to you.”

His smile rankled. “On the contrary, Lady Patience, my most pressing duty at this moment is to see you settled. And bearing witness to your discomfort has become the highlight of my day.”

“The highlight of mine would be if you fell overboard.”

“Unlike you, I am not awkward on my feet. I would have to be pushed.”

“I will see what I can do.” Patience snapped her skirt.

He angled his head. “As you wish.” He might as well have dared her. And, as if the gauntlet had not been passed, he indicated the room. “This is one of your cabins. As you can see, your things are here; you may sort them later. Your second cabin is directly across the way. Follow me.”

Angel closed Wellington inside with their trunks and followed everyone across the hall. Patience examined the tiny cabin. “Captain, we are five women with but two small beds. Surely there are quarters better suited to our needs.” She made for the companionway.

The Captain ordered the girls to, “Stay!” and followed.

Patience opened the last door to find a large cabin with two double-width bunks. This must surely be the most beautiful place on the ship, she thought as she examined the cabin in detail. Thick, slanting beams of sunshine entered through six, multi-paned windows across one entire wall. As sunlight passed through the etched glass, the beams broke, and prisms of bright color shone on the polished wood furniture and sailing instruments placed strategically about. “This will do nicely.”

“It will not!”

“Do I detect one of your autocratic rules coming on, Captain?”

He shut them inside, the door cutting them off, it seemed, from the rest of the world, and he stepped close. His scent, already familiar to her, was as comforting as it was disquieting.

“This, my Lady,” he said. “Is my cabin. The second bunk belongs to Shane.” He gave her an assessing glance, then, lids lowered, he reached up to finger the lace at her collar.

Patience was certain her throat swelled, for she could not seem to swallow.

“If you would care to share,” he said, his voice husky. “I could be most accommodating.”

“Share your cabin?”

He stepped a bit closer. “My bunk.”

His words, like cold water in her face, hit Patience full force. “You insult me, Captain.”

“On the contrary, Lady Patience, you should be honored. I never offer to share my bunk.”

He examined her, almost surprised at what he saw. He touched an errant curl at her shoulder, hesitated then lowered his hand. Some inner struggle seemed to overtake him. “I apologize, my Lady,” he said, and opened his cabin door indicating that she should precede him.

They returned to the girls.

Patience examined the tiny quarters with as much relief over her location as displeasure over its size. “Why do you take passengers if you have only two cabins? It makes no sense.”

“When my ticket agent is in his right mind—” He sighed. “Though I suspect his son, Dan, of—”

“The agent was young.”

“I was afraid of that. You see, the Knave’s Secret is a cargo ship, but I like to take one or two passengers on occasion. Tradesmen make interesting companions on a voyage. We discuss business, investments, topics that make the days pass. But unfortunately, this trip—”

“But you have a male passenger, do you not?”

“We do not.”

“I saw him board this morning.”

“Only sailors have boarded, other than you and your girls.”

“He was no sailor. He was a gentleman.” Patience heard her insult, tried to repair it. “That is to say, he was a man of—”

The Captain’s scowl dared her to continue.

“I ... didn’t think he was a sailor.”

“I sincerely wish you were correct,” the Captain said in disgust.

“We are women, Captain, not cattle. We are perfectly capable of providing diverting dinner conversation, should you wish it.”

He scoffed. “Yes four children arguing over a man they never met, who wouldn’t want them under any condition, must prove incredibly stimulating dinner companions. The Marquess of Andover, indeed. Save your diverse topics, Lady Patience, I’ll eat with my men.” He looked about the cabin. “Now, I trust you understand the living arrangements?”

Patience itched to slap the smirk from his face. “Perfectly.”

“Good. Three of you will share one cabin, two the other. We’ll string hammocks. You can put them away during the day to allow for adequate living space.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that in the first place?”

“You hardly allowed me the opportunity before you stormed—”

“Enough,” Patience said. “Angel, you and your puppy will share the other cabin with Grace. Rose, Sophie and I will share this one. Rose you may take the bunk.”

The Captain’s eloquent eyebrow rose. “Taking a hammock, Lady Patience. My, my. I am impressed.”

Patience smiled, refusing to be baited further.

The Captain coughed, nonplused. “I’ll leave you to your arrangements, then. Someone will be down to hang the hammocks later. Good day.” He stepped into the companionway and shut the door behind him with an authoritative click.

Sophie stamped her foot. “He called us children.”

Grace frowned. “And he said the Marquess wouldn’t want any of us. That wasn’t very nice.”

Angel tossed her chestnut curls. “The Marquess will certainly want one of us.” And which of them Angel thought he’d want, they all knew.

A crash caught their attention, then a sharp yipping.

“Wellington!” Angel screamed.

An eerie screech split the air. “Pittypat!” Grace choked.

Together they crossed the hall and Angel threw open the opposite cabin door. Under a chair ran a gray kitten followed by a barking Wellington. Between their skirts to the companionway, then up the ladder and through the hatch the noisy duo scrambled.

The girls followed to the main deck, Angel and Grace calling frantically.

The kitten changed directions, unexpectedly, and ran up the rigging. When Wellington attempted the quick turn, he slipped on the spray-slick deck, puppy legs flat out, and slid through a hawsehole into the ocean.

Angel leaned over the rail screaming.

The Captain came running. “What’s wrong?”

“Wellington has fallen into the sea,” Sophie cried.

At the Captain's murderous look, Patience stepped back. He named this her fault with his angry eyes. "The puppy, Captain! He'll drown or be eaten for bait. Do something!" Patience wailed.

He took Angel by the shoulders and thrust her at Patience. "Keep her the hell away from the rail before she goes over, too." He scanned the murky depths. "Blast and damnation!" The captain shucked his shirt and jumped.

A sailor not too far distant jumped at the same time.

Patience consoled Angel and turned to Grace who was trying to coax down her frightened feline. "A kitten, Grace?"

The girl had the sense to look contrite.

Time seemed suspended.

Finally, the sailor who'd jumped at the same time as the Captain climbed back aboard and gave Angel the pup. She took her shivering pet and began to stammer. The sailor shook his head and left. Angel cuddled the bedraggled pup while she watched the man as if he were the most interesting sight ever.

Patience sighed. She was going to have to watch them very closely.

She and the girls were wrapping Wellington when a heavy silence fell.

Patience looked to where all eyes centered. There, standing on the rail, black hair slick, bronze chest gleaming in the sun, one hand clenching a backstay rope, was a drenched, hard-breathing, furious Captain.

His jump from rail to deck moved his men to action. They returned to work so fast you'd think God had spoken. But he had eyes only for her. A tic worked in his cheek. As he clamped an icy hand around her arm and propelled her toward the hatch, he was the picture of Aunt Harriette's description of Satan.

And he'd come to take her to hell.

Sitting her roughly down on a hard, wooden chair, the Captain slammed his cabin door. With his back to her, he took a cloth and wiped the moisture from his hair, his wide shoulders and the back of his neck. He turned and stared at her, eyes cold, as he wiped his chest. She couldn't decide what was more mesmerizing, his eyes or his naked chest. "Captain, your chest is naked!"

"Because I jumped into the bloody cold ocean to save a dog. A dog, Lady Patience. With all those foolish women screaming like banshees, it's a bloody damn wonder my whole bloody crew didn't jump in the—"

"Bloody damn ocean."

His eyes narrowed. "Did no-one ever tell you, my Lady, that you have the vocabulary of a guttersnipe?"

It certainly wasn't the first time she'd heard that. "Perhaps, Captain, it's because I was a guttersnipe."

"Then the title is as false as the promises you made?"

"Not so. Both are genuine. I will help my girls find titled husbands, and I am, indeed, Lady Patience Kendall." Some experiences in life, however, cannot be helped, she thought.

The Captain shivered. "Well, then, Lady Patience had better watch her mouth, or no titled gentleman will so much as glance at her or her girls."

Patience repeated a despised phrase. "You have an unfortunate tendency to the vulgar, Patience, and you must repent." She smiled at the confusion on her abductor's face. "That, Captain, was my Aunt Harriette speaking. The two of you would get along very well. I don't like

her, either.”

“Be that as it may, we are losing sight of the problems you and your girls have already caused. I’d like to set down some rules. First—”

“Captain, I didn’t know about the kitten.”

“Kitten? I have a bloody cat for a passenger?”

“Dear, quiet Grace sneaked it aboard in a basket.

“Quite appropriate,” the Captain said. “Hell in a hand basket.”

“Captain, if I must watch my language, you should—”

He shot forward to bend over her, and clamp a hand on either arm of her chair.

Caged.

The spicy scent of him carried a salty freshness. His wet hair dripped on her bodice. Each drop seemed to be hot rather than the ice his skin proclaimed it to be. His wide chest, matted with dark, curling hair, was close enough to lay her cheek against. She examined it, then his hard mouth, then his intimidating, midnight blue eyes.

Looking back down, away from those eyes, she faced his chest again and found herself wondering if the hair was soft or coarse and how it would feel against her cheek.

“My dear Lady Patience. I believe I must—”

Patience stood, knocking her chair to the floor. “Captain, please.” But he gave no quarter and she was forced against him, the backs of her knees touching the overturned chair. As she sought to keep her balance, her hand came to rest in the soft, silky tangle about which she had been speculating. She nearly snatched it back at the heat she encountered, but she could not.

The Captain steadied her, bringing her closer, pinning her in place, all of her against all of him. Again. “Captain, your pants.”

“Yes?”

“They’re wet.”

“I could take them off.”

Heated spirals purred through Patience at the bold suggestion. She could no longer deny herself, and moved her fingers the tiniest bit, just to test the texture of the strands beneath them. “They’re getting me a little wet,” she said, trembling within, now that she knew how silky that hair really was, wondering if he would remove ... anything.

The Captain stepped back.

Disappointed, Patience lowered her hand.

“That’s nothing compared to what I want to do to you.”

Patience lost track of their conversation. “What?”

“I want to pick you up and carry you off....”

Her knees turned to jelly.

“And throw you into the ocean. So you would be more than a little wet.”

Now she remembered. She looked away from his angry eyes. “You said Angel could take the pup.”

“You argued in favor of it, Lady Patience. I merely capitulated. Those girls are your responsibility, not mine.”

“When I saw how insincere Angel was about caring for the pup, I tried to tell you, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“You always misunderstand—”

“Always? How can you say that? We have only known each other one day. One day, Captain. Less than twenty-four hours.”

He seemed shaken by her statement, an endearing look of confusion softening his features. “It seems as if we’ve known each other—”

“I know.”

He ran his hands through his hair, sprinkling her in the process.

She didn’t flinch, even when a droplet trailed down her neck and slid between her breasts, even when the Captain watched it and cleared his throat as it disappeared.

Silence filled the moment.

He cleared his throat again. “If you’ll excuse me, I do need to change,” he said, unbuttoning his pants. “I’m neglecting my duties.”

Patience couldn’t look away from those three open buttons or the curling hair that arched into intriguing darkness.

His hands stopped at the fourth button.

Rooted, she looked into his questioning face.

He raised a brow.

Patience turned and fled as if the devil nipped at her heels. The Captain’s sharp, deep laughter followed her into the cool evening air.

Hours later, after Sophie drifted to sleep, and Rose’s weeping calmed, Patience could still hear the humiliating sound. As she sought comfort in her hammock, her afternoon’s foolishness made her worry about her girls. They needed someone smarter, worldlier, and better able to deal with men.

She sighed, knowing there was nothing for it. They had her, only her, and she couldn’t fail them.

She wouldn’t. She’d find them husbands with titles and no bad habits. Were there such men?

Look at the Captain. She expected he had lots of bad habits. Which didn’t matter, because he despised her. And she had lusted after him. She had. She really had. And he knew it. At least she thought it was lust. How was she to know? It was something like, because she’d been very interested in ... everything.

She wasn’t even sure why she was so curious. She had never seen a naked man—except Reggie Hamilton from the neighboring house. When they were eight, they’d disobeyed and gone swimming and she saw his little ... thing. Why in heaven’s name had she stood there just staring at where the Captain’s little thing was?

Patience groaned, mortified once again, and pulled the blanket over her head.

For hours, she squirmed and shifted, uncomfortable in the spider-web of netting she must use as a bed for the next month or more.

When sleep finally came, it infused her with the most improper dreams. Perspiring, uneasy, she twisted to get away from the dark-eyed, bare-chested Captain, with his warm, seeking hands grazing her ankle, higher, and as she gasped and turned to run, she found herself on the floor.

Three times she fell to the cabin floor that night.

The next morning, stiff and bruised, Patience walked the deck, her gait slow. When she heard the bell for breakfast, she went to her cabin where a young sailor had come to set a table earlier. And there the Captain sat, charming the ribbons off her girls.

Now how could she stay away from him, if he was always here? He gave her his pirate’s smile. “Good morning, Lady Patience, I wondered where you’d got to this morning. Doc has made a fine lobsouse for us to share.”

“Who is Doc?” Grace asked.

Patience lowered herself carefully into a chair.

“Doc is the cook, who also happens to do the doctoring.”

Sophie patted her shoulder. “Then perhaps he should take a look at Patience. She fell out of that contraption at least five times last night.”

“Three,” Patience snapped. “I only fell three blasted times.” She placed her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands. Humiliated again.

Then she heard a familiar chuckle and her gaze rose with her need to exterminate the beast where he sat. He was wise enough to close his mouth, but she noted the amusement in those crinkle lines about his eyes.

Rose stepped into the breach. “What in heaven’s name is lobscouse?”

“Breakfast,” the Captain said.

Sophie shuddered. “It sounds like an affliction you don’t want to catch.”

The women all groaned.

The Captain laughed. “It’s ‘cracker hash.’ Hard-tack soaked in water until it softens, mixed with salt beef, pork and sliced onions. Doc bakes it until it forms a crisp top. That, a strong cup of coffee sweetened with sorghum, and a hearty, sea breakfast you’ve had.”

“I’m impressed you know the ingredients,” Patience said.

“I cooked for a few weeks, once, the time Doc broke his leg in a storm. I burned everything. Almost had a mutiny. It’s made me appreciate him.”

Everyone laughed, except her. She was still angry over his amusement at her falling from the hammock.

“We don’t cook during bad weather,” he said. “You’ll get hard-tack dry and be glad of it. And if you’re lucky, there’ll be left-over cold coffee for drinking.”

Just then, a grizzled, smiling Doc brought in the lobscouse and roast pork, filling the room with the aroma of spice and onion. The young helper carried steaming coffee. Everyone dug into the fare with enthusiasm, pronouncing it delicious.

Captain St. Benedict leaned close as the girls discussed ways to enhance the dish.

“Patience,” he whispered.

She leaned forward, pleased he wished to confide in her. Perhaps they could make peace, after all.

His eyes filled with merriment. “If there is a storm, make sure you sleep on the floor. You can’t fall off a floor.”

## CHAPTER THREE

The Captain watched Shane speak with the weepy female passenger. Rose, she was called, and she was beautiful. But Grant mistrusted the way she looked at Shane, almost as much as he worried over the way his brother looked back.

Weepy Rose, spoiled Angel, rowdy Sophie, and mousy Grace. How had a vibrant woman like Lady Patience Kendall gathered such a rattle-taggle group of husband-hunters, when she herself was nothing but a new colt, herself, romping in the meadow? Unspoiled. Looking for adventure. Easy to ... the bit? He scoffed. Not her. She wanted gentling, that red-head, lots of it.

By him?

God forbid.

Never mind gentling, caging, more like. To keep everyone around her safe. To keep her away from him ... or to keep him away from her?

Grant ran his hand through his hair. This voyage spelled trouble, and it began with a P. Patience watched the Captain watch Rose and Shane.

The Captain left his shirt unbuttoned, almost to his waist. She liked it that way and wondered what he would say if she told him so.

She guessed this wasn't the time. Judging by his stiff-backed, narrow-eyed stance, he didn't approve of the time Rose and Shane spent together, a displeasure that seemed to increase as each day passed.

Well, she had the perfect excuse to stop the discourse for the moment. With two-fold purpose, she approached Shane to ask for water and soap for laundry, disappointed and relieved to see that when Shane left, the Captain turned to other matters.

Patience examined Rose's red-rimmed eyes. "Aren't you feeling any better?"

"I am," Rose said. "Shane is very understanding. I never met anyone like him."

"He is nice, I know, but, likely, he should have been working just now."

Rose's eyes filled, and Patience touched her arm to pull her from her grief. "Do you think you're up to seeing if Grace needs a bit of fresh air? Even a kind-hearted soul like her can take only so much of Angel when she's sea sick."

Rose's attention turned outward, Patience had noticed, whenever someone needed her. "I'll go right down."

"Lady Patience," the Captain snapped. "I would like to speak with you."

Patience tried to ignore his roar and presented him with her sweetest smile. "Yes, Captain, what is it?"

"I give the orders around here!"

She nodded. "Now, even the fish in the sea know it."

"You have no right to give my men orders. If you want something—anything—you see me. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely. Now, may I ask why you are angry?"

"You asked Shane for a bucket of water and soap. That is out of the question. You and your girls have had your ration of water for today."

"Captain, the few inches allotted us were used by five of us to bathe, and the last dregs are being used to cool Angel's brow. We need a full bucket of water with soap." She took a breath to brace herself for his ire. "We will need one each and every day."

"Impossible."



Patience cursed her ill luck at having a fair complexion, and her worse luck at booking passage on this ship, with this man. "Captain, we are five women."

"Nevertheless, you may reclaim your vanity when we reach land."

Patience's palms itched to wipe the arrogance from his face. "Vanity has nothing to do with it."

"I don't have time for parlor games. I have a ship to sail. Good day, Lady Patience."

Desperate to make him understand, Patience caught his sleeve, and tried not to tremble over her brass.

Her captive looked pointedly at her offending hand. When she clasped the fabric tighter, he looked up at her with narrowed eyes, and, if she didn't miss her guess, a hint of grudging respect.

She dragged him away from the curious sailors. "Captain, women have certain needs," she whispered.

He mocked her with a smile so wide, so knowing, she released his sleeve and stepped back. He crossed his arms, enjoying her discomfort, and let the silence stretch. "When it comes to your ... ah ... needs, Lady Patience, I would be only too glad..."

Patience balled her hands into fists to keep her temper from getting the better of her. "We need to do our laundry."

He looked affronted, and this time, his face turned red. "There'll be no crinolines or corsets hanging on the deck of the Knave's Secret, and you can bet all your titled husbands on that!"

"We don't have to wash our clothes every day. We need," she cast her eyes down, leaned closer and lowered her voice, "to wash our ... our ... personal..."

The vixen's bent head and humble demeanor was so opposite the usual character of the Lady Patience, Grant's attention was full and truly caught. When she fumbled over the word personal, there came a dawning light. With a finger, he lifted her chin to see her face clearly. A rosy hue tinged her cheeks in bold relief, and he ignored the slight skip of his heart that said he'd been too hard on her. "Personal needs for your time of month."

Patience looked away, and nodded.

Finally, she looked at him.

Ignoring a strong urge to loosen a nonexistent noose from around his neck, the Captain broke eye contact first. "Five women. I apologize for taking so long to understand. You'll have your water with soap every morning. We'll set out extra rain barrels and hope our supply lasts. I'll string some rope on one of the lower decks. When you go down, bring a sailor with you. It's dangerous to wander those parts of the ship alone."

Panicked eyes begged for mercy. "Don't make me bring a sailor. I'll be careful."

She'd conquered her embarrassment with him, but she was ready to bolt at the thought of facing another sailor with so personal a task. Somehow, the notion pleased him. "I'll go with you, then."

"No! Please."

He needed to calm her; he liked the thought of an easy association between them.

"Patience, we have already discussed the monthlies and you haven't perished. Surely we can spend a few minutes while you hang your ... laundry ... without making an issue of it."

She sighed, examined his face, mistrust on her own, then finally, she nodded. "I'll need to go down as soon as we may."

"Fine. I'll send Shane to you with the soap and water then I'll string the rope and come back for you."

Less than an hour later, Patience followed the Captain into plummeting darkness. He held a

lantern in one hand and her bucket of clean, wet laundry in his other. The lower into the ship they traveled, the more warm and pungent the air. The huge vessel creaked in an extended, sinister manner, and each step deeper into the black pitch reminded her of a childhood story that scared her witless. As she felt her way along the wooden beams, lantern oil and smoke wafted back, filling her nostrils to the point she feared she might choke. "Ouch!"

"Don't run your hands along the planks, you'll get splinters."

Patience grimaced. "That warning could have come sooner."

"Sorry. I'll take them out for you later."

She didn't like that idea. "I'll go see Doc."

"I said I'll take care of it. Damn, but you're a stubborn one."

And you're not? "Thank you, Captain."

"How's this?" He indicated a clearing with a strong hemp line, as he'd promised, strung in several neat rows.

Patience didn't think stringing rope was an accomplishment to merit such pride. Still, he'd done it for her girls and she was grateful. "I couldn't ask for more. Thank you." She set to work hanging the bedding as a barrier, then their more personal items out of sight.

As she hung each item, Patience could see the Captain out of the corner of her eye, his back against a thick wooden rib of his vessel, a strong, able-bodied seaman watching her hang clothes as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. But he made her jittery. She swiped the hair from her face and smoothed her apron, wishing he'd look somewhere else.

The Captain was aware that he made the Lady Patience Kendall nervous. So aware, he wanted to smile. A vixen, she was, sleek and vibrant. That glorious hair hanging down her back, along with those big emerald eyes, were beginning to haunt his dreams. Damned if he didn't admire her for her spirit. Arriving in America to find that her intended was dead couldn't have been easy. Then taking on those girls—not that she should be charging them all for the same things. But sometimes people are forced to act. No one knew that better than him. He wondered how badly she'd been hurt by her intended's death. "Did you love him?"

She straightened, obviously surprised by his question. "Who?"

"Van Barten."

"How did you know about him?"

"Shane."

She nodded. "Rose."

Yes, Rose, he thought frowning. "Of course, Rose."

"He died before my ship ever arrived."

"You don't sound upset by your intended's death." He was strangely disturbed by her indifference.

"I didn't know him."

"Why were you going to marry him, then?"

"I needed—" She considered her answer. "A place to go," she said. "He had money and needed a wife to save the estate for his mother—though I didn't know that at the time. My father and Conrad's planned the match years ago. They're both dead now. My father's memory was ... tarnished; I thought keeping Papa's word might improve it.

"I know it was calculated," she added after a minute. "And perhaps insensitive, but I wanted to get away from my aunt, and she wanted to be rid of me. I thought even America might be better than spending the rest of my life in that stuffy old cottage. And Van Barten was rich. Money always makes a match easier, don't you think?"

Grant couldn't help his scowl and knew she'd seen it.

"Now you know what kind of a woman I am, Captain. Contriving, and a fraud, just as you say."

What was she hiding? "So if you had wed, you'd be a rich married lady and the family would still have the estate."

"Widowed, most likely." She wiped her hands on her apron. "It seems Conrad was dying. They both, he and his mother, knew that. What they needed was an heir. I was to have ... to be —"

"The mother of the heir?"

"Thank you." She bristled despite her gratitude. "Yes."

Why, he wondered, become disconcerted by the facts, if she were the heartless, schemer he'd imagined? It drove him daft, that innocence peeking through the indifferent shell she kept erected about herself—the shell he wanted both to tear down and fortify at the same time. "It doesn't seem fair you didn't realize the need for an heir ahead of time."

"He was as fair as I. He required a wife; I needed to get away from my Aunt. I would have served his purpose just as I used him to serve mine. I would be settled in America now, had everything worked out."

"You're very practical."

"I am that."

"A widow expecting a child doesn't sound practical."

"There are worse things," Patience said. "But I was unaware of the absolute necessity for an heir until I arrived. I might have decided differently had I known." She tilted her head, and gazed at some faraway dream. "Still, to have a child would seem ..." She colored. "Lovely, I guess." She turned to hang the next item and hide her embarrassment.

"What about emotion, Patience? Don't you want to fall in love, marry, and live happily ever after?" Hell, he sounded like a fairy tale. And, despite his resolve, he was starting to like her. Damn. When had that happened? He'd best keep up his guard and remember, no matter how vulnerable she appeared, she was still the haughty aristocrat who promised to introduce those hoydens to the Marquess of Andover ... and scheming and dishonest in the bargain, if her arrangement with those girls' parents was any indication.

"Emotion, Captain, is an expensive commodity, one I can ill afford. I'm afraid I shall have to make do with practicality. It is something I have in plentiful supply."

"You're as emotional as the next woman. Look at what you're taking on, trying to find husbands for those four, looking out for their best interests—"

"What?"

"You're helping them. Having husbands will be good for them. Make them happy."

He wanted to wipe the confusion from her face, and several pleasurable ways came readily to mind. "You know. Happiness?" he snapped. "It's an emotion. You do understand emotion?"

As she was about to straighten an item on the line, Patience hands stilled and she laughed, then she went on with her chore. "Not a bit of it." She shook the next item out and reached up. "I don't think marriage is good for a woman. Marriage is only good for the man."

He'd like to explore that further, in several directions.

"I never heard of a married woman who is happy, or the man, for that matter," Patience said.

He certainly agreed with her on that score except it was the man who suffered in a marriage. "If you don't think the girls will be happy, why find them husbands?"

“They want me to.”

“Their mothers want you to.”

“True,” she said, as if pondering a new concept. “But they seem to want it, too.”

“Have you actually asked them if they do?”

“It’s obvious by their excitement, they want husbands.”

“Suppose one of them wants freedom from marriage as much as you seem to. Would you find her a husband, anyway?”

“I never considered the possibility, but I won’t force any of them into a life they don’t wish. Believe it or not, I’ve become very fond of them. In these few days at sea, they’ve become special friends, despite a few annoying habits.”

“Of which you have none.”

Hers was a beautiful smile, one that would bring a poor benighted male to his knees one day. “Of which I have many, I know. Do you?” she asked. “Know it of yourself, that is?”

“I? Annoying habits?”

The Lady Patience laughed—not like an aristocrat, but free and easy. Grant was charmed despite himself, and laughed with her. “If you don’t want to marry, Lady Patience, what do you want from life?” He folded his hands behind his head, enjoying their chat prodigiously and found he really wanted to know her dreams.

She looked within herself. “I want a small cottage with a rose garden, in Arundel or Amberly. I like the South of England, especially Sussex. On the River Arun or perhaps further south, near the sea.” She looked straight at him, and her smile made him feel as if she were granting his greatest wish. “I want to be an independent woman, with a white kitten for my lap, and my old nurse, Martha, for my companion.”

“Exactly why, then, are you trying to find titled husbands for a bunch of flighty American women?”

“For the money, Captain. The money. They want husbands. Their mothers want them to have titled husbands. They are paying me and I’m providing a service. A service, I might add, that is best accomplished in a London drawing room by a titled woman of English Society. When those four young ladies are married, I will have my dream.”

“You’re every bit as young as they are.”

“I’m not, I told you. I’ll be five and twenty soon after we reach England. I’m on the shelf, Captain. And glad of it. There, now that’s finished for today. We can leave.”

Sudden anger burst within him, at her, at her practical heartlessness, but it made no sense. She wasn’t rejecting him. She didn’t want any man. And he was a fool to be disturbed by it.

“You’re a hard-hearted wench, Patience Kendall, and it’s a good thing you want a cold and empty house. You’ve a cold and empty heart to go with it. Do some poor beastie a favor and leave the kitten to someone who can love it.” He climbed toward the main deck, not caring if she followed.

Surprised at the Captain’s sudden ire, Patience picked up the bucket. They hadn’t known each other long, but this wasn’t the first time his actions confused her. She shrugged and followed. When they arrived on the upper deck, Rose and Shane were huddled together talking. Patience was glad Rose wasn’t crying, but she worried about what the Captain would say.

He turned to her. “Give me your hand.”

Glad he ignored Rose and Shane, Patience held one hand palm-up, but hid the other behind her back.

“The other one, dammit.”

With a moue of disgust, she complied.

“Devil take it, Patience, you must have half a dozen splinters here. How in Hades could you get so many in such a short time? I told you not to grab the beams.”

“I slipped and caught myself. You told me to be careful after I said, “Ouch.” It was your fault, not mine.”

He made a growling sound and clamped his hand around her upper arm. “Come along.”

Allowing that he actually meant to help her, Patience let herself be dragged behind him, but she entertained an overwhelming urge to trip him for his tactics.

The Captain’s cabin was as sunny and bright as Patience remembered. The multi-paned windows forming the farthest wall must be the windows along the aft of the ship whose beauty she had admired from the dock. From inside, with the sun shining, they were something to behold.

Below the wall of windows, a bench sat, one similar to a church pew, with soft, maroon velvet cushions. A person could rest, back to the window, or kneel on the seat, facing out. Were this her cabin, she would spend countless hours watching the sea. She knelt to look out now, resting her elbows on the wide sill, her chin in her hands.

A scrape, a crash and a grumble brought her back to her surroundings. She winced still not sure if coming here had been the smartest thing she’d ever done. All that noise, and all the annoyed scoundrel was doing was rummaging through his sea chest. She watched him for a bit then wandered about. She tested the softness of the mattress on a bunk. She sat for a minute at the large round table in the center of the room and ran her hand over the ornate carving on a matching chair. Then she wandered over to examine leather-bound books, decanters, and nautical instruments in the glass-fronted cabinet which occupied the only real wall in the cabin.

With a scowl, a vial, a cloth, and a knife, the Captain approached her.

She took a step back. “If you think I’ll let a man, who’s been furious since setting eyes on me, gouge me with a knife, you’re daft.”

“Shut up and give me your hand.”

“Will you give it back?”

“Patience. I’ve had about enough.”

“Hmm. I know exactly how you feel. Here then.” He took said hand and dragged it close to the window. “Ouch.”

“Blast it. I haven’t touched you yet.”

Patience liked the spark of humor in his eyes.

He probed for the largest of the splinters and dislodged it so quickly she hardly realized he’d moved until the pain of him ripping it out surprised her.

“Blast!” Patience pulled her hand away to suck at the sore spot. She watched him as her mouth soothed her stinging palm. He looked ... surprised? Whatever his reaction, his expression gave her the fluttering jitters.

“Damnation, Patience, I’ve hardly got started. Now give me that hand and don’t move it again until I tell you.”

“Yes sir, Captain, sir.” She pulled her hand from his to salute. “Oh, sorry,” she said, when he snarled and pulled it back.

She was forced to kneel on the bench as he tugged her hand across the wide sill and closer to the window.

“Some of them are so small, I can hardly see them.”

Patience wasn’t sure if he was explaining to her or himself. By the time they were in a

position that he seemed to find acceptable, her arm was stretched so far her fingers touched the window.

His height overwhelming, her would-be surgeon hunched behind and over her on the bench, one of his knees bent between hers, and she felt the hard contact to her toes. So immersed was he in his task, she was able to examine his face without detection. In his concentration he squinted, sketching deeper lines around his big, ink-black eyes and furrowing lines above his brows. In demon-like concentration, those eyes were the perfect foil to a tan face framed with waving ebony hair.

“You must be very old.”

She must have startled him, because his hand jerked and he nicked her.

“Ouch.” She attempted to move away but he pinned her in place with his muscled legs.

“I’m nearly finished. Quit squirming.” He re-bent to his task. “Why do you think I’m old?” He never looked at her with the question, but concentrated on her hand.

“Because you have gray in your hair. Aunt Harriette has gray in hers and she’s very old.”

“I didn’t have a single one until four days ago, Patience.”

She stiffened at the implication.

He chuckled at her frown. “I suspect your Aunt Harriette has so many because you gave her each and every one.”

Anger urged her hand from his.

“Don’t bloody move!”

With a sigh, she lay her head on her arm and closed her eyes. He shifted so that he was no longer above but beside her, her injured hand protected within his large capable one. He remained quiet.

She opened her eyes and lifted her head to view him better. With those little lines relaxed now around his eyes, he gazed into hers.

The center-hung lantern, creaking in rhythm with the moving ship, became the only sound.

From nowhere, a huge sense of elation, or contentment, or perhaps just relief that the Captain was finished, filled Patience.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. Moving from one injury to the other, he soothed each with his mouth, as she had done.

Patience’s heart beat a cadence she did not recognize.

Prickles raced from her hand, up her arm, and throughout her body, coming to rest in the most ludicrous places. She conceived an absurd notion to explain what happened inside her, and then he smiled. He smiled as if he knew quite well what happened and where those feelings centered.

That horrible, revealing heat rising in her face, again, she pulled free and leapt to the floor. “Thank you. I’ll go up, out, wherever, and leave you to your work.”

The Captain made a strangled sound, one akin to a groan and growl at the same time.

She nearly laughed.

“Wait,” he said, with a brusqueness that forced her to obey.

Scowl in place, he poured an oily liquid from the vial onto a cloth and gently dabbed the sore spots. “If Doc took the splinters out, he would dunk this poor torn hand in salt brine when he finished. You’d be jumping from the sting.”

“I didn’t know.”

He nodded but the scowl remained. “I want you to put a stop to Rose and Shane.”

“What?” Confused at the quick change of subject, Patience felt, nonetheless, easier with

judicious, reassuring fury.

“They are spending entirely too much time together,” he said.

“Captain we’ve only been at sea four days.”

“Precisely. In a few weeks, they’ll be ... even friendlier. See to it that doesn’t happen.”

And what did he mean by that? “Are you so protective of all your men, Captain?”

“I’d protect any that needed it, yes. But Shane is my younger brother. He has no title and I don’t want to see him hurt.”

“I’d hardly classify Rose as a woman with claws, but I’ll speak with her.”

Patience left, outrage in every pore of her body. His final, “See that you do,” left her with a bitter taste in her mouth.

She seethed for some time after that, trying to find a valid excuse for denying his wishes. But he was right. Her girls weren’t there to find husbands among the seamen and Patience was sure Rose’s mother would agree with the Captain’s assessment, not that she was a recommendation.

Beaten, Patience finally went to the couple, heads bent together in furtive discourse. “Rose, you should not be taking up Shane’s time like this. You keep him from his duties.” This was awkward, Patience thought, and she resolved to repay the arrogant Captain for placing this uncomfortable situation in her lap. She cleared her throat. “Will you go and look in on Angel for me?”

Head down, Rose stammered an apology to no one in particular, and left.

Patience was surprised when Shane touched her arm. “Ma’am, I mean, Lady Patience.”

Patience sighed. “Patience, please. I’m beginning to hate the sound of,” She scowled and lowered her voice, “Lady Patience!”

Shane chuckled and touched her arm. “Rose is suffering. You don’t understand about her. She needs someone to talk to.”

“Do you understand about her, Shane?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do.”

“You think she needs you to talk to, to help her through whatever is hurting her so?” How well Patience understood such a need, if not Rose’s particular one.

“She does. I’m good for her. I can make her smile.”

“Rose is looking for a titled husband. Your brother is worried you’ll get hurt.”

“Rose isn’t. Her mother just wants to be rid of her. Blackmail’s what it is. Rose doesn’t have a choice. And as far as my brother is concerned, well it’s time he learned I’m a big boy and can take care of myself.” He nodded. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Patience shook her head, even as she watched the first mate walk away. The next time she heard the Captain shout, ‘Lady Patience!’ she should probably jump overboard and save him the trouble. He wasn’t going to appreciate that she told Shane what he said.

\* \* \*

The Captain sat at his desk filling in the ship’s log, trying to concentrate, one question going round in his brain. Did he want to wring the vixen’s pretty little neck, or would he rather stroke it?

He didn’t bother to look up when the door to his cabin opened and shut; Shane came in and out all day. But, eventually, the lengthy silence called for him to raise his gaze.

Hands on hips, Shane waited patiently for permission to give voice to that which seemed heavy on his mind.

“Are you here as my brother or my first mate?” Grant asked.

Shane squared his shoulders. "Your brother."

Grant nodded. "Sit down. Have some port, and tell me what's bothering you."

"Actually, Grant, you are."

Grant took a sip of his drink and sat back. "The red-headed witch told you what I said."

Shane smiled. "Does that make you mad?"

"Hell yes." Grant slammed his quill on the table and stood to pace. Enough was enough.

"That woman's the worst nuisance I've had to deal with in my entire thirty-two years. She's ... conniving, aggravating and mark my words, she's trouble." He threw his hands in the air. "She's autocratic and demanding and so damned haughty, I'd like to ... to ... bring her down a peg or ... ten."

Shane chuckled. "And she's beautiful."

"Yes, damnation. But that's not the point."

"And she's desirable. And that makes you maddest of all, big brother."

"If you weren't my brother, Shane, I'd hit you."

Shane touched his brother's chest with the tip of his forefinger. "Stay away from her, Grant. So you won't get hurt."

Grant laughed, the irony in Shane's order not lost on him. Except that he was not smitten with Patience, like his brother was with Rose. He was aggravated as all hell with her—there was, perhaps, some lust involved, but no stronger attraction than that. He, at least, remained alert to the danger in the possibility.

Not so his brother. Looking at Shane's earnest, enamored expression right now, Grant knew problems were brewing. Big ones.

Shane's smile turned slumberous. "There's something about Rose, Grant. She needs me, and I think maybe I need her. I'd like the chance to find out." He grinned. "Same as you'd like the chance to find out if your Fireball will singe your eyebrows if you get too close."

The Captain laughed. "Appropriately put. But I have enough sense to step back if it gets too hot."

"More fool you. But I want the opportunity to allow my relationship with Rose to come to its natural conclusion ... without interference from you."

Grant nodded reluctantly, and winced at his notion of what a natural conclusion entailed. "You know what I told the men."

"There'll be friendships, Grant, and you said that was fine. We're going to be out here a long time. Maybe, there'll be a couple of problems. But you'll handle it. You're a good captain."

"You're a pain in the ass."

"The old man told you that before you took me on. Come to think of it, that was nothing to what he said about you. I seem to remember something along the lines of, 'ungrateful, arrogant son of a—'"

"That's enough. I have a very good memory where our father is concerned, and I always took that particular taunt as a direct slur on our mother."

"Do you doubt he meant it exactly that way?"

"Not for a minute."

"She was a bitch, Grant, you must admit. A beautiful, spoiled bitch."

"Yes, but one of her smiles and I would forget completely." Grant hated when he remembered his mother. She'd been gone twenty-five years. How in hell could he still feel like a desperate little boy who'd do anything if she would just love him? Love. Hah. He scowled into his port and downed it.



Shane watched him. "Do you ever miss it, Grant?"

"You mean the dissipated, worthless hell of a life we dragged ourselves up from?" He sighed and smiled in resignation. "The older I get, the stronger the pull. But I'm very good at ignoring sentiment. I wanted my independence more than anything. And I got it, by God. Our sire said we were no better than our roots and never would be. We showed him, did we not?"

Shane raised his glass. "Our father."

Grant did the same. "The bastard."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Contrary to the usual brisk sea wind, today, the heavy moisture-laden air on the main deck of the Knave's Secret became an extra burden. Patience lifted the hair from her neck, desperate to cool it, but the air did not move.

The sailors' grumbling added to her discomfort and made her want to scream.

When she'd arrived on deck, Sven, a Norwegian tar, looked to the heavens, as if for deliverance, and spat, "Vimen," in disgust. Others grumbled and walked away. They thought the women were, jonahs, jinxes, pure bad luck.

Patience wiped the perspiration from her brow. They blamed her and her girls for every problem. As if it was their fault sharks followed the ship, or the flying fish weren't flying.

True, Grace should not have left her book at the top of the ladder this morning. But the steps were steep and she'd planned to grab it once she was down. And Izzy had looked comical sprawled at the bottom, black tar crawling over his face and chest.

And the Boobies yesterday. How could it be their fault that a swarm of stupid birds took naps in the rigging? Hundreds of little brown fellows had flown toward them as one, masking the sun as they came like a huge black umbrella. How appalled the men had looked when the flock landed, and what a monstrous mess the little feathered creatures had made.

Blaming the women was so ludicrous, it might be funny, if it wasn't so sad.

And, of course, today the sailors said it was the girls' fault the wind had died. Who were they supposed to be, God? Enough was enough. Someone needed to speak to his superstitious men. Ignoring the beads of sweat dripping between her breasts, Patience approached the Captain with singular determination.

But, he, leaning on the rail, staring into the distance, did not so much as acknowledge her presence with even a turn of his head.

"Captain, I must protest your crew's disrespect toward the women."

He acted as if he had not heard, and Patience itched to grab his arm and force him to face her. "Captain?"

His brows furrowed and, without turning his head, he slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close beside him. "Look. Out there," he said, pointing. "About ten miles distant."

Patience ignored her heart's quickening, something that occurred often of late. This, however, was most pleasant, because the Captain was neither yelling nor growling, and she rather liked being just here tucked neatly into his side. She considered this new teasing sense of belonging, and decided to enjoy it, despite its false face, for the Captain sought only to bring her range of vision as close to his as possible. His arm around her meant nothing, and she did not wish it did.

When, despite her ruminations, the object to which he pointed managed to fix itself in her sights, Patience gasped. "My God. It's Aunt Harriette's notion of judgment day."

The Captain looked at her then and nodded ominously. "An accurate description, I'm afraid."

Heeding his worried expression, she wondered how much danger they were in. The air around them could only be termed sultry ... and dead calm, like the ocean. But in the distance, even as they watched, two furious rain squalls met, head on. Within the silent collision, a huge black cloud formed in the squall's center, tapering into a thin shaft. The tapered cloud then dropped its stem into the ocean stirring a turbulent whirlpool and sucking water up into itself. It

grew larger and stronger, like a massive, black balloon trailing its tail in a swirling sea.

“My God,” Patience whispered. “It looks as if the cloud, the rain and the sea are fighting.” She shivered.

The Captain pulled her closer.

Despite her anger and fear, Patience was certain that Captain Grant St. Benedict would protect them all, even his women passengers ... especially his women passengers. “It’s not an ordinary storm, is it?” she asked.

“It’s a waterspout, and it’s gaining speed and strength and heading our way.”

“And?”

He looked into her eyes. “It could tear us in two.” His words told her they were in danger, yet his look remained intrepid.

“And we can’t sail away from it, can we?”

He shrugged. “There’s not enough wind to fill the spritsail. We’re becalmed.”

As the evil black billow came closer, the air temperature dropped and Patience appreciated the warmth of the Captain’s body beside her. “How far away is it, do you think?”

“About a mile I’d say, but at the rate it’s traveling, it’ll be here in a few minutes. Are the girls below?”

Patience nodded.

He pulled her imperceptibly closer and tapped her nose. “You go too. You’ll be safer down there.”

When he let her go, Patience stepped from his view, but she stayed on deck.

The Captain, in bearing as well as name, examined flaccid sails, fore to aft, monitored the dangerous formation, and then considered the sails once more. “Let go your royals and t’gallants’ls, and stand by your tops’l halliards,” he called.

Shane echoed the instructions.

The blocks choked a death rattle as the sails slipped down the mast. The sky turned a peculiar, bruised cast as the churning cloud severed the ship from the sun. As the spout twisted and spiraled pulling itself into irregular shapes and masses, Patience held her breath, glad the girls were safe below and unaware of the danger.

So close was the tall hulking spout to the ship, Patience thought she could extend her hand and touch it. Then, as if from nowhere, icy wind whipped at her clothing, slapping the cloth against her arms and legs. Sails billowed and snapped, and the Knave’s Secret rocked like a paper boat in a hand-splashed puddle.

Shivering, Patience heard the ominous creak of the vessel, smelled the misty brine and wished the Captain’s arms were about her once more.

The ship listed. Patience lost her balance and fell against a rope coil, where she stayed, eyes closed, and prayed.

The Captain shouted frenzied orders. Stopped.

Silence.

Patience dared look. Fragments of the dark billowing cloud glided up and away in all directions proving it was made of mist not menace.

Patience screamed. In happiness. In thanksgiving.

The Captain bent before her lifting her to her feet. He bestowed a rare, jubilant smile and practically threw her into the air. The sun, freed of its black cloak, embraced them with its brilliance.

The moment etched itself on Patience’s heart.

Then, in a wink, the uppermost portion of the black cloud floated above them, blocked the sun and shrouded the ship in darkness. Rain came down in torrents.

Patience gasped.

Rivulets ran down the Captain's surprised face, his wet shirt shaped every muscle. He grinned.

Patience did too; she couldn't help it.

The Captain barked orders as the wind returned to drive their vessel. "Let's get you below," he yelled over the torrent. Hand in hand they ran across the deck and down the ladder. "Go, put on some dry clothes before you get sick," he said, launching her, with his hands on her bottom, toward her cabin.

Patience stored the shocking, tantalizing intimacy away for later scrutiny. She could not fathom him. He was as unexpected, mysterious and fickle, as that baleful black cloud. Filled with furor one minute, admitting the sun the next. Floating warm and carefree, or hard, angry and glacial—all were facets of the same tempest ... all of the same man.

He was, in short, one of nature's great puzzles, one she would like very much to solve.

\* \* \*

That they'd been spared mattered not to the narrow-minded sailors. The waterspout was the worst kind of bad luck, they said, and to them it proved the women were Jonahs. And however much the weather improved in the days to come, the sailors' ill-humor did not.

Restricted now to a modest corner of the deck, where they could cause no incidents, Patience and her girls' studied the drawings Rose had brought.

"Oh, what a beautiful baby," Patience said, examining one, noting there were several others, as the babe had grown. "Whose baby is it?"

Rose took the pictures and put them away without answering, handing Patience the drawing she'd just finished of her. Then she invited the sailors to have their portraits done. Brazen conduct for Rose.

She drew delightful exaggerations of each. She gave one big brute a twinkling hoop earring. On short, barrel-chested Izzy, she drew a black eye-patch. She posed a parrot spouting, "Vimen," on the Norwegian's shoulder, and turned his scowl into a huge, toothy grin. It made some of the men guffaw and slap their knees, especially Sven.

Patience watched the Captain's curiosity bring him across the deck, as far as a spar, where he leaned negligently to watch, much as he'd done the day they set sail. From his beard-stubbed chin, down his tanned throat, to his open-necked shirt exposing a vee of dark chest hair, she examined him, a distinct warmth purling through her. She became so heated, she began to fan herself with the drawing Rose made of her.

Angel's words penetrated Patience's lethargy at the same moment she realized the Captain had noticed her interest in him. "What Angel? What did you say?" she asked, very much aware the Captain could hear.

"I said tell Rose what Lord Andover looks like so she can draw us a picture of him."

Sophie's eyes twinkled and she clapped her hands. "Oh, yes, Patience, tell-tell. I've been ever so anxious to know what a man they call The Saint could possibly look like."

Grace smiled. "Please, Patience. Everyone says how handsome he is. But I can't imagine him."

Patience looked up, as if compelled, and found herself the recipient of the Captain's scoundrel smile. With one eyebrow raised, his grin was so mocking, as much as to say 'I dare you,' that she had no recourse but to begin. "He has black hair," she improvised. "It ... curls

slightly, if memory serves, and black eyes.”

“Eyes cannot be totally black, I think,” Grace said.

“Well then they are so dark a brown as to appear black. Perhaps it is his brooding expression and his way of frowning, by bringing his brows down to shadow his eyes, that gives them their ebony look.”

“I need shapes first,” Rose said. “His face, forehead? Once you give me those I’ll fill in the eyes and hair.”

Dark and broody was all she’d ever heard, so she made him up as she went. “A high forehead, a chin chiseled and square with a slight cleft in the center.” Accepting the Captain’s dare with bold eye-contact, she waited until Rose stopped drawing before she continued. “The perpetual shadow of a heavy beard mars the perfection of his face,” which Patience realized added fact to the word ‘dark.’ “A long straight, aristocratic nose.”

The quick scratching of Rose’s charcoal lulled Patience as she warmed to her task. Sails flapped. Commands were exchanged in the rigging. The Captain’s blousy shirt billowed in the wind.

“What else?” Grace asked, bringing Patience back to her purpose.

“Unmatched brows, one winged and one slashed, the second dipping lower than the first, so that even without a frown, a hint of disapproval remains.”

The Captain’s startled expression distracted her, his wide-eyed look asking a question she didn’t understand. She stumbled in her description for a minute. “Um, ah, creases. Laugh lines, I guess you’d call them. Lines, you know, crinkles around his eyes and near his mouth—that show he smiles frequently, though not always with the best of reasons.” She tilted her head. “Perhaps we could call them scowl lines or smirk marks.”

Sophie frowned. “Patience, for the love of Uncle Dewey, it’s a picture of the Captain.”

Surprised by Sophie’s words, Patience examined the drawing, herself. Sure enough, there he was, a rogue in truth, scowling back from the no-longer harmless sheet of paper. Oh, Lord, was she that taken with the man that she could think of no other to describe? Did he guess it? She examined the enigmatic look on his face, but could discern no specific emotion.

She shrugged and smiled wickedly. “Of course it is,” she said, as if she’d done it on purpose.

“I thought that’s what you were doing,” the Captain said, over her shoulder.

Startled, Patience dropped the drawing of her that Rose had done.

The Captain retrieved and studied it. He seemed so preoccupied with Rose’s talent, Patience guessed he hadn’t noticed her fascination.

“I’m disappointed,” Angel pouted. “Why ever did you describe the Captain instead of the Marquess?”

Patience laughed, a sound, which seemed counterfeit to her. “You’ll just have to wait and see about Lord Andover now won’t you?”

Their moans mingled.

To mask her blunder, Patience raised one eyebrow, a gesture she learned from the Captain, hoping it would produce the same confusion in him, as his matching expression did in her.

“Surprises are such fun. Are they not, Captain?”

He stood stunned for a minute, then he gave over and chuckled as he folded her picture and tucked it into his shirt, nodded his good-byes, and walked away whistling.

Patience watched him go, her heart calming. Thank heavens the scoundrel didn’t realize the implications in her error ... that she was childishy besotted with him, and that she wouldn’t

know Lord Andover if he were looking at her through a quizzing glass. Pray heavens she could keep both secrets 'till they reached London.

The next morning, the Captain walked the length of his ship.

What game was the vixen playing? Did she know the Marquess of Andover or not? Was her innocence a cunning ploy to make him drop his guard? Had she some nefarious plan to compromise him into revealing his secrets?

Whatever her design, he would hold to his independence like a lifeline. Watching her scheme unfold, however, might be amusing enough, for if Patience was anything, she was entertaining ... and annoying, and downright enchanting. He could hardly wait for her next misstep.

Yet, he must admit, her charade had alarmed as well as intrigued. Why had she described him, when she was supposed to be describing the Marquess? He stopped, a shiftless sailor catching his attention. What was the no-good, lazy blighter doing, lolling about when he should be working?

The Captain shot forward, hitting the fo'c'sle deck in one leap. "Get your good-for-nothing ass back to the dogwatch, sailor, or I'll skin you naked."

The blighter spun to face him. "How dare you speak to me like that!"

Patience's sun-kissed complexion pinked with the blush that never failed to distract him.

"Bloody hell!" He whipped the cap from her head and damned near gasped as her auburn hair fell in thick coils to her shoulders. Then under its own weight, the bounty cascaded further down in silken waves of brilliant color. He took particular note of the curly wisps resting near her pert little breasts. Breasts whose tips were clearly outlined in the sailor's shirt she wore. "What the hell do you think you're doing wearing sailor's clothes?"

Patience straightened, teasing the borrowed shirt further with her small but nonetheless feminine bosom. "What right do you have to speak to me like that?"

"I thought you were one of the men."

"One of the men?" Her large green eyes took on a sparkling quality.

The Captain knew he was in trouble. "Why are you upset?"

She looked far beyond the horizon. "I'm not upset."

"Yes," he said. "You are. Look, I didn't mean to be coarse. But when someone on my ship is shiftless and lazy, I have to be firm."

"It wasn't the salty language, though heaven knows Aunt Harriette would faint dead away if she knew talk like that didn't bother me."

Most women would be bothered, he thought, except the Lady Patience. What a paradox. "What's wrong, then?"

Patience examined the deck. "Nothing."

The Captain raised her chin. "Dammit, Patience, tell me what's wrong."

"It's just that ... you thought I was a man."

"A boy, actually. I thought you were a boy."

"Oh, lovely. Now, I'm not even a female child, I'm a male one." She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Nobody ever mistakes Sophie for one of the men."

The Captain sighed. "It's the bosom thing again, isn't it Patience?"

She examined a coil of hemp with great interest. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Whose clothes are you wearing?"

She raised her chin. "Paddy's." Her stance dared him to make something of the fact that Paddy, their cabin boy, was twelve years old.

He struggled to keep his mouth from turning up at the corners, because she was watching to be certain he didn't smile. No one knew better than he that Lady Patience didn't take kindly to being laughed at. But if his men saw her in that outfit, they wouldn't be thinking about ... "Take them off."

Patience laughed.

The sound stroked him.

"Don't be stupid. I like these clothes." She raised her arms and shuffled her feet, the dance serving to demonstrate her freedom of movement. Shaking her head, she sent the rest of her auburn hair cascading down to her waist, then placed her hands on her hips. "I love the feel of the wind's icy fingers running all over and around me."

Swallowing a groan at his physical reaction, the Captain grabbed Patience's arms and pinned them to her side. "Stop that and be quiet." He looked to see if they'd attracted attention and took her by the hand. "Come with me," he said trying to tug her forward.

She stood unmoving. "Do I have a choice?"

He tugged harder.

She gave.

Three men saluted as he went by dragging the sputtering nuisance behind him. The nuisance called for help from her girls sitting in the shade. They waved, smiling. Idiots, the lot of them.

He kicked a sand bucket from his path; it hit the mizzenmast and split. The splintering woke the damned pup who'd been sleeping in some rope. The beast came up barking.

"Let me go you big bully," the vixen shouted, hitting his shoulder.

Sven looked to the heavens. "Vimen," he said, shaking his head.

Patience grabbed the foremast as they went by, pulling him up short. He swore and grabbed her around the waist to carry her under his arm, kicking the rest of the way. Managing her, clawing and fighting, was such a formidable task, he lost his hold and she dropped through the hatch onto the cabin deck.

He almost apologized, until he saw how well she landed, and her fury when she looked up at him. Inside, he smiled. This was the best sport he'd ever had ... out of bed.

Though she was absolutely amazed she landed on her feet, Patience still wanted to beat the brute. "You ... you—"

"Man?" he finished, following her down. "That was fun," he said. "Want to do it again?"

Patience kicked his shin. "Imbecile!"

Grant pinned her to her cabin door, using his arms and his legs to hold her in place. "Never, I mean never, strut around in front of those men like you just did out there."

"I will if I want to!" She freed herself to grab her door latch.

He took her arm and made for his cabin. "This way, sailor."

Inside, Shane sat, booted feet braced on the table. Rose, in the chair opposite, sketched him.

The Captain scowled. "Out."

Rose turned crimson and fled. Shane, right behind, shot his brother a parting frown.

The door slammed. The Captain snarled his famous warning.

Patience winced, but she wasn't going to let the beast get away with such low tactics. "That was rude, Captain."

"Patience, I am rude. You know I'm rude. So stop being surprised by it. Now take off those clothes." He tugged the cord at the waist of her pants.

“I will not!” She slapped his hand away. “I like these clothes.”

“I don’t like you wearing sailors’ clothes.”

“They’re practical and comfortable. The pants give me freedom of movement, and with all the climbing around we have to do on this tub—”

He brought his face close. “My ship is not a tub! Don’t you ever call this ship a tub, again. Where are your dresses? I want you wearing dresses.”

Patience almost laughed at the autocratic demand. “I won’t wear any more dresses. I’ve ruined more than I can afford to lose. It’s sailor clothes or nothing.” Oh, Lord, tell me I didn’t say that.

The Captain’s black eyes widened. “I like the second choice.” After regarding her for a warm minute, he turned to dip into his sea chest, coming up with some dark blue trousers, a blousy, white shirt and a length of rope. “Give Paddy his clothes back. If you’re going to wear men’s clothes, you’ll wear mine.”

“Why does it matter whose clothes I wear? I thought you wanted me to wear dresses.”

“I should let you do any bloody thing you please.”

“Life would be much too easy if you did that, Captain. Heaven knows, we can’t be having life easy around here.”

He snarled and slipped his big, baggy shirt over her head.

“First you don’t want me to wear men’s clothes at all, now you want me to wear two men’s shirts?”

“Stop acting like a witch.”

That made her laugh.

His eyes sparked at the laughter, and she thought he would laugh too, but he turned serious. He slid his hands up under his shirt, the one he’d just thrown over her head, and, under its cover, began to undo the buttons on Paddy’s shirt, one by one.

Patience grew feverish; her limbs became heavy. Holding her breath, she could feel each stroke of the Captain’s fingers, how they slid between her breasts as he released each button from its hole. She should stop him. She couldn’t. Sometimes when they were alone like this, it seemed almost as if ... She stared straight into his eyes wondering if he experienced any of the same turmoil as her.

His look was intense, dark. She couldn’t look away, any more than he.

She thought the room turned stuffy and took a deep breath.

The Captain’s hand faltered and he too seemed to experience difficulty breathing.

He released her from Paddy’s shirt and under the white tent-like covering of his own, slipped it off her. His hands followed the shirt down, sliding slowly. She feared he would touch her breast, feared he would not.

When the stroke of his knuckles across the underside of one breast came, the heat of it raced through her. The sensation felt something akin to the time he’d soothed her hand with his mouth, after he took out her splinters, but a hundred times more so.

His touch was torture. It was heaven. God help her, she liked what he just did, wanted him to do it again. Aunt Harriette said she would go to hell. She closed her eyes and made fists of her hands at her side. Right now, she’d go willingly if he would come along and touch her like that again.

Lord she was beautiful, Grant thought. He throbbed with wanting her. Her eyes said she wanted him to continue, his body said he must. He knew in his head, he’d be crazy if he did. He slipped her arms into his big shirt then lifted the drawstrings to close the vee. Before pulling the



shirt together, he bent and kissed the slight swell of a breast. Then reluctantly, but prudently, he laced the shirt and tied it closed. Tight.

“Thank you,” Patience said in a soft, seductive whisper.

He should be thanking her. “You’re very welcome.” He released the drawstring at the waist of Paddy’s trousers and gently tugged them down, molding her hips with his hand, loving the shape of her with his palm.

He couldn’t believe Patience was so compliant, so open to being touched. Her reaction boded well for the man who would awaken her passion. He shook his head, reminding himself that was not his concern, and returned to his task.

She stepped from the pants pooled at her feet, obeying his nod. He wished she was this accommodating all the time. He wondered how long her affability would last.

He turned to get his trousers then looked back at her. That was a mistake. The red-faced nymph stood naked, except for his shirt covering her from neck to thigh.

He wanted to lay her on his bunk. To ravish, to cherish ... or to punish, for making him feel this way, this weak. He hated the quandary. If wanting her was so damned annoying, why did he want her so badly? And why was it so frustrating not to have her?

He tossed her his trousers. “Put these on.” He got a knife to cut a piece of rope, rueful over sounding so cross. From the corner of his eye, he saw her pull on the pants and tuck in the shirt with commendable speed.

He handed her one of the lengths of rope. “Here, use this to hold your pants up and turn around.” He took the shorter length and tied her hair together in the back, to keep it off her neck, like Paddy’s cap had done. He tugged gently at the silky auburn mass. “Reminds me of a spirited filly I had as a boy—of her tail that is.”

“Ouch.” She removed his hand from her hair and turned to face him. “What?”

“Your hair. It looks like Vix’s tail. Same color, same shape, longer though.”

“Vix?”

“Yeah. Vixen. We called her Vix.” He smiled remembering the filly’s registered title, Sweet Lady Vixen. How aptly it applied to the lady before him. “Go back up on deck now if you want. I’ll return Paddy’s clothes to him later.” He was going to scrub her wildflower smell from them first, so the damned kid wouldn’t drool. “Don’t dance in that outfit, Patience,” he warned, looking purposefully stern. “I’m not joking.”

Her chin rose a fraction. “I like to dance.”

“Patience....”

“If I feel like dancing ... I’m going to dance.”

He should be angry. He should be aggravated as hell. He should wipe that defiant look off her pretty, smiling face. He should throttle her.

He’d love to throttle her.

Instead, he took her in his arms and swept her gracefully about the cabin while he hummed a lively tune. They swung and turned faster and faster. Patience laughed. She picked up his tune with a lilting song and together they danced to their own private music.

The Captain surprised Patience by laughing with her, long and hard, wholeheartedly, as if he were enjoying himself. And he was, she thought. With her. Imagine that.

She hadn’t heard that easy laugh since the day she fell on the dock. Now she considered it so special a sound, she stopped dancing to watch and listen.

He stopped also—dancing and laughing—and leaned forward, his face inches away. Framing her face with his hands, he lowered his lips to hers. She moaned when they touched. A

soft kiss became warm, simmering. She knew she would melt from the heat ... and didn't care. She flattened her hands against his chest where his shirt lay open, sighing with liquid sensation. She traced circles in the silken curls, until he brought her fingertip to his nipple. She fingered it, amazed, curious. It was tiny, soft at first, now forming a hard bud.

Groaning, he took her mouth again. "Part your lips, for me, Patience. Just a bit. Yes, like that." He teased her upper lip with his tongue.

Patience sighed.

Simmering became full flame. Nips became bites, then ravenous hunger, impossible to appease. Need spread like melted butter. Patience slipped her hands inside his shirt and around to caress his strong, muscled back.

The Captain ran his hands down her spine, cupped her bottom and pulled her against him. How easily, perfectly, he could trace her shape with her in trousers. She was glad their bodies fit together so well. She experienced a sense of inevitability in this special bonding, softness rocking against hard.

However he moved, she followed.

When the Captain lifted her into his arms and walked to his bunk, her heart accelerated. When a look of horror crossed his face, and he stood her on the cold floor with dispatch, confusion replaced elation.

Breathing deep, the Captain disengaged himself, and took her hands, holding them together in his own.

The thudding of her heart slowed.

She was almost certain his did too.

"That's why you can't dance," he said, looking straight into her eyes. So straight she wanted to turn away, except she couldn't, not for anything.

"And, Patience? If you want to dance ... I mean, really dance, you come see me. We'll come here and lock the door. And we'll dance until you cry out with the joy of it."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Grant knew that Patience must be as confused by their dancing, and kissing, and by the things he'd said, as she was by her own unfulfilled, perhaps even unrecognized, desire.

When she fled his cabin, her face aflame; his body was afire. Why didn't the dog fall overboard when he needed an icy dip?

He paced his cabin, thinking of his clothes gone for such a lovely cause, of her wearing them against her smooth white skin, and chuckled at his condition. He would get hard every time he looked at her in that getup. Bloody hell.

His father would die laughing for thinking of his strait-laced, rebellious, son, frustrated by a skinny, slip of a lass, who looked as if she'd just left the schoolroom.

He combed his hand through his hair. Five women aboard and Lady Patience Kendall was the only one he wanted. Oh how he wanted. He'd like to teach that beautiful, budding bloom of womanhood a few things. Hell, he'd like to teach her everything.

He swore a colorful string of oaths and slammed his fist into the wall, gaining satisfaction from the pain. Shane opened the door in time to catch the diatribe, a grin on his face. "She came out wearing different clothes."

"And?"

Shane shrugged. "Just making an observation." He raised his hands in surrender. "It would have been fine with me, if she came out wearing nothing."

"Well, that was a close one, too. What about you and the waterfall? What were you two doing in here?"

Shane shook his head. "I'd prefer you to knock before you come in from now on, Grant."

Grant nodded. "I guess you'd best do the same." They sized each other up, neither of them offering a disclaimer. And that worried the hell out of Grant. For both their sakes.

Later, as Patience prepared to change into one of her two wearable dresses for dinner, her face flamed anew. She turned her back to her cabin mates, so they wouldn't see her distress and speculate as to its cause, though they'd speculated enough for a lifetime after she'd come back wearing different clothes. Thank God she'd convinced them nothing was amiss.

When she removed the Captain's shirt, she felt a new sensitivity in her nipples, almost as if he was still touching her there. They grew hard and achy with her just remembering. Other places too were sensitive.

What was happening to her? That man fascinated and frightened her. She wanted to see where this new awareness between them would lead, couldn't wait to see him, again, but wondered how she would face him, again.

She ached—loving and hating the need—and didn't even know what it was she craved, though quite certain only one man could satisfy her ambiguous desire, except that Captain Grant St. Benedict was not a part of her plan. A man like that became as great a threat to a woman's independence as she could imagine. Like Papa. A scoundrel, handsome, charming. The captain probably drank and gambled too.

'Twas not the captain she needed, but her freedom, to live her life as she wished, to answer to no one, present or future. Her goal, she reminded herself, was to become an independent woman. Dependent upon no one. Not even....

Patience snapped out of her reverie when her head and arms emerged from her dress. Sophie and Angel, heads bent together in concentration, made her smile. "How many needlework

items can you stitch, Sophie? And can anyone sew all the ones you design, Angel?"

"You know that's not all we do, Patience."

"Following the sailors about and getting yourselves and them into trouble is not the best of pass-times, either."

"We visit Horatio," Sophie said.

"Horatio? Is he one of the sailors? I don't think I've met him yet."

The girls laughed. "No, silly, he's a pig."

"There's a pig on the ship?"

"Yes, he's in a pen near the afterdeck, behind a bulkhead. "We never met a pig before," Angel said.

"We thought him very handsome and named him Horatio," Sophie added. "He's our special friend."

"I'm glad you found something to amuse yourselves," Patience said, thinking that if they were making friends with pigs, they were more bored than she realized. "Let's get some of Doc's stew."

Still self-conscious over dancing with the Captain in his cabin, Patience hoped her dance partner would be too busy to join them for dinner. But when she stepped into Grace and Angel's cabin, she saw it was too much to hope for. He looked as if he were waiting for her. Shane laughed at something Rose said, and the Captain scowled. When he saw her, he raked his gaze over her, his look changing from anticipation to disappointment.

Because she was wearing a dress? But he said she should.

She questioned him with her look, as if they shared some inner bond, a language transcending everything, a connection so tangible, it was hard to believe everyone in the cabin couldn't feel or sense the power of it. She looked from one to the other to see if they noticed, but they seemed oblivious. Thank God.

After a subdued meal, when the plum duff was brought in, the girls applauded Doc's masterpiece. Steamed in an oval tin mold, the dark, heavily-spiced pudding and cake mixture lay blanketed with hard sauce.

Patience tasted it. Ah. "A dish as delicious as it is beautiful." She took a second piece, licked her sticky fingers, but stopped when she noticed the Captain watching her.

"Got to call the watch," Shane said, jumping up. He left, almost as if he'd been prodded.

"Oh good. Dickie's on next," Angel said. "I have to get the riding lights from the lamp room. He promised to teach me to hang them in the rigging. Come and watch me."

Rose, Sophie and Grace followed her, eager for the upcoming show. The cabin emptied, except for her and the Captain. When Patience realized they were alone, she became self-conscious, remembering their dance and searched for a napkin to rid herself of the hard sauce on her fingers.

The Captain moved to the chair beside her. "Here, let me," he said, taking her hand. But instead of wiping it with a cloth, he took one of her sticky fingers and licked the hard sauce from it.

His tongue was rough, chafing and titillating. Patience squirmed in her seat. She should demand he stop, but something held her in place.

When he licked one finger clean, he began on the next.

A malady, intense and heavy, invaded Patience's limbs, her stomach, everywhere. She didn't like this silly game anymore. She didn't understand the object or the rules, and the uncertainty disconcerted her.

“It’s wonderful this way,” the Captain said, as if he could read her confusion. “Plum duff will never taste this good, again.”

Patience pulled her hand away, and wiped her fingers. “I’ll tell Doc you want more.” She stood and left.

Bemused, the Captain watched the vixen walk out, as regal as a queen. Well I’ll be. He ran his hands through his hair. “Idiot. What you want for dessert isn’t even on the menu. Worse, it’s pure poison. Forget it.” He started to follow, and stopped. “Did that twit say she was hanging the riding lights? Bloody hell.”

He came to stand beside Patience on the deck to watch Angel and the sailor, Dickie, climb the ratlines. “What in hell are they doing?”

“She told you, he’s teaching her to hang the lamp in the rigging. I heard him give her the proper instructions on how to make a rolling hitch knot and something about the lanyard and a shroud or something.”

“And you could tell the instructions were proper?”

Patience shrugged.

“Wonderful,” he said. “I’m sure with such an amazing accomplishment to her credit, your Lord Andover will choose the little Angel—and I use the word loosely—as the passion of his life.”

Their plan to meet the Marquess of Andover obviously nettled the Captain mightily, and Patience was beginning to sense the need to refrain from responding to his taunts, those regarding the Marquess in particular. She turned back to watch Angel. “See, she’s doing fine.”

“So it seems. Good night, Lady Patience.”

“Good night Captain.” Lady Patience again. Her title aggravated him as well, she mused, as she watched him go. In fact, he seemed to hate everything about England’s Aristocracy.

She smiled. He’d probably cuckolded an unsuspecting Lord and got caught. Not that she knew precisely what that meant, but she knew rakes did it. And if their snarly Captain was anything, she just knew he was a rake.

Angel and Dickie came down from hanging the red light then Angel went up alone to hang the green. When she finished, the sailors cheered and whistled.

Angel bowed and preened. “Dickie taught me something else.”

Patience winced, thinking of her dancing lessons.

“Listen,” Angel said. “Rules of the Road at Sea

When both side lights you see ahead  
You port your helm and show your red.

For green to green, or red to red,  
Is perfect safety, go ahead.

And when upon your port is seen,  
A stranger’s starboard light of green,  
There’s not so much for you to do.

For green to port, keeps clear of you.”

After good-nights all around, Patience said good night to Angel. The rest of the girls had long since gone to bed.

Later, lying in the hammock, with which she’d made a wary peace, Patience feared she might be a loose woman, for she should not feel the fluttering jitters when that blasted, arrogant man looked at her. And when he touched her. Blast, she was like a pup waiting for a bone. A foolish silly pup, who would be better off digging one up for herself.

She spent too much time thinking about the man. Think about something else, she told herself. Something wonderful like ... the rose garden at Craithorne, where she grew up, and the swing she'd loved so much.

Patience's eyes closed.

She glided in that very swing, the scent of roses wafting on the air. A strong, bronzed hand stroked her hair, her neck. Patience moved closer, and fell from the hammock. Odd sounds permeated her fogged brain—running feet, destruction, curses—prickles snaked along her spine.

“Fire! Fire in the rigging!”

The door to her cabin burst open. The Captain stopped when he saw her sitting on the floor. He used a word Patience never heard and pulled her to her feet. “That blasted woman set fire to my ship. Get your useless females on deck. Now!”

Within minutes, the girls were filling and carrying buckets from the water barrels, while sailors climbed the masts to put out the fire. After what seemed a lifetime, the fire had been stopped. As acrid smoke and the disgusting odor of burnt tar and hemp hung in the air, the sailors' fury began.

Exhausted, ready to drop, Patience and her girls stood in soiled nightrails, while the sailors jeered, calling them Jonahs, jinxes and even witches.

Tears made white lines through the soot on Angel's face.

The Captain shoved the sailor, Dickie, forward. “Lock him up.”

“Aren't you being a little harsh, Captain?” Patience said then stepped back at the fury in his eyes. “The fire wasn't his fault.”

“No. You're right, it wasn't. But be careful where you lead, Lady Patience, or I'll lock up your little Angel with him. No. That would be like rewarding the fool.”

“What?”

“To begin with, that idiot let her hang the second light alone, without making sure it was done properly. She didn't hang it down far enough. The flame from the lamp caught, setting fire to the rigging. The damage might have been minimal, had he been performing his duty; he was supposed to be on watch after all. But instead he and your Angel—which if you ask me is a little like calling you Patience—let the fire burn while they dallied in some dark corner.

Patience turned to Angel and could tell by her regretful look that the Captain spoke the truth. She must have sneaked out after they said goodnight.

“We're in the middle of an ocean, Lady Patience. Where do you think passengers go when a ship burns?” He let her ponder the possibilities and nodded. “We could have died. Every one of us.”

Patience put her trembling fingers to her lips.

“Exactly. Now, if you think the men resented you before, I'm afraid it was nothing to how they'll feel in future. A fire on a ship is the worst thing to befall a crew, and one of your girls started it. You'll stay in your cabins until further notice.”

“Oh, please, Captain, we—”

“For your own protection. If one of my men doesn't strangle a few of you, I might do it myself. Right now, Lady Patience, I'm sorely tempted.”

\* \* \*

Patience moved Angel in with her and Rose, putting Sophie next door with Grace. At first, Angel cried more than Rose. Eventually they read every book they brought between them—some more than once. They didn't see Sophie or Grace for days. They were cross, snappish, and Rose began to cry twice as much as before, only brightening when Shane sneaked a quick visit. Once,

when he was with them, they heard the Captain bellow his name and Patience worried one brother would murder the other. The only other person they saw was Paddy, and he had probably been threatened with drowning, because he refused to utter a word.

The absolute worst result of their incarceration, Patience hated to admit, even to herself, was that she missed the Captain. She wasn't sure why, because he shouted at her all the time, but she missed him all right. She must be daft.

Their last conversation had taken place the day he confined them to their cabins. She'd argued, pleaded, but he wouldn't be swayed. She said she needed to hang their things every day. He said he'd have one of the sailors do it. She told him how terrible it would be to hand their personal items over to one of the sailors who despised them. She could imagine the jests. The Captain said he would have Paddy do it. He reassured her nothing they had would mean anything to the boy. When she saw Paddy's red face, after the first day, Patience knew the cabin boy was smarter than the Captain thought. But at least he wouldn't mock them for sport.

Patience couldn't stand it. She didn't even know what day it was.

When Shane slipped into their cabin. Rose's face lit, but so did hers and Angel's. "How are my pretty ladies today?" Shane asked.

"You know, Shane, you'd best be careful. You'll have us all in love with you by the end of the journey and you'll have to choose," Patience said.

Rose and Shane gazed at each other. Neither had heard her jest.

Patience coughed discreetly, then stood between them and waved until Shane laughed. "Do you think you could find us some books we haven't all read twice?"

"There are plenty in my cabin," Shane said. "Why don't you just choose a few and bring them back here."

"Are you out of your mind? We might get eaten by the shark." Patience had had enough of the Captain's anger to last forever, and then some.

"For God's sake, don't all of you go. Patience, you've been in the cabin before, you know where the books are. It's a perfect time. I'm certain I saw him in the rigging a bit ago. Go ahead. I'll stay and protect Rose and Angel."

"Yes and what army will protect me if his Royal Nastiness should descend to his throne room?"

Shane smiled. "If I hear a roar, I'll come running."

"See that you do."

Patience looked both ways before leaving the safety of her cabin. As afraid as she was, it felt good to be free of confinement, even for a few minutes. She crept to the door of the officers' cabin and opened it, ever so slowly. It screeched on its hinges—a sound so disturbing in the quiet, she thought the whole crew would come running.

She stood still and waited, but nothing happened, so she went in. After closing herself inside, she leaned against the door, holding her hand to her pounding heart, examining the empty room before her. She was safe. Not to push her luck, however, she got right to her task.

She chose so many books, her arms were too full to get the cupboard door shut. "Blast and double blast," she swore juggling the volumes. Then she heard the faintest noise and hot prickles ran up and down her arms. She stood like a statue, not even breathing. After a minute, satisfied she was imagining things, she turned to leave.

"Going somewhere, my Lady?"

Books flew in all directions. Patience's heart beat so fast, she feared she'd swoon.

The bunk built deep into the wall to the left of the door, the one she hadn't looked back to

check, was occupied. By the Captain. And he'd scared her witless. Unadulterated dread—or was it joy at seeing him after so long—made her tremble the more.

God, he was the most magnificent man she'd ever seen.

He lay on his side facing her, propped up on his elbow ... naked, except for the blanket's strategically placed corner. The muscles, on his chest, arms and legs, were prominent and strong. Those little lines she loved—did she love those little lines, relaxed now, around his beautiful eyes? How could she? He could be mean, nasty. He snarled for heaven's sakes. How could she love anything about him?

Time stretched. The lines around his eyes crinkled. "I hope you came here for a good reason, my love. Do you want to ... dance, Patience?"

"Yes. Certainly, if you wish." She wouldn't let him see how agitated she was. If she remained agreeable, he might overlook her direct disobedience of his order.

"Have you ever ... danced before?"

"You know I have."

"You're talking about dancing, aren't you, Patience?"

"Yes. I loved dancing with you." His eyes looked dark, deep, almost bottomless.

"What about what happened when we stopped dancing?"

She never imagined they'd talk about it. She raised her chin. "Well, I may have liked that also." She bit her lip. "I believe I did. I thought you did, too."

"You're right."

"I'm glad." There were his eye-crinkles again.

"Do you have any idea how much I've missed these little chats of ours, Patience?"

She knew how much she'd missed them. "Have your men stopped grumbling?"

"I think I've convinced them the women aren't responsible for all the problems we've had. I'll need a little cooperation from you and the girls, though. You'll have to be very careful. Do you think they're ready to do that? The girls, I mean?"

"I know Angel and Rose are. I haven't even seen Sophie or Grace in days. I miss them. Can we get back to normal now?"

"Sweetheart, things haven't been normal since the day I watched you fall on your face." He sighed. "Sometimes, I have this dreadful fear they never will be again."

Her eyes widened in shock. She feared the same thing.

Her thoughts must show, because he sighed and nodded. "You'll have to excuse me for not rising in the presence of a lady. I haven't a stitch on."

"I thought not."

"You're not even blushing. Good girl. But I think you should leave before I begin to entertain thoughts of ravishing you."

Actually she'd like to know about being ravished. Especially by him. She opened the door, took a step, then stopped and turned. "I'm not sure what that would consist of, exactly. Ravishment, I mean. But ... perhaps, I might like to try it someday."

Before the Captain had a chance to consider her words and take her up on her request, Patience scooted out the door and let it slam behind her. She could be bold only to a point.

No sound came from inside. She must have left him speechless.

She went to tell the others they were free to leave their cabins, fanning her face as she tried to forget the sight of him. If a man could be called beautiful, the Captain was.

Grant chuckled as he jumped from his bunk, but the sight of his books scattered about turned his expression to a scowl, then he shrugged. "It was worth it, just to see her."



Someone knocked. "Grant, you in there?"

"Come on in."

Brows raised, Shane took in the tomes settled haphazardly about, then his brother's unclothed form.

Grant stepped into his pants, chuckling over the possible motivations Shane might imagine for the scene.

Shane grinned. "Your little she-devil exited this room as if the hounds of hell nipped at her skirts. I don't want you to blame her. It was my fault. I told her she could come in and get some books for the girls." He examined the mess again, hands on hips, and shook his head with a grin. "Care to enlighten me? Though whatever you say, I'm certain it can't be better than the possibilities that come to mind."

"She said she would like it if I ravished her."

"Did you?"

"Not yet. How's Rose holding up?"

Shane put his hand to his chest in all innocence. "I don't know."

Grant buttoned his shirt and chuckled. "I know damn well you've seen her every day since I confined the witches to their cabins."

"I had to, Grant. Rose is hurting." He sighed and sat on his bunk. "Rose has a baby girl back home. That old puritan mother of hers said Rose was unfit, sent her away, and kept the baby."

It was Grant's turn to raise his brows. He sat to listen.

"A couple of years ago, Rose fell in love with a fisherman. Her mother disapproved. He died at sea, never knowing about the baby. Rose hopes if she makes a good match, her mother might give her baby back. She's grief stricken, Grant. I wish there was something I could do to help her."

Grant shivered with unease when Shane looked him in the eye. "I think I love her. You may as well know that."

Time to be stern, Grant thought. "I know you think you do. Exactly as you said."

"Don't. Don't let the hateful woman who bore us keep you from finding someone to love. It's possible, big brother, and the best thing that can happen to a man. Don't let your fear of becoming like the bastard who sired us cause you to be just like him. Old and alone. I care about you, Grant. Give life a chance. You deserve it."

Grant bristled. "Fine, fine. I'll think about it."

"I'll take that as a sign of encouragement. There was a time you'd have said there was nothing to think about. I'll be happy with that, for now. Anyway, thanks for listening. I appreciate it."

Grant slapped his brother on the back, which was as close as they ever got to a show of affection, but Shane knew he cared—as much as he was able to care about anyone. Grant supposed if there were someone in his life he loved, it was Shane.

"I think I hear the witches in the companionway," Shane said. "Does that mean you terminated their sentence?"

"Yes. And Old Mother Witch hasn't wasted time informing them, either."

When he and Shane went up, the main deck had become a country fair. All that's missing is a Gypsy wagon, Grant thought. Dublin played his harmonica while Paddy drummed a bucket. Sophie and Angel danced with each other. Patience and the other girls sang and swayed to the music. Sven, the big, burly Norwegian, laughed and stamped his foot.

When the girls finished their song, the sailors began an old sea chantey. "I met a girl in Portman street, the sweetest girl I chanced to meet. I pulled her up against my chest. My seeking hand—"

Grant rang the watch bell. He knew the words; he didn't think the girls should. "How about a change in entertainment? Jasper, Shanks, let's have a pugilistic demonstration."

His men did a bit of fancy footwork and some prime boxing that entertained the sailors fine, but none of the women, except Sophie. She screamed her enthusiasm. "Duck. Pop him one good, Jasper, old boy." She mimicked their moves. "Wowee, did you see that? Smack to the jaw." She punched the air.

Mortified, Grace tried to quiet her.

Sophie ignored her friend's pleas.

The Captain laughed. He enjoyed Sophie more than the boxers.

When the match was done, a prideful Jasper, the announced winner, allowed himself to be applauded by Miss Sophie. No doubt, he liked her adulation very much.

"I wish I could learn to do that," Sophie said. "I had this nasty cousin who pushed me around when I was small. I'd love to be able to pop him one when he couldn't see it coming."

Jasper's eyes widened; he scratched his beard. "Well now, Miss, I could teach you a thing or two about taking care of yourself, if you'd like."

"Would you? Right now?"

The sailor grinned with pride. "Sure. I can be the one to teach you and no mistake. Since fairness is important, Miss, I'll be teaching you by the Marquess of Queensbury rules. You'll be learning them as we go. Now, you step forward. No, your left foot first. Just there until it touches my toe. Fine. Move your right foot back a little." He watched her. "A bit more."

Sophie complied to each instruction with eagerness, no matter how simple.

Jasper nodded as each command was executed properly. "Make a fist." She did. He shook his head and repositioned her fingers and thumbs. "Always keep your thumbs outside the fist. Inside, they can get broke. Now extend your left hand and keep your right up front, even with your left elbow. Like so." He arranged her arms. "Remember this stance now, because it is your first position. My, you do look right fearful, Miss."

Sophie beamed then growled fiercely, exposing perfect white teeth.

The sailors guffawed. The Captain didn't think they'd ever had such a good time aboard ship.

"Now, then. What you want to do, Miss, is to hit me on the nose."

Jasper had no sooner finished when little Miss Sophie shot out with her left, quick as lightening, hitting him square on the nose. Blood spurted onto her dress. Jasper went down with a thud smacking his head against the capstan, the sound like the crack of a cannon. And it was worse to hear for knowing it was the poor fellow's skull that got cracked.

The Captain stepped forward.

Sophie crumpled in a silent heap.

Grace screamed and screamed, until Angel took her below.

Rose tried to revive Sophie.

Patience glanced at the quiet sailors as she wiped the blood from Jasper's nose and the Captain made certain there were no bloody gashes about his head. The seamen looked from her, to the moaning Sophie, to the unconscious sailor.

"Vimen," the big Norwegian said, and then he began a rolling chortle that grew loud and contagious. Before long, every man and woman roared gleefully. They laughed because little

Sophie had nearly killed their big strong ox of a boxer. They chuckled good-naturedly at the mumbling Jasper as he stood staggering, looking slightly bemused.

Jasper, however, certain they were laughing because he was bested by a woman, acted none too pleased.

In the end, only Jasper said they brought more bad luck. Patience was quite certain only he believed it.

“Don’t concern yourself, Patience,” the Captain said. “Once his headache goes away—in two or three weeks—he’ll forget all about this.”

Patience moaned.

The Captain cuffed her arm lightly. “I was only teasing.”

He made her feel better with that bit of playful reassurance.

But Sophie was broken-hearted. She had caused more bad luck.

## CHAPTER SIX

“They’re back. The flying fish are back!”

Patience couldn’t believe her eyes. She’d never seen anything like.

The girls’ cries drew Shane and the Captain toward the rail. Shane gravitated to Rose and the Captain stopped beside her. “They fly so far,” she said. “Are they really wings?”

“Of a fashion.” The Captain smiled. “I’ve seen some fly farther than a thousand feet, though five-hundred is probably average. When their wings get dry they have to dive back into the water.” He pointed aft. “Look. There.”

“What’s that?” Angel asked.

“A dolphin ready for its dinner. Dolphins will keep just under a flying-fish waiting for it to alight.”

The fish cunningly flew to a distant wave, dipped its wings and darted off at an angle, avoiding its pursuer.

The girls cheered.

The dolphin jumped out of the water, wiggled in midair, then dove back in. Patience leaned near the Captain, “I think the dolphin rather sweet.”

He tweaked her nose. “If you ever tell anyone, I’ll deny it, but I agree.”

Happiness filled her. The Captain stood beside her, smiling. The sailors looked on, without scowls, and the girls enjoyed the show. At that moment, not a worry beset her. Could their bad luck be over?

Without warning, a stream of sea-foam covered them. One of the girls screamed.

When she wiped her eyes, Patience saw Sophie sitting in a puddle, hair dripping in her face, a flying-fish flopping in her lap. Wellington cavorted to and fro before her, yapping.

Patience knelt beside her. “What happened?”

“It hit me in the face,” Sophie wailed, watching the offending creature stink up her gown. “I was so surprised, I tripped and landed on my ... deck.”

“Sophie,” The Captain said. “If Doc is in a good mood, he’ll fry that delicacy for the person lucky enough to find it.”

Sophie examined the creature, mouth pursed, eyebrows furrowed. “Hmm.” She looked at the girls, the sailors, her gaze stopping at Jasper. She smiled, carefully grasped the fish by its tail-fin and picked herself up. She went to Jasper, who tried to look stoic with a wiggling fish hanging topsy-turvy before his face. “By way of apology,” Sophie said. “I would like to fry this myself and give it to you as a gift. Will you let me make amends, Jasper, for popping you?”

Jasper gave a half nod.

Sophie served the succulent morsel for breakfast the next morning, and Jasper declared it, “The finest eating since leaving the Emerald Isle.”

That same day, the Captain’s voice calling, “Ahoy,” through the speaking trumpet caught Patience’s attention.

A regal blue-sailed vessel glided toward them. It came so close, Patience thought she might jump to its deck, but when she looked, the ocean gap between ships was much wider than she thought.

“What ship?” a man from Blue Sails called through his horn.

“Knave’s Secret, from Newport,” the Captain responded.

“Where bound?”

“London.”

“How many days out?”

“Nineteen, What ship?” Captain St. Benedict asked.

“The Connecticut, from Dover.”

“Where bound?”

“Providence.”

“How many days out?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Permission to come aboard?” Captain St. Benedict asked, surprising her. Half an hour later, she watched a dory carry him over. He climbed a rope ladder and went over the side to be greeted by a bearded man. They shook hands and strode from sight.

\* \* \*

At nearly midnight Grant finished his errand, shook Captain Davenport’s hand and thanked him, satisfied with his night’s work. When he returned to his ship he gave orders the dory await his return.

“Shane, wake up.” His brother sat right up, always ready to respond in an emergency.

“Captain Davenport is willing to take you aboard. I just want to know one thing.”

“What?” Shane pushed his hair from his eyes, and scrubbed at his face with both hands.

“Does Rose want her daughter back?”

“Of course she does!”

“Captain Davenport needs an extra man. Two of his crew were lost in a storm. He’ll take you on. Go back to Rhode Island for Rose’s daughter. From what you said about her mother, she’ll do more harm than good to a little one. After that, fast as he can load his cargo, Captain Davenport’s sailing to London. You get the baby in Updike’s Newtown and return to Providence in time to join him. You’ll arrive in London, two, maybe three weeks behind us.”

Shane listened, his face registering stunned amazement. “I can’t believe you’d do this for Rose. I mean, I’m important to this ship. You can hardly do without me.” He grinned.

Grant cuffed him. “Your watering pot is not going to be happy ‘til her chick’s back in the nest, and you’re not going to be happy ‘till you’re in there with them.” Grant tried to be stern, but from Shane’s grin, he could tell it wasn’t working. “You know damn well, you’re the best mate a man could want, but I’ve got Jasper and Sven.”

Grant began to pace. “I must be getting soft, but since you told me about Rose’s little girl, I’m plagued by the memory of us, barely out of leading strings, setting off in the middle of the night to find Mother. The look on the old man’s face, when he caught us, telling us she was no good, that we were better off without her; it’s haunted me. I hated him for that as much as I hated her for leaving. And I hated myself, most of all.

“Rose’s baby should be with Rose. She shouldn’t grow up thinking her mother deserted her, or, dammit, that it was her fault her mother left. Go get her, Shane.”

“Aye, aye Cap’n.” He pulled on his pants. “I’m going to let her meet her new papa ‘cause I’m going to marry Rose soon as I get to London.” He threw clothes into his sea bag. “Don’t tell anyone where I’ve gone. I want to see Rose’s face when I put Amy in her arms.”

“Whatever you say. Get going. Captain Davenport’s a fair man, but we’ve kept him waiting long enough.”

Shane smiled, slapped his brother on the back, threw his bag over his shoulders, and left without another word. Standing on the deck of his ship, in the dark of night, the Captain watched his best friend board The Connecticut.

Eight bells. Midnight.

In his cabin, he poured himself a brandy, relaxed against the cushions on the window-seat and watched the Connecticut as it got smaller in the distance. He missed Shane already. There had been just the two of them since he was ten, Shane eight, and they'd always looked out for each other.

It wasn't Shane's sailing off that really bothered him, Grant knew. But his brother would soon become a bigger part of Rose's life. He would have a family apart from his older brother. He guessed that was how life should be. Hadn't Shane said so? Hell, he just hoped they'd be happy.

Grant closed his eyes for a minute, and he saw children of different ages, lined according to size. The littlest, a girl, about two, on the left, a boy, twelve or thirteen on the right. Dimples, red hair, laughing green eyes. Patience, scooping the babe into her arms.

Her eyes were loving, her smile welcoming as she looked at someone he could not see. Jealousy filled Grant, regret. Another man taught her passion.

But, no help for it. He remembered the look of loathing on his mother's face when he reached for her, his confusion at her disgust. He had always feared getting close to anyone, except Shane, who suffered as he did.

Now he found himself weakening. A small breasted girl—no, a woman—with auburn hair, and a smile to make the heather bloom, called to him. Patience. He gave up, and let the fantasy play out.

But children were no longer part of it. Patience wore a long rose nightrail, impending motherhood making her glow. He went to her, cupped her ample breasts and realized he'd have to tell her that when she carried and nursed their ... her children, she would have a bosom.

She'd like that.

But he was shaken. It seemed too possible. Too real.

"No." He shouted into the empty cabin. There'd be no loving and no risk of not being loved in return. No rebuffs. Grant stood, shook his head. He lived on his own and wanted it that way. He refused the dream. "No, no, and no!" he shouted, tossing his brandy glass against the wall.

He embraced the sound of shattering as he undressed and climbed into his bunk. And as he closed his eyes, he wished his soul did not also feel shattered.

Sleep, drive her from my mind, he prayed as he drifted.

Patience lay beneath his questing hands. He kissed her breasts, her lips, touched her everywhere. She gloried in his attention, did things that made him shudder and harden. He would slip into her velvet sheath when he could wait no longer. Any minute now.

Grant fought wakefulness against the disorienting pounding in his head.

Patience knocked on the Captain's door again. She had to know the truth. Now. "Captain? Captain, are you in there?" She opened the door to his cabin, went in, and shut it behind her. Had he sent Shane on the Connecticut just to get him away from Rose?

He slept. She watched him for a minute, wishing, but anger beat longing. She shook him, hesitated. Perhaps she should wait until he came up on deck. No, dammit, she was mad.

His chest and shoulders were exposed, a sheet covered the rest. Deciding she'd better not touch him, she bent to his ear. "Captain," she whispered. "Captain, wake up, please. I need to speak with you." Why was she being so polite when she wanted to throttle him, she was so angry?

But it seemed cruel to startle even the snarly Captain awake. Sighing, she spoke a little

louder. "Captain. It's Patience. Can I speak to you?"

His sleep-glazed eyes opened and as she was about to speak, he pulled her, in one fluid motion full on top of him, and his arms closed hard around her.

His mouth opened and came for hers. Lightning struck when they kissed, his mouth performing a hot, fierce, plundering.

The angles and contours of his body seemed to met her own. She loved moving with and against, into and along him, wished, almost, that they might go on forever, living out their lives here in this bunk, kissing, holding, discovering.

"Lets ..." He nipped at her lips. "Remove ..." He nipped again. "... your nightrail."

Patience evaded the next nip. "I'm not wearing my nightrail."

Her answer seemed to freeze him. He stilled, scanned her face, the cabin. Then he pushed with such strength, she toppled to the floor.

He growled when he saw what he'd done, and offered his hand.

She ignored it and rose on her own. "Thank you very much. I must say, your good morning is decidedly unique." She dusted herself off and looked at him lying there breathing hard, chin pointed toward the ceiling, one arm covering his eyes, one knee bent beneath the sheet.

"Anything more to your morning ritual I should be aware of, Captain?"

"Get the hell out!"

"I would like to speak with you about Shane."

"He's gone."

"That's what Jasper said. And I want to know why?"

The Captain removed his arm, the look on his face hostile, angry. "Not that it's any of your business, Lady Patience, but The Connecticut's Captain needed a first mate."

"And you needed?"

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"You needed to keep Shane and Rose apart. You said you didn't like their friendship."

"You are an ignorant little miss. They are not friends."

"You could never understand anything like that, could you? You're cold and hard-hearted."

"It was a business deal, Lady Patience. The Captain needed Shane, and I needed two barrels of good French brandy."

"I guess you couldn't have struck a better bargain than that, could you Captain?"

"Yes," he said in disgust. "I could've traded Shane for a good French whore."

In disgust, she left him.

Days later, alone in her cabin, Patience paced, beside-herself worried. With Shane gone, Rose had resumed her habitual lament. Her grieving was so quiet now, it seemed almost deeper than at the beginning of the voyage. And the more restrained Rose's grieving, the more Patience worried.

Angel, never having got over setting fire to the ship, had taken up the womanly art of needlework, her stitches reminiscent of the loose rigging. Grace became her ever-patient teacher; Sophie hadn't the perseverance for it.

Patience was disgusted with the lot of them.

She threw herself onto Rose's bunk and lay on her stomach, knees bent, feet in the air. She was disgusted with herself as well. The Captain hadn't spoken to her in three days, wouldn't even look in her direction.

And all she could think about were his shattering kisses as she'd lain atop him in his bunk. Fool that she was, she was actually happy to have experienced just that much passion. He made

her aware of herself as a woman, something she would never forget. Unfortunate, however, that her only experience of passion would be with the ornery Captain of the Knave's Secret.

Oh, but he was such a sinfully-handsome beast.

They'd shared other kisses, small ones, other touches, and there was the dancing. That was heady. But the other morning, with him sleep-warm and lusty, well, that had been sheer bliss. She became all liquid and willing just remembering. His tongue invaded her mouth, his lips skimmed hers, angling this way and that, taking and taking. She couldn't seem to give or get enough.

Patience touched her cheek where the Captain's morning beard had rubbed it raw.

She pondered how his hands had slipped to her bottom and pulled her against him, how deliciously, wonderfully wicked she'd felt lying atop him, parts of him, hard rigid parts, seeming to belong just there, nestled into welcoming parts of her.

A sweet, cloying warmth invaded with a vengeance. She took a great gulp of air, let it out in a whoosh, flopped onto her back, and placed her feet flat on the wall.

How could a memory make her feel prickly needy? How did the Captain feel when he remembered? Probably angry, like when it happened, the way he'd been since.

Patience pushed both feet hard against the wall, shrieked once for satisfaction and jumped from the bunk. She exited the cabin and made for the main deck. She had to stop thinking about it. She had to forget this odd craving to repeat the experience. Captain Grant St. Benedict disliked her, and she disliked him. He'd sent Shane away to be nasty, to separate him from Rose. For that alone, she wasn't speaking to him.

She found Sophie in the galley. She'd been so taken with cooking the flying-fish, she'd become enthralled with cooking anything. Doc, a fatherly man in his fifties with a white beard and beaming smile, seemed to enjoy teaching her. Even now, his laughter confirmed it.

"Where'd Angel go this morning, Sophie?"

"To feed Horatio."

Doc sobered. "Horatio?"

"Horatio, the pig. He's our pet," Sophie said with a smile.

Doc's laughter grew until he had to wipe his eyes with his apron. "Angel's going to be mighty surprised at how she finds Horatio this morning," he said catching his breath.

"Why?" Patience and Sophie asked together.

"Because we'll be roasting him, soon as he's slaughtered."

Sophie paled and ran from the fo'c'sle.

After a stunned minute, Patience followed, but she didn't see Sophie anywhere. Where had she said the pig was kept?

Barking, screaming, shouting, and an equally loud squealing, made Patience lift her skirts and run.

Red and Izzy knelt holding a huge frightened porker on its back while being accosted by the pig's protectors. Angel cracked each man over the head with a broom while Sophie wielded a huge coil of rope, slamming it against Izzy yelling, "Murderer!"

Horatio tossed his head from side to side, squealing relentlessly. Angel finally tossed the useless broom and began kicking the pig's assailants. One well-aimed sally split Red's chin. He let go of the pig to grab his face, blood dripping between his fingers.

Despite Sophie's attempts to knock him unconscious, Izzy tried valiantly to clutch Horatio single-handed, but he couldn't do it. The terrified swine jumped up and began a squealing run for its life. Wellington followed barking steadily. Pittypat fled for its kitty life tripping a sailor coming into the fray.



The huge porker jumped over the forward hatch and made his way to the fo'c'sle deck nearly succumbing when Paddy came up behind him, and threw his arms around the animal's belly. The pig dragged Paddy—or Paddy rode the Pig; it was difficult to tell—nearly fifty feet before the poor boy had enough sense to let go.

Patience tried to help Paddy and stop the pig at the same time landing herself in a heap, skirts over her head. Fortunately, everyone was too busy chasing Horatio to notice.

Their evening meal continued across the deck, Angel and Sophie in frantic pursuit. Patience wondered how they intended to protect Horatio even if they caught him.

With a growl of fury, the Captain joined the fray. “Bloody, useless jackasses. One crazy pig and two women against a ship full of men. And you call yourselves sailors! Catch him, damn your hides!”

Shanks tried, then Dublin, even Sven. All made missing tackles, Shanks and Sven knocking heads into the bargain. All in all, his sailors failed to respond to the Captain's direct, if ridiculous, order.

Rose and Grace arrived adding their screams to the uproar.

With two sailors waiting aft, Horatio seemed finally cornered as he wove in all directions.

As Patience and the Captain caught up, the pig scooted down the cabin hatch, making for the Captain's cabin direct. And they were right behind.

Through the open door the pig shot, then circled the beautiful cabin like the cornered prisoner he'd become.

Wellington's constant barking seemed to make him more skittish, so Patience put the pup in Rose's arms and shoved her and Grace out the door.

Horatio knocked over two more chairs, and jumped on Shane's bunk to evade the Captain's tackle, which caused the furious man to tumble off his brother's bunk and slide into his sea chest.

Horatio's eyes rolled in his head, his squeals demented. With nowhere else to go, the crazed animal jumped on the window seat, then made for the open sea by jumping through the window, glass flying in all directions.

He'd barely hit the water when the sharks following the ship put him out of his misery. Piggy suicide.

Angel and Sophie screamed.

The Captain wiped his bloodied hands with a cloth and glared at her as if she, alone, had caused the fracas. It was all Patience could do not to say, ‘It wasn't my fault,’ but in a way, it was. These were her girls, after all.

Still, he didn't say a word.

Silence, punctuated by Angel and Sophie's sobs, lengthened to the point you could cut the tension with a knife, and a good thing no knife was available, because from the look on the Captain's face....

“You must understand, Captain. The girls thought of Horatio as a pet.”

“You must understand, Lady Patience, the sailors thought of him as their supper. They aren't going to be happy the sharks had pork tonight and they didn't.”

Angel and Sophie gasped at his heartless statement.

“Get them the hell out of here!” the Captain snapped.

Patience called to Grace, waiting in the companionway, and handed the sobbing girls over, then she examined the Captain's angry face. “What are you going to do?”

“Board up my window for starters.”

“I'll change the bunk, sweep up the glass, and wash the floor. That should take the piggy

smell out of the room.”

The Captain scowled, opened his mouth, clamped it shut, shook his head, and left.

Patience washed and scrubbed until the room shone bright.

When the Captain returned to board the windows, she had just finished. He looked around.

“Thank you. Though I think it the least you could do, under the circumstances.”

“Sometimes you can be quite disagreeable.”

“Not as disagreeable as I might be. I could think of several forms of punishment for those two, but I’ll refrain, this time.”

“Why?”

“Because, when I was on deck, I realized discipline was unnecessary. A lot can anger a sailor, Patience, and there’s much he can forgive, but taking away his food, that he will not forgive. They’re so positive you and your girls are bad luck, I’m worried they’ll try to throw the lot of you overboard.”

Patience couldn’t hide her concern.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “As much as I’d like to, I won’t let them.”

“I’m sorry about the entire incident, Captain. Truly.”

“Are you?” He was suspicious of her apology, she could tell.

“Yes,” she said. “I love pork.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

After the pig incident, Patience and the girls walked the deck together once a day then returned to their cabins. When they did, the sailors wouldn't look at them. Even Doc ignored Sophie when she offered to help with the cooking. The Captain merely grunted when Patience tried to speak to him.

One afternoon, a few days later, Patience heard Jasper say that he and the Captain had the night watch, so after the girls were asleep, she went on deck. The Captain could not walk away from her, if it was his duty to be there and she needed to speak with him.

He stood at the wheel, moonlight etching his features to harder angles. The sight of him filled her with a huge sense of regret. What they'd shared was special, yet not enough. There would never be a true friendship between them, or anything else.

Uncertain what she expected with regard to this man, Patience realized she was sorry she would never have it. Then she scoffed at herself for being so fanciful.

All was quiet. A few men worked in the rigging. Jasper kept watch while the Captain stood at the wheel.

"I didn't think we sailed during the night," she said as she approached him.

"We don't usually. But the weather is favorable tonight and I thought it best to make time before the men's anger gets the best of them."

"You want to be rid of us?"

"Yes."

Patience wished she could see his face more clearly and sighed. "I had hoped to make amends, somehow. We've had some wonderful times, the girls and the sailors. I wish there might be only happy memories of our voyage."

"The women will remember the good times, Lady Patience. The men will remember the bad."

"Why? Do you suppose?"

"Because the men predicted disaster. Remembering it, they'll believe they were right all along. Everyone likes to be proved right. And from the little time I've spent with your girls, I think they are likely to remember the good in most situations."

Patience had to agree, and nodded, but he didn't notice because he didn't care to. Discouraged for so many reasons, she turned to go.

"Wait."

The word made her heart skip and she turned back to him.

He handed her an object which she stared at with great surprise, attempting to identify it for all of a minute, before she realized it was a lantern, dark and cold. "It went out," he said. "The draft is strong here. Take it to the lamp-room, will you, and re-light it? Then I won't have to call one of the men from the rigging."

Her disappointment bringing an ache to her throat, Patience went to the lamp-room, opposite the forward house, where the men bunked, re-lit the lamp and returned to the main deck.

The sight she saw stopped her dead.

Advancing toward the Knave's Secret, in full sail, came a huge, hulking phantom of a ship, cast as it was in moonlight as a dark, eerie pewter, given its lack of rigging lights.

If it continued its present course, it would split the Knave in two.

“Jasper! Captain! A ship! Coming down on us. Sail O! Sail O!” Patience shouted, waving the lantern, to catch the eye of someone, anyone, on either ship.

“Hard down your wheel,” Jasper shouted. “Stand by the topsail halliards.”

The Captain spun the wheel.

Suddenly, like her heart, the Phantom fairly leapt from its perch to rise like a conqueror. The sea, green and luminous in moonlight, now gave a glowing, eerie cast to the spectacle. The huge monster, its bowsprit like a lance, hovered over the Knave. Patience was surprised it didn’t tangle or foul the rigging, but, like The Connecticut, it must be farther away than it appeared.

When the looming hulk buried herself back in the sea, it came so close, the splash made a frightening, thunderous sound while seething, foamy water boiled over the Knave’s decks.

Fear held Patience frozen. As the water roared and covered them, the lamp flew from her hand, and the wave threw her against the wheel box. She sought purchase, grasped a crampon and, held.

When the churning water drained low, she gasped and coughed. Surely she would never breathe again.

But, eventually, she did. On all fours, taking deep, treasured breaths, she raised her head and looked about.

The Captain had been tossed like a rag doll against the hatch. With an ugly gash on his forehead, he lay unmoving, her lamp floating beside him.

“Hard over, sir,” Jasper shouted. “Hard over, sir, I say.”

Patience knew Jasper could not see the abandoned wheel whirling out of control, setting the ship square to impaling itself on the Phantom’s bowsprit, a lance in every sense of the word.

If that spear met its mark, the Knave would splinter and become the conquered, the Phantom the conqueror. And everyone would die.

Her heart pounding in her head, water pulling at her dress, Patience dragged herself to the ship’s wheel, almost as wide as the span of her arms. With every ounce of strength she could gather, she set to forcing it in the opposite direction from whence it had gone minutes before.

She emptied everything from her thoughts but her girls, and from some hidden cavern in her mind came a desperate need to turn the wheel. She pulled and turned for her very life. For everyone’s life.

She wondered momentarily at her strength, could not fathom it, but thanked the heavens, nonetheless, and continued to turn. For they must, at all costs, evade the Phantom.

She couldn’t let the girls die. She loved them all.

As she forced the next spoke downward, she began a litany. “For Sophie,” another spoke, “For Angel.” One hard turn for each of the girls, then for each sailor, Doc, Dublin, Paddy and the rest. When she turned a spoke for the Captain, she sobbed, panic nipping her, but she stayed with the wheel, turning, praying.

How long she should continue, she did not know; she simply knew she must.

Sudden voices pierced her determination. Strong arms attempted to hinder her. “No!” She fought Lucifer’s temptation to relieve the pain in her arms, but— “I can’t stop. I can’t let go. They’ll die.” She sobbed. “Oh, God, they’ll die.”

Lucifer uttered an expletive in the Captain’s voice. “Patience, Patience. It’s all right now. We’re safe. You saved us, Patience. Do you hear me?”

“I have to turn the wheel!” No matter that she’d conjured the sweet-snarly captain, she would not be seduced from her purpose.

“Sweetheart, everything’s fine now. Let go, love.”

She looked up. Her imagined Captain had a bloody gash on his brow, and she knew a surge of pain at the sight. But she wouldn't let go of the wheel. She couldn't, or her girls and the sailors would die.

Grant ignored the pain in his throbbing head and slipped his arm around Patience's waist, holding her tight, aching for her panic, proud as anything of her courage.

Jasper had to pry her hand from the spokes, one finger at a time. "Her fingers are so stiff, Captain, I'm afraid I'll break one."

"Be careful then or you will. I've seen this kind of hysteria before." Grant bent to Patience's ear, to gentle her with his words as if she were a frightened colt, poised to bolt, but when her hand became finally free, she grabbed a different spoke.

Jasper looked at him and sighed.

Grant shook his head. "Try again. The minute that hand's free, I'll hold it so you can remove the other."

Patience held the wheel in a death-grip, but they finally tore her away. "No, they'll die, my girls, the sailors. I can't let them die."

Grant lifted her in his arms. "Hush, love. They're safe. Jasper is taking the wheel now, see?" He knew she must understand because she calmed in his embrace. "Jasper, get us back on course. Dublin can finish my watch."

Grant carried Patience toward his cabin, his climb down the hatch, a study in balance. When he tried to lower her into Shane's bunk, she took such a stranglehold of his neck, he almost choked. She gripped him tight as she had the wheel. Her eyes were open, but she didn't seem to see him. Balancing her, he yanked Shane's blankets free of his bunk, hooked a chair leg with his foot to turn it and sat with her on his lap, Shane's bedding in a heap nearby.

He kissed her forehead, alarm biting his belly. She could have been washed overboard. He pulled her closer. "My brave little sailor, we need get you out of your wet clothes or you'll catch your death. Me too. If you were yourself, I'd suggest we get naked together, just to see your cheeks turn pink. But it's no fun teasing you unless you can fight back. I do so enjoy our little squabbles."

He pushed the hair from her eyes and pressed her cheek to his chest, stroking her temple "Patience, you were wonderful out there tonight. No sailor could have done a finer job. From the moment you saw that derelict ship and alerted the watch, you were magnificent. I watched you while my head throbbed, my stomach revolted and my arms and legs refused to heed my instructions. You held our lives in your tiny, capable hands and saved us all. Only one in a hundred non-sailors would have thought to flash that light? When you turned us from destruction, I knew you must be the bravest woman ever."

Patience whimpered and burrowed closer.

Grant stroked her brow worried about this daze she was in.

"I'm not brave," she said, after a minute, in less than a whisper.

He smiled. "Brave doesn't mean you're not afraid. It means that in the face of your fear, you do what you must to come about. And you did precisely that, both tonight and when you arrived in America. And do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think the families who placed their daughters in your care, and their faith in you, were very smart."

Patience shivered and sighed. "But I can't do it."

"Do what, love?"

“Find them husbands,” she wailed and looked him in the eye. “I don’t even know the Marquess of Andover.”

He chuckled, certain now that his faith in her was well-placed. “Let’s worry about that later. If you hadn’t saved everyone tonight, you wouldn’t need to know the scoundrel.”

“But I have to do right by my girls, Grant. It’s important. I love them and I gave their parents my word.”

She called him Grant. Pride and humility warred within him. Pride won. He kissed the top of her head. “You’ll do your best to keep your word. If there’s anything I’ve learned, you’re sincere. Even when you’re not certain how, you do the right thing. Now, no more talk. Let’s get you out of these wet clothes. You’re freezing.”

She nodded, but kept her arms tight around his neck and nuzzled her face against his shoulder.

Grant chuckled. “Patience, you have to let go.” He loosened her hold, brought her icy hands to his lips, then he blew warmth over them while massaging them between his own.

“I have blankets. What I’m going to do is stand you up, peel you out of your wet clothes, quick as I can, then wrap you warm and tight. All right?”

He was so frightened by her look of trust, he wanted to fetch Rose. But he couldn’t. He needed to be the one to care for Patience. As much as he knew she needed him to.

When he tried to stand her up, her legs buckled so he sat her down and knelt before her, practically tearing her sodden clothes from her shivering body. In a flash, he held her up and wrapped her in Shane’s blankets like an Egyptian Mummy.

“No,” she squealed, when he tried to place her on his bunk. “Don’t let me go.” She thrust her arms from their confinement and clamped them about his neck, the blanket gaping at her breasts.

He kissed the topmost arc of one, couldn’t help himself, and thought she might have purred. “Patience, I need to change into dry things, too. Let me go for just a minute while I change, then I’ll hold you again.”

Patience allowed him to set her on his bunk, but she seemed forlorn when he let her go, almost to the point of tears.

He groaned and turned his back to her, stripping and pulling on dry trousers fast as he could.

When he turned back, she seemed a bit more relaxed. “Are you any warmer?”

“I’m only warm when you hold me.”

He smiled and poured her a brandy. “Here, sip this.”

She shook her head.

“If you do, I’ll hold you, again.”

She looked suddenly haunted. “Please no.”

“Patience, it’ll warm you.”

“Spirits can make you do terrible things. No one should drink, Grant.”

“It’s like medicine.”

Her fear turned to sadness. “So Papa said.”

A warning sounded in Grant’s head, but this was no time to pursue the questions that resulted. “Brandy is often given to people who have been injured or had a shock. Ask Doc tomorrow, if you don’t believe me, but drink it now. Please.”

Her determination wavered.

“Patience, do you think I would give you anything to hurt you?”

“No,” she whispered.

Her easy answer purred through him the way his name on her lips for the first time had done. “Then drink this, please.”

She nodded once and accepted the glass. Crinkling her nose, she took a sip and handed it back. “Thank you. That was—” She gasped.

“You need more than that,” he said, eyeing the glass.

“It worked.” She fanned her face. “I’m much warmer.”

“Just one more sip?”

She shook her head in adamant refusal.

He lifted her, gloried in the feel of her arms slipping easily around his neck, of her body pressed close, and turned back his blankets. He placed her near the wall, got in beside her and pulled her close.

She put her head on his shoulder and her arm over his chest. “It’s hot in here.”

Damned hot.

Her sigh, as she drifted into sleep, fanned warm air against his cold neck. Her exposed breast, pressing soft against his chest, caused another stir. He smiled in contentment, covered her exposed parts and snuggled close, his own eyes closing.

\* \* \*

“I can’t turn the ship! I don’t know how!”

Patience’s scream woke Grant. “Shh. Patience, love. Relax.” Her grip on his arm would probably cause a bruise.

She whimpered. “I don’t know how to steer a ship.”

“I’ll teach you, Patience. Tomorrow, I’ll teach you how to work the wheel.” He felt her calm. “Would you like that?” He stroked her arm resting on his chest.

She sighed and relaxed. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Captain?”

“Yes.”

“I just want you to know, I’m still angry at you for sending Shane away.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“Just so you know.”

“Be quiet and go to sleep.”

Patience woke in the Captain’s bunk—in Grant’s bunk—alone, her clean sailors’ clothes placed over a chair. She remembered the Phantom ship and her panic, and running for the wheel, then she’d been here with the Captain. It had seemed so right to snuggle up to him and sleep. And, oh! sometime during the night, he’d promised to teach her to steer the ship! She got up, surprised she ached in so many places, dressed quickly and went on deck.

It was near noon, she surmised, by the placement of the sun, as she stepped into the fresh air. Cheers and whistles startled her. “Whatever is the matter with everyone?” she asked as her girls approached.

Sophie hugged her. “Patience, you saved the Knave’s Secret and all aboard last night. Don’t you remember?”

“Did I?”

The Captain—thinking of him as Grant was difficult on deck, surrounded by sailors—stepped closer and nodded. “The wheel was turning out of control after I was knocked senseless,” he said. “We were directly in the phantom ship’s path.”

Snatches of memory teased her. “I remember thinking we would split in two, that the girls, the sailors would die. I ... I tried to turn us in the opposite direction, away from the ship, so—” She recalled using their names as she grabbed each spoke. “I turned us away from that ship? I did it? Not you?”

Lord, the Captain was handsome when he smiled. “You did it,” he said. “We are all most grateful and will continue to be for the years we’ve been given because of you.”

Patience felt her blush, either from Grant’s smile or everyone else’s applause.

They stood in line, those formerly, nasty, grumbling tars, with their shaggy hair and beards and their leathery, wrinkled skin, and smiled and shook her hand. They thanked her one by one, calling her Ma’am, Lady Patience or Yer Ladyship. She was so happy she might cry. Grant stood beside her throughout, beaming with what seemed like pride. She would examine that thought later. The girls hugged her in turn.

The Captain said she showed incredible bravery, but her actions seemed more like practical, common sense to her.

Doc made a beautiful plum duff for lunch, because it was her favorite. Patience leaned toward the Captain when they were finished eating and the girls were deep in conversation between themselves. “Last night, when we were, ah, we were—”

“Sleeping?”

“Yes, sleeping.” She ignored the smile in his eyes. “You said you would teach me to steer the ship. Will you?”

“I always keep my promises, and the sea is perfect right now. But aren’t your arms sore? Do you think you can manage it so soon?” His hands slid slowly up her arms and then down again as if he were trying to soothe her aches.

She wondered if he would keep doing it, if she said they hurt, and considered it, but she was eager to handle the wheel, so she shrugged away her discomfort, experiencing disappointment when he released her.

The Captain took her hand. “Come along, then.” He led her to the wheel. “I’ll set her on course. Now, stand here. Grab the spokes like so and feel the ship on its course. See how the sails are filled and the wind carries her forward? From here, we make certain we don’t go in the direction the wind directs all the time.”

Patience felt strength surrounding her, in the ship itself and in the man behind her. He slid his hands atop hers, his palms skimming her knuckles. He guided the wheel with her, her thrill having little to do with controlling so massive a vessel. His breath tickled her neck. She wanted to turn her head, to feel his beard-stubbed cheek against her own, to lean into him.

“Now look at the compass and watch the mark,” he said, distracting her daft musings. Just as well. “If it moves to the left of the point, turn the wheel a couple notches to the right, to pull her back again. If she comes back too fast, shove her over a couple of spokes. Sometimes it’ll take a couple more spokes to bring her to heel, but as soon as she’s where you want her, you’ve got to bring her back to where she was or you’ll be running the ship in a circle the whole time.”

Patience turned in disbelief. “Could you repeat that?”

“You’ll begin to see the sense after a time. Keep her on course and see what happens.”

Patience loved the sun kissing her hair, the wind sifting through it, the Captain’s deep rusty voice in her ear, and the tickle of his breath with each word he spoke. As if that was not enough, the power in keeping such a giant vessel on course surged through her like heat lightening at midnight, bright, deadly, and exciting.

He gave her a smile and a, “Good girl.”



When he wasn't angry, he could be downright wonderful. Contentment flowed through her. "Give her a spin to port," he ordered.

When she followed his precise order, she laughed at his surprise.

"By, God, you're a natural. You've had her all to yourself for the past half hour. You can take me sailing anytime." He squeezed her shoulder and kept his hand there afterward.

Patience pictured a smaller vessel in a secluded sound, the two of them drifting alone of a lazy summer's afternoon. His hands would be on her then, too. She'd let go the wheel and turn to wrap her arms around him...

The bell rang for the change in watch. She was surprised the afternoon had passed so quickly and sorry to see her lesson end.

After dinner, he walked her to her door while the others lingered over tales of buried treasure and ghost ships. He kissed her forehead. "Back to the hammock for me," she whispered, as his lips lingered against her hairline and his arms came around her. She grieved that though Shane's bunk lay empty, she couldn't stay in his cabin with him. Besides, it wasn't Shane's bunk she coveted, but Grant's, his body close to hers.

He stepped back. "I'm afraid so. Last night was an unusual circumstance. Tonight would be \_\_\_"

"Of course." She colored, scooted inside, shut the door, and leaned against it. She had almost begged, but he had made excuses.

Sometimes she could be such an idiot.

When her hammock rocked, a short while later, Patience jumped before it could throw her. Books slid off the table.

"All hands! All hands on deck, ahoy, to shorten sail."

A thunderous crack split the night.

Water seeped under the cabin door.

"Get dressed," she shouted to the girls then ran to the second cabin. The Captain met her in the companionway. He ran a hand through his dripping hair. "A spar snapped. I need a couple of you to see to the injured. We've the storm from hell, and it'll be the devil to pay. The rest of you stay in the cabins. Don't light the lamps."

"Captain, wait." Patience caught his arm. "Can we replace the injured men?"

Surprised, he nodded, "You, Angel and Sophie. Wear your pants and caps. Get some oilskins and boots from the men's quarters; they'll protect you from the weather."

Grace and Rose tended the wounded.

The Captain put Angel on the deck pumps, tying her to the mast to keep a wave from taking her.

When he put Patience on the wheel, her surge of triumph met one of fear. But she didn't let him see it.

"The squall's taken all three topgallant sails and parted the jib sheet," he said, but she could hardly hear him over the gale's fury. "I've got to go up the rigging. I need you here. You've already got a feel for it; keep her straight as you can, else she'll twist ... but hell, you know that. Use everything I taught you today, but remember the sea and the wind are much more determined tonight." Her heart warmed at his confidence, despite the icy elements.

He placed Sophie near her. "You pull at the same time as Patience, in the direction she tells you." He looked into Patience's eyes. "With Sophie, you're strength is doubled." You all right with that?"

She nodded and quelled a panicked urge to kiss him, for fear it would be their last.

He secured them both to the wheel house. “The rudder’ll be flapping in the swells and turning the wheel all to hell.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Thanks.”

“Take in the mainsail,” he shouted a moment later. It fell, but the wind whipped it back into place with the report of a cannon. It became engorged like a balloon, strained and split.

Squealing rigging, snapping canvas, shouted orders, became a wail of pandemonium amid the bellow of mother nature. They’d ride a monstrous wave high, high into the air, and fall fast, back into the trough, the ship sounding as if she’d split in half. The whole was tumultuous, yet eerie, as if they’d been abandoned by God.

Patience’s heart pounded with a fear of never being connected to the world again. She kept an eye out for Angel, not too far distant, and Sophie nearby. Her chicks, fighting the elements with her, were safe. If they didn’t sink, Grace and Rose, below, would be safe too.

“Man overboard!”

The alarm hung in the air.

Patience looked at Sophie and saw fear reflected in her eyes.

Minutes, or hours, passed; Patience wasn’t sure. The wind calmed. Jasper came and took over the wheel.

Where was the Captain? Horror held Patience in its grip. “Who was lost?”

Jasper shook his head. “Go below. All of you. There’s nothing more you can do.”

Sophie and Angel went. Patience followed, saw them warm and dry, went to check on Rose and Grace and returned topside to wait.

The sea calmed. A furious rage became an angry swell. The regular watch, four hours, changed to a dogwatch, two. Jasper continued at the wheel. He sent the crew to their bunks. The storm was over.

Oh, God, where was the Captain?

Eight bells sounded a new watch. Head bent in prayer, Patience huddled against a bulkhead. Face wet, her tears mingling with drizzling rain, she looked up to see Jasper heading below. The abandoned wheel was steady now. They were at anchor.

She’d give anything to hear a shout from the snarly cap— Then she saw him, leaning against the wheel house, arms crossed, studying her.

He opened his arms.

With a whoop she ran into them.

He gasped when she hit him, hugging hard as she could, to draw him within her where he would be safe.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded, afraid she might cry.

“I’m taking the watch. Will you stay for a while? I know you’re wet and cold and I shouldn’t ask, but ... though I find this curious in myself for the paradox, I’d like to spend a few calm moments with you.”

“Who fell overboard?”

“Paddy.”

Her eyes filled.

“No, don’t.” He hugged her. “He’s safe. He got caught in a sail like a babe in a cradle.”

Her happiness returned. “Thank God you’re both safe.”

“Both? Did you think it was me?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry.” He gave her a soft kiss. “No one has ever worried about me before. Thank

you.” She would remember this particular smile the next time he scowled. He took her hand. “Come with me.” He led her to a sheltered corner, drier than most places on deck.

The sky, which had seemed their enemy a short time ago, shone a clear dark blue, a million tiny stars winking down, the air cool and fresh. He rested against a stack of lashed crates and tucked her between his raised knees, pulling her back against his chest, and holding her loosely with an arm under her breasts. “Comfortable?”

“Very.”

He toyed with her hair. “No matter how many times I pull these springy wisps of copper straight, they bounce right back.”

Within the comfortable silence, she closed her eyes. His breath tickled her. Under her hand lay the cool, slick oil-skin covering his leg. The hard deck below her was tempered by the yielding strength of his chest at her back. Scents teased her, the salty sea, wet wood and rope, clean air and him. She knew that of them all, his scent would be forever etched in her mind as the essence of this moment.

“Are you dry under that thing?” He slipped his hand between two hooks on the oil-skin and felt her dry shirt beneath. The proximity of his hand to her breast sent tremors through her.

“Everything’s dry but the trousers. How about you?” She slipped her hand under his oil-skin and caressed his thigh.

“Mmm,” he all but purred. “Do you realize what you’ve done to me on this voyage? I’ll never look at plum duff, riding lights, the wheel, flying fish—so damned many things—without thinking of you. Even my cabin haunts me, between the bunk, the books and that boarded-up window—which, by the way, let in water during the storm.” He tweaked her nose. “Hell, I won’t even look at a pig the same way again. Future voyages will seem dull by comparison.”

Take me with you, again, Patience wanted to say. Instead, she laughed. “Don’t forget, you jumped into the ocean for a puppy.”

“For you, Patience. I jumped into the ocean to save that puppy for you.”

“Oh.”

He was quiet for a few moments after that. “Do you know, a couple of nights ago, while on watch, I could have sworn I heard the sound of your laughter in the wind?”

Patience couldn’t help be aware that they would be separated soon, and he would go back to sea without her. It seemed impossible that she might miss him when they parted. After all, they’d only known each other a short time. Still....

His fingers teased her neck as he moved the hair aside. Soft, cool lips followed, moving slowly over her exposed flesh. His hand moved from her waist upward. Ripples of pleasure flowed with every touch. His thumb teased the underside of her breast as he took a tongue-swirling taste of her neck. Ripples became bounding waves.

“Mmm, salty, but delicious.” He nipped her earlobe. “I want to know your dreams, Patience.” He kissed her lips. “Tell me what you see as the perfect future.”

“Nothing beyond this moment. My dream is now and it’s wonderful. Don’t speak of the future. Don’t talk at all. Just continue what you’re doing.”

“Ah, but Patience, I want to do more. Will you let me? Do you still mean to know why men like women with large bosoms?”

A fire began within her, a small flame fed by his actions. As he offered to reveal one of life’s great mysteries, her heart began a newer, faster rhythm. She turned to look into his eyes. “Tell me.”

“Will you let me show you?”

She wasn't certain that would be a good idea ... and yet she wanted to know. And it should be him that showed her.

She could see that he sensed her quandary.

"Something incredible can happen between a man and a woman, Patience. But to be truly understood, it must be experienced. I intend to give you that, no, to share it with you." His look brought new warmth.

"Yes. Please." A flame centered in a place that never knew such heat. He turned her until her back rested against one of his arms. He brought her chin up so as to place his lips on hers. They were soft, like a whisper, a flutter of wings so translucent you hardly knew they were there but for the silken beauty they represented.

"Captain, I—"

"Grant. Say my name, Patience."

She whispered it, almost reverently.

More than anything, Grant wanted to take Patience to a place higher than she'd ever been. That she was intrigued, even aroused, but not fearful, almost became his undoing. He kissed her repeatedly, drawing from her honeyed mouth. She opened to him and followed his unspoken instruction. A quick, brilliant pupil, he had, but he slowed to calm his already frustrated body.

"Show me now, Grant."

Oh, God. "Yes, my little Impatience. But stop me if you're frightened or unsure."

She nodded.

He undid the fasteners on the slicker; she helped. He untied the cross-strings over the bodice of the shirt he had given her and separated the fabric to expose her shift, sheer and damp. He kissed the top of one breast through the clinging fabric. "So beautiful."

She regarded him. "Questions?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"You know, don't you, that I wouldn't do anything to hurt you?"

"Of course."

That scared him. Damn, this woman could make him feel emotions he didn't think existed. He remembered his fantasy, the children, and her, pregnant. He thought about waking up beside her every morning, of actually hearing her laughter, rather than conjuring it in the wind. He should run like hell. One look in her green eyes, and need overshadowed fear. He wanted to be the one to teach her about loving, and by God, he would. Her firm breasts peeking through her shift were small but perfect. With the back of his hand he grazed the underside of one.

Her eyes closed, and she took a breath.

"Do you like that, love?"

"It feels ... extraordinary."

"You deserve nothing less," he whispered, certain she deserved more than a jaded sea captain on a wet deck. He nearly closed her shirt, his shirt, over her tiny breasts, but he could not seem to make himself. "Your breasts are perfect, Patience. Not too small, just right. See how they fit my hand?"

Smiling, she watched him tease a tiny nub. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply so as to fill his hand. He obeyed her body's unconscious entreaty, and she whimpered. Pulling her higher up against him, he kissed her as he pleased her, her ardor matching his. He moved the fabric of the shift aside to expose her skin to the cool air.

He took in her beauty and was humbled. "I want to touch your breasts with my tongue and take you into my mouth. Do you wish it, Patience?"

“More than anything.”

At first, he teased her, a tiny lick at the bud, then another, bolder taste. When he closed his lips around her nipple and suckled, she cried out with what must be her first pleasure, and he was exhilarated to be the one to give it to her.

“Grant, I feel faint.”

“Relax and enjoy, love. You won’t faint. It pleases me to give you this. It’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

This, between them, was just physical, of course; he knew that. Still, he couldn’t shake the notion he’d never experienced anything quite like it before, his purpose centered in the pleasure he could give, rather than receive. He placed his hand flat against the juncture of her legs. She whimpered and arched.

He stroked her lightly and she moaned against his mouth, then suddenly she was kissing him, drawing from his lips. God, she was incredible.

“Cap’n! We’ve a problem below decks. The sea’s past the water line. Yo Captain? Where ye be?”

Patience’s eyes widened. Even in the moonlight, Grant could see the blush wash over her as awareness set in. He placed his hand against her mouth and shook his head, only removing it when she nodded understanding.

He closed her shirt and hooked the slicker. “I’m sorry, love, we’ll finish later.” He kissed her quickly but with force. “Stay where you are until I go below, then go to your cabin. Are you all right? Can you manage?”

Wide-eyed, she nodded.

As if from afar, Patience watched Grant stand and arrange his clothes. With a wry smile, he leaned down to kiss her before he stood and walked away. With an explicit oath, he ordered Jasper below then his shout for the pumps to be manned floated upward followed by a quick response.

Silence descended. Still, she sat stunned. As her mind cleared, she realized that sailors would soon return to run the pumps. She rose and went directly to her cabin, for surely if anyone saw her face, they would know exactly what happened.

Rose and Angel slept, praise be. As she undressed, Patience realized she was especially tired, pleasantly so. Her body hummed. Just thinking about Grant’s promise to finish later brought a flood of confusion. Finish what? Could that have gotten any more intense? That something she had never done in her life, which she suspected she shouldn’t have done now. Oh, who was she trying to fool, anyway? She knew he shouldn’t have touched her that way. But, glory, it had been wonderful.

She was glad they would be in London soon. This ... fascination she had for the Captain had to stop. She didn’t want to be ... attracted? Tempted? She sighed. Neither seemed strong enough. Captivated, more like, but it went deeper than that. Still trying to put a name to her feelings, Patience threw her nightdress over her head and set about pulling her hammock down.

There came a light tapping at her door. When she opened it, Grant stood waiting. She stepped into the companionway shutting the door behind her and felt childish in her ruffled night-rail and bare feet. She covered one foot with the other to dignify her position then felt even more foolish.

Grant noted her embarrassment and tipped up her chin to examine her face. “Are you all right?”

Patience nodded. “What do you call what happened between us? What we just ... did?”

Heat filled Grant anew. “Passion, sweetheart. A most gratifying experience, was it not?”  
“Well, yes, but, can a woman share such with just any man?”

Grant stood stunned, both by her question and by the answer that had come readily to his mind. He ran a hand over his face refusing to believe that passion with Patience was different than with anyone else. Perhaps it was more intense ... probably because she was an innocent, and it intrigued him to be the man to awaken her. Her guileless expression, her prim, childlike gown roused an absurd notion in him to pat her on the head and offer her a sweetmeat. His invective, sharp and raw, startled her, and he scowled. “Any man and any woman can experience passion together.”

Patience saw exactly when Grant departed, and the arrogant Captain returned. “You’re lying. I can’t imagine letting Izzy, Red or Shanks—”

He grasped her shoulders. “Stop it!”

She smiled inwardly, because only Grant had the capacity for jealousy, so it was he, not the Captain, who’d snapped. “Perhaps Jasper, though,” she said, baiting him, and he growled. “Good night, Grant,” she whispered and stood on her toes to kiss him with all the fire they’d shared earlier.

She rejoiced when he groaned and pulled her into his arms to deepen the kiss.

Some while later, he stepped back. “Good night, Patience,” he said, a quiver in his voice.

“I’m looking forward to continuing our lesson,” she whispered, slipping through her door. “Let me know when you’re ready,” she added, before shutting it soundlessly.

“Oh, I’m ready,” she heard him mutter. “But if I have any sense at all, your lessons will continue when hell freezes over.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Angel braved the rigging with Dickie, and the way the Captain shouted angry orders made her thankful to be out of range.

“We’re almost to London,” Dickon said, as they stood on the ratlines, high above the deck, weaving and knotting the oiled hemp into new rigging.

“We are? Oh. I’m going to miss you.”

He looked incredulous. “No, you’re not. You’re going to marry me.”

“I am?”

“Why else do you think I took ship as a sailor?”

“To see that I had a safe journey?”

“Angel, a bloody paragon couldn’t have insured a safe journey for you and your friends. There must have been a bloomin’ bunch of guardian angels aboard. For the life of me, I can’t figure out why we didn’t burn down or sink with the help you girls were.”

“Dickon!” She stamped her foot shaking them so much the ropes swayed precariously and threatened to topple them. Embracing each other, with the coarse hemp between them, they rode out the hazard.

“That was a damn stupid thing to do,” Dickon said when he let her go.

Angel set her jaw, pouted prettily, and narrowed her eyes in a way that always worked with Papa, and sometimes even with Mama.

“I’d like to kiss that pout away, but cute as you are when you do it, there’ll be none of that nonsense when we’re married.”

Angel beamed. She loved the authority in his voice. She loved the word marriage. She guessed she loved Dickon, especially for coming after her. “Yes, Dickon.”

He nodded approvingly. “I’ll need to find out where you’re staying in London.”

“You can follow us from the ship.”

He shook his head. “Have to unload and swab the decks, or the Cap’n’ll string me up.”

Angel bit her lip. “I’ll send you a note.”

“Too risky.”

“I’ll come and tell you.”

“Angel, if sending a note’s too risky, coming yourself, surely is.” He shook his head. “You don’t know one thing about London and the danger on the streets, especially near the docks. Don’t leave the house alone. I mean it. Be serious. How am I going to find you?”

“Well, what’s wrong with a note? Patience won’t mind if I send one of the servants out.”

“She can’t know.”

“Why ever not? I’ve thought it quite silly, since you rescued Wellington, to pretend I didn’t know you.”

“Sweetheart, your mother is paying Patience to find you a titled husband. She won’t earn any money if you run away with me.”

“Are we going to run away?” Angel turned the romantic notion about in her head for a while, enjoying the possibility of a romantic adventure.

“I must be besotted,” Dickon said. “But you’re worth the price I’ll undoubtedly pay when I face your mother’s wrath.”

Angel laughed at the look on his face, pleased that her laugh charmed him.

He smiled as if reading her and shook his head. “How about Gresham’s Lending Library

on Lombard Street? When I'm finished duty—that should be in about three days after we make port—I'll go there every afternoon at two. I'll wait an hour perusing Mr. Shakespeare. A lending library's a perfectly respectable place. Surely Lady Patience won't object to your going. You can tell her you heard about it and wish to visit."

"It sounds like a perfect idea," Angel said. "I do love penny novels. How do you know about Gresham's?"

"Won't be the first time I've been to London. Came with my father ten years ago. We spent two years visiting the world's ports. You just don't sit right down and build a ship, you know. You study them, sail them."

God she loved him. She was proud of him, too. "Gresham's Lending Library, Lombard Street, two in the afternoon. I'll be there."

"See that you are. I don't want to wait forever to make you m'wife."

The way he looked at her, she thought he might kiss her right there. "Oh Dickie."

"Who the bloody hell told you rats to take a rest?"

Angel looked down. "Is he talking to us?"

"Fraid so."

"He called us rats!"

"Sweetheart, we're standing on the ratlines. That makes us rats."

"Oh."

"Let's work faster. We're almost finished and I don't want the old salt to scrape my barnacles."

"Right." Angel understood nothing of what he said.

The Captain paced the storm-ravaged deck surveying his domain. The tempest had crippled the *Knave* and before she could continue her journey, she must be repaired. He couldn't get Patience to London fast enough; she was a woman a man could drown in, and he had a long-standing fear of drowning.

As he lay sleepless in his bunk the night before, he'd come to a decision. There'd be no more lessons for his greedy little student. Her education was becoming downright dangerous to his sanity and his future. He found himself satisfied with the decision, but disappointed at the same time, and annoyed as hell over his frustration.

As the sailors fitted spare sails, Rose mended the ones torn in the storm. Though Grant chafed at the delay, he would not sail without spares. For all he wanted to shout for Rose to hurry, he couldn't bring himself to give her the backside of his tongue. How she ended up in this nest of vipers, he didn't know, but he stifled his anger as he approached her. "I'd like to hoist sail tomorrow, Rose. Need the sheets mended and stored first. Think you can get it done?"

"Yes, sir," Rose said, smiling up at him.

Females. God drown the lot of them. He sighed. He didn't mean that, of course. Women had their uses. Patience had been hot as a flame in his arms on deck last night. She'd kissed him, opened to him, tangled her tongue with his, purring all the while.

He nearly tripped on the capstan, and ran a hand through his hair. Stop torturing yourself, he told himself. He wanted to be furious, needed to be. Bloody hell, he was furious. Sure they'd helped in the storm but it was everything, the damage they did before the storm, the time delays, the repairs ... the fact that caring for Patience scared the bejesus out of him.

He headed for the rigging and didn't stop climbing 'til he got to a slack-jawed jack-tar making slip-shod repairs, and took great satisfaction in snapping at his tail.

"What's stuck in his craw, ya s'pose?"



The Captain heard Jasper's question clear as day, certain the tar didn't note the wind's direction when he posed it.

"Had it with the females, I'll wager," Izzy said.

Jasper nodded. "I could understand before the storm and the ghost ship. But those females have been a mighty hand lately and no mistake."

"If you ask me, it's the one scrubbin' paint over there. Slid right under his skin. Makes him madder'n'a hornet. Or scared as one."

"You're right. Fine kettle of fish for a scoundrel, fallin' for a woman." Izzy shook his head. "Nasty business."

The Captain wavered between anger and respect for such perception. "Mangy sea-dogs," he spat, starting down.

"Best shorten sail," Jasper warned. "Here he comes and he'll clap a stopper on us faster'n you can whistle for the wind." They turned their attention, and their muscles, to a splintered spar.

The Captain hit the deck with a thud, his feet planted wide, his stance sure. Hands behind his back, he ambled by Jasper and Izzy, and he whistled a funeral dirge in slow, subtle warning, calming himself in the process, until he found Patience on her knees.

She scrubbed the deck in furious concentration, bedraggled, exhausted. Sure, he'd needed their help, but not like this. She didn't deserve this.

Yet her hard work aggravated him. Not a surprise, he supposed. It seemed everything aggravated him today. Hell, she didn't need to work like that. She paid her way across—well, someone paid it, at any rate. He'd given her this task after she spent two hours on the deck pump. What was wrong with him?

He'd been harder on her than the rest, he supposed, because, well, if she hated him, he'd be less likely to give in to his need to teach her every blasted thing he knew of passion and pleasure. That he was a bloody bastard hit him like a blow. That he was ashamed of it hit him harder.

"Lady Patience."

She ignored him and scrubbed faster.

"You've put in a hard day. Go rest now." Guilt nipped his gut. No one had gone as long without a break. But, Lord, she was stubborn. "Patience. Stop." She wouldn't look up. He bent on his haunches to get her attention. "Patience," he said gently.

"Go to hell!"

He stifled a chuckle. "Stop amusing me. I'm trying to stay mad enough to keep my hands off you."

"Put your hands on me, I'll cut them off."

"That's bloody grisly, but it's probably the only thing that'll stop me. Drop that rag and let me help you up."

She stopped scrubbing, sagged, and lowered her head, but she didn't drop the rag.

He grabbed one of her hands to tug her with him as he stood.

Patience cried out and took her hand from his, cupping it in the other.

"What the?" He took her hand to examine it, red, raw, cuts and blisters exacerbating the damage.

Pain shot through him at the sight. "Who the hell put lye in this water?"

"Stop shouting! You told me to do this miserable job." She lowered her voice. "When I asked Doc what I needed, he gave me water. I didn't think it was enough so he threw something in to help. How was I to know it removes skin?"

"The sand is supposed to make the scrubbing easier."

“I used sand too.”

“Yes, I can see that, and the sand got into the gashes and blisters with the lye, irritating your hands the more.”

Patience held her roiling emotions in check. If the bastard continued to be kind, she'd cry. She would not let him see how tired, sore and upset she was. “Leave me alone. I'm finished and I'd like to retire.” She rose ignoring his extended hand. Her back ached and her knees wobbled and despite her wet, torn, stained clothes, she departed with all the dignity she could muster.

He followed, she knew, and wished he'd go away. She stopped before reaching the hatch—she simply hadn't the strength to go down, nor did she know how, without using her hands.

The Captain stopped beside her and lifted her hands to examine them. “They must burn like fire.”

“Yes.” She didn't look up; she couldn't face the kindness she heard in his voice.

“Wait here.” He disappeared down the hatch.

She lowered herself to a coil of rope surprised at how comfortable she was.

He returned with a small, cobalt jar of salve. “Let me put this on your hands. It's thick; it'll protect as well as heal.”

She refused to remember how caring he'd been when he took out her splinters, kissing and soothing each one, how gently he'd held her after the Phantom ship. “No, thank you. I don't need anything from you. I'll just sit here and rest a bit then I'll go to my cabin and take care of myself.”

When Grant saw Patience's eyelids droop, he decided to wait her out. “Fine.” He stepped from her line of vision, watching her snuggle her bottom more comfortably in the rope coil and reacted instantly, dammit.

She tucked her legs up and leaned against a rain barrel, hands palms up, eyes closed, and fell deeply asleep.

Grant studied her for some time, softened by each freckle and wayward copper curl. He admired the determined set of her shoulders, even in sleep. Shaking his head at his daft musings, he stooped before her, covering each raw hand with a slab of salve.

She never woke, though she sighed, likely in relief.

He cursed himself for a heartless bastard seeing her tiny sore hand nestled in his big brutal one. With his anger, he'd hurt her physically, and if he didn't miss his guess, he'd hurt her in the region of her heart as well. And Grant was surprised to discover this bothered a conscience he'd assumed long-dead.

Since the activity on deck centered away from them, he carried her to his cabin and put her on his bunk leaving her to sleep. Later, he brought a large copper tub in, and when it slipped from his hand and hit the floor like a thunderclap, Patience slept on. After several buckets of steaming water, the tub sat filled, and on she slept.

He stood over her. “You little witch,” he whispered. “You haunt my dreams and I beg to be haunted.” He touched a curl at her cheek. Her hair, wind-tossed, matted, and salt-water sprayed, still looked beautiful. Her hands, red and raw with jagged nails, were small and delicate. Actually, Patience was tiny all over. Funny, she didn't give the impression of being small, but larger than life. Waist, breasts and hips were all miniature, and he wondered, with a note of alarm, if she could bear children safely. Then he cursed the disquieting thought and tossed it aside.

Less than five feet tall, the green-eyed sprite had found places in his big, old, ugly heart that were soft and vulnerable. Who would have thought?

“Patience, Sweetheart, wake up.”

Her eyelids fluttered and she looked at him, her easy smile incredibly sweet.

Grant knew life would be easier if that smile did not make him so happy. “C’mon lazybones, time to get up.”

“Lazybones?” She sat up scowling. “What a nasty— Is that a bath? A real bath? In a real tub? I haven’t had a bath in—” She shuddered. “Never mind, it doesn’t bear thinking of. A bath.” She knelt to dip her hands in the warm water and stopped when she noticed the salve.

“Patience, the bath isn’t for you. It’s for me. I thought you’d scrub my back. You owe me more time since you didn’t finish the deck.”

If she were a cat, her back would be up. Her narrow-eyed stare foretold a need for retribution. She searched, likely for a weapon.

“No, Patience, don’t touch my books with salve on your hands. You’ll ruin—”

The book just missed him and he laughed, which of course, provoked another try. He’d known it would. She aimed better the second time and hit him in the shoulder. “Ouch.” She smiled with a nod of satisfaction and searched out another missile. He’d have to scrape salve off everything, but he enjoyed the diversion. Especially after the storm’s fury, and what had come after, with her.

“You’re wrecking all my books with— Not the sextant!”

His denial was all the enticement she needed. She raised it.

“By all that’s holy, Patience, don’t throw it. It belonged to my grandfather. Patience!”

She tossed it, her aim steady.

He caught the prized instrument with ease—as he believed she intended—and cradled it against his chest for several grateful heartbeats. “God’s truth, that was close. For a minute there, you had me worried.”

She opened the cabinet and reached for the decanter of brandy, with a sidelong look toward his reaction. Hard for him not to smile. “No, wait, love. Throw the port. It’s lousy. But don’t throw the brandy.”

Patience chose the brandy and unstopped the decanter. The heady scent assaulted her, bringing fast, burdensome memories of her father, but she denied her grief, and returned to the game.

Presenting a feline smile filled with purpose, she poured the golden liquid, swirled it in her glass and raised it in a salute. Watching Grant over the rim, she pretended to sip, liquid barely touching her lips. “For medicinal purposes,” she said.

She loved him watching her, hands on hips, a twinkle in those devil’s eyes. She felt heat from that touch of brandy—or from something more. Whatever the cause, it spread within her. She replaced the stopper and aimed the decanter.

“It’s yours.” Grant’s hands went up in supplication. “The bath’s yours.” Mirth shook him. “I always meant it for you. Honest. I was just teasing.”

A gurgle of laughter escaped her. “You mean it?”

He nodded, tucking his sextant safely inside his sea chest and unearthed a bar of fragrant, spicy soap from its depths. He held it out to her with a smile. “I mean it.”

Patience nearly danced in joy. “Hurrah!” She tried to undo the buttons on his shirt but couldn’t, her hands were so slippery.

“Come here.”

She did, awed at how readily she allowed him the intimacy. He unfastened the buttons quickly and carefully. “Thank you,” she said, turning to the tub. She began to remove the shirt,

but stopped. "Wait, you get out of here."

"Devil take it, Patience." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned arrogantly against the door. "I thought you'd let me stay and watch."

She scoffed. "Because I've lost my wits?"

"One can only hope." He chuckled and opened the door to go. "Let me know when you're done. I'll have someone empty the tub."

Patience smiled. Their play had eased her heart, and it had nothing to do with passion, and as she questioned the thought, Grant stepped quickly back inside, and kissed her. "Wish I could join you," he whispered before he left.

In minutes she stepped into the soothing, decadent warmth, and slid deeper and deeper until she shuddered in near-ecstasy.

\* \* \*

When the watch changed, Grant realized Patience had been down there a long time. Perhaps she'd climbed back in his bunk and gone back to sleep. He went and knocked on his door. "Patience?" When he heard no response, he opened the door a crack.

What a picture. Her asleep in the tub, and she hadn't yet washed her hair.

He closed his door with a gentle click and stooped down beside her. He could hardly see her body beneath the water, for the soapy bubbles, rather disappointing, but probably for the best. Smiling, he dipped his hand in then let a drop trickle from his finger to her nose. She made a face as if to dislodge it, but never woke. He dribbled water on her brow.

Patience opened her eyes and smiled. "Hello."

"Hello, my drowsy mermaid. You fell asleep."

"What a silly thing to do. I have to wash my hair."

"Fine," he said.

She closed her eyes. "Fine."

He chuckled. "Patience. Let me help you."

"Mmm." She seemed to be drifting back to sleep.

Grant stood, rolled up a sleeve, thought better of it, and removed his shirt entirely. He took flannel toweling from his chest and set it aside. After dipping a small bucket in the water, he knelt behind her and poured the contents over her head.

Patience gasped and woke with a vengeance. "Are you trying to drown me?"

"No, I'm washing your hair. The water is cooling."

"I'll do it."

"Let me. Please."

"All right." She closed her eyes then snapped them open. "What are you doing in here? I'm naked."

"I noticed. Now give me the soap."

She didn't move.

"Patience, if you don't give it to me, I'm going to go in looking for it. Never mind. That sounds like more fun." He extended his arm toward the water, but Patience slapped the water so fast, spray hit them both. In a flash, she located the soap and tossed it at him.

He juggled it for a minute, grin wide, and wiped his face with his arm. "Thank you."

Before long, he lathered her auburn curls, enjoying the sensation. With soapy hands, he stroked and caressed, a slow, lazy scalp massage.

Patience moaned. She sighed.

Grant reacted to every sound. He stroked from her neck to the top of her head then down

again. The more he caressed, the more verbally she expressed her pleasure. What it was doing to him, listening to those little mewling sounds of satisfaction, was indecent. She had sounded exactly so as he'd suckled her breast. He remembered it well. His body did, too.

He stood suddenly. "Time to rinse." He pushed her head down and dunked her, arms flailing, and got as much of the soap out as he could while she was under.

Patience shot to a standing position gasping for air. "Bastard," she yelled, as she tried to get soap from her burning eyes. When she could finally see, Grant struggled with his laughter, as he held open a large square of flannel. She stepped from the tub, snapped it from his hands and wrapped it around herself. "I can't think of a word dastardly enough to call you."

She wished Grant didn't look so bloody charming, his eyes twinkling like a court jester's, his face a study in male perfection. How the devil could she be angry with a Greek God, his smile bright enough to shame the sun. "Oh, go away. Now. Immediately." She waved him out. "Shoo."

"Has anyone ever said that you have a magnificent body, Patience?"

There came his mocking smile again. And his bare-chested self was calling her magnificent. She swiped her dripping hair from her eyes. "No one else has ever seen it, dolt. Do you think I go around letting strange men see me naked?"

He inclined his head as much as to say, I have, his eye-crinkles prominent.

"Besides you, I mean. And you are strange, make no mistake."

He bowed with a flourish. "I am humbled."

Patience scoffed. "You are a braying ass."

He hooked his shirt with a finger, threw it over his shoulder, and left laughing.

Clean and dry, Patience realized she had no fresh clothes. Maybe if she stuck her head into the companionway, one of the girls would hear her call. She opened the door a crack, to see if anyone was about, but before she had a chance to check, a fistful of garments were shoved in her face. "For my Lady."

She snatched at them and slammed the door, nearly catching Grant's hand then she leaned against the portal shaking her head. Captain Grant St. Benedict could be a most agreeable man, if he weren't so exasperating.

Half an hour later, Grant was glad he'd been able to make up to Patience for being such a cad earlier. He thought she must be finished by now, so he sent Jasper for the tub. The sailor came back shaking his head, a grin splitting his face. "Won't let me in, won't let me have the tub. Said to leave more hot water outside the door."

"Good thing we've had plenty of rain. But what's she up to?"

Jasper shrugged and chuckled, suspiciously.

Grant went down to find his door locked to him, bolted from the inside. "Patience, open the door."

"Go away, Captain. The girls are taking turns bathing."

"Blast and damn, Patience, that's my cabin and I need to get some sleep. I have the midnight watch."

"You may use my hammock until we are finished."

Grant accepted her offer, but he woke, disoriented, and nearly got tossed by an angry hammock. Rising, flexing his stiff muscles, he thanked the stars that Patience hadn't witnessed his near-fall.

He followed shrieks of laughter toward his cabin and stopped before the open portal in shock.

Patience, Rose and Grace, freshly bathed, hair just washed—Patience with wispy curls about her face—stood around the tub. Angel and Sophie bent over said tub, very wet. And, there at the bottom, in several inches of water, sat a shivering Wellington.

When Grant entered his cabin, the pup took to yapping and jumped from the tub to circle the room, stopping to shake and sprinkle water randomly about.

“Damn it, Patience, stop him.” Grant scooped the pup and held him at arms length for protection. “I want this mess cleaned. Now. I want my floor mopped and....”

Grant saw the wide-eyed look on Patience’s face at precisely the same moment he felt a new warmth spread down the front of his shirt. He looked down, hoping beyond hope that what he feared was happening, was not.

How does one keep one’s dignity, he wondered, when a pup has just relieved himself down the front of one’s shirt? One does not, came his brain’s unfortunate response.

Into the silence, a giggle. He searched the girls’ faces, but not one moved a muscle. He placed the pup on the floor, heard another snort, a snigger, and he straightened to catch who dared.

Patience grabbed her middle, doubling over “Oh, God. I can’t hold it in.”

She was not alone. The girls laughed ‘till they wiped their tears. They tried to look away from the benighted sight of him, in an effort to control themselves, but they began laughing, again, as soon as they saw his yellow-stained shirt.

Patience handed Wellington to Angel, shooed the women from the room, and closed the door. She turned back to him, the picture of sympathy. “I’m— Well, but, you—” She bit her lip, shook her head, and proceeded to unbutton his shirt. Without his cooperation, she slipped it off him then dipped it into the remaining bath water to rinse.

“Blast it, Patience. You bathed a dog in that water.”

“Yes, but then he peed on your shirt. I’d say the shirt’s worse than the water.”

Grant growled at the minuscule particle of his best soap that Patience held toward him. “Right.” He snatched the soap with a scowl and rubbed it over his chest, ‘till it nearly disappeared altogether, then he accepted the sodden towel Patience offered and regarded it.

“It’s my towel,” she said. “Never touched Wellington.”

Shaking his head for his squandered wrath, he wiped his chest dry, and donned a clean shirt. “When you’re finished cleaning in here,” he said. “I’ll be on deck.” He succeeded in holding his smile until he left the cabin.

On deck, a short while later, Patience sought him out. As she approached, he admired her beauty and tried not to think of her standing naked, drenched and wild-eyed, in his tub. “Took you long enough,” he said.

“We made quite a mess, and then, of course, the pup.” She bit that lip, again, but failed to disguise her merriment. “I’m sorry, it’s just when I think of it.”

“I know,” he said, revealing his own amusement. “You should laugh more often. Your eyes sparkle and your dimples bloom.” He wanted to kiss them, but settled for touching each one with the tip of his finger.

Patience’s smile faded. “I thought I’d forgotten how to laugh, but I’ve laughed more on this journey than in the past twelve years.”

That surprised him. He wanted to touch her, restrained himself. “I’d think you were someone who laughed often. What made you stop?” He gave in to his impulse and brought her against his side. Gazing at the calm, blue-black sea, his arm around her, the moon painting a silver trail to the stars, Grant found it difficult to remember life without Patience.

“Twelve years ago, my childhood ended,” she said. “The exact moment I entered Aunt Harriette’s cottage. She didn’t want me. Suddenly there was nothing to laugh about. To her, I can do nothing right.”

Grant stepped behind her to massage her rigid shoulders. “She cared for you a long time. There must be some kindness in her.”

Patience tended to remember the bad rather than the good with Aunt Harriette, because it seemed there was so much more hurt. She sighed. “For years, I listened to her scold and preach. She said, ‘do not’ so often that I usually ‘did’ just to be contrary. ‘No Patience,’ became her motto. Said I wouldn’t go to heaven. We fasted and read the bible for my sins. According to her, I’m too flippant, too bold, too precocious, too practical, and too impractical. Too everything. She said she only put up with me because I was her dear sister’s daughter. I’d best be content, there’d be no marriage for me. No man would want me.”

Grant bent to her ear. “I have to tell you, without a doubt, she was wrong.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” she whispered, appalled at what she’d shared.

He turned her and looked into her eyes. “I want you.”

Patience needed clarification. “She meant no man would ever want to marry me. Do you mean that you want to?”

Grant stepped back. “Well, no. I have no intention of marrying. Anyone. Ever.”

“Nor do I,” she said, more disappointed than relieved. “See, we find more common ground daily. I think we’re friends, Grant. I’ve noticed that no matter how much we fight and bedevil each other, a real and true friendship has crept upon us without our realizing it.”

“You have, have you?”

“Yes, and for some reason, it’s important to me to preserve it.”

“How do you know this ah, friendship exists?”

“Well.” She sighed, considering. “When people are friends, they do things for each other. Like ... when you removed my wet, icy clothes, wrapped me in blankets and held me while I slept to keep me warm. Such acts show concern and caring, like when you tried to teach me why men like women with large bosoms. It was something I wanted to understand and you tried to help. By the way, I still don’t quite comprehend, so we’ll have to ... discuss that again.”

Lord, yes. He bowed. “At your service.”

“You showed concern when you made me take off Paddy’s clothes and gave me yours instead. You danced with me. You took out my splinters. You washed my hair when I fell asleep in the tub.”

If she had a father, he’d be called out for this friendship. With reason. “Do me a favor, Patience. Don’t tell anyone about the wonderful things I’ve done for you. Aside from the splinter thing, I’d rather keep the rest between us.”

“I know you’re modest. But that doesn’t change anything. We’re friends.”

He cleared his throat. “What about when I kiss you?”

“Friends kiss, do they not?”

“Patience I feel much more than friendship for you.”

“Like what?”

Grant considered the raw truth. “Lust.” There, he’d said it. Now, no one could say he’d been trying to lead her astray.

“Lust. I thought so. See there, you’ve taught me lust. I knew that’s what I felt. Oh, and passion. Remember, you taught me passion.”

He could not hold back his surprise. “You felt lust? For me?”

“I’m sure of it.”

Lust be damned. He couldn’t act on it, anyway. He sighed with regret. “Patience, friends do not feel lust or passion for each other.”

“They don’t? Then what are people when they feel lust and passion?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Frustrated.”

“What?”

“Lovers, Patience. Lovers feel lust and passion and act on it.”

“Are we lovers then? Because lovers must surely love each other, right?”

“No, we’re not lovers, yet, or ever. And no, I do not love you, nor you me. Love is for babies, children, brothers and sisters, grandparents, and so forth and so on.”

“But—”

“Patience. You were right. We’re friends. Now, let us change the subject. I think I have the headache.”

“Then sit down, lean on me, and close your eyes.”

He sat. “Will you be quiet?”

“Well, I wanted to ask you about the Marquess of Andover.”

“Oh.” He sighed. “Very well. Ask.”

“Do you think he might consent to marry one of my girls?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Perhaps if I offered to pay him.”

Grant laughed. “Patience, the Marquess is a rich man. He doesn’t need your money. What do you really know of him?”

“Nothing.”

“Why did you promise their mothers to introduce their daughters, if you don’t know him?”

“It was Cordelia.”

“Who is Cordelia?”

“I told you. She is the mother of the man that I went to America to marry, who is now dead.”

“Cordelia is dead?”

“No, the man I went to marry is dead. She’s his mother and very much alive.” Patience turned his head with her hands so she could see his face. “Do you understand now?”

He nodded, having lost the strength for further explanation, and settled more comfortably against her so that the back of his head nestled between her breasts.

“Well Cordelia told people that I knew positively everyone in England. I had told her about the Marquess in my letters—Gossip, you know, to make the letters more interesting. She’s a wonderful woman, but she told everyone I could have married the Marquess but turned him down to marry her Conrad. How could I say she was lying? She had just lost her son.”

“I see.”

“It wasn’t until the day we were ready to leave that I realized the web in which I had entangled myself, and everything was planned and—”

“I understand now how it happened. Tell me what you’ve heard about the Marquess.”

“Well, they say he’s a rake, black hair and eyes, and he dresses in black, as if he were the devil incarnate. He travels the world to places like India and exotic islands, which is why his skin is dark as a heathen’s and leathery from the sun. He belongs to the Hellfire Club and has bastard babies running all over England.”

Grant chuckled.



“I’ve heard these stories all my life so I imagine he must be about a hundred years old.”

“The Hellfire Club and bastard babies. That’s a lot for one man to answer for.”

“I’m sure there’s much worse. I just don’t know what it is.” She sighed. “Those girls’ mamas are never going to forgive me.”

“If one of your girls manages to marry him, her mama won’t care what a degenerate he is. All they care about is his title.”

“Oh. You must be wrong. Certainly no mama wants her daughter to marry such a horrible man.”

“In some ways, you are still very young, Patience.” He felt her back stiffen instantly. “Now don’t get all tense and angry. I didn’t mean to set you off. It’s just that you don’t know what people will do to gain wealth and a title, or what they’ll live with for the sake of both. But if it will make you feel better about your promises, I’ll make sure you get an introduction to the Marquess of Andover when we reach London. Just an introduction, mind. I won’t encourage his attention toward non-angelic Angel or crazy Sophie, or the others. I don’t want any cats, dogs or swine there, either.”

“I’ll never be able to thank you. I want to do right by my girls.”

“You will. Now rest here with me.”

She settled and he snuggled next to her and took her in his arms, cradling her as if she were precious. “You feel good,” he admitted. “I’m tired. With the storm and everything else, I haven’t slept in days and that blasted hammock is terrible. How do you stand it?”

She cuffed him. “Grant, we must be friends. See how you enjoy being with me, and tease me, and snuggle up close, and sigh when you do?”

“Mmm.”

“Are you very sleepy?”

“Mmm.”

“Sleep then. I’ll watch for you.” She kissed him on the brow.

“You’re a good little sailor.” Allowing himself to close his eyes, Grant savored the feeling of time suspended, of oneness with Patience. He’d given himself extra watches this trip, just to be alone with her. Though he wanted to slip into blessed oblivion with his head on her breast and his hand just below, she needed to know that they’d likely arrive in London tomorrow.

My God, was that a pain in the region of his heart? Was he feeling the loss so keenly, then? What an idiot; of course he was. Why else this ruse to get her to spend her last night with him? He could be sleeping in his bunk, but stayed exactly where he wanted. With Patience. Even if it meant hours on a hard deck, his back against a coil of stinking rope.

His hand poised to stroke her breast. He wanted very badly to continue their lesson. Hell he wanted to haul her to his cabin and make love to her all night. But he had to stop, now. Before it was too late.

Too late, too late, too late. The echo in Grant’s his head almost made him gasp. He lowered his hand to his side, self-preservation prompting honesty. “If the weather continues to cooperate, Patience, we’ll be in London by tomorrow. The next day at the latest.”

“What?”

“You should be happy, Lady Patience.” He pulled away and sat up without glancing at the stricken look he was certain marred her features. “You are ready to begin husband hunting among the elite of England and you won’t have to put up with a scurvy crew or their snarly Captain any longer.” He stood and helped her up. The moon slipped from behind a cloud illuminating her big green eyes. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Of course, Captain.”

“Captain? What happened to Grant?”

She tilted her head to one side as she regarded him. “I’m never quite sure.”

“You sound as if you’ve misplaced something.”

She gave him a half smile, one he couldn’t quite fathom. “You cannot misplace something you never had.”

“You can’t be sad? Don’t try to tell me you’re not happy to be shed of the seafaring lot of us.”

She stood straighter, raised her chin. “While it’s been very interesting, Captain, you’ll excuse me for saying so, but you’ve all been rather difficult to deal with.”

He laughed, loud in the dark pitch of early morning. They were alone in their own universe, and she made him so happy it scared the hell out of him. He hugged her, lifted her off her feet and twirled her. “Patience. Patience. Who will entertain me when you’re gone?”

“I don’t know,” she said, voice weak.

Grant set her down, brought her close for a quick, hard hug, an embrace meant to snatch at the last bit of her he could allow.

She lowered her head. “I’m going to miss you,” she said in a tiny whisper.

He held her away from him. “Here now, what happened to the determined, practical young woman who defied everyone to bring four girls to London? You were strong and in control the day we met.”

“Here stands the real Patience Kendall. A coward. I can only be strong when someone needs me.”

“You can be strong for yourself, too, Patience, like when you were stranded in America, and you found an activity to pay your way home. The proof is here, where you stand now, on a ship in England’s waters.”

Patience shook her head. “No. Mrs. Kane got me here. I simply agreed then she arranged it all.”

Grant looked around. “Is she here then?”

Patience slugged him.

“You accepted the woman’s challenge and you alone carry out her plan. That’s what strength is, Patience. Remember? I told you that the night you saved us from the Phantom. Now smile, tomorrow is the beginning of a new adventure, a whole new life. If you ask me, only someone who is very strong would be willing to face London Society, had they any other choice.”

“I don’t know a lick about London Society, so I expect I’m simply too foolish to know better.”

“What? Didn’t your aunt teach you how to go about?”

“Oh, I know the dances and how to behave in polite society, be it Arundel or Amberly. But she warned me I’d never step foot in London, so why plan for something I’d never know?” Patience shrugged. “I’ll manage. I always do.”

He admired her determination. Hell he admired most things about her. “I know you will.” He needn’t worry about the Lady Patience Ann Kendall, he told himself, except he couldn’t seem to stop.

“How long before you sail again?” she asked.

“I’ll be in London for repairs. A few weeks.” What the hell was he talking about? He could choose any of his ships sitting in St. Katherine’s Dock right now. “Besides, I promised to

introduce you to the Marquess of Andover.” And how in bloody hell would he manage that bit of chicanery?

“Oh. Well, then, I guess we’ll see each other occasionally. Will you be going to any of the balls?”

“I hate bloody English Society. Those people are pompous, over-fed and over-bred without a whole brain among them. They look down their noses at an honest man who works for a living and cheer a rakehell who gambles fortunes, uses women, and tosses them away. They accept, even admire, married women who take lovers—but don’t get caught—and snub the ones who do.”

The timbre of his voice had risen, but when he realized it, he calmed. “I can’t think of anything worse than spending time in Society or at any of its shallow pleasures. I wish you joy of Society, sweetheart. Now that I know you better, I’m not sure you’ll relish the experience any more than I.”

“Will you come to say good-bye before you sail?”

“Of course, Vixen. Do you know where you’ll be staying?”

“No. We have to find a house when we get there.”

“The agent that leased me the house in the city I share with Shane is very good,” he said. “I could send someone round with a note for him before the sails are lashed. He’d be waiting for us by the time we dock. What say you?”

“I’d appreciate it, Captain. You are a good friend.”

He grazed her lips with his index finger. “I am that.” Were those tears in her eyes?

She stepped back and turned away. “Thank you, Captain St. Benedict, for everything. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Lady Patience.” He watched her disappear from sight, wanted to say he’d stay until they were settled, until she didn’t need him anymore, until—Truth to tell, he should leave as soon as possible, so he wouldn’t need her anymore. Already too late for that, because what he imagined he needed, didn’t exist.

## PART II

### CHAPTER NINE

London, England

Grant knew, before they arrived, the stir they'd cause. Plump, beringed matrons with haughty disdainful looks would gaze clandestinely from luxurious salons and drawing rooms through arched and many-paned windows. Curious maids and butlers would watch, conjecturing among themselves, as six elegant carriages stopped in front of Number 23 Grosvenor Square.

Bored, wealthy, married Ladies and their current court of lovers would stare with disgust upon the scene. So self-indulgent were they that anything not directly related to their own benefit must be of the lowest order. Still they would stand witness.

Grant stepped from the carriage, knowing eyebrows would raise and whispers begin. He examined the row of black-lacquered doors with shiny brass knockers and shuddered.

Across the street, a door opened and a retainer scurried out, taking side glances as he went. Curtains in an upper-story window of the same house slid apart. Then another door opened, another curtain moved, as if the tableau had been frozen until their arrival, then brought to life in the next instant.

He handed Patience down from the first carriage. She kept her eyes downcast. Their ride was strained, the silence long. They'd hardly spoken a word since the night before.

"Thank you, Captain, for helping me find a house. You've been—" He wanted her to say something meaningful, but sensed she didn't dare, as should be. What happened between them on the ship was finished. Best forgotten. "You've been," she tried again. "A good friend."

He winced at her words and handed Sophie and Angel down, Sophie's enthusiasm bubbling over. "Will we meet the Marquess tomorrow?"

Patience searched his face for a reaction, but he couldn't stop his scowl.

Grace and Rose waited in the second carriage. Already standing outside the vehicles were maids wearing dull gray or brown redingotes carrying serviceable bags. The last two carriages carried the male servants. Grant instructed them to unload the luggage strapped atop the vehicles.

Patience's heart accelerated with excitement. Life as she knew it had been truly and forever altered. Back in her own country, she was prepared to find husbands for her girls. She'd see that each was happy before she allowed a match. She wanted nothing less for any of them.

They had a house and servants and tomorrow they'd buy the clothes they needed. She'd find some of Mama's old friends to sponsor them and secure invitations to the various social events significant to successful husband hunting. "Don't dawdle, girls," she said. "Well begun is nearly done."

As she stepped into the foyer of her fashionable new establishment, maids and manservants filed past seeming to know instinctively where to go.

The girls stopped as one and stood in silent awe. Gilt-edged paintings on cream silk walls, rose marble floors and curving staircases, the mahogany rail buffed to a superb sheen, imparted a regal air. The room spoke a refined welcome, silently conveying dignity and grace. Both suddenly seemed to flow through Patience.

The Captain took her arm. "The caretaker lives above the mews out back. The housekeeper, Mrs. Dale, will live in and should arrive soon, along with the cook. Let me show you around." He opened the first door and bowed her inside. Patience beheld the most beautiful room she had ever seen. "The Rose Drawing Room," he said.

She wandered inside smiling as she examined the chamber with delight. Old rose, cream and pale fern green predominated. The fashion was soft, comfortable luxury, done simply, but in classic, good taste. "I have the most wonderful sense of arriving home after a long journey," she said. "This is absolutely perfect."

"I knew this house would be right for you."

"You know this house?"

"Yes, I ... came here once or twice as a lad. The Lady Briarleigh was an old dear. She would have liked you, Patience."

"She would probably turn over in her grave if she knew I brought four husband-hunting Colonials to live here."

"No. She was a fighter too. You've reminded me of her on more than one occasion." He looked away from her inquisitive smile. "Let me show you the bedrooms."

They settled the girls first, each in her own room, to rest, then Grant led Patience down the hall. "What will be your first order of business?"

"New clothes for all of us. As soon as I find out where to purchase them."

He nodded agreement before indicating a door. "This is your room. It has always belonged to the mistress of Briarleigh."

"The same colors as the Rose Drawing Room. I love it. Thank you, Captain, for everything."

He placed his hands on her shoulders, removed them quickly, and turned away. "You don't have to thank me. We are friends, as you said."

Friends. She hated that word.

He handed her a card. "Here's my address in London. Send for me if you need me."

She couldn't look in his eyes. Throat aching, she nodded fearing she would weep.

"Walk me downstairs, will you?" he asked.

She nodded, again. As they neared the front door, Grant stopped, hesitated, then swore under his breath. He propelled her into the drawing room with a hand at her elbow and closed the door. He leaned his back against it, closed his eyes for a minute then said emphatically as if to himself, "Just once more."

Hauling her up against him so hard, she felt gloriously crushed, her feet barely touching the floor, Grant opened his mouth over hers and kissed her with savage heat. "Patience," he whispered, before his lips forced hers apart in a feverish, nearly-brutal kiss.

Patience lowered her guard and allowed herself to take as desperately as he. He cupped her bottom and held her against him, and she threaded her hands through his thick wavy hair, loving the soft silk. She remembered touching it like this on the dock in America, when he'd slipped her foot into her shoe.

That was the first time. This was the last.

A sob escaped her. Grant pulled her face into his neck, breathing heavily, holding her for a long time—would it ever be long enough? She could feel him swallow hard, his heart thudding against her breast and knew he didn't want to say good-bye any more than she. Nevertheless, he set her away from him. "Have a wonderful life, Vixen."

She had been set adrift.

He wrenched the drawing room door open and crossed the foyer, never looking back. Her last impression was of his greatcoat swirling him into foggy oblivion.

Grant had left her forever. And whether Patience wanted it so or not, he left her, nonetheless, altered. Almost dazed, she climbed the stairs, placing one foot, mechanically, after

the other, and made it all the way to her room before her pain turned, finally, to a bearable anger. “Damn you to hell, Grant St. Benedict.”

She crossed the elegant bedroom and stopped under the portrait of a handsome rogue in riding clothes. His dark eyes and square jaw reminded her of the Captain, and she sighed. “Face it, Patience, everything reminds you of him.” She sat in a large enveloping chair, curled her legs under her, her head against her arms, and closed her eyes.

Taking a deep relaxing breath, she decided that anger, especially at herself for caring, or at him for not caring, was useless. “No time for foolishness,” she admonished herself. “The girls are looking for titled husbands and we’re finally in London. I’d say we’ve a beginning that bodes well for our success.”

If she meant to forget the snarly Captain, she couldn’t continue to sit here and conjure him up. And since the girls were napping, she decided to explore.

Patience entered the library and gasped at the inviting apartment, all dark, rich wood and sleek, leather-bound books, except she felt as if she was back in the Captain’s cabin. Blast, it even smelled like his cabin. With its big, sweeping window, the look was undeniable, though the view of the garden, as opposed to the open sea, made her feel a bit more secure in her landed world.

Paintings of nautical subjects covered the walls. Ships in bottles, charts and image-reflecting, brass-trimmed navigational equipment gleamed on polished surfaces. There, on the sideboard, sat the ever-present decanter with etched glasses to match.

She could almost smell the sea. If she closed her eyes, she was certain the Captain’s own scent—Grant’s scent—would fill her. Contentment and warmth stole over her; the perception was eerie, but it was an impression she savored. Exhausted, unable to fight sleep any longer, Patience curled up in one of the tawny, leather-covered chairs facing the hearth.

She was home.

\* \* \*

Grant St. Benedict Garrick strolled into White’s and nodded at several surprised gentlemen.

“I say, Saint, giving up the sea, are you? Can’t imagine why, she’s probably a worthier mistress than mine!”

Chuckles met the comment. That particular rake was notorious for choosing the unlikeliest of mistresses, still Grant winced. Nothing had changed, more’s the pity.

Other members greeted him less warmly.

Try as he might to attend the attempts at conversation, his mind kept straying to Patience. He had not seen her for two days.

Since he’d sent her Madame Lambert’s direction only this morning, she would most likely be there about now. Had he purposely suggested that today would be perfect for her and the girls to visit the dressmaker?

He shrugged away the question. How easy it would be for him to walk by the shop, gaze in, ascertain everything was well, and continue on. But he wouldn’t. It was past time for him to allow her to go on with her life, while he went on with his.

Then why, he asked himself, did he make certain she would go to the dressmaker today. Because he was a fool.

He picked up the London Times in exasperation and found an article on the results of the embargo between America and England during Boney’s war. Ah, here was a subject worthy of his interest. As far as his trade with America was concerned, the embargo could have made or broken him.

He was glad the war had ended, finally, for more than monetary reasons. He might never have met Patience otherwise. What a scamp. Even if she needed his help choosing the girls' wardrobes, that wasn't his style. And Patience could handle it. Hell, she could handle anything.

He thought of the calling cards he'd printed for her this morning. He could hardly wait to give them to her. His typesetter just about had apoplexy when he walked in and said he wanted them printed immediately. It was a good thing he owned the shop. Rolling up his sleeves to set type and ink the press reminded him of when he'd apprenticed to learn the trade. He never invested in a trade unless he knew how to perform each task.

He folded his paper, placed it on the table.

In the way, he'd learned to sail.

He stood and walked through the club.

In the way he intended to learn to run his Massachusetts textile mill.

On the steps outside, he donned hat and gloves.

He could hardly wait to try his hand at spinning and weaving.

He sauntered down the street.

He would learn to run all the modern machinery that he and his partner would bring to Lowell.

He turned the corner.

The dyeing process, now that would be fascinating.

Grant stopped, surprised to find himself near Hyde Park, while he didn't remember leaving the club. He shrugged. Oh well, Madame Lambert's was just around the corner. He might as well walk that way.

His spirits lifted, he quickened his step.

\* \* \*

Though they were dressed in their absolute best, they, all of them, Patience had to admit, looked like country misses come to the big city, especially in contrast to the fine materials on display. But they wouldn't be here if they didn't need new things.

Madame Lambert had been waiting on a customer when they arrived. At once, the girls went to the bolts of silks, satins and laces chattering about evening gowns and carriage dresses. Their shock at the prices were expressed too loudly, their American accents coarse, rather than charming. When they took to tittering over designs for undergarments, Patience wanted to strangle them.

The proprietress gazed askance. They were making a bad impression, Patience knew, but she didn't know how to stop them. She asked them to keep their voices down and discuss something less shocking than undergarments.

They discussed Horatio then laughed and cried in turns.

Patience mentally threw her hands in the air. There was no use. Instead, she worried and waited, and waited to be served, striving for that illusive virtue, patience, though she failed miserably.

She glanced at the Ormolu clock with regularity.

Madame had said good-bye to her last customer more than a half hour before.

The bell above the door tinkled as a new customer entered.

Madame appeared instantly, becoming a paragon of servility and sweetness.

"Madame Lambert," Patience said stepping forward. "We have been waiting an age." Patience looked at the new arrival wearing a lime- and turquoise-feathered hat, and smiled. She looked like an overdressed peacock. "Pardon, My Lady, but we were here first."

The peacock peered through her lorgnette, examined Patience then her girls. "Indeed." She waved her hand as if shooing an insect. "As I was saying, Madame—"

"My girls and I need dresses," Patience said. "Ball gowns and such. We should be served next."

With a satisfied, condescending smirk the peacock intoned, "Your girls? You are not old enough to have four grown daughters? In what way, pray, are they ... your girls?"

"They're not my daughters."

"Your wards then?"

"Not exactly my wards."

Grant had been watching and knew that something was terribly wrong. Patience's raised chin and ready stance said she was already stepping on society's toes. If the customer she argued with wasn't titled, he'd ... appear at a bloody damned ball.

He entered Madame Lambert's silently through the side door, noting the antagonistic set to the faces of the customer and the modiste.

"Madame Lambert does not serve women of your sort," the customer said. "She caters to refined women of society!"

"Sort?" Patience snapped, her chin so high, her mouth so set, she reminded him of when he'd thought she was a child.

Rose charged forward. "Why you narrow-minded old—"

Grant stepped forward. "Lady Patience!" He bowed. "So nice to see you again." As much as he'd wanted to cheer Rose on, Patience could not afford to tweak an aristocrat's nose first day out, not any more than she already had. He would, however, remember to tell Shane how much he liked his future sister-in-law.

The color in Patience's cheeks bore testament to her agitation, but her relieved smile was enough to clear London's fog. "Captain."

He kissed her hand. "My Lady."

He turned to the proprietress and the customer. "I see you have met Lady Patience Kendall, most recently returned to London from travels abroad, and her charges, daughters of some of the wealthiest men in the world." He let his statement hang in the silence.

The customer's showy plumes bobbed in counterpart to the color rising in her face.

Madame Lambert stood pale and mute.

The haughty matron's eyebrows knit as a series of emotions, passed over her countenance, embarrassment, shock, and finally ... elation? "Not Constance Kendall's daughter?"

He saw the same emotions flit across Patience's face. "Yes, Constance was my mother. Did you know her?" Patience displayed a new set of emotions, recognition, surprise, and then cunning. "Wait, I know you. You're Lady Caroline Crowley-Smythe, Mama's dearest and loveliest friend, are you not? I should have recognized you immediately, except you are even younger-looking than you were the last time I saw you."

"You remember me?" The peacock's plumes fanned and shivered.

"I remember when you would come to tea. I thought you the most beautiful woman I had ever seen—like a fairy princess. Oh, excuse my manners, Lady Caroline, this is Captain St. Benedict."

Grant was glad for the opportunity to kiss the Lady's hand. It gave him a chance to get his laughter under control.

The woman tittered like a schoolgirl.

Patience introduced her girls in a manner that gave him hope for her success in society.



Lady Caroline Crowley-Smyth, without ever actually saying she was sorry for being so rude, became very condescending and solicitous. She left after dispatching hugs and kisses to all the girls, with an extra for Patience, and promising vouchers for Almacs and invitations to the events of the season. "After all, I must take it upon myself to see that dear Constance's daughter and her very lovely charges are not set adrift. Now if you need anything, anything at all, please call on me." She handed Patience her card and kiss-kissed the air by her cheek before she departed as if a score of ladies-in-waiting followed.

The modiste became all supercilious smiles. "Now, My Lady, let us get down to the business of garment selection."

Patience donned her gloves. "Madame, it is late. I find myself exhausted from the wait. I would rather return home for tea and look to purchasing new wardrobes for the five of us on the morrow. Perhaps we shall find a shop that is not so busy. Come along girls."

Bravo, Grant thought, and hid his smile with a cough. "Perhaps that would be best, Lady Patience," he said.

The dressmaker looked ill. "I am so sorry for the delay, Lady Patience. Please, if you will accept my most humble apology." She encompassed the girls in her contrite look. "Clotilde," she clapped her hands. "Tea and cakes for our guests and lock the doors. We will give Lady Patience and her wards our complete attention. Captain St. Benedict, may we have the honor of your presence for tea?"

Grant bowed, his prospect for the day brightening. "I would be delighted, Madame."

Patience's eyebrows rose at his gallant display. When the over-perfumed modiste went into the back room, he touched Patience's cheek. Lord, he'd missed her. Had it only been two days?

Patience stepped back. "What are you doing here? Surely you didn't miss us?"

"Yes. No. I was walking by when I saw you and noted your distress. Would you rather I had not—"

"No. Please. Please accept my thanks for coming to our rescue."

"Again," he said.

"Again," she admitted.

Grant remained after tea to take part in choosing fabrics and patterns, approving colors and styles for each girl. Fortunately the current mode of high-waisted gown suited all. Still Sophie wanted robes over hers, Rose preferred tunics. Grace's tunic must be long, Angel's short to expose more underskirt. And they must discuss which tunics must have pointed, scalloped or straight cut edges, blonde lace or ruching? Such a tizzy. As different as the girls, fabrics, color and sizes varied.

Mrs. Lambert clapped her hands once more. "Come ladies, we must choose undergarments, stays, drawers, chemises—"

"I think that I shall take my leave, ladies," Grant said bowing. Madame Lambert returned to her work room while good-byes were said.

"Again, thank you Captain," Patience whispered. "For this afternoon. It was just that we had waited so long and I was so, so—"

"Impatient?" Grant said, brow raised, a knowing gleam in his eye.

"Aggravating man."

"Vixen, there is nothing so endearing as a woman named Patience, who is totally lacking in said virtue. I consider it part of your peculiar charm."

"Peculiar?"

"Unique." He kissed her hand once more before letting it go.

“You have quite redeemed yourself.”

“Lady Patience,” Madame Lambert called from the back. “I have the solution for the draping of your dresses. If we use the stays to push up the breasts, add bosom inserts, and a small padded bustle—” She came to the front of the shop. “My beautiful gowns will hang properly on your boyish—” She stopped, pink with embarrassment. “Captain St. Benedict, I thought you had left.”

The modiste looked as if she might swoon, while the crinkle lines about the Captain’s eyes became prominent. Boyish figure, indeed! Patience turned her back on the dratted woman and dragged the smiling idiot outside, letting the door slam behind her.

“Sweetheart, don’t be angry,” the idiot said. “You have a beautiful body. The woman doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Will you be quiet! Do you want everyone to know that you do know what you’re talking about? Never mind. Until this moment, I was happy you were here. Now, I could throttle that woman, and you along with her.”

Patience hated herself for warming to his chuckle.

“Patience, at the risk of getting into trouble here, I think you should order several sets of bosom inserts. You’ll need them, love. Get some of those new drawers also. They sound wickedly exciting.”

“I will not buy wicked undergarments for your depraved enjoyment. I can’t believe I was so happy to see you. Odious man. I don’t need your help anyway. I don’t need anyone. Go back to sea where the flying fish and boobies like and understand you.” She turned her back on him to enter the shop. When she had to pound on the door to be re-admitted, she knew she turned brick red, she was so hot with mortification.

She could still hear the snake’s laughter even after she was back inside. If only the sound wasn’t like music to her ears.

Early the following afternoon, they were sitting in the salon discussing hair styles when a servant delivered a stunning array of beribboned boxes with a note.

“What does it say?” Sophie begged, consumed with curiosity.

“Tell, tell,” Angel added.

Patience split the seal, and smiled. “It’s from the Captain. ‘My Dear Lady Patience, and friends. Please accept my good wishes on your forthcoming venture. I took it upon myself yesterday, after leaving you, to purchase a few tokens of my thanks for your help aboard the Knave’s Secret. As ever, G. St. B.’”

“Gifts should be opened one by one so we may all enjoy each,” Grace told them.

Patience laughed wondering if this was a hidden facet of her personality or if Angel had influenced the no-longer quiet miss. “Who will be first?” she asked.

“I will, I can’t wait,” Sophie said. From her package, she drew two hair combs of French jet shaped like a fan. Before the gilt-edged mirror above the curio, she arranged them in her blond curls.

“What a perfect foil the jet is against your blonde hair, Sophie,” Patience said. “That man has hidden depths.”

Angel unwrapped a set of ivory combs carved with a thistle design and Patience marveled at how striking the cream combs in Angel’s brown hair shown. She expected he’d sent each of them a set of hair combs. How considerate.

“I can hardly credit that the snarly Captain could be so thoughtful or select such delicate gifts,” Angel said.

Rose stepped closer. "It's your turn Grace."

Grace's eyes glowed, despite her spectacles. "Oh, my." She displayed a mother-of-pearl spectacle case, covered with floral inlays and lined in blue watered silk. "I have never owned anything so beautiful." She traced the design with her finger.

Patience swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Yours is the largest of all, Rose," Sophie said.

Rose smiled, and she was beautiful, Patience thought, but one was hard-pressed to remember it with her sad demeanor. The rare times she smiled, she put them all to the pale. She removed a beaded purse with a chain and a center clip to hang over a belt at her waist. From inside, she took a fine linen handkerchief and had tears in her eyes.

"For pity's sake, Rose. If you cry when you're happy as well as when you're sad, you'll flood the house," Angel snapped.

Rose burst into laughter. "Your turn, Patience."

"What could he possibly have sent for me?" she wondered aloud as she examined two boxes with her name on them. She chose to open the tiniest first.

"Hurry," Sophie urged.

The flat, silver, filigree box fit in the palm of Patience's hand. A tiny clasp at the side revealed an interior of spun gold and a stack of ivory calling cards proclaiming her to be, 'Lady Patience Ann Kendall' with her new London address. "It's a card case," Patience said. She looked at the girls. "People here in England present their card when they visit. When someone is not at home, they leave their card," she explained. Then she found a note peeking out one of the small compartments. It was from Grant. 'I pronounce you a 'Lady of Society,' he'd written.

"What does it say?" Sophie asked.

"He says we're ready to enter society."

"But what's in the other box?" Sophie added. "Lord, I don't know how you can be so calm with two gifts to open."

Patience untied the ribbon on the second box laughing at Sophie. The girls stepped closer. She lifted the lid and slammed it down again. Bosom inserts! She gathered her gifts and stood. "Come along, we have much to do today. Well begun is nearly done, you know."

The girls followed her up the stairs and all the way to her room, begging for a look, but Patience denied them even a peek, closing off their protests when her door was firmly shut.

She tossed the offending gift on the bed. She was going to throttle the scoundrel.

The next morning, their first invitations arrived. By afternoon, boxes of hats and shoes were delivered. Patience accepted an invitation to a ball being given by the Duke and Duchess of Dorset and sent a note round to Madame Lambert requesting a set of ball gowns for Friday next.

The modiste's return note read, "It will be extremely difficult to finish five gowns in so short a time, but for you, I will hire extra seamstresses and have them ready." Patience gave an unladylike snort. It was the least the woman could do.

The following day, Lady Caroline Crowley-Smyth paid a morning call with Mrs. Trahern, a bosom friend, who brought her son, Oliver, along. Though he had an eye for Sophie, Patience could see he was obviously tied very tightly to mama's leading strings. Oliver led the girls to say the most outrageous things. Patience was beside herself and only breathed a sigh of relief when they left.

After that, Patience's drawing room saw no less than a dozen or so male callers each morning, Oliver Trahern always among them. Oliver said the girls were all the rage.

The following evening, ensconced in a large leather chair before the fire at White's, cigar

smoke curling about his head, Grant sipped his brandy and read his paper, his attention caught by an article decrying appalling working conditions in England's mills.

"A hundred pounds for Grace," he heard, and Grant chafed at the enthusiastic betting, though it was quite routine, so he shifted and concentrated on his article.

"Double to form a dalliance with Sophie."

Child labor. Poor working conditions. Not in his mill.

"Rose is the beauty."

By God, they were a noisy lot— Grant raised his gaze. Rose, Sophie? He shot from his chair. "Damnation!"

Men moved aside as Grant made for the betting book direct. Oh, they'd attract men all right, but the wrong kind and for the wrong reasons.

He read down the list of bets searching for one particular name. And there it was. The man who could get Lady Patience Kendall to don britches and ride astride through Hyde Park at five p.m. would win two thousand pounds. Patience had liked to ride astride through the Arundel countryside; she told him so. And she must have told the girls. "Bloody hell!"

He grabbed cane, hat and gloves and left without a word.

\* \* \*

Patience looked upon her girls with pride. "Well, I must say you look wonderful. Grace, dear, don't squint. Put on your spectacles until we arrive. Remember what Lady Caroline advised; use your lorgnette. It's quite modish."

Sophie's gown was of honey-gold silk. Turquoise brocade for Angel, and mulberry crepe shot with amaranthus for Rose. Grace had finally settled on a lilac tunic over purple satin. Patience outright refused her request for brown or gray.

She, herself, wore a shimmering sea green faille with a gauze overskirt in pistachio. Grant had been particularly fond of these colors. It was too bad he wouldn't see her tonight. Wearing the bosom inserts annoyed her, mostly because he sent them. And though she had determined never to wear the blasted things, the dresses just didn't fit right without them. She hated to admit, even to herself, that they gave her a roundness she enjoyed, false though it was.

Perhaps it was best Grant wouldn't be at the ball, Patience mused as she watched the passing scenery from the second of two carriages. She was perfectly capable of managing on her own.

They passed through the receiving line thanking the Duchess of Dorset for the kind invitations and waited at the top of the stairs overlooking the ballroom. When their names were announced, and they began to descend, the entire assemblage—all six of them—stopped to watch. Patience's heart beat to the rhythm of the music. Why were they staring?

\* \* \*

"What do you mean they've gone?" Grant demanded none too quietly.

The retainer stood calm despite Grant's scowl. "They have departed for Dorset House."

"The ball? Damn and blast, man, they've gone too early."

"Yes sir."

"Didn't anyone tell them about appearing fashionably late?"

"Apparently not, sir."

"How long ago did they leave?"

"A little more than an hour, sir."

"Thank you, Winters."

Barely twenty minutes later, Grant jumped from his carriage. "I'll walk from here, John. I

don't know how long I'll be, but wait."

The coachman tipped his hat. "Sir."

Grant walked past eighteen carriages waiting in line to arrive at the front steps and discharge their elegant passengers at exactly the proper moment. He took the steps to the town-house two at a time and waved at the Duke of Dorset as he bypassed the receiving line.

The Duke chuckled.

His Lady scowled. "I finally get him to attend one of my balls and he doesn't have the courtesy to pay his respects."

"You invited him then, pet?"

"Of course not, but it's still a feather in my cap that he's here."

The Duke patted his ladywife's hand. "And well-deserved, my love."

The Duchess smiled as if the compliment were her due. "Thank you, Montvale. Dear Lady Lessing, so pleased you could come."

Grant descended the steps into the Dorset House ballroom at a quick, though sedate, pace. He did not wish to be formally announced; it would be best if this could be done quietly. But to his chagrin, there were several in the room who recognized him immediately.

He made his way to the gaming room and stood unobtrusively in the doorway between there and the ballroom. Bloody, dissipated fools trying to impress each other on one hand then stab each other in the back when self-gratification warranted. God, I hate this. What in bloody hell am I doing here anyway?

Then he saw her. Patience looked as refreshing as the sea on a bright sunny morning. Jet beads wove through her rich copper curls. With her little breasts pushed up by the sea-green gown's waist snug below them and the sheer overskirt ending in a long pointed train at the back, she looked every inch the Lady he'd most like to undress.

She, of course, was the reason he was here. It seemed Patience was the why of everything these days. A habit he should break. And so he would. Tomorrow.

Patience beamed at her girls with pride. All except Grace were dancing. She moved forward, but stopped when she saw Grant in black evening clothes bending over the hand of an elegant, older woman sitting with the matrons.

He straightened and came to her, a friend beside him.

"Lady Patience," Grant said. "May I introduce my fellow scoundrel?"

"Fitzalan, at your service," said the gentleman, himself, who bowed and kissed her hand, another handsome devil.

"Are there more of you?" she asked. "Scoundrels, that is."

"Two more," Fitzalan said. "Four in all. Gabriel rarely attend these affairs, and—" Fitzalan turned to Grant. "Devereux has his hands full, I hear. He may call upon us one day soon."

"At which point, we shall go," Grant conceded. "Honor the bond, yes? Give voice to the oath."

Fitzalan nodded and turned to her. "Which reminds me. When your Captain is out to sea, Lady Patience, you may call upon the rest of us, according to Grant's wishes." Fitzalan gave her his calling card. "Call me, and as many scoundrels will come who can. I'll see to it." He bowed again. "Good day, my Lady."

She curtsied and watched him go.

Grant took her into his arms for the waltz.

"Is he here?" she asked.

"Who?"

“Why the Marquess of Andover, of course.”

Grant scowled.

A poor beginning, Patience thought.

“No. Dammit. He’s not here. Now let’s do this properly.”

She thought she’d better humor him and nodded.

“Good evening, Lady Patience.” He took her hand and kissed it.

She curtsied, impressed by his courtly demeanor. “Good evening, Captain.”

“May I have this dance, My Lady?”

Whatever upset him seemed to have disappeared as quickly as it came. “By all means, Captain.”

He swept her into his arms, and for a few moments waltzed her silently about the room.

“Thank you for the girls’ lovely gifts.”

“Next time you enter an establishment like Madame Lambert’s, Patience, give them one of your calling cards. There will be no mistaking your identity. Are you wearing the—”

“Do not even say it! You committed an appalling breach of etiquette by sending me those, those—”

“Bosom inserts,” he whispered warming her ear.

“Scoundrel!”

“We’ve sufficiently established that, I believe. Now, do you know what I wanted to do when I saw you standing here tonight.”

Oh, Lord, her knees were turning to jelly again. “What did you want to do?”

“I wanted to invite you to share our first dance. Then I remembered we’ve waltzed before.”

Patience’s face warmed.

“Much as I’d like to, Patience, I cannot end this dance as I did our last.”

“You knew what I was thinking?”

He chuckled.

“It’s as well,” she said attempting to gather her wits about her. “I’m certain kissing is not at all the thing to do on the dance floor.”

“Not at all. Nonetheless, I wish very much to do exactly that.”

Patience wondered if he was gammoning her but she couldn’t tell. That irritated her. On one hand she wanted him to be sincere about wanting to kiss her, on the other, she was angry for wanting it. “I thought you hated English Society. And I didn’t think they invited sea captains to Society Affairs.”

“I do hate Society. And you do learn quickly, Lady Patience, to make the class distinction and look down on those beneath you. Though, if I remember correctly, you put me in my place as an ignorant Colonial the first day we met.”

“Captain, I told you I was sorry that day and I’m sorry now, if I sounded—”

“Oh, you did. But, save the condescension, Patience. It doesn’t wash. Now to correct your misconception, the fact is I was not invited. I am just being myself, an ignorant Colonial, coming to this ball despite having no invitation. I did it, however, out of concern for the lovely young ladies you brought with you tonight. I see they are nearly all dancing this waltz. Who gave them permission to do so?”

Patience stopped moving. “Permission?”

He forced her to move as he scowled down at her. “One must have permission to dance the waltz. I secured it for you before I asked you to dance. Who secured it for the girls?”

Patience’s eyes filled. “No one. Oh, Grant, is that a terribly unforgivable error? What am I

going to do?”

“Nothing at the moment. Let me think.”

They were distracted by a shriek and turned to look. Rose pulled from her partner’s arms, slapped him across the face, kicked him in the shin with the force of a lead-balled pendulum and ran from the room.

Patience tried to step from his embrace to follow Rose.

Grant held her in place, his hands firm at her waist. “That scene isn’t going to do the girls any good. Don’t compound it by rushing after her. I’ll get Rose’s wrap and escort her to the carriage. You stroll about the room, casually, as if you haven’t a care in the world, and gather the girls to leave. Under no circumstances show regret or concern. You must accomplish it smiling, with as much ease and decorum as you can summon. And, Patience, never let them know you care one whit what they think. Do you understand?”

She nodded as if in a stupor. He needed to snap her out of it and get some color into her. “Patience. Have I told you how lovely you look. Those bosom inserts make a considerable difference to your overall, um, carriage.”

Patience gasped.

As her lungs filled, her breasts rose, and Grant flashed his most wicked smile. “That’s even better, sweetheart.”

Just like a firecracker, she came to life, color flooding her. “If we weren’t in a crowded ballroom, I’d slap that stupid grin off your leering face,” she whispered furiously.

“If we weren’t in a crowd, my love, I’d pull you right down and continue our delightful lesson.”

Patience’s eyes widened. “Odious snake.” She turned away, dismissing him out of hand. Good.

When Grant stepped back into the ballroom after settling Rose in the carriage, he accepted a glass of champagne and sipped it casually. He overheard a group of women chattering like chickens on a ship before a storm. He attempted to ignore them while scanning the room for Patience, but they repeated one name like a death knell, Miss Kane. What the bloody hell had Sophie done now?

Patience stopped beside him and touched his sleeve. “It’s possible we have a problem.”

“Have we? Really?”

“Sophie has made a match.”

“At her first ball? Pray tell, who is the lucky man who has asked for her hand in such a tempestuous fashion?”

“No one has asked for her hand.”

“Patience.”

“Oh, all right. But I’m very concerned about Sophie right now. It seems she has asked Baron Munchkin to marry her.

“And?”

“He said he would be delighted.”

Grant snapped the stem of his glass in half.

## CHAPTER TEN

Pain cut through Patience in rather the same way the glass shards cut Grant's bloody palm. "You've hurt yourself!"

"It doesn't signify." He urged her into the garden with a nod, his uninjured hand to her back, and dropped the glass into a marble urn.

Patience took her handkerchief and wiped his hand with tender strokes.

"Leave it. We ... You, dammit, have more pressing problems. Baron Munchkin is in exile from Russia, and it worries me that no one knows why. Everyone does know, however, that he is penniless and hanging out for a wealthy wife. When you consider that English heiresses have eluded him for years, this certainly turned out to be a successful evening for him. A wealthy American is as good a meal ticket as any, though I suspect a Colonial would have been his last choice some years ago." Grant shook his head. "How do we extricate little miss dervish from this misalliance without causing an international incident, I'd like to know."

"Perhaps she doesn't want to be extricated. She seems to have made an excellent match. He is a Baron."

"Patience, you're sharper than that."

Patience bristled. He'd insulted and complimented her in one stroke, to which she could form no reply.

"The Baron lost two wives, one after the other, not five years ago. Both wealthy. Both dead. Accidents, of course."

Patience paled. "Please help me get them home. We can decide what to do later."

"That's my girl. Ever practical. Fetch Grace, she's danced with the same partner too often. She will be considered loose, which is the least of our problems. No, your problems, blast it."

"Do you suppose it matters so much about Grace dancing with the same partner? After all, she waltzed without permission. One doesn't seem to be worse than the other. However, Lady Caroline Crowley-Smyth did turn her back when I approached her a moment ago. Does that signify? Should I worry overmuch about that?"

"Only if you want your girls to find titled husbands. But after tonight, it won't be a concern, because you'll likely never be invited to another London society function. As far as I'm concerned, that's cause to rejoice. But the girls' mamas won't be best pleased."

Patience stifled an overwhelming urge to weep.

Grant took her arm. "Let's go before the girls add more social blunders to their list. Get them together and meet me in the foyer."

Grant found Angel first, placed her arm on his and led her outside toward the waiting carriage.

"Saint? I say, Saint. Wait up, man."

Grant walked faster, wishing his blasted nickname to hell, but his pursuer caught up. "I say, Saint. What's the idea, leaving with my ladybird?"

Grant stopped and regarded the man. Just who he needed, the biggest rakehell in England, calling Angel— "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, hello, My Lord," Angel said, preening. "Captain, I'd like you to meet the Marquess of Andover." She smiled with pride. "Won't Patience be surprised?"

Grant raised a brow. "Indeed?" He regarded the mock Andover until the object of his inspection squirmed like a worm-sucking fish.



“I forgot to tell the Captain our news,” Angel said, oblivious to the undercurrents.

The erstwhile Andover beamed at Angel, looked at Grant’s scowl, and succumbed to a fit of coughing. Grant slapped him on the back. Hard. “What the devil’s going on here?” he asked, not masking his fury.

Adam Skeffington, Earl of Hertfordshire, loosened his cravat and swallowed. “Angel here —” He cleared his throat. “Has agreed to be my ladybird.” He smiled in triumph. “Thought I’d bring her round to Kensington tonight.” His eyes narrowed. “How’s it happen she’s leaving with you, I’d like to know?”

Grant turned to Angel. “You’ve agreed to an arrangement? With the Marquess of Andover?” He spoke the title with emphasis.

“Yes, Captain, I have. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“His ladybird, Angel?”

“Well, yes. I suppose that’s what it’s called in England.”

“Please tell this gentleman what a ladybird is.”

“Certainly, Captain, if you wish, though I don’t see the need. I’m sure he knows very well.”

“Humor me in this, would you, Angel, and tell his Lordship what you perceive to be your role as his ladybird.”

“I say, Saint. This is most irregular.”

Grant held up a hand. “Hear the lady out ... Andover.”

Angel thought for a minute. “I suppose I would be the lady he takes for walks, and to the theater, and drives in the park.”

“And?” Grant prompted.

“Oh yes,” she said, as if she forgot something important. “I expect a man sends his ladybird flowers and such, does he not? Did I remember to give you our address so you may send trinkets, my Lord?”

“Stay!” Grant said to Skeffington as he took Angel’s arm and propelled her forward.

“Angel, let me hand you into the carriage. Rose is inside and she needs you.”

“Of course. Good night, my Lord.” She waved and turned back to Grant. “Won’t Patience be pleased that I have come to an arrangement with the Marquess of Andover, when we have been waiting so long to meet him?”

Grant frowned. “Angel you will not speak of this to Patience until I introduce the subject. Do you understand?” She looked disappointed. Grant could hardly credit her innocence. He shook his head. “You don’t understand what’s happening here and I can’t go into it right now. Be a good girl, will you, and don’t say anything to Patience. When I get to the house, we’ll discuss it.”

Angel seemed finally to accept his word and nodded. He opened the door and handed her up offering an encouraging word to Rose, still teary-eyed, before he closed them in the carriage.

When he reached Skeffington, he took the bouncer’s arm in a firm grip and led him away from the fashionables still arriving. “So the Marquess of Andover has made an appearance here this evening?”

Skeffington chuckled.

Grant chuckled with him. “Care to tell me why you did it?”

“What? Called myself the Marquess of Andover? Easy. It’s all the chit could talk about. Made her dreams come true, so to speak, or I would if you’d let me take her to—”

“Don’t ... make me call you out,” Grant said.

Skeffington shuddered. "Point taken, Saint. We'll forget the whole thing."

"Not yet, we won't. You do understand the girl has no notion she agreed to become your mistress?"

"Do you think so? I didn't know they made them that stupid anymore."

"Let's just call Angel innocent, shall we?"

"See here. What right do you have interfering? This is a private affair. I could bring her along to the house as I planned, bed her properly and she'd be begging me to ... ardrkk."

Grant held the insect by his collar, his feet hardly touching the granite step. "I claim the right of an old family friend to protect the Lady's virtue. She is an innocent, too young for your profligate ways. If I hear another word about this, Skeffington, I'll put a ball through your heart, I swear it. And if you ever, ever, attempt to pass yourself off as the Marquess of Andover again, the Marquess will personally see to it that you leave England in disgrace. Do I make myself clear?"

The blighter nodded, as best he could with a crushed Adam's apple, and Grant dropped him so fast, he crumbled to the steps. "See that you keep your word. If you don't, God's truth, you won't live to lament the day you crossed me." Grant dusted his hands, straightened his cravat and headed up the steps to find Patience and the rest of her brainless charges, certain her purpose in dragging them across the ocean was to drive him to Bedlam. And she was achieving her goal.

He found the Baron in the gaming room. Between the Russian's match with Sophie and the stack of notes at his side, it appeared he was having a good night. Well, appearances could deceive. "Munchkin, I'd like a word with you, if you please."

"Not now, Saint. I have a date with destiny. I cannot lose, and I won't walk from a win."

Grant bent close, so only the Baron could hear. "Speaking of destiny, I spent time with the Lady Regina several months ago, old friends you know. Had an informative chat."

The Baron turned a sickly gray and threw down his cards, his fat beefy hands shaking as he tucked the notes in his pocket.

Grant knew then that he'd hit the mark. Good. He found an empty sitting room and closed them inside. "Won't you sit down?"

"Whatever the chit said. It's a lie," the Baron stammered. "You know what mistresses are like when you drop 'em."

"What did you do, Baron? Brag of your cunning while your face was pressed to her fleshy breasts. Tried to impress her, did you? Foolish man. Now you must pay for her silence."

"I paid the tart to service me. Nothing more."

"You pay for those services in the bedroom, man, not in a back alley while the lady wears a hood to cover her face."

The Russian sighed. "Had to pay her off. To keep her from repeating her spiteful lies."

"Won't your paying her seem to lend credence to them?"

The man appeared to shrink. He removed his handkerchief and dabbed perspiration from his bald pate. "What do you want?"

"You didn't make a match tonight. Never took place. All a hum."

The Baron sputtered. "I'll look the fool."

"You frequently do. No one will suspect anything amiss."

"And if I go through with it?"

"Were you aware that one of your conveniently dead wives was cousin to the Regent's dresser? A word from him and, say, from the Lady Regina, might be enough to begin an investigation."

The man's legs shook. He sat. "No match. Never happened."

Grant nodded, but before stepping from the room, he turned back to the shaken occupant. "There is an emergency at home. You'll need to leave England in the morning."

"But I cannot..." The man's voice became a tired whisper. He looked into Grant's eyes, then quickly away. "Yes. I'll need to leave."

Loathing filled Grant. It must be in the blood, the blue blood, he thought—this lying, cheating, manipulation. Lord, he hated the games. He scanned the ballroom. He hated the players as well.

Patience's approach, Sophie and Grace in tow, turned his attention to other pressing matters. "Ladies." He took Patience's arm. At the carriage, she spoke to Rose and Angel to be certain they suffered no harm then she allowed him to hand Sophie and Grace inside. "Patience and I will take a little longer getting back," he said. "We're going to take my carriage. But I want to speak with you tonight, so don't retire."

Patience knew, as Grant walked her to his carriage, that his protection was more than she deserved, and she was grateful. That ballroom had been a veritable hornet's nest. "Do you think the girls will be all right?"

"They're young, they'll survive, though I'm afraid I can't predict their success in the husband-hunting arena."

"What about Baron Munchkin? I'm frightened, Grant. If Sophie's in danger, I'll never forgive myself."

"I've taken care of him."

Patience stopped. "You mean she's safe? You're certain?" She swallowed the sudden tears that threatened. She touched Grant's arm knowing he was now her rescuer in truth. "When I think of what might have happened. Thank you, Grant." He placed his hand over hers looking down at her with something of a smile.

What would she have done without him? What would she do when he was gone?

Miss him, came her answer. Lord and she could never let him know how much. She shuddered.

He removed his evening cape and threw it around her shoulders, pulling it closed at her neck.

"You look handsome in that top hat, Grant. Dapper."

He removed the curly beaver, examined it, and placed it at a jaunty angle. "When in London." He pulled his cape's hood up over her hair. "My carriage is a distance away yet and I don't want you to catch a chill." To her surprise, he lifted her into his arms. "Don't look so frightened. I won't drop you. You weigh less than a thistle."

"Papa always said I was small of stature but tenacious of spirit."

Grant handed her into his carriage. "Your father had a gift for understatement." When the vehicle began to move, Grant raised her legs to his lap and removed her wet shoes to massage her feet. The first time he'd held her foot, she'd thought him a scoundrel. Now she was certain of it.

"As I suspected. Your feet are cold as a stone wall in January."

"England's chill does seep into the bones," she said. "Mmm." He was so tender right now, she could hardly equate him with the snarly Captain, because tonight he was Grant. She closed her eyes in ecstasy at the stimulating massage, wondering if he harbored any other personalities.

Grant wondered how in hell massaging someone's feet could be erotic. He'd come to expect this type of paradox with her. She'd scrambled his brain—and other parts of his body—

starting the day they sailed.

In self defense, Grant tucked his cape around Patience's feet. "This'll keep them warm for now." Then he ruined the perfectly good defense by pulling her onto his lap. Lord, this was even better.

"Why will it take us longer than the girls to get back to Briarleigh House?" she whispered against his neck.

"I wanted to speak with you about the ball, but I've changed my mind. Now I just want a few quiet minutes with you."

"I have made such a botch of things."

She verged on becoming a watering pot, and Grant knew he needed to distract her. So he kissed her. She angled her head to welcome him, and he coaxed her lips apart with his own, until he found heaven. Their tongues met. He groaned and shifted positions, rocking her against him, while he cupped a small straining breast.

His blood surged at the sounds she made.

As they kissed, she unbuttoned his waistcoat and shirt and slid her hands inside, running her palms over his bare chest.

"Oh, God, Sweetheart."

Disappointment filled him when she broke the kiss, until she nibbled her way down his neck and nuzzled his shirt open further to rub her cheek against his chest. His heart took to hammering when she tongued his nipple, and he about came when she closed her mouth around a hard bud.

He undid her bodice and lowered it to tease her with his thumbs. But it wasn't enough for either of them. He raised her, and laved a breast in slow strokes. She gasped, held his head against her, and with her body's seeking movement, she unwittingly stroked his hard arousal. He lifted her skirt to explore the silk of inner thigh. "Sweet, sweet Patience," he whispered as he encountered her center, and knew he must have her, then her words penetrated his fever. He gave up her breast with regret, his hand at her apex. "What?"

Her slumberous look surged through him as she arched against his palm. She took a deep breath. "I, I think we've arrived."

Almost, but not quite, he thought, relief and regret warring within.

Patience looked at her exposed breast and became aware of herself throbbing against Grants hand. Fire crept along her spine, her entire being aflame. She hid her face in his neck. "Has anyone ever exploded from this? That you know of?" she whispered.

The rasp of their breaths filled the carriage. Grant pressed his hand against her one last time. She gasped, need suffusing her.

As if from afar, she watched his large, callused hands, so strong they could raise a sail against the wind, gentle now, as he brought the bodice of her dress together and fastened it.

He'd deftly managed her clothes, but he couldn't seem to put himself back together. She pushed his clumsy hands aside to secure the studs in his shirt, but one had gone missing. She looked around. "Oh, Grant. I think we've lost one."

"We're lucky it was the only thing lost here tonight."

"What?"

"Another time," he said, almost grateful for the close call they survived. He held one of his wrists out, palm up. "Take a stud from the cuff and use it on the front." He watched as she did then turned her face to his. "How do you feel?" He finger-combed her hair while she repaired his cravat.

“I don’t know,” Patience said, honestly. “Exhausted, as if I’ve just run a race. I’d like to curl up and sleep, though I don’t believe I was ready to stop when we did.”

He touched his brow to hers. “Patience. Patience. What am I going to do with you?”

“Be my friend?”

“Ah.” He tapped her nose. “Well, friend, we have problems to deal with. Someday, though, I would like for us to spend—” He searched for the right words. Unlimited time, came to his mind, then, forever, which didn’t suit. That led to betrayal and suffering. Grant sighed. “I’d like to spend time with you—without spoiled American misses who need to be throttled. Are you ready to go inside now?”

Patience nodded. “Whatever will John Coachman say about our staying in here so long?”

“He will not dare say anything, though we have no control over his thoughts.” Grant chuckled. “Patience, before we open the door, perhaps you had better scoot off my lap and over to the other seat.”

“Oh!” She complied with a giggle, but managed to wipe the grin off her face by the time he handed her out.

Before shutting the carriage door, Grant picked up something thick and white from the floor. From its shape and texture, he realized it must be a bosom insert. He grinned as he fingered it. Patience had walked almost to the stairs so he tucked it in his frock coat, dismissed his coachman, and quickened his pace to catch up. He’d give it to her later. They’d dawdled long enough as it was.

As they made their way up the steps, Grant shook his head at the curious faces in the window. “Look at the hoydens,” he said. “No sense of decorum. I can’t guarantee they won’t have something to say about how long we sat in the coach.”

Less than fifteen minutes later, Grant leaned against the mantle and contemplated four—no five—dangerously-innocent misses.

Grace settled her spectacles on her nose at the rate of about once per minute. Angel braided and unbraided the tassels on her shawl not meeting his stony regard. It bothered Grant that they sat in fear, yet somehow, for their own good, they must remain so. He slapped the mantle. Because he damned well wanted to make an impression here!

Rose, not surprisingly, began to cry. When he questioned her, she tearfully refused to explain her attack upon the Earl of Garwood. Grant sent her to bed. They could not speak sensibly tonight.

Pulling away from the mantle, he spoke to the others as he paced. “Tonight was a disaster. As far as English Society is concerned, your chances of finding titled husbands are ruined. Finished. At an end.” He stopped to regard them.

They withered as he watched.

Patience, his darling Patience, looked as if she would like to let her very dreamy eyes shut. He should be angry. But all he could think about was the reason she was so lethargic. And he wanted to finish what they started. Again, and again, and again.

He coughed and cleared his throat, and regarded Sophie, Angel and Grace. “If there is any way to undo this evening’s social debacle, you must listen carefully. Under no circumstances should you dance more than two dances an evening with the same partner. Never dance the waltz unless you are given permission to do so. You cannot call a Duke ‘Duke,’ Angel, you must call him, your Grace, likewise his wife. Lesser titles are referred to as, my Lord, or at the very least, Sir or my Lady. Is any of this making its way into your cotton-filled heads?”

The only girl who nodded was Angel, all the while twirling a chocolate curl between her

fingers with a smile on her face.

Grant saw Patience shift in her chair, rearrange her cape, and notice for the first time that she was off-sided, one bosom bigger than the other. She touched the flatter breast, then she skimmed her bodice to her waist. When she began to search the immediate vicinity, he coughed to get her attention.

She looked up and by her color he saw she realized he knew. He patted his pocket to tell her he had it. Her eyes widened, and she groaned.

The girls' looks of contrition increased at the sound.

Grant felt bad upsetting them, until he looked at Sophie. Acting as if their problems had nothing to do with her. She laughed. "Well I have done nothing wrong. I have made a match."

Grant rounded on her. "You haven't made a match, you twit."

Sophie looked stricken. Her large brown eyes filled with tears. Vexed with himself, Grant took a moment to regain control. "Did no one ever tell you, Sophie, it is in poor taste for a woman to ask a man to marry her? Poor taste? Hell, it's unheard of. A blatant miscarriage of all that is proper. A woman should know something about a man and his expectations before even considering his proposal."

"He's a Baron," she said in a small voice, shrugging her shoulders, as if to ask, What else is there to know?

"Baron or no, the man has two dead wives to his credit. Wives who left their fortunes to him. That he is paying blackmail money to his ladybird might also interest you."

Sophie's thunderstruck countenance was satisfaction for the moment. He turned to Angel. "Speaking of ladybirds, Miss Angelique—you'll forgive me if I find it difficult to call you Angel—Did you not think it odd to accept a position for which you had no knowledge?"

"Well, the Marquess of Andover said—"

Patience perked up. "The Marquess?"

"Dammit, Patience, don't be a fool. The idiot was not the Marquess. He said he was, because that's all Angel talked about. He thought to satisfy her then take advantage of her." He turned to Angel. "You don't know what a ladybird is."

Angel sniffed. "I thought I did."

"Does anyone know?" He looked from one to the other. "A lightskirt?" He thought they'd know that one. He was wrong. "A mistress?" Surely they—

"What is a ladybird, Captain?" Angel dared ask.

Grant stopped for a moment, feeling the need to call forth some form of dignity, though uncertain of how to convey it. Looking at their expectant expressions, he knew he was drowning, sucking more water for air than a whale. That a pack of schoolgirls should fluster him so, but he wouldn't let them.

He straightened. "When a man has a ladybird, she performs certain, ah, tasks." He sat and steepled his fingers. "That is to say, she usually—" He cleared his throat, sat forward. "Most unmarried men have ladybirds, however, some married men also enjoy..."

Grant coughed and stood, again, then he sipped his brandy, faced them, shook his head, and began to pace again. "You see men have certain needs. Well, as to that, so do women." His arms went up in defeat. "Patience! Tell them what a ladybird is."

Leaning on the mantle to regain his scattered wits, Grant waited for Patience to enlighten her girls without shocking them. His men would lambaste him over this, if they ever heard of it.

Patience took a deep breath. "A lightskirt is ... a woman who ..." She looked at him with regret. "Grant, I don't know, either. I asked Aunt Harriette, once, and she made me memorize the

Book of Proverbs.” She wagged her finger at the girls. “But it is a very bad thing.”

Grant rubbed the back of his neck and checked his pocket watch, relief filling him. Three in the morning. No wonder they were all exhausted. “Go to bed, girls. We’ll speak about this again tomorrow.”

The girls sighed in unison.

Patience stood beside him, as if declaring them allies. Then her hand crept into his pocket and he knew her motive. He sidled close to make it easy and decided not to mention her pink face.

It was some time before goodnights were said and they were finally alone. “I have ruined their chances,” Patience wailed. “I have taken their parents’ money under false pretenses. And, oh, Grant, I spent some of it. How will I ever repay them? Worse, how can I repair the damage I’ve done my poor girls?”

“Poor girls?” He laughed. “I made it sound worse than it was. Don’t worry anymore tonight. We’ll find a way to repair the damage. I promise.” How, he did not know, but for Patience, he guessed he would try anything.

She accepted his word with a sigh of relief and pulled the bosom insert from beneath her shawl. “And where did you find this dratted thing? I suppose I should be glad it wasn’t on the ballroom floor. That would have added dignity to the evening.”

Grant laughed. “Patience, with you, nothing seems to be as dark as I imagined. Thank you for that.” He stepped back. “It’s late and you’re sleepy. You should go to bed.”

“Not yet. Do you have to go, or can you stay a while?”

That she wanted him to stay pleased Grant. He kissed her ear. “I’ve a need, Patience, to find us a bed, and to finish what we started in the carriage, then to hold you in my arms and ride the wave of satisfaction together.”

She smiled, trust and something more, in her eyes. Consent though it be, her faith was nearly enough to change his mind. Nearly. He locked the study door and led her by the hand to the oversized settee. He eased her to her side leaving space for him. When she opened her arms, his heart swelled.

“I’ve thought about this a long time,” he said, as he lay facing her. “I want to hold you because we need to be together like this, both of us.”

Patience sighed. “I’m glad you want this as much as I do.”

Grant almost told her, just then, how terrified he was of the way she made him feel. He knew he could talk with her about anything, because they were friends. They really were. But he dare not give voice to his fears. Especially now.

He ached, literally, to awaken Patience’s slumbering passion. Confident that these lessons he taught his entrancing pupil would not lead to marriage—which neither of them wanted—he kissed her lightly, smiling into her emerald eyes. Mesmerizing eyes. “You’re a sorceress,” he said. “You weave your magic and I submit willingly to your enchantment.”

She laughed, and the melody of it soothed him. He began a kneading motion with his fingers, massaging across her shoulders, down her back, to the base of her spine

“Mmm,” Patience purred. “I’m sailing on a warm breeze.”

He continued to stroke along her spine, and without his noticing, she’d opened his shirt. She slid her hand inside to slowly stroke, from his neck to his waist, then back. Lord, if she didn’t stroke lower. He caught his breath each time her fingers came near, then stopped.

Finally she scanned his face, almost as if she was looking for a signal she should continue.

“Tell me what you want, love,” he whispered. “Let me hear you say it.”

“I want you to kiss me.”

“What do you feel when my lips meet yours?”

“Silk, warm, then cool, in turns. Your kisses make me feel like I’ve stepped into a lake, refreshed, tingling.”

Grant fitted his mouth to the invitation of hers, slanting first this way, then that. He ran his tongue across her lips and when he could wait no more, into the warmth inside. She tasted of honey and wildflowers and responded like the brightest of pupils. He stopped to catch his breath. “When you step into that lake,” he asked. “Have you no fear of drowning?”

“‘T’ would be a sweet way to go.” Patience could not get enough of Grant’s kisses and the intensity of her need did frighten her, though she was loath to admit it for fear he would stop.

When her strokes reached Grant’s waist, and she felt him shudder, she dared slide her hand inside the band of his trousers.

He grasped that hand, stopped it. “God’s truth, Patience. If you continue, I won’t be held responsible.”

Embarrassment filled her and she pulled away. “I’m sorry.”

He released a long, slow breath. “It’s not that I don’t want your touch—I do, badly—but I crave it too much ... for my sanity and your well-being. “I want tonight to be for you, Patience, not me.” He cupped her face and kissed her again. Pulling her so satisfyingly close, Patience thought she might take to bleeding if they separated. She closed her eyes, wanting more, fearing it. Aching for his mouth on her breast again, she unbuttoned her gown.

Grant’s eyes smoldered at her blatant invitation. When he helped her with her buttons and lowered her dress to her waist, she knew he wouldn’t stop this time.

Almost reverently, he accepted her offering. Pleasure purred through her as he closed his mouth over her, more than satisfied at her size, no bosom inserts necessary. When, at the same time, he slid his hand up the inside of her leg, Patience held her breath, expelling it only when he found her center. She arched against his hand, but froze in shock when he sought her core. “Grant!”

“Let me, Patience.” He nipped her lips. “Let me touch you like this, please.” As if he understood how much she wanted it, he stroked her, and a sweet spiral of pleasure lifted her higher than she’d ever been, before, almost outside herself.

“There’s so much to teach you,” he whispered. “So much you don’t understand. I know I don’t have the right to bring you the fulfillment of marriage, but this, love, let me give you this.”

Grant’s heart trebled its pace at her nod. Such a look he saw in her eyes, of trust, of longing, and of something he dare not question. Never had he wanted to pleasure a woman so badly, to bring her release.

Calling up every bit of experience, Grant played Patience like a fine instrument, bringing her slowly to the brink, then letting her glide toward rest, before raising her up again. He trailed kisses from her lips to her breasts, stopping to suckle, drawing sweet cries that fed his sense of power and mastery. He took pride in her expressions which moved from shock, to wonder, to rapture.

She trusted him enough to relax and allow him to cast his own spell, opening herself like a bud come to flower. When she soared mindlessly, up and over the precipice, he rejoiced in her ecstasy.

Calling his name, Patience sought his lips in a frenzy of need, and Grant drank the sounds of her fulfillment like a man parched. He sustained her climax until he feared she might faint then he lowered her slowly back to earth assuring her of his arms around her as she calmed.



He pressed his lips to the beads of moisture on her forehead, touched her parted lips with his, and covered her legs with her skirt. Then he brought her against him in a gentle, sheltering caress. "Sleep, sweetheart," he whispered, and she did.

Grant chuckled as he throbbed ruthlessly against her. And as the clock on the mantle marked the night's passing, a startling revelation came to him. For the first time in his life, his need to take had been surpassed by his need to give.

Watching the wonder of newfound passion wash over Patience, seeing her turn to him with desire, had been, perhaps, one of the greatest experiences in his life. Grant shifted in discomfort and tucked that knowledge where it could not be examined further. And with dread, his need became nothing more than a dull reminder. Settling his vixen more neatly against him, he sighed.

Fast upon its wings, came her sigh, bringing him a joy so pure, Grant did not believe he had ever known this serenity. Savoring, he allowed himself to drift into sleep.

\* \* \*

When dawn broke outside the window and teased Grant's lids with gentle fingers of light, he covered Patience with her cape and carried her to her room. Slipping her gown the rest of the way down her hips, he pulled her chemise up to cover her, and settled her in her big bed without waking her.

A sharp, biting regret that he could not climb in beside her, take her into his arms, and lose himself in peaceful oblivion—tonight, every night—chased Grant down the stairs like doom nipping his heels. And as he opened the front door, he vehemently denied the shifting of a deep-rooted principle within him, a tenet subtle, yet grave, but impossible to define.

Strangely, he was as glad he could not define it as he was that the shift had come.

Did the hope of new beginnings beckon?

Or was he set on a collision course that could ruin him?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Despite the afternoon sun tracing the window, the scent of kidney and eggs, a morning's feast, permeated the dining room.

Acute awareness of her uninhibited passion in Grant's arms last night disconcerted Patience and stole her appetite. Not so, the snarly captain eating a robust breakfast across from her. "I am going to stay and make sure you succeed in your goal, Patience," he said. "Call it blatant foolishness on my part, but I feel a certain responsibility to see you settled in that cottage with a rose garden and a white kitten. Hell, I'll even help you find your old nurse. I won't rest 'till it's done."

Her old urge to throw something at his head intensified.

He waved his fork in the air. "Free to sail the seas for the rest of my life, I will be happy in the knowledge that four self-indulgent noblemen have found vexatious wives to deliver the misery they deserve."

Patience tossed her napkin at his head. "Grant St. Benedict, you are a pompous ass, and I don't need your blasted help!"

"You know, you still have the vocabulary of a guttersnipe."

She retrieved her napkin from the floor, silently acknowledging the truth in his statement. She had acted the child just now, yet she couldn't seem to help herself. So many emotions assailed her this morning, every word and action, his and hers, seemed either tilted or topsy-turvy. "I suppose you expect me to thank you for this tremendous sacrifice?"

"Seeing the five of you settled will be thanks enough, I assure you." He refilled his plate then proceeded to eat in a manner that brought Horatio to mind.

They had been at daggers drawn since late morning when he returned. She was terribly self-conscious over what happened last night, but he acted as if nothing of significance had. And why should she be surprised by that? He'd experienced not so much as a thimbleful of emotion the entire time she'd known him.

She wished she could be so unfeeling.

When she woke this morning, the memory played in her mind with such detail, she nearly burned to cinders. Previous to this, any such indulging with Grant, she'd considered harmless. But now....

She did, however, experience a perverse satisfaction in the knowledge that the indiscretion would give Aunt Harriette apoplexy, if she knew of it. Warranted, of course.

She expected she'd go to hell now, quite possibly a price worth paying. She sipped her tea regarding the snarly man-beast with narrowed eyes. Curse her, if he wasn't handsome, whoever he was.

Last night he'd been Grant; this morning, the Captain.

Grant had caused her downfall—well, helped with it, at any rate—so she was perhaps safer with the Captain.

"I always thought you too young to take on husband-hunting," he said. "Now you've proved it. Society would as soon accept me as a chaperone for the girls before they'd accept you, after last night."

She raised a brow. "Last night?"

He had the grace to flush. "The ball," he said.

"Oh. And you think they'll accept a sea captain who attends affairs to which he has not

been invited? You feel you will lend propriety to this situation? A man who seduces—”

“Patience, stop it!”

She’d shocked him. Good.

“The girls,” he whispered.

“I was as innocent as they when I boarded your ship.”

“Lady Patience, none of us is as innocent as we were when you boarded.”

Pensive, she rose with a cup of tea and strode to the window. “Even I know it’s impossible for you to chaperone the girls. I need a better idea. A much better one.”

“Your Aunt Harriette would lend the necessary propriety.”

Patience choked on her tea. When she caught her breath, she tried to laugh. “She might teach them all to pray, Captain, but she won’t find them husbands. The idea is absurd. I promise you, she’d begin by saying it couldn’t be done. Her warnings would fill a book.”

“My dear Lady Patience—”

Patience tossed her napkin atop her uneaten breakfast. “Lady Patience and the Captain, how utterly ridiculous after last night.”

His turn to choke.

Good. “Have I offended your sensibilities, Captain St. Benedict?”

“Stop trying to change the subject. We are talking about bringing your Aunt to London.”

“No, we are not.”

He cut a piece of kidney with slow precision, put it into his perfectly formed mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “Do you suppose that Lady Caroline Crowley-Smythe—”

“She’s not speaking to me.”

“I suspected as much. Her direct cut is only the beginning. Your Aunt is your only chance, Patience. Else send your not-so-innocent misses back to their parents, because their husband-hunting is finished.”

Patience tried to form a scathing rejoinder but she could think only of his perfect mouth ... on her breast. Delicious tingles invaded her limbs and a telltale warmth crept up her face. She went back to the window. “I’ll think on it.”

The advent of the girls became a welcome distraction.

Grant sat back and sipped his coffee watching them chatter with Patience. Look at them, magpies the lot of them, like any normal family at breakfast, full of tidings to share. And, Patience, young as she was, personified the mother figure. He respected her for that. She cared deeply about them, and he believed that, in the end, she would do what was best for them.

There was something about her that made it downright urgent he get her settled and himself back to sea. His dreams had been playing tricks on him, throwing the two of them together, whenever he closed his eyes. “Not bloody likely!”

Silence settled like a mantle on a nest of jackdaws. Everyone stared at him. Had he spoken aloud? He groped for sanity, cleared his throat. “I’d like to address a subject I neglected to mention last night.” He tried to ignore expressions that said, Oh, no, not again, and expelled his breath. “It seems that the Honorable Oliver Trahern and his cronies placed several disgraceful bets at White’s concerning the five of you.”

Patience stilled. “Bets?”

Sophie’s brows furrowed. “Wagers?”

“Judging you, correctly,” Grant said, “As Colonials with no notion of how to go on, they bet they could incite you to several specific and scandalous exploits.” He took another bite of kidney, which tasted suddenly like mud, swallowed with effort, and placed his fork by his plate.

“No bet was won, though. You were more outrageous than they bet you’d be.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Patience snapped. “Your revelation is reassuring. We all feel better for your having shared it.”

Grant wiped his mouth with his napkin and sat back. Ignoring the charm in Patience’s scowl as he examined the other four. “To place you squarely back into Society’s good graces, I will need your full cooperation. You must learn the rules and follow them without question. Do you agree to do this?”

They nodded. “Will that be enough, after everything?”

“Ah, Rose. I did not have an opportunity to address you last night since you were indisposed, but I must remedy the situation now. You may not be aware of this, but it is in bad form to assault a peer before two hundred witnesses.

He couldn’t help his smile and damned himself even as his chuckle escaped. “There was a redeeming result of your outburst, however unexpected. Seems you gave Garwood the most female attention he has enjoyed in an age. I hear he boasted of the event for the remainder of the evening. With a little encouragement, he might forgive you. Wagging tongues will take longer to stifle.”

Rose lowered her eyes.

“To get back to your question as to whether improved adherence to rules is enough, it is not. The way I intend to lend you society’s stamp of approval is to bring Patience’s Aunt Harriette to London to stand as your chaperone. Lady Wilson told me Patience’s aunt was a darling of society at her debut. Her very presence might well make the four of you appear respectable.”

Patience, red-faced as he’d never seen, stood slowly. “I told you, I absolutely refuse to bring Aunt Harriette to London.” She looked at the girls and pointed a stern, but lovely, finger at him. “You think that toad lectures? Wait until you hear my harridan of an aunt prose on. She’ll have us on our knees praying for society rather than entering into it. Between balls, we’ll read psalms.”

She’d called him a toad!

Grant watched her walk away, head high, four chattering girls in her wake. Exhausted from lack of sleep, he made his way to the library to await the result of the animated discussion he could hear in the next room and settled himself in a chair by the fire.

An hour later, Patience entered the library and shut the door. The room was silent but for the gentle snore of a beast at rest. She gazed into the glowing ashes of the hearth. Her girls depended on her, and it was important that she do her best for them, more important than gaining her independence. She sighed in resignation. Therefore, she would bring her aunt to London. Aunt Harriette did seem the only answer to redeeming them in the eyes of society.

And damn the snarly beast for pointing it out. She looked daggers at him as he slept, the adorable, soft, warm fool. His head lolled on his hand and on his face played an idiotic smile. She wanted to kiss him awake, and her wanting was stronger than her anger. Blast, what attracted her to such a man? She couldn’t believe he suggested she bring her aunt here. And for him to suggest it to the girls after she’d said no, was unforgivable.

Patience marched over to his chair and nudged Grant’s supporting arm out from under his head with great satisfaction.

With quick, muddled movement, he regained his balance and regarded her with sleepy confusion, looking more dear than ever.

To hide her weak-kneed response, she crossed her arms, turned and looked out the window

while he regained his wits.

“Patience?”

Damn. He even sounded slumberous and cozy. Taking a breath to fortify herself against his wiles, she turned, but his look of vulnerability nearly became her undoing. She tried to ignore the pull, but stepped forward, despite herself. “You win. I will ask my Aunt to act the chaperone. For the girls. If not for them, I’d consign you to perdition for your underhanded tactics.”

He gave her a melting perusal with heavy-lidded eyes. “Come here.”

Patience took a step closer, her legs like mint jelly, tingly-cool and trembly-weak.

Taking her hands, he lowered her to his lap, tucked her face into his neck and settled her into his spicy warmth. And, oh, Lord, wasn’t this the most wonderful place in the world?

“This,” he said, as he kissed her cheek, “is my favorite place for you to be.”

She sighed. “I have the backbone of a garden snail.”

He twisted a curl around her ear. “For agreeing to bring your Aunt to London?”

“For agreeing to sit on your lap.” And for liking it so much.

“If it’s any consolation, my own determination not to let you use your womanly wiles on me has gone the way of your backbone.”

“I weaken so easily where you’re concerned. Must be a character flaw. Aunt says I have many. You’ll hear all about them in the days ahead.”

“I’ll probably agree with her.”

“No doubt. I can hardly wait for the happy event.”

He kissed her nose. “We’ll make the trip to Arundel tomorrow. Where are the girls? I’d like to speak to them before I leave.”

“Rose isn’t feeling well. She went back to her room. I told the others to wait in the drawing room.”

“Then let’s go.”

With regret for leaving her warm, safe shelter, Patience stood.

Grant, looking as reluctant to end the peaceful moment, stood also and took her hand. He kissed it then indicated that she should precede him from the room.

After making their plans known to the girls, Grant admonished them not to leave the house, nor be in to callers the following day while their chaperone was away. Sophie moaned about remaining in seclusion. Angel saved them by proposing they be allowed to visit Gresham’s Lending Library that very afternoon, with Patience’s escort, and the Captain’s, if he pleased.

Grant agreed that reading would give them something to do for the rest of today and for their day at home tomorrow.

Sophie and Angel, excited by the prospect, climbed inside his carriage. Rose said she would enjoy any penny novels they brought back, and Grace whispered her secret love for the newly-popular, Gothic mysteries. “Bring back dozens,” she called as their carriage pulled from the curb.

At the library, having left Sophie to the Perils of Penelope, and feeling positively wicked, Angel unobtrusively moved through the rows of books until she came to the section on Shakespeare. She pulled a book down and opened it to hide her face, then she moved the book in one direction, or another, while she scanned the rows nearby.

“Why don’t you just wear a sign that says, ‘I’m having an assignation?’”

Delight filled her. “Dickie.”

“You’re a slowtop, but I guess I don’t care. It’s always been you, Angel.”

She beamed and dared a quick kiss, which Dickie seemed pleased to receive. “What’d you

bring him for?" he asked nodding toward the sitting area where the Captain sat, face in the London Times.

She shrugged. "Have you been free to come here often?"

"The past few days. I have a plan. Here, write your address on this paper."

Her feeling of delicious wickedness leaning slightly toward guilt, she did so.

"I'll get in touch with you when I have everything settled," Dickie said. "I've got to get out of here before the old tar sees me." He looked about, stole a kiss and slipped away, leaving Angel bemused and happy, and determined to ignore her niggling doubts.

Back at home, Patience watched her girls eagerly sort Gresham's bounty. Other than a book by Hannah Moore she had chosen, Angel and Sophie brought back a score teeming with romance and intrigue, which Grace and Rose perused with delight.

Her arm in his, she walked Grant to the front door.

"I won't see you this evening," he said. "I have an appointment at my club. I'm thinking of investing in a gas association to light the streets of London. It's an exciting prospect."

"I've read about it," Patience said. "A lot of people think its nothing but hocus-pocus and can't possibly work."

"Oh, it'll work all right. Already does in Pall Mall."

"What are you most excited about, Captain? Gas lighting for London? Becoming part of the annals of history, in the event it works, or a new business venture?"

He laughed and kissed her on the nose. "Yes."

"Do you enjoy trade more than the sea?"

"I enjoy many things, Lady—" He sighed. "Patience. There is much you do not know about me."

"Like my girls," she said, "I too enjoy a good mystery. Perhaps someday I will uncover the secret of Captain Grant St. Benedict."

"No doubt you will. I fear, however, you will find the truth less exciting than speculation. Until tomorrow." He tipped his hat.

"I'll be ready," Patience said, sorry to say good bye, chiding herself for the fact.

It was a good thing no one else could imagine one's dreams, she thought as she dressed the next morning. More than likely, Aunt Harriette would take one look at her and know all the wicked things she and the Captain had done, in and out of her dreams.

Later, contentment flowed through Grant as their closed carriage meandered through the sleepy English countryside. For breakfast, they had stopped in Horsham at the Traveler's Jump Inn. Now Patience was trying to come up with a reason to abort the journey, and her attempts were entertaining the devil out of him.

"I can't believe I let you persuade me to this course," she wailed. "The woman has positively hated me since the day my parents died. She'll frighten the girls, I tell you. Oh, Grant, let's turn back. I don't expect you to stay and help me. I'll send them back to America, whatever's best for them, really. Just don't make me go to my Aunt."

"Is this the Patience who was left stranded, penniless, in a foreign land and came about? The one who saved a ship, its crew and passengers from certain death? Who—"

"Enough."

"Patience, I can hardly credit you, frightened of an old woman? From the stories I've heard, I'd think you would like her. She was quite the catch in her day."

"If she was such a catch, why didn't anyone keep her? Answer that if you will. Probably because she's like a big old fish. They throw 'em back, you know. Good sport, but they're tough

and stringy. Who wants 'em anyway?"

She made him laugh. There was something of the child in Patience that would always appeal. "Let's talk to her. If I don't think it will work, I won't introduce the subject. We'll make a short visit and return to London."

Patience pouted. "She'll say finding them husbands can't be done and she'll refuse."

"You hope." He shook his head. "If she does refuse, then it'll be finished. But if I think you're wrong about her, I'll broach the subject, Patience, and you will ask."

"Fine, but can you not simply introduce us to the Marquess of Andover, then go back to sea and forget us. I'll manage. Truly I will."

"When your aunt is ensconced as chaperone, and you are respectable ladies again, I'll introduce you. Not a minute before."

"If you judge my aunt to be unacceptable, then what?"

"Then I'll introduce you to the Marquess, as I've promised. Though, Patience, I must warn you not to place your hopes in that quarter. It won't work."

"Is he in town? You weren't sure if he would be."

"He is."

"How old is he?"

"Old enough not to get snagged by a woman who falls in love with a pig."

Patience huffed in disgust and turned to gaze at the scenery. She tried to ignore the sense of homecoming as she watched the passing countryside. "There is nothing as beautiful as England when it's all green and dewy, is there?" She lowered the window and inhaled the fresh earthy scent. "With castles in the distance and black-faced sheep dotting every hillside. Oh, look! I love those little Gothic chapels that seem to sit neglected in the middle of a green pasture. They're part of England's very special charm, don't you think?"

"Every place has its own charm, Patience. My home in America is every bit as beautiful and gracious, but in a different way, from my home in England."

"You have a home in England? Other than the quarters you and Shane share in London? I thought you made your home in America."

Patience could not help note his pained expression. "My current home is in Boston, Massachusetts, and I love it there. But if the trade embargo between England and America is ever reinstated, I won't be able to go back for a while, and England will, once again, become my home. I have a country house in Brighton, as a matter of fact. It overlooks the sea. Hence my love for sailing."

Perhaps he would prefer not to have shared that, but she couldn't help asking one more question. "Where were you born?"

"Plymouth."

"I can't believe it. I was born in Torquay and lived there until I was twelve when my parents died. We didn't live so very far apart growing up. You'd think I would have heard of the St. Benedicts."

"You'd have to account for the fact that I must be at least ten years older than you. By the time you were hanging from trees, I would already have gone to sea."

"How did you know I liked to hang from trees?"

He gave a satisfied smirk. "I have come to know you well in the past months. Let me see if I can guess anything else."

She doubted he would. She had such a checkered past.

He pondered for a moment. "You swim like a fish."

She scoffed. “You know you’re right. Anybody from the coast would. Now let me guess something about you.” She thought about his arrogance and determined self-assurance. He made decisions, despite what others thought. “I’ll bet when you went to sea, you went in direct defiance of your parents’ wishes.”

Hah. She’d surprised him. “I’m right then.”

“Almost. I defied my father.”

Sensing his withdrawal, likely because of the inevitable question of his mother, she changed tack. “We’re even then.”

He let out his breath and relaxed, arms crossed. “I imagine you’re no stranger, Patience, to defying your parents.”

“Other than tree climbing, I never had the chance. I was young when they died. But I’ll tell you who I have defied. My Aunt Harriette. Most recently, because of you.”

He sat forward brows lowered. “I beg your pardon?”

“Every time you touched me like no man should, and I let you, it was in direct opposition to everything Aunt Harriette preached.”

“Is that the only reason you allowed it, Patience?”

She looked him in the eye for a minute and then down at her clenched hands. “You know it isn’t,” she whispered.

They stared out opposite windows.

“Grant. I need to talk to someone about it and you’re the only one.”

She’d confused him again. “What?”

She took the pink satin ribbons, hanging neatly from her bodice, and began to knot them. When she ran out of ribbon, she saw the length of knots. “Oh, bother.” Sighing, she unknotted them—Aunt Harriette would expect sloppiness anyway. “I want to know what happened the other night. No. I want to know what you said you had no right to teach me. The marriage union, you said, or something like. I don’t know anyone else I can ask. I’ve never been intimate with another human being, other than you, so you must tell me.”

“Patience, that is usually the prerogative of a husband.”

“A house here in Sussex, a rose garden, a white kitten, and my old nurse. That’s my future. None will provide the information I seek. I think since you have, shall we say, piqued my interest in the subject, you could at least enlighten me. I will never marry so there will be no other way for me to learn.”

Grant cupped the back of his neck, something she’d seen him do often lately. Then he sighed and removed his greatcoat. He raised his booted feet to rest them, cross-ankled, beside her on the seat opposite, loosened his tie and unbuttoned his waistcoat. Regarding her as if she were a snaggle-toothed witch, he sighed again. “All right. You must certainly have seen farm animals, ah, horses or sheep, mating?”

“Of course. Which is why I am asking you about men and women, not animals, Captain.”

He gave her a wry grin. “You’re not making this easy for me. Men and women are special in that when they choose a mate, they choose for life.”

“Captain, can we get past that, please. The other night on the sofa in the drawing room, you touched me, in, what I can only term, a scandalous manner. It was ... however, shall I say it? Exhilarating. I do think I’ll probably go to hell for it, by the way, but it was worth it. Now, you hinted that something more would have taken place were we wed. Not that I would ever consider that, mind you. Marrying you, that is, or anyone. But married people would have proceeded in a different manner. What would have happened next?”



“God’s truth, Patience. The Deity must have some vengeful plan in bringing us together. Knowing you has become the most vexing experience of my life. What do you expect me to say? Do you want me to describe something so wonderful as if it were written in a textbook? Perhaps you wish me to draw you a picture. I could do that. You could show it to your Aunt Harriette.”

He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “A man does not go about explaining something like that in cold terms to a young girl with wide eager eyes who deserves better.”

He saw pain cloud those eyes before she lowered them and knew he’d hurt her. “Bloody hell.” He reached for her.

Settled on his lap, Patience turned her face into his neck.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m a brute. I’ll tell you. Bear with me here would you? This will be a first for me.”

Excitement overcame her chagrin. “Consider it practice. You may need to explain to your daughters some day.”

He laughed. “I may not want a rose garden and a kitten, but marriage is not in my future any more than yours. I’ll be telling no daughters, you can be sure of that. What I want from life are the successful business enterprises I already have and a few others to keep my mind stimulated and my purse filled. My house will be large to entertain friends, acquaintances and business associates, and I will have gained people’s respect, despite the fact I am in trade. That’s why we suit so well, Patience. We both have a goal the other understands. Now, be quiet while I compose my thoughts.”

Patience hid her eagerness for the coming lesson.

Grant took in her demure posture and cleared his throat. “What we shared the other night was a wonderful, affectionate experience, but it would have gone further were we a married couple.” He blew out his breath. “Don’t watch me like that.” He pushed her face back against his neck. She wiggled her bottom to gain a soft nest. “How appropriate,” he drawled.

“What?” she asked, sitting up.

“Patience, when we hold each other and kiss and such, do you not notice anything about me?”

“What do you mean? We both act as if we have lost our breath. I like the way your skin feels under my hand and I like the way your hand feels on my skin.”

This time it was he who shifted, to give her a clue as much as to make himself more comfortable, under the circumstances. “You throb when I touch you intimately, Patience.”

She looked as if she were trying to reach some high mathematical conclusion, then she wiggled her bottom experimentally, until a look of wonder came into her eyes. She nodded. “You throb too, don’t you, Grant?”

“When we lie facing each other, like on the settee, we are in the perfect position to make love as two married people. You see, like any male animal, a man grows hard when he wishes to mate with—make love to—a woman.”

Her eyes were filled with wonder. He tried to ignore their beauty. “After you ... after I ... that is, after you experienced that rapture, like the other evening in the library, I would then have inserted that part of me into you. God, it sounds so cold and horrible said that way, Patience, and —”

“Are you sure? I don’t mean to contradict you, Grant, but I don’t think it would fit.”

He took her hands and tried not to smile. “I’m sure.” He brought her fingers to his lips. “You wanted to know so I told you. But what I haven’t said is that what you felt was only a small portion of the inherent ecstasy in coming together the way I just explained. It’s better than

anything you ever imagined. Making love is glorious.”

Grant wondered how he could believe it; he had never made love in his life. He had merely satisfied himself with lust. How base that sounded.

“So, when you throb it means you’re hard and capable of doing ... that? Like right now?”

He shifted her back to the opposite seat and lowered his legs, crossing his ankle over his knee, wondering how he got into this.

“Show me.”

“What?”

“Show me what it looks like when it’s hard,” she repeated slowly, as if speaking to a child.

“You’re impossible. Do you know that?”

“If you don’t, I’ll never know.”

“Then you’ll go to your grave not knowing!” He knocked on the roof with his cane.

“Driver stop.”

When the carriage stopped, Grant jumped out.

“Where are you going in the middle of—”

“I’m going to take the ribbons. I’ve a need to drive.” He slammed the door in her face.

A minute later the carriage took off at such a pace Patience’s neck snapped back and she hit her head.

They arrived at Aunt Harriette’s a full half hour ahead of schedule. When Grant opened the carriage door for her to alight, he was still scowling.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You should be.”

“It’s not my fault a man of the world, like you, was shocked out of countenance by a country mouse like me.”

“Hah! Mouse, indeed.”

Patience lost her interest in their banter the minute she looked about. She couldn’t believe she was back in the sleepy village she had detested so long. She had forgotten the beauty of this place.

Most of the cottages in the lane were thatch-roofed and white-washed, her aunt’s a bit shabbier about the edges than most, yet still charming and homey for all that. Patience wondered why she’d never noticed that before. A neat stone path bordered by Lavender, Savory and Rosemary, their scents bringing her home more than her very presence, led to the familiar, scarred front door. She knocked on the arched, slatted portal.

When no one answered, she entered. Utter shock sent shivers down her spine.

“What’s wrong?” Grant asked.

“It’s the same but different. The paintings are gone, the stone floors bare of rugs.” She walked past the front room to the kitchen, then up the stairs, silent, Grant following. “All the furniture we brought from Craithorne is gone. I never saw these crude benches and tables before.”

“Perhaps your aunt has moved,” Grant suggested hoping to relieve her dismay.

Patience seemed to find that possibility a relief. She searched an ancient wardrobe. “No,” she said. “These are her clothes.”

She descended the stairs with the agility of someone who’d maneuvered them with speed for years and made for the kitchen to stand looking about, hands on hips. Grant pictured the freckle-faced twelve-year-old in this very spot.

“Where could she be at three in the afternoon? Our ritual was tea and fresh baked scones at

three-fifteen without fail.” She searched the cupboard. “Mama’s silver tea set is gone.”

Lowering herself to a bench by the table, Patience gazed absently at the room. Grant sat behind her, put his arms around her and took her cold hands to chafe them. The room and her hands were like ice. “So, there are some good memories here?”

“I suppose.”

Two grimy urchins came prancing into the kitchen, hand in hand, and stopped when they saw strangers waiting. A girl of about twelve held the hand of a boy somewhat younger. Grant noted that Patience stared with every bit as much confusion as they. Two taller boys and another girl skipped in and collided with the first set. Each child carried a book. “What you doin’ here?” a boy asked.

“This is my Aunt’s house. What are you doing here? And do you know where my Aunt is?”

“Sure,” a smiling girl answered. “She’s cleaning up ‘ta manor house, then she’ll come teach us reading.”

“Cleaning? Aunt Harriette is in service?” Shock had barely registered on Patience’s face when an older woman came in. “You’ve arrived before me again, have you?” She stopped when she saw Patience.

Grant stood, but the woman ignored him, studying her niece, her distress clear. She removed a much-worn cape and hung it on a peg. “Children,” she told the urchins, “No school today.”

Their cheers filled the small kitchen.

“Double tomorrow,” she said. “And don’t forget your bibles.” She shooed them out ignoring their moans and grumbles over double lessons. Then she turned to Patience. “Patience, dear. Why are you not in America with your new husband?”

Grant bristled at the word, husband, and chided himself for the inconsistency. Patience might have a husband someday—she should—which would be best for his peace of mind.

Patience stood and nodded to her ogre of an aunt, or so she thought her. “Aunt Harriette.” For a moment Grant thought Patience would bolt, but with obvious effort, she remained stoic. “I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, Captain Grant St. Benedict.”

Her aunt nodded. “Captain.”

He bowed. “Lady Belmont.”

“Please sit down, Captain.” The woman looked to Patience, seeking explanation.

Patience swallowed, but Grant could see from her stance that it wasn’t likely anger she swallowed, but pride more like. “Conrad Van Barten died before I arrived in America,” she said. “I was stranded and alone, with no money and no place to stay. Mrs. Van Barten took me in for as long as she could. You were right. I shouldn’t have gone. I was foolish.”

Grant stared. He’d no more expected Patience to admit to being foolish than he expected to learn that her aunt tried to stop her.

“Patience, dear.” Her aunt reached out, then thought better of it and turned her hand to removing cups and saucers from the cupboard, but not before Grant saw the light fade from her eyes. “I’m sorry you had no money,” she said, her back to them. “If any had been left, I would have given it to you.”

Patience stilled. “What are you saying?”

“I sold everything to pay your way. Sending you to America was my only hope of saving you from a life of poverty.”

“You sold nothing to send me. Everything was still here when I left. Including Mama’s tea set.”

“The squire agreed not to take possession until after you’d gone.”

“No. You told me not to go. You named all the horrible consequences that could befall me. You insisted I stay. You said I could never succeed as the wife of a man I did not know. As any man’s wife, I believe you meant.”

“Your interpretation is not entirely accurate. I said what I did to make you go. Nothing sets up your back and firms your stubborn determination like being told you can’t do something, Patience. Remember how your father taught you to swim?”

From the set of Patience’s shoulders, all the fight left her as she sat, speechless.

Grant almost smiled at the aberration.

“Knowing you as I do,” her aunt said, “I feared if you knew we were down to our last farthing, practical as you are, you’d go right out and earn our bread any way you could. I didn’t want that kind of life for you. I thought I was sending you to a better one. There was nothing left here for you.”

“Left! There was nothing here for me in the first place. Being stranded in America was still better than remaining where I was hated.”

Harriette stepped back as if she’d been struck. “Hated?” She made to speak, sealed her lips, reached out, and let her hand fall to her side. “I don’t hate you,” she said in a ragged whisper.

Grant wished he was not witness to such an emotional scene. He was uncomfortable enough to bolt, himself. But he stayed. For Patience.

“You don’t hate me?” Patience laughed, acting like a spoiled brat. Grant wanted to shake her.

“I have much to explain, do I not?” her aunt said, gazing into a memory-filled distance. “Poor child. It is not you, but your father I have hated—or more correctly, been furious with,—for so many reasons. And when your mother died, I swore I would never forgive him for bringing about her death.

Patience made to rise. Grant held her in place, his hands on her shoulders.

“Don’t bristle, Patience,” her aunt said. “It’s unbecoming. Sit still and listen. It made absolute sense to me that if your mother died in childbed, then your father brought about her death.”

Grant saw the real Lady Belmont emerge in the woman’s stance and demeanor. She raised an imperious hand to stop Patience’s rejoinder. “But a truth has haunted me since you left. Your parents loved each other. Those baby boys who died hours before your dear mother were a result of their love, just as you are.”

The woman rose and went to the window, less regal, more beaten.

Grant wished now he had left. If Patience had been conceived in love, she was unique. If his mother had loved his father, ever, then her hate had blossomed upon his birth. Not for the first time, Grant wondered what he might have done to change that.

“I was jealous of your parents’ love for each other,” the tired woman finally said, still looking out the window, unable to see her niece stiffen in shock. Harriette sighed. “And I was furious with the man who destroyed my sister.” She cleared her throat. “From the day they set eyes on each other, she was his, and when she was gone forever, my anger became unreasonable and unforgiving. My sister died because she was weak from birthing twins at a time when her heart had gone to the grave with her husband. Your father’s irresponsibility certainly contributed to your mother’s pain, but despite all that, my sister loved that man.”

Lady Belmont returned to stand before Patience. “You resemble her so much. Every time I looked at you, it reminded me she was gone, and how she died. I suppose, without realizing it, I

took my anger out on you. I didn't mean to, but—" She raised her chin, as Grant had seen Patience do countless times. "It wasn't until you left for America that I looked back, really looked, and realized the wrong I'd done you. When you are alone, you have an incredible amount of time to lament your errors."

The woman seemed suddenly old and frail as she put her hands over Patience's. "My mistakes loom the greater for this last and I must ask your forgiveness before I begin my confession, for I fear you will leave after you hear it and never return."

Patience took her hand from beneath her aunt's as if she could not bear her touch. Her aunt's eyes dimmed the more.

Grant knew, even if Patience did not, that she needed to forgive, so she could let the misery go. She was a woman now and it was time for her to put her childhood behind.

"No confession need be made," Patience said, as if she cared not at all.

Grant knew better.

Lady Belmont sat. "I must. It's time." Her eyes filled. She took a deep breath. "Your father was the only man I ever loved."

Patience gasped. Grant took her hands.

Her aunt nodded, almost in acceptance, as if her niece's condemnation was her due. "Your grandparents could barely afford a little season, and then for only one of their daughters. I was the oldest, so the season was mine. A family friend chaperoned me. It was my only chance to make a match. "That was when I met your father. He made me feel so special when he smiled at me. I can still picture him during our first waltz, such a dashing rogue, chuckling at a silly, schoolgirl remark I'd made. You remember his smile, Patience. It could be as warm as a hearth in winter, or as refreshing as iced peaches in summer." Harriette wiped the tears on her cheeks with her fingertips. "He paid me marked attention during those weeks in town, and I fell deeply in love."

"I don't want to hear this," Patience said.

Grant squeezed her hand. "But you must."

Patience's scowl was fit to turn him to cinders.

Her aunt took a shuddering breath. "When I invited your father home to meet my parents, he met your mother." She smiled sadly. "You know what happened."

Lady Belmont stood and grabbed a rag to wipe an imaginary speck from her plank table with agitated strokes. "Mark my words, Patience. Love that turns to hate is all the more caustic." She stopped, dropped her hands to her side, and gazed at Patience with entreaty. "I understand if you can never forgive me."

From Patience, no answer was forthcoming. "Patience?" Grant prodded.

She turned to him. "It wasn't like my parents to be so cruel."

A proper sentiment, if slightly misplaced. She should be speaking to her aunt, not him.

"I don't think they realized my heart was engaged," her aunt said. "They saw only each other."

Patience stood, walked the length of the kitchen, and back. "It hurt to know I was unloved and unwanted. Is that how my parents made you feel?"

Aunt Harriette wiped her eyes. "However I felt as a result of their actions—which did not necessarily reflect their purpose—it was never my intent to make you suffer in return. Bitterness is a two-edged sword that can cut where and when you least expect. Don't ever let yourself succumb to the temptation of giving in to it."

Grant thought it was time for Patience to admit she understood something of her aunt's

pain. He took it upon himself to give her a gentle nudge in her aunt's direction, but it was like nudging a boulder. He wouldn't be surprised if his hand formed a bruise.

"I do not deserve your forgiveness and I know it," her aunt said. "Thank you for letting me know you are back in England." Lady Belmont reflected the same stoic pride her niece often did. "Whether you believe it or not, I wish you a happy life, Patience."

"Dammit!" Grant startled them both, so lost were they in each other. "You are exactly alike, the both of you, stubborn and pigheaded. Lady Belmont, you cared for Patience, yet she thought you hated her. Perhaps she had reason to think so, perhaps not. But it seems to me, that in the face of these revelations, it's time to begin again."

"I would like nothing more," she said. "But I fear that for Patience it is not possible. And I understand. I truly do."

Patience gave no indication she was open to a reconciliation and Grant wanted to throttle her. "Patience your aunt reduced herself to poverty to send you to a better life in America!" He looked from one to the other and saw mirror expressions of despair. They wanted to reach out to each other, he thought, but didn't know how. A picture of his father at their last meeting flashed in Grant's mind; he pushed it aside. "Patience, she is your only living relative. This is a chance to begin anew. New beginnings are rare in this life." His father's face intruded again; he banished it. "Forgive your aunt and be done with it. You need each other."

They stood like strangers, yet there was love, if they would but see it. He nudged Patience again. She stepped toward her Aunt, but as she was embraced, Patience's arms remained by her side, her hands closing into fists.

Lady's Belmont was ready to begin, again. Patience had a long way to go.

"Since you've been gone," Harriette said, wiping her eyes, ignoring Patience's solemnity, "I made peace with your parents. I thanked God and them for the years I had with you."

Patience choked down a sob. Grant pulled her against his side to tell her without words that she was not alone.

Her aunt looked at them with a question she did not voice. "I'm sorry there was nothing in America for you, Patience. It was a mistake to send you."

Patience wanted badly to cry. Her throat hurt so she had to swallow to soothe it. Memories of her and Aunt Harriette here in this house, this very room, came rushing forth, many of them good, more of them than she expected. The events her aunt revealed explained so much, but the past held such pain.

If they could just go back to the beginning ... yet the true beginning had happened before her birth, so there really was no going back. She looked at Grant, at her aunt. They were waiting. The next move was hers. She raised her chin and took a deep breath. "Neither of us could have known what would happen in America, Aunt. And practical as I am, I did manage to make my way. I have a good deal of money. I will return what you spent on me."

Her aunt looked wounded.

"I mean, I would like to help you, if you will allow me."

Her aunt's expression softened and Patience relaxed a bit. "I could never have earned so much money had I stayed here in Sussex. Other than cleaning, I can't imagine what else a woman—" Wisdom dawned, fast and brilliant. Patience grinned. "Grant. I think I know what a lightskirt is!"

"Patience Kendall!" her aunt said.

Grant threw her an annoyed glance. "Wonderful. Excellent timing."

"I wondered for years, Aunt, about the girls at the Hoop and Barrel, and why you didn't

want me to pay attention to ‘such goings on,’ and suddenly, just now, it all fell into place. But, I’m a grown woman now, and you’ve no right to reproach me any longer. I don’t live under your roof, and I never will do so again.”

Harriette sighed. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“How could I feel any other way? And you haven’t changed that much. You still keep your hand in, do you not? Those children are learning to read from bibles. The poor things must receive your scolds now. Do you still impose fasting for penance?”

“Much as you might think it, I am not a pompous, bible-toting old harridan.”

Patience couldn’t help her laugh. It was as if her aunt read her mind. “You were once.”

“Patience!” Grant said.

“Hush. This is between me and my aunt.”

Her aunt almost smiled. “The only books Reverend Alderman would provide for my class are bibles, dear. I have changed. Losing you shocked me into looking at myself. And I didn’t like what I saw. I pray someday you will believe me.”

“We’ll see,” Patience said.

“Good,” Grant said, taking heart from those words. “Ladies, I would like to have the honor of escorting you to dinner at the Black Rabbit which, if I remember correctly, is not too far distant. Patience and I have something to discuss with you, Lady Belmont, do we not, Patience?”

Patience rolled her eyes. “I still do not think it one of your brighter notions.”

“For the girls,” Grant said.

Patience groaned. “For the girls.” She sighed in resignation. “Well, Aunt, the fact is that I haven’t made my way ... perfectly ... on my own.”

\* \* \*

After a dinner of wild turkey, parsnips and roasted potatoes, mostly easy-flowing conversation, and the warmth of the huge hearth at the Black Rabbit, Grant brought Aunt Harriette back to her little house loathe to leave her behind. Patience had no such problems.

Aunt Harriette promised she would be ready to chaperone Patience’s charges when Grant’s carriage came for her in one week’s time. She was too grateful to her employers to leave them without warning.

“Grant,” Patience said as they began their return journey. “When you went to fetch John Coachman, Aunt said she was proud of me. She said it could not have been easy to turnabout in a foreign land and all. I kept waiting for a scold and some ‘hell and damnation’ to fall upon my head. Mayhap she has changed. But I still don’t like her all that much.”

“Do you forgive me for suggesting we seek her help?”

“I might. Someday.”

Grant was satisfied with the day, and the ride home was simply perfect.

Patience slept the whole way.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

After three hours in Patience's London house, Harriette told her that the girls were rag-mannered colonials who would never be ready to face English Society.

Patience threw her hands in the air. "I knew you would say I couldn't do it."

Her aunt looked stricken, then contrite. "Perhaps I spoke too soon. It will be difficult, but we will try." She sighed as if bracing herself. "And we will succeed."

Patience saw progress in the concession. Besides Aunt Harriette was right about the girls, but she would never admit it. "Aunt, I expect if anyone can teach them proper manners and repair the damage already done, 'tis you."

"Thank you dear." Her aunt made to pat her hand but Patience pulled it away so fast, regret stabbed her at her aunt's hurt.

Two strained days passed before they were able to share a normal conversation after that uncomfortable episode. "Are you aware," Harriette whispered, "That Rose is likely in the family way?"

Patience all but wilted. "I have thought of nothing else for the past week, ever since returning from Arundel. And I could weep for thinking of the consequences. She was ill the day we were gone and then again the next morning. When I went to see if I could help, she told me she suspected as much and cried in my arms. I am at my wits end as to what to do. She will give me none of the particulars and how else may I help her?"

Harriette examined Patience's face with distress. "No blushes child?"

Patience had no control over the heat that made a slow journey from her neck to her forehead. If she were to touch her ears, she knew they would be warm. "Aunt."

"Thank goodness, there are blushes left."

"I can't imagine why my blushes matter one way or the other. Rose is the one with the problem. Did she confide in you?"

"With her room so close, I could hear she was quite ill and went to her. Though I helped her and she cried, she never spoke of it and I did not ask. I believe she realized I understood."

The ironic image of her Aunt as warm and understanding pushed aside, Patience worried about Rose. "She has done nothing but cry since the day she boarded the Knave's Secret and now it is worse. I have asked her if expecting a child out of wedlock is the reason she cried so much when we left, but she says she was not breeding when we departed if, in fact, she is now. I suspect the father is Shane, Grant's brother, yet I considered him such an honorable man. But then, Grant is honorable and he—" Patience knew her blush rose once more but she refused to respond to the worry on her Aunt's face. "Everything will come about."

"I'm not certain about this problem with Rose, Patience. But I have considered it and I do think we'll get your other young ladies settled creditably."

"Thank you, Aunt Harriette," Patience said, and she meant it.

After a week of observing her new charges, Aunt Harriette assembled the girls. She stood before them, and looked from one face to the other before speaking.

All her years of practice had Patience mentally preparing for battle.

"A more stunning group of women, I could never imagine," her aunt said.

The breath Patience had been holding, escaped.

"To think that you all look to me for help. It is quite daunting, but I vow, it is an honor I will try very hard to earn. I cannot begin to do justice to the unique beauty I find before me. I



must confess that after speaking with and observing you, I cannot find one thing I particularly dislike. As a matter of fact I have discovered extraordinarily wonderful facets among you and I feel I must begin our much-needed lessons by pointing out your good points first, if you will indulge me.”

Though Aunt Harriette was probably not a stone taller than her, Patience never considered her of small stature. She’d always seemed imposing and in complete control. And the day she’d brought her from Arundel, Patience saw that the children Aunt Harriette taught, and those who employed her, held her in high regard. Now, in a short time, she had become more than the girls’ chaperone.

Though for the sake of their lessons, Aunt Harriette insisted each girl call her Lady Belmont, they took to her as if she were aunt to them all. These things puzzled Patience even as her Aunt spoke.

“What I am about to say is the absolute truth,” Aunt Harriette said. “Please keep it in mind at all times as you go out into society. More to the purpose, you mustn’t forget these points later as I indicate the errors you display in preparation.”

She turned to the quietest. “Grace, I shall start with you. You are graceful, caring and giving. A warm young woman with much love to share, your beauty is like a soft beacon that draws people to you. It is evident as it shines in your lovely large eyes and within your radiant smile. Any man who gets you will win a prize beyond measure. Never forget that and hold your head with pride.”

Patience had never been so surprised. It must be a trick.

Aunt Harriette spoke to each in turn. She said Sophie’s exuberance and optimism in any situation seemed to infect the people around her as did Angel’s happiness and natural charm.

Patience opened her mind and heart and began to see her aunt in a new light.

Rose, with the classic beauty admired by any man, was far and above the most beautiful of face and figure, yet in disposition she suffered great deficiency, yet her aunt made Rose glow with praise so that everyone tended to forget the other.

A long-forgotten contentment in regards to Aunt Harriette entered Patience’s soul and she was not a little surprised by it. Had she, at some point in time, been loved by her aunt? Had she realized and accepted it? Before her parents died, perhaps?

Patience opened her heart.

To her absolute amazement, Aunt Harriette found the unique golden core of each girl and brought it out for them all to exclaim over and examine. She expected Aunt did it so each girl might have pride in herself.

The self-confidence Aunt Harriette handed out was precise and perfectly suited to the individual. Self-assurance shown on the girls’ faces and happiness for them bubbled within Patience.

“Now for my niece.”

Patience jumped as if a cannon cracked. The moment of reckoning. The criticism.

“You, young woman—” Aunt Harriette paused, as if considering her words. “My flame-haired, freckle-faced niece, are too bold, too impatient and much too forward and impetuous for your own good.”

Just as she’d thought. This was the harridan she remembered. The girls’ faces reflected dismay. Patience gave them all a smug, I-told-you-so look.

A trill of laughter surprised her. Aunt Harriette, laughing? Patience had never seen the like. Gaiety suddenly gone, eyes filled with tears, her aunt whispered, “And I love you, my dear child,

so very much.”

Oh. Oh no. She was not prepared for this. She couldn't meet this, to admit she might care, when she'd hardened her heart so long. It was impossible.

Patience bolted, and just as quickly stopped at the bottom of the stairs, indecision rending her in two. Dashing tears from her eyes, she reluctantly returned to the drawing room. Head down, she stopped to stand mutely before her Aunt's chair. When she finally looked up, Aunt Harriette's look begged for love.

Pain shot through Patience. How well she knew that particular, desperate need. She knew it so well that a sob broke and she knelt, skirts settling, to throw her arms around her aunt. “I'm sorry. So sorry.”

Aunt Harriette pulled her into an embrace and rocked her like a small child with a big hurt, shushing her, consoling her, both their faces wet with tears. Patience could smell her aunt's Lavender and with it came the memory of other hugs, other such moments.

Patience smiled when her aunt cupped her face and looked deeply into her eyes. “You have done nothing wrong, child,” she said. “I should have told you I loved you a long time ago. Can you find it in your heart to forgive a selfish old woman many, many mistakes?”

Patience swiped at her eyes. “Only if you'll forgive a silly child many more?”

The girls dabbed at wet eyes one second and laughed the next.

Male laughter intruded. “You look like Bedlamites gone over the wall in someone else's finery.” Shane! Smiling, shaking his head, he leaned on the door frame, arms crossed, his big brown eyes trained on one person. Rose.

All activity stopped. The girls stared in surprise. Not a sound could be heard save the ticking of the clock on the mantle.

When Rose's bodice ruffle tore, as a result of her nervous twisting, the tear was so loud, everyone breathed again.

Patience welcomed Shane with a hug.

The girls ate up his witty greetings, but he never stopped watching Rose, or she him. It was obvious he wished nothing more than to take her in his arms. Patience wondered why he did not.

Finally he moved toward the object of his warmth. “I missed you, Rose.” He said it more in the way of a friend than a lover, and Patience was disappointed, as Rose seemed to be.

“I brought you a present from America,” he said. “Wait here and I'll get it.”

He'd finally singled Rose out, and it was obvious from her blush, she was pleased.

Though everyone was eager, quite fifteen minutes passed, and yet Shane did not return.

Patience stepped toward the doorway. “I'll go find out what's keeping—” She backed from the door so Shane could enter the room.

Rose screamed.

Frightened by the scream, the baby in Shane's arms began to wail.

“Amy! My baby, my beautiful girl.” Rose took the child from Shane and planted kisses on the little one's face. “You brought Amy. Oh, my God. Oh, Shane.” Rose held the infant close as she sobbed openly, joyfully.

Shane led Rose to the settee, his arm about her shoulder. He sat and pulled her and her child against him, burying his face in Rose's hair. Patience wanted to turn away at the look of love on Shane's face, at the single tear on his cheek. When he closed his eyes in near-ecstasy, she did turn from a scene too intimate to witness.

She gazed out the window. The baby in Rose's drawings had been her daughter, Amy. Rose had traveled with a broken heart, because she left her baby in America.

Harriette herded the girls from the room.

Patience turned to leave with them when a familiar arm came around her shoulders. She found herself looking up at Grant, at those crinkle lines and that irresistible smile. Her heart opened like a bud coming to flower. The drawing room door closed softly. Patience turned and melted into his embrace.

Rose's agony of the past months was clear, and Patience's soul was touched. With the surge of emotion on Rose's behalf, as well as her own inner rejoicing, no other haven would be perfect.

Grant sighed in contentment and held Patience tight. He'd stayed away for a week, since their trip to Arundel. He'd even sent his carriage for her to fetch her aunt alone. He'd managed two more days away, and, thank the Lord, Shane returned last night. The perfect excuse offered, he grabbed it like a lifeline and accompanied his brother here to Briarleigh this morning. He kissed the top of Patience's head, neatly tucked under his chin. Between his real need to hold her, and his brother's reunion with Rose, and Rose's with her child, he was vulnerable and frightened. But Patience had this uncanny ability to calm him, and for a time, he would let her.

After a long embrace, Patience stepped away and turned toward Shane and Rose leaving him bereft.

Lost in a passionate kiss, they were oblivious to anyone else in the room, even to the tiny hands patting them. Grant reached for his lifeline once more.

"Let's leave them alone," Patience whispered.

"No, wait." Shane's husky voice stopped them.

Little Amy began to whimper. Rose tried unsuccessfully to calm her. Grant did not consider that a good sign. Even he could see it hurt Rose that her daughter did not respond to her. When Shane took Amy on his lap, the child settled down and stopped fussing. "We've been on a long voyage, Rose, where I was her only nursemaid," Shane said.

Rose smiled wistfully. "I understand."

"She'll get to know you, again. She's all yours now. After living with your mother, it's a wonder she has such a sweet disposition."

Rose placed her hand in the child's. When Amy grasped her mother's finger, Rose smiled.

"Patience, this is my daughter," Rose said. "I thought I would never see her again, which is why I cried so much."

"I'm so happy you have her back, Rose," Patience kissed Rose on the brow.

Rose looked into Shane's eyes. "I can't believe she's here. I'll never be able to thank you enough for bringing her to me." Rose and Shane got lost in each other.

Grant cleared his throat. "We'll leave you alone."

"No, Grant," Shane said. "Patience and Rose should know."

Grant chose to ignore Shane's words. He took Patience's hand and headed for the door.

"For once in your life, big brother, sit down and listen!"

With a sigh and a raised brow, he turned back toward his pesky little brother. They glared at each other for a minute then Grant gave up. He indicated Patience should sit and placed his chair beside hers. After he sat, he took her hand. That he planned to go about his life without this hand in his, disturbed him; that he would then be empty-hearted as well as empty-handed, alarmed him, but he ignored the warning and tightened his hold, nodding for Shane to proceed.

Shane looked at Patience, then Rose. "Our mother left unexpectedly some years ago. We were young, but old enough to understand we'd been abandoned. It seemed as if she didn't want us, which is very difficult for little boys to accept. After Rose confided that she left Amy with that puritanical mother of hers, I told Grant—"

“I had no choice! Mama sent me away and kept her.”

“We understand, Rose,” Patience said. “It was obvious to all of us you were being forced to leave. No one would think for a minute that you chose to leave your daughter behind.”

“Thank you, Patience.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t make that clear,” Shane said, squeezing her hand.

“I think this can wait.” There was an agitated edge to Grant’s voice.

“Wait forever, you mean. I want them to know.”

“You’re upsetting Rose,” Grant said, none too calmly.

Rose smiled, nearly a first. “I’m fine, really.”

“See?” Shane’s look was smug. “Now, as I was saying, I told Grant about Amy. When Captain Davenport said he was on his way to Rhode Island, Grant got it in his head I should return for Amy. You have to realize that in giving up a splendid first mate,” Shane boasted, “a Captain makes more work for himself and the rest of his crew. So it was a sacrifice for Grant to be without me, but send me he did. He said Amy shouldn’t spend her life wondering why her mother left, wondering what she did to make her go. You see, we always thought it was our fault our mother left. That’s a big burden for a child.”

Grant knew Shane expected to be upbraided later but his brave brother didn’t seem to care.

Shane kissed Rose’s hand. “I’d seen enough of your mother to know she wasn’t what a baby needed. I know she’s your mother, but you didn’t make out in the mother area any better than we did.”

“My father left her for another woman. She turned hard and hateful. I have good memories.” She kissed her daughter’s downy cheek and took the sleepy infant from Shane’s arms. Sighing, she leaned back into his warmth and encouraged him to continue his story.

“I worked on the Connecticut on the way to get Amy. Grant paid for the voyage back. A sailor doesn’t have time for a baby and a nursemaid has less time for sailing.” He looked at Grant. “Which reminds me. I have a few complaints about what passengers have to put up with on one of those ships, and a few ideas on how to make a passenger’s voyage more comfortable.”

Grant chuckled. “So do I, little brother. I’ve been thinking about building a line of passenger ships. We’ll talk.”

“Good,” everyone said together.

Rose kissed Amy’s dark curls. “Though words are so very insignificant, Captain, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart, for sending Shane for my daughter. She’s the most precious gift imaginable. I’ll be grateful all my life for what you have done for us. Amy will thank you someday.”

Uncomfortable with Rose’s gratitude, Grant stood and made for the brandy. Pouring a glass he asked if anyone else wanted one.

Patience hated that he sought brandy when he was upset; she’d seen him do it often enough. Though he drank little other than that, as far as she could see.

“We’ll all have one,” Shane said.

Like Patience, Rose set her glass aside without drinking. “How did you convince mama to let you have Amy?” Rose asked.

Shane looked at Grant. “You were right about persuasion, Grant. She took the gold willingly enough and handed Amy over.”

“She sold my baby?”

“Not quite. I carried a letter with an official seal from the Knave’s Secret, signed by Captain Grant St. Benedict, outlining the reasons why she could go to jail for stealing your child.

A list of American officials, friends of our illustrious Captain, added weight to the document. She was so mad, I thought she'd say no just to be difficult." He squeezed Rose's hand. "You know how she can get. But the gold turned her resistance. I took Amy and re-boarded within a day."

"I didn't know a Captain carried any official weight with the law," Patience said.

Shane and Grant chuckled. "It was a bluff, pure and simple. But it worked. I must say brother, you have a mind for deception." Shane saluted. "I would never have realized."

Grant shoved his hand through his hair and went to gaze at the winter-sparse garden outside.

Rose stood. "As much as I hate to let go of my precious girl, I think I should put her down."

"Shane, since Amy is so comfortable with you, why don't you stay here until she gets to know her mother again," Patience suggested. "The room next door to Rose is empty and you're welcome to stay." She hoped it would give Rose a chance to tell Shane there was going to be another.

"I think that's a good idea, if Rose doesn't mind?"

Rose's slight blush was evident, as was her pleasure. Together, they took Amy upstairs.

Patience looked at Grant, his back to her. "How many barrels of good French brandy did you trade for Shane, Captain?"

His reluctant smile appeared.

"You made me so mad when I thought you sent him away. Did you want to make me hate you?"

He captured her hands. "I looked forward to the day you would show your appreciation. Now, be a good girl and thank me properly."

Patience wondered what he would consider a proper show of thanks. Perhaps a kiss. A quick brush of the lips and a thank you. Or one of those lovely long kisses that filled her with a surfeit of need.

Emotion played across Patience's face, as if he could see the thoughts dancing in her lovely head. He wondered what she considered proper thanks but decided to make things more interesting. Sliding his hands into her hair, he pulled out every last pin until the carefully coifed mass tumbled to her shoulders in a disarray of seductive copper curls.

Patience took him by the hand and brought him to the large bay window fronted by a green velvet window seat. She urged him to sit with his back against the side pillow and lifted his legs to rest along the seat. He crossed his ankles and arms and waited to see exactly what she would do next.

Perched primly at the edge of the bench, facing him, one knee raised for balance, she leaned forward. Sliding her hands under his waistcoat to his shirt and wetting her lips, she leaned forward and examined his face. Coming nearer still, she paused close enough for him to lick her lips, himself. "Is a kiss sufficient thanks for such a noble deed?" she whispered.

"Thanks be damned, kiss me before I perish." He captured her and her lips. Starved for more than a week, Grant gloried in the reunion, and if Patience's response was any indication, so did she.

Voices outside the door caught his attention, hers too from the look on her face when she pulled away. They waited to see if they should jump from the spot. The voices faded, so did his forbearance. He mumbled an oath, hauled her on top of him and slid the curtains closed, effectively sealing them in a cocoon. He settled Patience on her knees straddling him. "I like you just here," he said, sitting straighter. Winding his arms around her, he kissed her with greedy

enthusiasm.

Patience relaxed and settled on his lap. She pulled from the kiss and wiggled against him. "You want me." Her smile was smug.

"Always have. You simply didn't know. You've had this effect on me since the beginning."

"I have?" She looked delighted. "In the beginning, when? I know; after the storm."

"Definitely after the storm." He trailed a finger down her chin to her neck. "Sooner than that, though." He grazed his knuckles lower and stopped where skin met bodice.

She watched, and looked up at him, wide-eyed.

He took her mouth again.

After a while, she sought breath. "When you gave me your clothes?"

A fond memory, he thought, teasing below her breast then he treated the palm of his hand to its gentle swell. Passion darkened her emerald eyes. They closed. He hardened. "When I took Paddy's clothes off you, I wanted you badly, but sooner still."

He teased a nubbin as she touched her brow to his and breathed deeply. "Danced, when we danced?" She shuddered. "Did you want me then?"

"No, yes. Sometime in the beginning." He couldn't remember now. He was too busy tormenting her as he throbbed beneath her. "The first week, maybe the first day."

"When I pulled your face into my skirts?"

"Between your legs, you mean? But it doesn't matter, I can't think for wanting you."

"I want you too."

This was the first time she admitted it. "Do you now?" He could do something about that.

The door creaked, jarring him to alertness.

"Patience, are you in here?"

They stopped breathing and stared at each other, stunned, alert.

"God's truth I can't imagine where that girl's got to with that devil of a Sea Captain in tow." Harriette's voice faded, but the door did not close. They heard servants chattering in the hall.

Grant put a finger to his lips and quietly unlatched the window. Throwing the casements wide, he slipped outside. Hands at her waist he lifted Patience out.

"It's freezing out here," she whispered on a shiver. The wind tossed her hair wild, a blaze of fire amidst the ice of winter.

"Cool air will do us good right now. It was getting downright hot in our nest. We're lucky we didn't do something foolish."

"I know," Patience said.

Though he'd like to stop and soothe, and inquire as to what she thought foolish, he thought a brisk walk round the house best. "There's the ballroom. One of those French doors should get us inside."

"Hurry. My feet are freezing."

"Be patient." He shook his head. "Never mind, I should know better."

She elbowed him in the ribs.

"Ouch. Stop that!" After rifling three multi-paned doors, he found one unlocked and pulled her in behind him. He chafed her arms, kissed her cheek, and combed his fingers through her hair, making her look more like she needed seeing to than ever. He sighed and ordered his eager body to calm. "Follow my lead and agree with whatever I say."

He could tell by her expression, Patience was about to argue.

"Just do it!"

Voices and footsteps got closer. He placed her arm on his and moved forward, giving them the appearance of a couple on a leisurely stroll.

The gilded ballroom's doors were thrown open to reveal Harriette and the girls.

"Lady Belmont, girls! Just in time," Grant said. "Patience has decided that the next ball you attend shall be your own."

Aunt Harriette beamed. "Why, Patience, what an absolutely delightful idea. It will be a terrible crush, I'm certain. Everyone will come just to see what these minxes will do next. A grand show we'll give, with our society manners and proper deportment. Let's see, we'll need three, no, four weeks to prepare and send invitations. Grace, dear, do go and get your writing things. You can help with the lists. Patience, fix your hair; you look like a street urchin." She swept the air with a shooing motion. "Come along, girls, we've plans to make."

"Let's go, Urchin," Grant said, taking Patience by the hand. "We've got to get to the drawing room and remove the evidence."

When they got there, they found the curtains open and the window latched, everything as it should be. Shane leaned against the mantle, smiling. "On my way home to pack a bag for my stay here," Shane said, "I discovered the ladies on a search." He nodded toward the window. "I covered your tracks."

"There is absolutely no way you could know—"

"Grant," Patience warned.

Shane laughed. "I peered out the open window in time to see your skirt, Patience, as you disappeared 'round the corner. Here..." Shane opened Grant's hand, and dropped Patience's hairpins into his palm. "You might want to try putting them back where you got them."

Grant left with Shane.

Patience's face had still been pink as he and Shane bid her farewell, Grant remembered as their carriage rumbled along the square. He thanked heaven Aunt Harriette had intervened. One of these days, her spitfire niece was going to muddle his good judgment beyond repair. It had been close too many times.

Not for the first time, he wondered why Patience was able to accomplish, with no noticeable intent, what so many other women had tried and failed.

No woman had ever enticed him into a compromising predicament, yet he'd come close too often with Patience. Damned if he wasn't the one at fault half the time for setting up the bloody situations. He must try to think more clearly where Patience was concerned. He couldn't let himself get caught. Ever.

Well, the ball would take care of everything. Patience would meet the Marquess of Andover and be finished with him after that.

Four more weeks and he'd go back to sea. He could do it.

\* \* \*

Once Aunt Harriette filled the girls with self-confidence, she barreled into them with a vengeance. Everything they thought they knew must be re-learned. Walking. Dancing. Greeting. Eating. Speaking—not speaking! Rules. Rules. Rules!

Patience's head ached.

"There are more rules to behavior in society than minutes in a day," Sophie complained after a difficult day of lessons.

"Sometimes I don't think we can do it," Patience confessed to her aunt as they took after-dinner tea with the girls.

"Nonsense. There are only two weeks to go. With all the sparkle you have among you,

you'll be ready to set the town ablaze. But remember, the things you must not do, are every bit as important as those you must. Perhaps more so. And, while we are speaking of what we must and must not do, Patience, dear, I hate to bring this up. But I do think it's important."

Here we go again. "Certainly, Aunt. What is it?"

"It's that naughty Captain, dear."

Oh, dear. "Naughty?" Patience chuckled to hide her agitation. "That's a good description. Don't you think so, Sophie?"

Sophie frowned suspiciously. "Why do you ask me?"

"Because I knew you would comprehend the word better than anyone."

Sophie pursed her lips. "Hmm."

The girls laughed.

"Patience you must face the fact that your Captain is not of your social standing."

"And?"

"You must not see so much of him. Not see him at all, I should say."

Patience crossed the room, her back to the group. "Why ever not?" Her aunt's words disturbed her more than she liked.

"You are seeking titled husbands for your girls. You should move in only the most elite social circles. Your Captain is not of that company."

Patience turned back to her aunt unable to mask her distress. "Why must you call him my Captain? He is not my anything."

"Of course, child. Whatever you say."

"You don't need to be patronizing. I was merely stating a point about which I feel strongly."

"Clearly, I've distressed you. I hoped we could discuss—"

"This discussion is at an end, Aunt. I will see you in the morning."

Midway to her room, Patience changed her mind. She went down the stairs, called for her cape and made a quick escape out the door, the doorman calling dire warnings should she venture out so late unescorted. She flagged down the first hack she saw and made her way to the Captain's London quarters.

After pounding on the door for several moments, she confronted a sleepy-eyed Shane. "Patience what's wrong? Has anything happened to Rose or Amy?"

"Calm down, papa bear. They are as healthy and happy as they were when you returned to live here yesterday. Where is that ogre of a brother of yours? I need to speak with him."

"I'm afraid he's at his club. But I expect he'll be back shortly. I'll just send a note round to summon him, shall I?"

Relief filled her. "Please. Thank you, Shane."

"Come into the library. The fire's lit."

Sitting in a cozy chair inhaling the spice of Grant's cologne, Patience eyed the brandy Shane left for her, wondering why the Garrick men had such a penchant for the bitter stuff. Then she curled up in the chair to wait.

And wait.

When Patience opened her eyes, her first sleep-filled sight accelerated her heart. Back-lit by the blaze in the hearth, standing there frowning down at her, Grant looked like Satan. And he must have her in his clutches, because Aunt Harriette's edict that she end their friendship scared her to death.

"What a sight," he whispered before he kissed her. "I like finding you asleep in my favorite



chair, though it's not the thing, Patience, to visit a man in the middle of the night." He lifted her and sat with her on his lap, their favorite position.

He grazed her cheek with his lips. "What are you doing here at this hour? Not that I really mind."

Awake now, Patience remembered her alarm at Aunt Harriette's words and she began to tremble. "Oh, Grant."

Grant rubbed her back. "God's truth, sweetheart, you're frightening me. What on earth's the matter?"

"Aunt Harriette said we shouldn't, shouldn't...."

Grant feared her aunt suspected that they had been intimate.

"She said we shouldn't ... be friends any longer."

"What?" He sat her away from him so he could see her face.

She fiddled with his cravat. "She said to go on correctly, I must only mingle with the elite of English Society, and that you aren't."

"Elite?"

"My social equal."

"Are you certain she's not trying to push us together. Remember, she tells you, you can't, if she wants—"

"Stop it," Patience said annoyed. "I fail to see what's so funny, unless you don't see our friendship as anything for which to care overmuch?"

"Of course, I care about our friendship. But you must admit that I shot myself in the foot with that one. I'm the one, don't forget, who made you bring her to London so everything would be done properly. Don't you see? She is exactly correct. We shouldn't be friends."

"You don't wish to be my friend any longer?"

She looked like a sad pup. A damned cute one. "That's not the point. We need to do what's best, so the girls will find titled husbands. Your own chances, Patience, could suffer. A sea Captain for a friend is not conducive to reeling in a titled husband."

"I don't want a titled husband, you dolt. They do. I want—and I can't believe you can't remember such a little thing, because sometimes you seem to be so very intelligent—a house, a white kitten and a rose garden. Remember?"

"Listen to me." He took her hands in his and rubbed her fingers with his thumbs. "You don't know what you want. You are too passionate a woman to live without a husband. You must marry someday." He squeezed her hands. "Patience, you'll never know of love. Never have children, if you don't." Grant wondered for the hundredth time why her hands in his felt so perfect and he tried to recapture the logic in giving her up.

"You know," Patience said. "You are also too passionate to live without being married. Yet, you say you will not."

"I'm a man. With a man, it doesn't matter. He can always—" He searched her face for the dawning of understanding. Surprisingly when it came, there was no accompanying blush. He was sorry he had done that to her—taken away her blush.

"Oh yes. Ladybirds. Men may have them but it is frowned upon for a woman to take a...." She tilted her head in question.

"Lover."

"But for a man it is not called a lover?"

"No. Well, yes. Sometimes."

"The rules are very different for a man than for a woman, are they not?"

“I’m afraid they are. But the fact remains that a passionate man can exist very comfortably outside of marriage. A woman with passion, the kind you have, Patience, cannot.”

“I don’t understand why.”

“Because society will not allow it. Oh, occasionally wives of very wealthy, very influential men have discreet affairs. These are overlooked because their husbands are important. But everyone knows, and though the women are not ostracized, they are frowned upon.”

“I certainly have lived a good part of my life being frowned upon. Aunt Harriette was once very good at it, you know, so I shall not care for the usual.” She nodded her head as if coming to a satisfactory conclusion. “I expect I’ll fly in the face of convention and take a lover.”

Fury exploded inside Grant’s head. He damned near dropped her on the floor when he stood. Grabbing her by the arms, he held her in place. “Dammit, Patience, don’t be a fool. A nobody like you would never get away with it.”

“Don’t squeeze so hard. You’re hurting me.”

Shocked, Grant let her go.

Patience rubbed her arm, her look rebellious. “I don’t need your permission to take a lover, Captain. We’re only friends after all.”

For the life of him, Grant couldn’t understand these warring urges to beat Patience one minute and make love to her the next. He stood rooted, his fists clenched, waiting for her stubborn jaw to firm in determination, certain it would.

It did. She nodded. “I shall take a lover. I will.”

Even though he expected it, the shot landed like a fist to his gut. He grasped her arms again. “You little hellcat. If you are so willful that you will throw society’s rules in its face by taking a man to your bed then that man had damned well better be me!”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

That man had damned well better be me!

For two days, the memory of Grant's words tortured Patience with images best left unimagined, but like sustenance, they fed her.

Gazing at her reflection in the cheval glass, she frowned. She was supposed to be dressing for her birthday, not mooning into a looking glass. At her age, besotted like a child with a first crush.

She should know better. She was on the shelf and happy for it. And today she was of a mind to celebrate the occasion.

She took up her hairbrush. She'd celebrated her last upon the sea heading for an arranged marriage. The one before that in Arundel with Aunt Harriette eating mutton stew with fresh-baked bread. Now that she thought on it, that one had been special, considering the circumstances. There had even been a plum tart for dessert and a warm scarf for the winter.

She sat on her bed, lip between her teeth, regret for her selfish, angry childhood filling her. She picked up a cooling cup of tea and sipped absently. No wonder Aunt's resentment for a brother-in-law who squandered every coin and left his only daughter destitute. Her frustration at being unable to provide must surely have added to her anger. The days of fasting for little sins would have stretched their food. Patience recognized the ploy. When she'd asked recently about the pup that disappeared, her Aunt confessed she couldn't afford to feed him and gave him to a good family.

Most titled ladies in Society would never make the kind of sacrifices Aunt Harriette had. Thank God for an aunt who loved too much to be conventional.

Patience realized her hate had been born when she'd heard her aunt say her father had as good as killed his wife and sons too. She shouldn't have been listening, she knew, because hearing and understanding are very different, especially when you're twelve and you've just lost your parents.

She placed her cup in its saucer and stood to smooth her gown. Recent days with Aunt Harriette were ones of revelation and love. And this would be a special birthday, because Grant would be here. He was bringing his father, of all people, a man she hadn't known existed. Grant said they'd recently mended past differences, and that he had her and Aunt Harriette to thank for the example.

Rose was happy Shane was coming. Patience didn't know why he hadn't asked Rose to marry him yet, but he'd better ask soon, especially with an expected baby.

Patience had told Aunt Harriette she was inviting the men for Rose's sake. Of course, it was just as much for herself as Rose, but she refused to feel guilty. It was her birthday after all. Anyway, she hadn't the slightest intention of ending her friendship with Grant—if friendship it was.

After his suggestion that she take him to her bed if she intended to take anyone, she'd spent so much time considering it, she could not get it out of her head.

A clock chimed somewhere in the house. "Oh, Lord. I've a party to attend." She adjusted the skirts on a gown of bishop's blue taffeta shot with silver threads, like dancing stars on a night dark sea. The fabric had been one of Grant's particular choices at Madame Lambert's. Her thoughts centered on bold suggestion as himself for her lover, Patience descended the stairs with a bemused smile.

“I told you she was beautiful,” Grant said. His deep throaty chuckle at her blush making her heart beat faster.

Beside Grant stood a tall, dark-haired man. Though gray peppered his hair, and he stood a bit thick about the middle, his arrogance and bearing said he could only be Grant’s father. Aunt Harriette beamed as she stood beside them. Shane’s blonde good looks were alien to his family coloring. She’d have to ask Grant about their mother.

Patience curtseyed before the older gentleman.

“Patience, my father, Brian Garrick.”

The man bowed and took her hand. “My dear, your beauty does a man’s heart proud. My sons have their father’s taste in women.”

Harriette laughed. “Hardly old, dear man.” She tapped his arm playfully with her fan. “Come along now. We can await Rose and the others in the drawing room.”

It was soon apparent that Grant’s father loved Rose.

He declared his approval of both his sons’ choices in women, giving Patience the uncomfortable notion he thought she and Grant were a couple. “Grant and I are just friends,” she said, finding his laugh as annoying as his son’s.

“There is nothing funny about it. We are simply friends.”

The older man waved away her protest. “Of course, my dear.” He shook his head at his oldest. “Knowing Grant, I understand only too well.”

“That will be enough,” Grant said.

“Mr. Garrick,” Sophie said, “How is it that you and your sons do not have the same last name?”

Grant looked as if he’d like to turn Sophie over his knee.

Brian smiled. “Garrick is our last name. Shane and Grant chose to use my mother’s family name for their ... careers on the sea. St. Benedict is their middle name. A simple matter to drop the Garrick.”

Patience did not comprehend the undercurrents passing between father and son.

Grant placed his hand on her shoulder. “I think you should open your gifts.”

“Splendid idea,” Sophie agreed.

Patience would never stop thanking Providence for the girl’s enthusiasm. It had filled many a tense moment.

Grant sat on the arm of her chair. She opened Sophie’s gift first. “A silver name brooch. It’s lovely.” She attempted to pin it to the bodice of her dress, but could not secure it.

Grant leaned close to maneuver the clasp, slipping his fingers inside the neck of her gown to anchor it. Until Aunt Harriette coughed discreetly, Patience had not been conscious of the impropriety. From Grant’s look, neither had he. He raised his eyes, wide and suddenly aware, to hers.

She asked with her look, ‘What shall we do now?’

With a wink, his expression said, ‘Leave it to me.’

“There, all fixed,” Grant said moving back to his perch. “It’s lovely, but, Sophie, the spelling is wrong.”

Patience examined the pin in confusion.

“It should be spelled: I M P A T I E N C E.”

Patience elbowed him, approved his grunt then she returned to opening her gifts. Delighted with her scent bottle from Grace and the cameo from her aunt, she turned to Rose and Shane’s gift. The large box had intrigued her into saving it till last.

Drawing the crystal decanter from the box, Patience gasped. With a cut nautical design and leather holder, the carafe was exactly like the one aboard the Knave's Secret. "It's beautiful." She remembered raising it to throw at Grant the day he gave her the bath.

Shane beamed. "To remind you always that Grant didn't trade his best first mate for good French brandy." He took Rose's hand. "From both of us. You should always have brandy around for when my brother visits."

His words lessened her pleasure in the gift. She would leave it on display. Whether she would ever fill it was another question. But she thanked them each with a kiss. "It reminds me of our voyage. Thank you."

"One more," Grant said as he went to fetch his gift for her. He placed a willow basket, soft pink fleece covering it, with a white rose on top, in her lap.

Patience picked up the rose, looked into his eyes and was lost. Another of Aunt Harriette's well-placed coughs broke the spell. "Thank you," she said, not certain who she thanked.

"I couldn't get you a rose garden for your birthday," Grant said, husky-voiced. "So the rose must be a symbol." He removed the fleece from the basket. There, curled in the center, lay a sleeping kitten, a ball of white angora, a bow twice its size about its neck. Patience lifted the tiny creature with a squeal. No larger than her hand, the kitten yawned mightily as she pressed it to her heart.

"Patience, the bow is the color of your hair," Grace said.

Patience tilted her head at Grant in silent question.

"They'll probably take bets at my club as to what idiotic thing I'll do next. I went to two dressmakers before I found the right color. There is no color called foxpelt." He nudged the kitten under its chin. "Open those big eyes, Fluffball, and let your mistress take a look." The feline complied and meowed as it gazed up at her. "Green eyes, just like yours. I couldn't resist."

Patience touched the fuzzy mite to her neck and rubbed her chin gently against the velvet fur. Grant was a beautiful man with a heart to match. "Thank you. I think I'll call ... him?"

"Her."

"I'll call her Snowdrop," Patience said, pleased with her choice. "Delicate white flowers that brave a spring snow. Precious but hearty, white on white, like my kitten."

"Snowdrop," Grant said, "I like it."

Shane coughed. "That's 'Lady Snowdrop' to you."

Grant raised a critical brow at his brother who chuckled, along with Angel and Sophie.

Patience decided to ask him about that later.

"Now, all you need is a house and a rose garden," Grant said, and Patience's joy in the evening dimmed. He wanted her settled so he could go about his life. Was she holding him back?

"Does anyone know where Angel is? She has a present for Patience too," Sophie said.

As if she heard them, Angel came rushing in, out-of-breath and rosy-cheeked, package in hand. "I'm sorry I'm late. I was just getting some air."

"Were you running, dear?" Aunt Harriette asked.

Angel laughed, a false sound, which made Patience examine her face.

"Here Patience. I bought this on Portobello Road the other day from a lovely old lady who promised good fortune and happiness to the person who received it."

Patience looked for a place to put Snowdrop, took Grant's hand, turned it palm-up and placed the kitten into it. She thought the sight rather adorable—the man not the cat—his hand filled with a drowsy feline sporting a huge copper bow.

Angel's gift was hidden inside an oval box covered with cloth-of-gold which Patience

thought very pretty. She opened the lid and raised a porcelain figurine for everyone to see. “Angels playing on a cloud. It’s beautiful.”

“There are four, see?” Angel said. “One for Grace, Rose, Sophie and me, your four angels.”

Grant’s bark of laughter startled Snowdrop, who jumped to Angel’s skirt before it flew toward Aunt Harriette.

Aunt Harriette screeched and knocked over the tea things, spurring the kitten to greater speed. The frightened fluffball knocked a vase off a table before scurrying up the curtains where it finally came to rest, shivering at the top.

A rusty masculine chuckle began, and grew, to become a great gust of hearty laughter.

A jolt of shock surged through Grant. He looked at Shane, just as surprised. They watched mesmerized as booming laughter came from their sober, unsmiling, father. The man laughed so hard, he might injure himself.

When Grant recovered sufficiently, he saw Patience on a wobbly chair trying to reach the kitten. “Will you wait a minute, you little idiot.” He arrived in time to catch her as she tumbled into his arms.

“See?” he scolded even as he hugged her.

“You frightened me. I would have been fine.”

His father laughed again. Shane, too. Grant turned, Patience still in his arms, to watch. How boring his life must have been before the advent of Patience and her angels. Setting her on her feet, Grant rescued Snowdrop from her perch and placed her safely in her mistress’s waiting arms.

When everyone was settled again, he felt a strong need to hear more of his father’s laughter. “Father. Have I told you about Horatio?” And so began several hours of stories concerning the girls’ beginnings, their journey on the Knave’s Secret and their adventures in London.

In the recounting, the adventures, though in actuality often ordeals, became merry frolic, and no one laughed more than his father who dabbed at his eyes so often, they were red. Embroidered tales continued through dinner and after.

“You’ll be at our ball on Saturday, Mr. Garrick?” Harriette asked as the men left.

“Certainly, my Lady. Wouldn’t miss it. Anything involving ‘the Angels’ is sure to be entertaining. Until then.” His father bowed and kissed Aunt Harriette’s hand.

Grant bid her a sober farewell, a rare occasion where no kiss was shared in the leaving. He saw disappointment reflected in her eyes.

“Thank you for Snowdrop.”

He was uncomfortable with the look on her face, her yearning as intense as his. “You’ll have everything you need to set yourself up after the girls are settled.” He hated how he sounded.

“Yes,” Patience said, struggling to keep her smile. She cuddled the kitten closer. Grant wished it was him.

“Come along now,” his father urged.

\* \* \*

Dressing for their ball became a festive occasion. Patience sat in her chemise and wrap while Aunt Harriette hummed a lively tune and coaxed each of her curls into its proper place. “Aunt, I believe this is the first time I have ever heard you sing.”

“Well, I’m happy. I have you back and you know I love you.” She patted a stubborn curl. “There, you are done. Beautiful, as always.”

Her Aunt turned to the girls. "Having you all in my life has given it new meaning. She took Amy from Rose. "Go get dressed now. I'll put her down for the night. Wouldn't want to keep that handsome man of yours waiting."

Two hours later, Aunt Harriette declared the event a sad crush, which meant they were a big success.

Patience perused the gathering, disappointed Grant had not come through the receiving line with Brian and Shane. She kept seeking broad shoulders and dark wavy hair and listening for the sound of his voice. She had assumed he would be here.

The girls behaved with decorum and followed the rules Aunt Harriette drummed into them. Sophie, Angel and Rose had a bevy of beaux, Shane among them. They enjoyed every glorious moment of attention. Grace spoke with an attentive gentleman, also wearing glasses.

Aunt Harriette whirled about the floor with Brian Garrick. He might have something to do with her humming. He'd called several times since her birthday, and it wasn't her girls he paid attention to, but their chaperone. Lady Harriette Belmont looked absolutely regal tonight. Young. Happy.

The orchestra in the gallery finished with a flourish. Brian delivered her aunt to her side and bowed. "My dear, I hope you will honor me with a dance later this evening."

Patience nodded. "I certainly would not miss the opportunity to dance with the most handsome man in the room, Mr. Garrick."

The older man chuckled. "Speaking of handsome men, I promised my son I would present someone to you this evening, but I have not seen the gentleman in question as yet." He looked about as if to be certain.

"And, what gentleman would that be?" Patience asked, puzzled.

"Why, the Marquess of Andover, of course. Grant did promise an introduction, did he not?"

Excitement beat in Patience's breast. "I didn't know we invited him, Aunt?"

Harriette looked as perplexed as she. "We didn't."

Brian looked away. "Grant probably made one of the girls send the Marquess an invitation as a surprise."

Patience laughed. "None of them could have kept that secret."

"Perhaps Grant invited the Marquess, himself," Aunt Harriette said.

"Perhaps," Patience said.

Brian walked her aunt to the punch bowl, then after a while, he returned and took her hand. "He's here. Come along, Patience, I would like to get this introduction concluded, so that I may take your aunt on another turn about the room. Do you think people would talk if I danced with her more than twice?"

"Don't even consider it. We cannot do with an ounce of gossip; we've caused too much already. You'll have to settle for taking her in to supper."

He kissed her hand. "Of course, my dear."

A staccato rhythm began in the region of Patience's heart. The Marquess of Andover, at last. His introduction to the girls would fulfill her promise to their mamas, not to mention that meeting him would appease her growing curiosity.

Brian excused his way through the crowd surrounding the Marquess, explaining he would like to introduce their hostess to the nobleman. The gentlemen and ladies parted. Brian drew Patience into the center of the circle, and she stood face to face with Grant resplendent in black evening attire. God's truth, the man is handsome, she thought.

"Lady Patience, may I present the Marquess of Andover."

Grant bowed and kissed her hand then he gazed into her eyes, an inscrutable look upon his face.

Patience could not move. Warning bells went off in her head. Loud. Grating. Her smile faltered. She looked from Grant to Brian and back again. Afraid to speak and sound utterly foolish, Patience replayed the last minutes in her head. When Brian had introduced the Marquess of Andover, Captain Grant St. Benedict bowed and kissed her hand.

Patience removed her shaking fingers from Grant's and turned to Brian. "Sir, is your son the Marquess of Andover?"

Speaking with pride, tinged with, what seemed, regret, Brian answered quietly, "Yes, my dear, he is."

Patience heard speculative whispers. If she turned away and ignored such an important man, she would commit a catastrophic error similar to the many committed by her girls at their last ball. She stiffened her spine. "I am honored to meet you, My Lord. If you will excuse me, I must see to my other guests. Do enjoy your evening." She curtsied and turned away, congratulating herself on her aplomb.

The orchestra struck up another waltz, and as Patience walked sedately toward her aunt, she found herself neatly maneuvered into Grant's arms and onto the dance floor.

For several moments they remained silent. Discomfort, then anger replaced the immutable joy Patience found in his arms. "I seem to remember you once called me a fraud."

The black devil holding her captive did not respond, instead, he waltzed her into the center of the dancers.

"My Lord, I have no wish to dance. Will you please return me to my Aunt's side?"

"No. I will not. And my name is still Grant."

"I recall that you told me your name was Grant St. Benedict. You are a liar as well as a rakehell."

"I have always considered my title a curse. It was bestowed upon me for services rendered, and one does not tell one's monarch what to do with an offered title. I have no use for the aristocracy, a fact I have told you repeatedly, Patience, which is why I went to America to seek my fortune in honest work. My full name is Grantland St. Benedict Garrick, Marquess of Andover, known to some as, 'The Saint.'"

"At this moment, my Lord, if you will forgive me, I find the name, Saint, particularly ill-suited. Please return me to my Aunt."

"I will not, Patience, until you call me Grant. I have the fortitude to wait for days." He raised one Satanic brow. "I would welcome the challenge. Now be a good girl and call me Grant."

Challenge. He was offering a challenge. She could accept that. "I am not on familiar terms with anyone by that name, my Lord."

When he moved his hand lower on her back and pulled her imperceptibly closer, she stiffened and tried to pull away but could not move so much as a muscle.

"Call me Grant, Patience."

"Lady Patience to you. It's no wonder you called me fraud; you would know."

"Patience, I weary of this game. I am one and the same person you have called Grant ..."

His voice lowered to a whisper. "With breathless abandon as I kissed you or stroked—"

SNAP. The heel of her slipper broke as she ground it into his foot.

He cursed under his breath and lifted her higher into his arms, her feet barely touching the floor. With deft movements, he gave the impression of dancing her through the open French



doors and out onto the balcony. She hated his power—physical and otherwise—over her.

He sat her down hard upon the cement balustrade bordering the darkened garden. “You little hellcat, you could have broken my foot.”

She wiggled to get free, but he held her firm, his hands on her hips.

Palms flat against his chest, Patience tried to push him away, like trying to move a brick wall. “I wish I had. I wish I had cracked your skull, you black devil.” Her voice rose, but she hardly cared. They were outside after all. “Father of bastard babies, rakehell, no good lying ... scoundrel.” She grabbed Grant’s shoulders and tried to shake him.

They were of a height at this angle and it gave her a feeling of power for a change. But just as quickly as it came, the powerful feeling faded. “Damn, I’ve run out of dastardly things to call you.” She stopped trying to throttle him, marginally aware that she caressed his shoulders toward his neck. Her fury died as his eyes captured hers. She tried to fight the pull. “There aren’t enough words to describe how vile, how despicable....”

Grant took her mouth so unexpectedly, in a kiss so masterful, heat shot through her with the force of a lightening bolt.

In response, Patience slid her arms full around him.

His hands wandered to just beneath her breasts.

She stiffened.

“Open your mouth, Patience. That’s my hellcat. Show me a witch’s passion to meet a black devil’s desire.”

Grant’s words struck some primal chord within her, and she matched him on a plane of mutual need that begged to be satisfied. He drank from her parted lips in long greedy drafts. She heard whimpers of ecstasy, surprised they were her own. He traced the bodice of her gown, lower, lower still, for slow tantalizing moments, until he finally slid his hand beneath.

Oh. She closed her eyes. Oh, Lord. “Yes,” she whispered against his mouth as she shuddered with the contact. He insinuated his leg between hers. She pushed against his arousal, reveled in it, pulled him closer. Fire emanated from her chilled breast as Grant’s mouth crept slowly toward the taut peak. “Oh,” she sighed, “Grant, please.” She anticipated the touch of his lips with a physical pleasure bordering on agony.

He lifted his head to gaze at her, his dazed look turning from passion to satisfaction. “Correct, Patience. My name is Grant. Now you have learned that basic lesson, we will continue to more advanced studies ... at a later time.”

He lifted her off the railing, stood her on her feet, and before she realized what was happening, he raised the bodice of her dress and patted her hair in place.

As he straightened his cuffs, her fury burst forth. SNAP.

“Damnation!”

Her second heel had gone the way of her first, every bit as satisfying the second time. “I needed them to be the same height, so I could walk properly,” she said. “If you will excuse me, I must go upstairs to repair the damage you have done.”

She’d caused him pain, yet his eyes danced. She refused to be charmed. As she was about to enter the ballroom, a very firm slap to her bottom made her squeal in surprise.

“Someone who acts like a child deserves to be treated like one,” he said, sotto-voiced as he passed her by to enter the mingling throng.

Grant’s slight limp, Patience decided, made retribution quite satisfying. She stumbled her way up the stairs then stopped to remove her ravaged slippers. Saint indeed! No wonder he’d scoffed on the dock. No wonder he’d named her fraud—hearing her promise to introduce the

girls to the Marquess of Andover, when there he'd stood in the flesh, a scoundrel in the flesh.

Twenty minutes later, newly coifed and shod, Patience vowed she would ignore the knave ... whoever he was.

Calling him My Lord provoked him. Good. But why did people call him Saint? It was beyond imagining. And he made fun of her being called Patience!

Grace danced with the quiet gentleman and for the first time, Patience saw radiance in her smile. The girl's beauty shown from within, as Aunt Harriette had said, but it had never shown so bright as now.

Angel, to Patience's annoyance, was nowhere in sight, which happened more often than she liked, and worried her more each day. What could the girl be up to? Nothing good, she feared. She'd best have a word with Angel first thing in the morning.

Brian bowed before her, looking uncertain of his welcome. Patience took his hand as he led her into a country dance. After having been passed from one partner to the other during the set, Patience finally met him again for a short turn. "Do you forgive me, Patience?"

They bowed and turned, arm in arm, in the opposite direction. "For siring such a dastardly, ill-mannered scoundrel?" Patience asked. "Certainly not." They bowed and parted company before facing each other again. "You could have done better," she said.

As they separated, Brian's laughter floated back. Lord, but, she liked the devil's father. When he took her hand again, he whispered, "Did do better. There is Shane."

"That's true." She nodded. "My compliments."

After the dance ended, he stopped her before they reached her aunt. "But it's not Shane who makes your heart pound, is it now?"

"No. It isn't," she said. "The urge to do murder does make one's heart hammer."

With a chuckle, Brian squeezed her hand on his arm. "Grant's a good man." He kissed her cheek. "I think you know that." Then he traded her for Harriette.

Angry with Brian's scoundrel son, Patience said yes to the first man who approached. He danced well and spoke little, which gave Patience an opportunity to look for Grant. When their gazes met across the floor, she realized he'd been watching her. At that moment, her dance partner made a bold move on her person, and Patience caught the blaze of anger on Grant's face, just before he masked it. It pleased her to taunt him, so she looked into her partner's eyes and smiled.

Revenge tasted sweet as Patience partnered her fifth in a long line of admirers while the heat of Grant's gaze singed her back. He hadn't danced at all since she began her campaign to provoke him.

As a rotund military man stepped on her foot, Patience learned vengeance can also be painful. But remembering how Grant's own feet must pain him, she laughed in delight, hoping each trill—and she trilled loudly—would grate like flint on steel.

Patience saw that despite his black looks, several daring beauties—perceived willing to scale mountains to attain matrimony—remained by his side competing for his attention. Her joy in her game dimmed when he partnered a blond with an enormous bosom. And when he looked at the ninnyhammer, smile wide, Patience wanted to scream. But she had started the game, after all; drat her for her foolishness.

Soon his string of admirers was as long as hers.

Patience took supper with four gentleman, losing her inspiration to be charming, while Grant dined with several well-endowed, ladies. It was almost as if he chose them for their bosoms. No. It couldn't be.

At four in the morning, their guests seemed to wilt. They left, one by one, all except Grant, Brian and Shane, whose lingering aggravated her. Why did they presume the right of family to remain and discuss the event? Why did no one else seem bothered by it? The girls, sleepy, but content with their evening, lounged on settees, dreaming perhaps of the future. The men sipped their brandy. Brian enjoyed a fine cigar. Lord, wasn't this the homey scene? And why did it seem so right?

Aunt Harriette came in and sat in the chair whose arm was occupied by Brian. Patience raised her brows when Brian took Harriette's hand in his and they smiled into each other's eyes, for all the world as if—

"Oh my!" she said, the exclamation startling everyone to attention, so she decided it was as good a time as any to address them. She stood and smoothed her skirts. "I wish to congratulate you, ladies, on a fine evening. You impressed everyone. The gentlemen—and I name them so loosely—who perpetuated the betting at White's tendered personal apologies and promised, in future, to refrain from such. Lady Caroline Crowley-Smyth has restored her patronage, now that we do not need it, but it is another victory.

"Speaking of victories, the Duke of Graham, from Edinburgh, has asked to call upon Grace." Grace bowed her head, hiding her smile. The word Duke was repeated with squeals. It seemed their quiet, warm-hearted Grace would likely make the best match. Though he was older by perhaps fifteen years, it was clear the nobleman appreciated the calm, loving woman.

The announcement subdued Rose—though Shane seemed not the least aware of it. Patience wondered why more men were not murdered by women. She speared Grant with her look.

He smiled and raised his brandy snifter.

The girls' were so animated, Patience could hardly believe they'd gone nearly twenty-four hours without sleep, not to mention their having danced nearly half that time. Still in all, she would like to sit right down and gossip with them. Being the person who must remain in control could be sobering.

Patience clapped her hands to gain their attention; she was fairly jumping out of her skin with the need to get her final announcement over with. "Girls, believe it or not, this is a night for more surprises. From the first day of our journey, I listened to you argue over which of you would marry the illustrious Marquess of Andover. You even questioned whether you would ever meet him."

All looked up expectantly. If a hairpin fell, they would hear it. "The time has come. Before I make the introductions, however, I would like you to know that I met him tonight, despite your parents' misconceptions."

Should she take Grant by the hand and drag him forward, make the announcement and let them tear him to shreds? If only they would. Perhaps no formality was required. Perhaps a quick, 'The Captain is the Marquess,' would suffice.

She looked to her sympathetic Aunt, to Brian, who smiled, to Shane, whose nod said he knew she could do it. She'd thank him for that later. She stopped at Grant. The scoundrel's eyes danced. He enjoyed her discomfort!

While she considered retribution, he stepped forward. "Patience's shock this evening is entirely my fault, and I publicly beg her pardon." He bowed before her and took her hand to kiss it then turned to the room at large. "As I beg yours. It was the hand of fate, I have no doubt—a fate I know to have a sense of humor—that led Patience to book passage on my ship. God's truth, a truth I have long tried to deny, I must tell you now, that I ..." He looked from one to the other.

Patience saw the dawning in some eyes.

“I am the Marquess of Andover.” He bowed again. “At your service.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Exhausted from the excitement and success of their ball, and from learning the Marquess of Andover had lived among them for months, Patience's girls had said goodnight. Shane and their father had gone home and Aunt Harriette went up exacting a promise that Patience would quickly follow.

Grant stood by the mantle and watched Patience pace in agitation while searching his mind for a way to make her understand. Everything. He stepped up behind her and put his hands on her arms. "Patience, please."

Like a shot, her arms swung out knocking his away. She turned on him like a spitting cat. "Please what? Please forgive you? Forgive you for letting me call a Duke Brian for heaven's sake? For hiding the fact that you are the Marquess of Andover? Perhaps you'd like me to forgive you for telling me in the middle of a crowded ballroom before hundreds of curious guests."

"You sound like a fishwife."

"Perhaps so. But I have every reason to sound this way. What do you wish me to forgive you for, Grant? You want me to accept the deceit and lies, and forget they happened? I'm sorry, my Lord, but there's too much between us now for anything ever to be the same again."

Grant lifted Patience in his arms. "Damned right there is. So stop acting the spoiled child!" He'd startled her. Good. He sat down with her, glad she was still too surprised to argue.

"This is what's between us, Patience," he said, swooping like a bird of prey seeking sustenance, stealing her breath with a kiss.

Still, she pulled away, gazed at him, groaned, and came back for more. Her cold anger warmed to a glowing ember. Grant knew he'd tamed her when her hand slipped inside his shirt. He nearly lost his breath at the feel of her caressing his chest. Reluctantly, he placed his hand over hers, above the fabric, to stop its wayward journey. "Hear me out, will you?"

Patience wondered how Grant always managed to calm her. A moment ago she was a volcano about to erupt then he kissed her with such tenderness. No matter what happened between them in the future, she'd never be able to forget the tenderness, the caring, and the passion. "All right, I'll listen."

He nodded. "As you already know, my mother ran off. Shane was eight and I was ten. I don't think she ever wanted us. She certainly never wanted to be bothered with us."

Patience tried not let him see her pity. "Through the eyes of a child, it might have looked that way, Grant. But, I've learned that a child's perception can be distorted. What happened to her?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. But believe me, she didn't love us." He took one of her loose curls between his fingers. "Anyway, when we discovered she was gone, Shane and I set out on our ponies in the middle of the night to find her. We were babies really, and we wanted our mother. We didn't understand that she didn't return our love."

Grant shook his head. "The old man." He sighed. "No. I've called him that for too many years. Father found us near morning. He was angry. He told us our mother was no good and we were better off without her. It can be hard on a small boy to hear his mother is no good. But father must have been right, because we never saw her again. I don't know if she's dead or alive and I don't care. Our lives changed, but not as much as you'd imagine. We had one parent, who was a rakehell of the first order. Women, parties, gambling, were everything that mattered to him.

He rarely bothered with us. No doubt, we reminded him of her, or more precisely, what he'd lost—my father never took kindly to losing. Anyway, we didn't see him often and what we saw, we detested.”

Patience kissed his nose.

He kissed hers. “My father’s steward, Hadley, took us under his wing. He showed us people were equal, not upper crust and soggy bottom, that satisfaction could be found in honest labor and pride could come from that. The more Hadley taught us, the less we respected our father, which was not Hadley’s purpose. To be fair, he tried awfully hard to instill respect for Brian in us.”

“He must have been crushed you were so hard-headed.”

“Spitting mad. Not crushed. Not Hadley.” Grant smiled looking far into the past.

Patience was glad he had a few happy childhood memories.

“After Hadley died, I went in service to the crown for a while. That’s how I got the blasted title. Then society opened up to me, and I hated it more up close than from afar. In my mid-twenties, I convinced Shane to join me in a shipping business. Two know-it-all bucks, we went to London to tell our father what we thought of his world. I hated him quite a bit more than you hated your Aunt Harriette. We made our own way after that day, and never contacted him.”

Patience thought her heart would break.

“We built a shipping empire in Boston. Our ships sail all over the world. Shane captains some and I captain others. Sometimes, as on *The Knave’s Secret*, we take ship together.”

He smiled and touched the tip of his finger to her lips. “One day, on our way to London to enlarge our empire, we took on a hellcat and four spitting kittens. Patience, you taught me to forgive, and to find, buried deep inside, a spark of caring for my father. After you made up with your aunt, I went to him and we talked, much like you and your Aunt did, except we talked louder. Eventually, we formed a wary peace.” He kissed her. “I have a family again, because of you. I think Brian is happy too.”

Patience wiped her eyes. “I’m glad, Grant, and I believe Brian is happy. Shane, too. But, Grant, that doesn’t excuse the fact that you lied to me. Once we got to know each other, I told you I didn’t know the Marquess. It was time for you to speak up. The fact that you let the lie fester so long—”

“Please believe that I stopped thinking of myself as the Marquess of Andover.” He shook his head. “No, it’s deeper than that. I denied who I was, even to myself. It was only after I settled with my father that I found myself willing to admit it. Remember, I wasn’t forced into it tonight. I could have said he left town. But I felt I owed you the truth.”

Patience felt manipulated, but she could not seem to decide how. And it was so late, and she was so tired. “Thank you. I think.” She leaned her head on his shoulder and toyed with his earlobe. “Why then did you tell me you would introduce me to the Marquess as early as on the ship?”

“If he was in England. I had a mind to say he was not.”

“More lies.” Patience straightened. “What about the gossip? The terrible things they say about you? The Hellfire Club?”

“The Hellfire Club has been dead for years. The men who belonged to it were worse than the idle rich. They were, some of them, murderers. That was a falsehood among many, though more damaging than the ones I started myself.”

“You started rumors about yourself?”

“To give me the opportunity to pursue trade, discreetly. It’s frowned upon among the

aristocracy.”

“But you prefer commerce to Society.”

He nodded. “I own printing presses here and in Boston. I have investments in several companies. I have a friend, Francis Lowell. We plan to build a textile mill in Massachusetts. There are other businesses—”

“I want to know about the bastard babies.”

He took her hand. “I assure you, no bastard babies of mine run about the streets of London.”

It did feel splendid, his skin against hers. “Boston?”

He chuckled. “No. Nor Boston either.”

“Where?”

“Nowhere! Patience, stop it.” He hugged her.

“Grant, if you never intended to accept your title, why did you bother to start rumors that allowed you to dabble in trade, making people think you traveled instead?”

“Ah. Well, now, you are asking me to admit something to you that I have only recently admitted to myself.” He thought to sample a quick taste of her lips and go on, but her open-mouthed invitation caused a quickening response.

He stopped and struggled to regroup. “I guess I have always, deep down, intended to return and accept my heritage when my father’s title befell me. There are people who depend on my father for their livelihood, like Hadley’s family and his children’s children. I have a responsibility to them.” He tweaked her nose. “I was not keeping it from you, specifically, Patience, but from the rest of the world, and if truth be told, from myself. Please forgive me.”

She told him with her mouth upon his, with her fingers in the hair at his nape, with her moans at his touch. He stood and carried her toward the settee. She ached to think what might happen. He was about to lay her down when the door opened.

Grace blushed crimson when she saw them.

Grant set her on her feet.

“What is it Grace?”

The normally calm girl wrung her hands. “Rose is crying and packing. She says she’s taking Amy and leaving London. She won’t talk and I can’t change her mind.”

Patience touched Grant’s arm. “I was afraid of this. Will you wait?”

“Of course. Go ahead. I’ll be right here.”

Amy sat in traveling clothes wrapped in a blanket, crying as hard as her mother who was throwing her cape over her shoulders. Several bags stood at the door. Patience lifted Amy and unbuttoned her warm clothing.

Rose sniffed. “Patience, what are you doing? We have to go.”

“You’re not going anywhere until we talk, and I fear Amy will suffocate while we do. Take off your cloak and sit. Grace, dear, go and fetch tea and toast for us, will you? When you return, you may take Amy to your room for a while.”

“Of course.”

“Rose, do sit down, you’re making me dizzy. None of us has had any sleep, and it’s dawn. There now, tell me why you have to flee London.”

Rose wiped her eyes and shook her head.

Patience decided if she ever did marry, she would have only male children. Grace returned and took the baby. Still Rose said nothing.

“I’ve listened to you cry long enough, now drink your tea and listen.” Patience sipped the

sweet milk-laden brew and let it calm her. “You’re pregnant with Shane’s child and leaving so he won’t know.”

Rose’s teacup split the saucer as it landed. “I’m sorry,” she said wiping her wet hand. “It was very shocking to hear it that way. Of course, you would realize my suspicions are confirmed. But Patience, he doesn’t want to marry me and I can’t stay and get big and round with no husband. I won’t go through that again. I’ll go to the country. I’ll take in sewing and washing and say I’m a widow. I have money. Papa gave it to me when he left. He said I’d need it to get away and he was right, though he meant away from mother.”

“How do you know Shane won’t marry you?”

“He hasn’t asked me.”

“Did you tell him about the babe?”

“Of course not! I don’t want to trap Shane. I love him.”

“Certainly, and he loves you. You have only to look at him to know.”

“As to that, the Captain—or the Marquess—looks at you in exactly the same way.”

“He does not! And we are not speaking of me, so let’s leave the scoundrel out of this. I think you should speak to Shane. He’s a warm, caring man who loves you and Amy and would be bereft to lose you, not to mention the child you carry, if he knew of it. Get into your nightrail, climb between those sheets and sleep. I will send someone to wake you at ten. Then you will tell Shane he is about to become a father and shortly after that, I predict you will become a bride.”

Rose smiled. “When you say it that way, it makes such sense.” She hugged Patience.

“Thank you. You are the sister I can always count on.”

Patience hugged her back. “I have always wanted a sister.”

“Me too,” Rose said. “And now we have four.”

Patience went back to the library where she found Grant sleeping on the settee. He looked as if he’d tried to stay sitting but fell over. Funny, she thought as she slipped his shoes off and lifted his legs to the cushions, she never noticed him looking at her the way Shane looks at Rose.

She pushed a curl from his brow. She should let him sleep and go upstairs. Instead, she locked the library door and snuggled against him. He opened sleepy eyes and smiled at her.

“Go back to sleep,” she whispered. “The house will be quiet for hours yet and I’ve locked the door.”

He kissed her, pulled her against him with one arm and settled her head in his neck. “A man could get used to this,” he said in a sleepy voice and drifted off.

So could a woman.

Someone tried the library door at dawn to light the fire. Patience ignored the knob’s rattle and drifted back to sleep. Someone tried again at nine, probably to clean. Still locked. Patience closed her eyes in contentment.

“Bother,” someone in the hall said. “Dusting can wait ‘till tomorrow.” And so it could, Patience thought.

At noon Aunt Harriette’s voice brought her full awake. Grant too. But they ignored the sounds. Patience felt Grant’s arousal against her middle and smiled into coal black eyes. Ah those crinkle lines.

He kissed her and held her warm willing body tight. “Mmm.” His kisses trailed to her breast where he nibbled through her gown.

Exploring and teasing became a lovely early-morning pastime. Patience slid her hand to that mysterious hard ridge. His groan shot fire through her. She was about to explore further when the sound of a key in the lock moved them like lightening.



Grant, on the inside, was quicker, however, and knocked Patience to the floor. He picked her up, kissed her on the brow, and pulled her to the chairs facing the hearth. He sat her in one, himself in the other, and crossed his legs of necessity. Patience looked like she was going to giggle. He gave her a warning look as the lock gave. She looked as if she'd been sleeping, he thought, a good thing, but he wished she wasn't breathing so rapidly. He feigned sleep because, for the life of him, he could not stand as Aunt Harriette entered the room. He hoped Patience would be smart and drag the woman away. He wondered if the powers of mental thought could be transferred as some scientists seemed to think, so he tried. Get her the devil out of here!

Aunt Harriette seemed to accept that he slept because she whispered. "Dear, did you stay up all night?"

"Oh, no," Patience whispered back. "I fell asleep. It certainly looks as if Grant did. Come along, Aunt, and talk to me while I bathe and dress. I feel decidedly uncomfortable. Let 'The Saint' sleep a while longer."

Grant barely held his chuckle until the door shut.

He sent a note to his house and had fresh clothes brought. Utilizing one of the guest rooms, he bathed, shaved and changed before Patience returned to the library.

"Oh, good. Food," Patience said when she saw the tray waiting. She bit into a warm fruited scone. "Mmm. It may be two in the afternoon, but I want breakfast."

Grant raised a brow and leaned over the small table between them. "I'm famished for what we started when your darling Aunt interrupted."

Patience smiled sweetly. "Don't forget who insisted I bring her to London."

He scowled. "Can we send her back now?"

"No. But listen, we have other problems."

"Patience, I hate it when you say we have problems. They are, inevitably, incomprehensible and insurmountable."

"You told me you'd stay and help with the girls."

"More fool, me."

"All I need is someone to talk to. There isn't much you can do about this. I've handled it and I need you to say I did fine."

"And if you didn't?"

"I don't want to know."

He nodded and sipped his tea. "I understand your rules. Now tell me and don't run in circles. Plain speaking if you please. My brain is fogged from lack of sleep."

"Rose is pregnant."

Grant's eyes widened as he put his cup down with a clatter. "I must say, Patience, when you get it into your head to do as I ask, you are quite good at it!" After a minute of shock, he smiled. "So, I'm to be an uncle. Does Shane know?"

"I hadn't thought about you being an uncle. Do you think you can act like one?"

"What? Bounce the little tiger on my knee? Of course I can. I think I would be quite fond of Shane's children. I'm happy for them. Is Rose well?"

Patience jumped from her chair. "No, dolt, Rose is not well. She is not married to your brother, and furthermore he hasn't asked her."

"A mere technicality."

"Not to Rose. She was packing to leave this morning when I stopped her. I've convinced her to speak with Shane, and I certainly hope he offers for her. She's more than four months along. It must have happened at the beginning of our voyage."

Grant was startled by that. “Of course, I don’t know a great deal about these matters, but shouldn’t it, I mean wouldn’t she be ... larger by now?”

“Look at this dress Grant. What does it look like?”

Grant studied her small but perfect breasts and the lavender high-waisted dress that lifted them quite nicely. He watched how one lone curl barely touched the peak and longed to lift it and place his lips on the spot. “You look as if you need to be kissed.”

Patience groaned. “Grant, does it look as if I’m pregnant?”

“No. Well, yes, actually. Are you wearing your bosom inserts?”

She rolled her eyes and prayed for patience. “You need to get some rest. I’m trying to tell you that a woman can hide her delicate condition in this style dress. I’m sure many women do.”

Grant went to her. “I’m sorry to babble like an idiot. My lack of sleep is beginning to take its toll.” He took her into his arms, put a hand below her breast, and slid it to her waist, then her abdomen where he made lazy circles. “You’d be beautiful if you were, Patience. You should reconsider your dreams for the future and think of marriage.”

Patience had closed her eyes with the slow strokes. Now she opened them wide. “Should I? Who should I marry?”

Grant remembered his mother and dropped his hand as if he’d been burned. “You’d make someone a wonderful wife, I’m sure.”

She faced the Captain again, which made her angry, at herself for the seed of hope she’d allowed. “I think few men have the sensitivity to be husbands, so I’ll keep my dream if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly. It would be best. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be off. Don’t worry about Rose and Shane. They’ll work it out.”

After Grant left, Patience attempted to speak with Angel about her unexplained absences, but she was on her way out to visit the lending library with Sophie. She promised Patience they would talk later.

Later, as they finally began that talk, angry shouts reverberated through the house and drew Patience to the top of the stairs. The girls followed.

Shane shouted, calling Grant interfering and unfeeling. Then the mild-mannered first-mate planted his brother a facer.

Grant fell back and hit the stair rail.

The girls gasped.

Patience screamed, not knowing if the resounding crack was from the rail splitting or Grant’s thick skull.

Shane ran half-way up the stairs then stopped to look up in fury. “Dammit, Rose, why in hell didn’t you tell me you’re pregnant?”

Rose wailed.

Patience grabbed Amy.

Rose fled in tears.

Set in motion again, Shane followed.

Grant rose on a moan, rubbing his jaw, and watched Patience soothe the crying babe. His afternoon’s anguish returned. Patience with a babe. Agony filled him at the sight. A passionate battle warred in him. She looked absolutely perfect cradling an infant. Would that the child belonged to them. No. He sighed at the pain all around. His needs and fears engaged in combat at a pace too fierce for him to command. And he hated not being in command, especially of himself.

He wanted Patience. He did not.

“I can’t believe you went to your brother with this, you ... Never mind what you are; Amy’s too young to hear it.” Patience fled and left him standing at the bottom of the stairs. The outer door opened behind him as Harriette and Brian came in from the rain.

“What’s wrong?” they asked, looking from the girls to Grant.

“Damned if I know, but I’m bloody well going to find out.” He took the stairs two at a time. Moments later, he found Patience in her room rocking a sleepy Amy, a look of fury on her face.

He knelt in front of her. “Why are you angry with me?”

Amy opened her eyes and held her arms out to him.

Surprised, he took the baby girl and let Patience show him how to hold her so her head rested on his shoulder. Amy sighed in contentment and closed her eyes.

Patience frowned. “You do charm the ladies.”

He scowled.

Patience shook her head. “Do you want to sit in the rocker?”

“No,” he whispered. “Come with me. When she’s asleep, we’ll put her down so we can talk.”

Patience followed him down the hall to the last door and into a room with children’s furniture. “What a lovely room, but how did you know it was here?”

“Now that you know I’m the Marquess, you may as well know this was my grandmother’s house. She left it to me, but I haven’t lived in it since I was seventeen and she was alive.” Patience watched him rub Amy’s back. “After my mother abandoned us, when my father came to town, he left us here with my grandmother, Lady Briarleigh. She was an old dear. We spent hours in this room, Shane and I. He loves this place. I’m going to give it to him and Rose as a wedding present. I have other houses.”

Patience pursed her lips. “I wish you would not do anything admirable while I am so angry with you.”

Grant put Amy on the counterpane of the little bed and placed a coverlet over her. “Do you think she’s warm enough?”

“Yes,” Patience said grudgingly.

He took her hand and led her through a connecting door into a lovely sitting room, leaving the door open a crack so they’d hear Amy if she woke. Urging her toward two chairs facing a large bay window at the far end of the room, he sighed. “Tell me why you’re angry.”

“Furious. I’m absolutely furious with you. Rose should have been the one to tell Shane about the baby. Not you. I told you in confidence, Grant. How could you be so callous?”

She got up to pace and stopped almost immediately. “Nothing you do should surprise me, not where the heart is concerned. Your shameless disregard of Rose’s feelings in this instance is proof you know nothing of love. And Shane was right, you do not possess an ounce of feeling in you. Do you realize how emotional Rose is right now? Shane charged into this house as if you were forcing him to marry her. She may never get over it.”

Grant wondered for a minute why he felt so betrayed by Patience’s words. Everyone had always assumed he knew nothing of love. He liked it that way. Most of his life, he’d cultivated an attitude of hard-shelled invulnerability, so he should be pleased at his success.

Yet, Patience’s charge was like to bring him to his knees. Why?

Because he knew of love. He loved her.

Did he? Dear God, no.

As if a stone pillar fell on his chest, Grant began to fight for air. He turned toward Patience, turned away, the light in the room dim. Gazing out at the dark streets, an occasional carriage-lamp bobbing along like a beacon in the mist, Grant almost wished he rode safely away.

He wanted to say something, but no words would come. He couldn't bear to look at Patience, yet he ached to feast his eyes on her. Her face was too ... dear, a peril if ever he'd known one. He couldn't love her. He couldn't. He would not allow himself to.

Shane and Rose came in, breaking his web of panic, saving him as surely as if they wielded swords. Grant took a breath, another, until the room came, once again, into focus.

"Where's Amy?" Shane asked.

Grant breathed easier, forced a smile. "Sleeping like a kitten in her new papa's old room."

Rose smiled as Shane put his arm around her waist. He looked at Grant and Patience. "I want you to know why I didn't ask Rose to marry me the day I brought Amy back. It broke Rose's heart that Amy was attached to me and not her. I wanted to give them time alone, for Amy to know her mama, again. Otherwise, I feared they'd never have that special connection. The covenant between a mother and child is powerful, but if it's broken...." He looked at his brother. "Well we know how that can be, don't we? I didn't want to come between them, so I waited. It was the longest wait of my life." He smiled, then. "Father's gone to arrange for a special license. We'll be married tomorrow. I'd like you to stand with me, Grant."

"And you with me, Patience."

Patience rose to congratulate them. It would be the only time she and Grant would ever stand together at the front of a church.

Several hours later when sleep would not come, Patience found her room too small. And when she heard what could only be the sound of Shane opening the door to Rose's room, it became stifling. Why?

Because she wanted Grant in here. She missed him.

How could she be angry with him and miss him at the same time? "Damn you, Grant St. Benedict. Damn. Damn. Damn." Yes she was furious, and haunted by the look in his eyes when he left. She couldn't let this chasm of anger grow wider. Their friendship meant too much to her. He meant too much to her. She dressed quickly, and ran down the stairs and out before anyone could warn her against going. She hailed a hack just outside the door. Midnight wasn't the least late in London.

At Grant's front door, Patience wondered if she should have come and almost left. Then she peered through the long, side window, just to see if perhaps Grant was around, and something caught her eye. A glowing light, moving, weaving in and out, like ... fire.

Patience tried the unlocked door, rushed in, a blast of heat slapping her in the face. She gasped, smoke licking her throat and bringing tears to her eyes. Oh God. Oh God. The acrid smell turned her stomach, fear trebled her heart. "Grant!" She screamed above the crackling roar of flames. "Grant? Where are you? Answer me, blast you. Grant!"

She brought her skirt up over her mouth and nose as a barrier, removing it to call Grant at intervals, then protecting herself again. Making her way blindly, she knocked over a small round table. When it rolled toward the flames and became engulfed, she realized she'd unintentionally added fuel to the fire and she sobbed.

She ran up the stairs calling Grant, though her throat was raw and the smoke she swallowed burned her lungs.

From the little she could see, the fire centered the upper hall. She stood foolishly still, looking into doorways, and thought she spied a form in a small salon. "Is someone there?" she

called. If there were someone in that corner chair—and she could not be certain, for the flame glowed so strongly before her that it made everything the blacker behind—and difficult to enter the room. Though smoke hazed the air and crackling heat hissed a warning, she made an aborted attempt.

In all likelihood, the room had another doorway that opened off a side hall near the servant's stairs, which she must reach, for it did look as if someone slumped there.

Patience made her precarious way to where she expected to find the servant's hall, but a wall of flame danced in her path. With no intention of giving up, she covered her head with her skirt so she could jump the flames without fire catching her hair. Once done, she leapt through the blazing rampart. Fast. Blind. Screaming.

On the other side, she smothered the fire licking at her petticoat. Afterward, praise be, she found that second door.

"Grant, oh Grant. It is you." She locked her arms around his waist and tried to pull his unconscious form from the chair. A dead weight, she fell instead. The paper in his hand feathered away, flamed. The picture Rose had drawn of her blackened and shriveled, its extinction snapping Patience to action.

She slid Grant to the floor, the sound of him landing making her wince. Then she got behind him and dragged him by his wrists toward the servant's stairs, her arms pulling from their sockets, God alone knowing where she found the strength.

She dragged him down the stairs, the thud, thud, thud, of him hitting gruesome accompaniment to the conflagration hissing at the top of the stairs.

An enormous welling of emotion assailed her. Laughter threatened, teetered, and became tears. Hysteria took root.

When she got him to the scullery, she lay him on the floor and ran to slam the door behind them, cutting off the smoke and flames chasing them. She flexed her arms and rolled her shoulders, crying out with pain then she dragged him the last few feet and out the service door.

A maid with her beau in the outside doorway screeched when they appeared. "Help me," Patience begged, her voice a husky rasp, the pain in her throat intense. The maid's young man dragged Grant clear of the house.

Patience followed, taking in drafts of cool air, afraid she'd never breathe free again, sick with worry that Grant would never regain consciousness. "Anybody else inside?" she asked the maid, refusing to consider the worst.

The girl shook her head and gazed with horror at Grant.

"The house is aflame!" Patience said. "Don't just stand there. Get help!"

The maid wailed and ran. After the young man dragged Grant to the farthest reach of the property, he went to fetch a doctor.

Patience slapped Grant's face. Gritty voiced, she ordered him awake. Tears blurred her burning eyes and scored painful trails on the painful flesh of her cheeks. "Wake up," she sobbed. "Wake up you snarly Captain."

She pushed at his chest and cursed. "Don't you die on me, Grant St. Benedict. Don't you dare die."

She rolled him to his side and slapped his back hoping to knock some breath into him. "Breathe. Breathe, damn you!" Nothing seemed to work. Kneeling with her hands between her knees, she let her tears fall. "Oh, please, no."

Covered with soot, sick with despair, Patience placed Grant's head in her lap and wiped her eyes to see him better. Holding his head to her breast, she rubbed his chest. "You make me so

bloody mad. If you ... if you leave me....” Her voice broke. “I’ll never forgive you.”

She touched his cheek. “I won’t, you know.” She sat him up and knelt behind him, pounding his back while keeping one arm about his waist.

“Yell at me.”

THUMP.

“Call me Lady Patience.”

THUMP.

“Swear, damn you.”

THUMP.

“But, don’t leave me.”

THUMP.

“If you do ... If you do....” Patience lay her head against his back and let her tears fall. Grant was dead.

She had failed him. Something sharp and caustic, like hot lightning, struck her heart, ripped through it, and she knew the wound would never heal. If her life were to end now, she would welcome the decision.

Sagging against the lifeless body of the man who had become her other half, silent tears began to fall, until an outward tremor shook her.

She raised her head. Another tremor, the barest rumble.

She pulled away from Grant and pressed her hand against his back. “Oh, please. Oh, please.” A quivering against her palm set her to rubbing his back with brutal force, then she began to pound it, again.

The tremor grew to a great heaving gasp. A horrendous cough—which at any other time would have frightened her senseless, but it drew from her a delighted whoop.

Patience pounded mercilessly, while Grant struggled for each and every breath.

He might have said, “Stop!” She wasn’t sure, but she wasn’t taking any chances, so she continued, until his large muscled arm swung around and grabbed her mid-slap. He pulled her around and against him. “Stop it you bastard.”

He coughed, then caught his breath and looked, really looked at her. “Patience?” He peered closer, unfocused, and bleary-eyed. “Jesus, you look like hell.”

She laughed, or more precisely, gasped. “Those are the most beautiful words I have ever heard.”

“Why the devil were you beating me? And what in bloody hell are you doing here?” He took several deep breaths and closed his eyes, as if he were in pain. “It took two bottles of Brandy to blot you from my mind and here you are again?”

“Brandy?” Patience wanted to beat him bloody now, maybe use a few of Sophie’s techniques, but she was still too grateful he was alive. Almost. “Grant St. Benedict, have you been drinking?”

The dull-minded oaf nodded and smiled.

Just like Papa. Patience denied a crippling surge of despair and chose rage, instead. “You bastard! You get drunk as a sailor—”

“Am a sailor.”

She ignored that. “You let your house burn around you—and you along with it. If I hadn’t come along....” Trembling overtook her.

“Wha’d ya mean burn?”

“Fire, fool. Your house is aflame as we speak.”

Patience's words did for Grant's foggy brain what the air had not accomplished. He looked at his house. "Shane." He tried to rise. "I've got to get Shane."

She pulled him back down; it didn't take much effort, the dolt was sotted. "Shane's at Briarleigh with Rose. Safe. I sent your maid for help. She said no one else was inside."

Men were yelling orders now in the street out front.

Grant stood, unsteadily, and pulled Patience up with him.

Her choking frightened him. He tried to soothe her. What must have happened finally registered in his mind. Her voice was hoarse, more so than his. It cost her dearly to speak. He examined her more closely, her smudged face, filthy gown, scorched and torn. A puckered, leaking burn striped her arm from wrist to elbow. Tears lay sooty trails on her red, dry face.

She had run into a burning building to save him. The thought overpowered. She had risked her life. For him. "Oh, God." Mindful of her wounds, he pulled her against him, his heart hammering a wild beat. He kissed her beloved face, her red-rimmed eyes, her cracked, parched lips. "I could have lost you," he said on a shudder.

"I thought I had lost you."

Her tears tasted of salt, and sadness.

Blind panic slowed and Grant's brain began to take over. Why hadn't she gone for help instead of risking her foolish neck? Why had she put herself in danger?

He turned her toward the moonlight so he could see her clearly. Such an adorable, dirty face. "You little idiot! That was a bloody stupid thing to do. Downright half-witted, running into a fire and injuring yourself." He lifted her arm to examine the burn. "Will you tell me why a woman, as practical as you are, would rush into a house afire?"

Patience wasn't certain. She gazed from the bloody gash on her arm to his angry, handsome face. Why had she rushed into a house ablaze?

For him, of course. Didn't he realize that? She'd done it to save the man she loved.

"No," she whispered. Please God, no. Don't let me love the drunken sot.

Footsteps grew loud, too loud. The pounding of them hurt her head, expanding it at each thud, like great heaving waves in her brain.

She tried to maintain her dignity as she fought dizziness. Thump, thump. "I'll thank you to ..." Thump. She held her head. "Stop calling ... me ... names. I've ... Oh." She blinked to clear her vision. Thump, thump, thump. Why wouldn't the pounding stop? "I've never been foolish a day in my...."

"She fainted dead away," a man said.

"Too much smoke," another replied.

"Will she make it?"

Patience did not recognize any of the voices coming from a distance. If only her head would stop spinning, she could open her eyes. She tried to raise her leaden lids, but couldn't.

"Thank the Lord." That was Aunt Harriette.

"Amen." Grant's voice.

She managed, finally, to open her eyes. Dear concerned faces bent over her, Sophie, Rose, Grace and Angel. Aunt Harriette with tears in her eyes. Grant scowled down—or was he the Captain just now?—and yes, as she suspected, his hand held hers. "Why is everyone watching me?"

Grant's scowl cracked as he raised her hand to his lips, to hide the chink in his armor, Patience imagined.

"You've been unconscious since I brought you home," he whispered. "You pulled me out

of the fire and saved my life. Then you fainted.”

Her turn to scowl. “I never faint. I was tired. I must have fallen asleep.”

“And a long sleep it was,” a weasel of a man with beady eyes said, stepping near. “Six hours. I feared the smoke had filled your lungs and you wouldn’t be long with us.”

Grant squeezed her hand, again, his own shaking. The Weasel packed his bag, giving Aunt Harriette a set of dubious instructions. After bending to kiss her cheek, Rose shoed everyone out and followed.

Grant sat on her bed, his half-smile-half-frown a sign the Captain might return. Patience hoped not; she liked Grant’s protective demeanor, but she knew from experience that vulnerability usually brought the Captain.

“Aunt Harriette let you stay in my bedroom alone with me. Is she ill?”

Grant looked rueful. “When the doctor wanted me to leave so he could examine you, I tried to plant him a facer. I expect no one dares tangle with me right now.”

Patience hid her wonder, lest he note her perception. If he’d been Grant and fit to kill, his motives bore consideration. But if he’d been the Captain, he ran true to form.

Still, with her unconscious and unable to draw out the Captain, he was likely Grant.

Patience touched her head, which hurt for thinking, the answer so far out of reach as to be unattainable. She sighed and brought on a fit of coughing.

Grant raised and offered her a drink with a shaking hand.

Sipping helped. After a second, she calmed, closing her eyes and swallowed painfully.

Grant moved her hair from her eyes. “Throat better?” he whispered.

She nodded.

“Good. That drink will also help you sleep so your throat and lungs can heal.” He raised her pillows so she could sit up a bit, to make it easier for her to breathe. Then he gave her a chaste kiss. Though barely a touch, it spoke more of emotion than he’d ever expressed. She wished she had the strength to examine his contradictory actions.

Grant opened a jar of balm, the spearmint scent alone soothing. She closed her eyes as he smoothed the cool ointment on her cracked lips. He must have thought she’d fallen asleep, for as he touched the balm to several sore spots on her face and neck, he swore a colorful oath beneath his breath, as if he were cursing himself.

Patience hid her smile as contentment seeped into her bones and she began to drift.

Grant smoothed her brow with a touch light as butterfly wings. “Sleep, my love,” he said. “Heal. And perhaps someday you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Was she his love? She wished she wasn’t too sore and sleepy to ask.

Grant examined her parchment dry skin, her burns wounding him anew, and swallowed hard. His fault for turning to drink.

Patience’s eyes opened.

“Close your eyes, Sweetheart. I’ll wake you in time for Shane and Rose’s wedding, and not a moment before.” Through his own selfish actions, he might have lost her. Forever. A thought not to be borne.

There was much for him to consider as he kept vigil, for he would not be sent away. If Aunt Harriette had it in her mind to sit by Patience, well, then she’d met her match in him.

\* \* \*

Hothouse tulips breathed spring into the small chapel.

Grant could not believe Shane was about to take a wife. He did not believe he had ever seen such a look of pride on his father’s face. Hell, he did not believe he had ever been so proud.



Standing up for Shane and Rose, he and Patience stood at the front, Grant with his arm around her, since she had just risen from a sickbed. As if she needed him, when the Lady Patience Kendall had become the strongest adversary Grantland St. Benedict Garrick, Marquess of Andover, had faced his entire life.

The organ began to play.

Shane and Rose marched up the aisle side by side. Rose wore a silver gown and carried lilies. His brother wore black and carried Amy. They spoke their vows with certitude.

After the ceremony, they traveled to Brian's house for the wedding breakfast, since Patience and the girls had moved there so Rose and Shane could have their new home to themselves.

On Patience's other side, Sophie leaned toward her. "Have you seen Angel? Sir Harold wishes to be introduced, but she's gone," Sophie said. "I checked everywhere."

"That's impossible," Patience said. "Wasn't she in the coach with you?"

"I thought she was with you. She's been acting peculiar."

Grant stood. "More peculiar than normal?"

Sophie followed him and Patience from the room. "We've been friends since we were children. We shared everything. But lately she's been secretive and when I ask questions, she snaps."

Patience made for the stairs. "Let's check her room."

Grant was sorry he hadn't thought of it. They found Angel's trunk and valises by the bed.

Sophie paled. "One of her bags is gone."

Patience found a note propped against a candle-stand. Her hands shook and tears filled her eyes as she read it.

Grant didn't bother to hide his worry. "I know," he said when she looked up. "We have a problem."

Patience touched her throat. "Angel has eloped."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Who in bloody hell did she elope with?” Grant shouted, staring at the seditious note. “I wasn’t aware Angel had formed an attachment.”

Pale and trembling, Patience sat on Angel’s bed.

Grant knelt before her. “What does she say?”

“That she loves Dickon and will marry him, title or no.”

Sophie frowned. “Dickon? Dickon Remington, the shipbuilder? I didn’t know he was in London.”

Grant bit back an expletive, remorse filling him. “He did come to London. You said you saw a male passenger, remember, Patience? The day we left Rhode Island?” He shook his head. “I said you were wrong, because the man wasn’t a passenger; he was a sailor.”

Patience gasped. “Dickie, the sailor? The man she cavorted with before our eyes?”

Sophie took Angel’s note and read it again. “Angel met him in secret at home, too.” Her lips trembled. “I never met him, but at least she used to tell me about him back then.”

“I have to go after her,” Patience whispered.

Grant shook his head. “No, I’ll go.”

Patience stood, her bearing erect, eyes so narrow, he could almost feel the sting of emerald darts. “Angel is my responsibility,” she said, chin raised. “Sophie, go and ask Brian if he can spare his carriage—”

“I’ll go,” Grant repeated, glad Patience’s color was returning apace with her determination. “They’ve likely gone to Gretna Green.” He tapped her nose to soften his words. “I order you to stay.”

Her cheeks positively bloomed then, along with the glint in her eyes. Bloody hell. Of course, she wouldn’t let a little thing like near-death stop her. He’d forgotten her penchant for opposing his orders, anyone’s orders. Grant cupped his nape. Now he remembered what Harriette said about goading Patience to action. Tell her she couldn’t.

“Damnation,” he muttered. Perhaps if he’d said she must? No, she worried about Angel and all her girls. She would chase half-way ‘cross country for them, even if it jeopardized her health.

And damned if he didn’t respect her for it. “Blast it, Patience!”

Sophie looked from one to the other. “Patience wins. I’ll order the carriage.”

In a token show of displeasure, Grant cleared his throat. “I’d make better time on horseback. Alone.”

“And if she gets abandoned, how will you bring her home? Over the back of your horse?”

“I know Dickie Remington, Patience, he’s not going to dump her by the road after following her half way ‘round the world,” Grant said.

Patience shrugged. “Nothing you say will change my mind.”

“They have two hours on us, no more,” Grant said, giving up the fight. “Angel was at the church. Meet me downstairs. I’ll get cook to pack a basket. If we don’t stop for food, we’ll make better time.”

Before long, his father’s carriage sped along at a neat clip, until the rains came and it got bogged down in muddy tracks.

Grant swore beneath his breath while the outriders rocked the carriage free, every motion like a ticking clock with time running out.

Patience slept on. He settled her in comfort, while across his arm, her flaming hair seduced him now in the way it had done while the wind whipped it into her face on the dock. He twirled a stubborn curl between his fingers, the silk anointing his calluses, and closed his eyes.

As ever with Patience, caution made him want to run, and need made him want to stay. He'd thought she was a child and admired the woman she would become. He was an idiot.

The carriage jolted forward, once again, and when Angel was back, safe in Patience's care, he'd best return to sea, or be lost.

He must not forget that in the name of matrimony, women robbed a man to the bone—baubles, money, home and hearth, then, eventually, inevitably, they took a man's pride and self-respect. Grant had seen it played over and over in Society. He'd watched his mother emasculate his father.

He must not believe Patience different. He fingered the buttons on her bodice, trying to picture her as a black widow, spinning her web, with him as her intended victim.

"You're trying to ravish me while I sleep, aren't you?" she asked. "I like it."

Grant stared into eyes more potent than poppies. "You never give voice to the expected." Yet, was not an eagerness for ravishment a lure in itself?

"Oh, Grant. Do you think Angel is all right?"

"Dickie's a good man. Angel will be fine."

"I'm a terrible chaperone; Rose is in the family way, and—"

"Married to the man she loves."

"Now Angel has run off, God knows where."

"Dickie followed her to England while her mother was her chaperone, before you arrived at the ship."

Patience shrugged. "But Dickie. It was always Dickie. I should have known."

"Sophie is her best friend, and she didn't know." Grant opened the willow basket on the carriage floor. "You need to eat something. How does soft bread and marrow pudding sound?"

Patience swallowed a small bit.

Grant shook his head. "I don't know why my throat isn't as raw as yours."

"I called to you and swallowed smoke." She touched her throat.

"I'm so sorry," Grant whispered against her hair. "It's my fault."

Papa was always sorry after his drinking tormented Mama. He begged forgiveness in the same manner. Mama always forgave. And so too would her daughter?

No, Patience thought. She needed the strength not to follow in her mother's footsteps.

After two in the morning, the Gretna Turnpike brought them to the river, Sark, near the Scottish border. Patience gazed out as they rolled into Gretna. It consisted of nothing more than a cluster of white-washed cottages, a church, a farm and two inns.

A gin-soaked bench-dweller said that it was not to the church Angel and Dickon would have gone, but to The Queen's Head or Marriage House.

As they entered, Patience's strength seemed to drain away. A barrel-chested innkeeper, wearing an apron awash with ale and porter, led them to a private parlor. "The Remington's have come and gone," said he to their inquiry. "Remington's wife said summat of hurrying home for patience." He shook his head. "Imagin' not 'avin the patience for the beddin'" He tipped a non-existent hat to her. "Sorry, Mum."

"Remington's wife," Patience said on a wail. "They're already married?"

"Right they are, Mum. For good and all."

Grant dispatched the innkeeper with an order for brandy.

“Aunt Harriette will be beside herself, and the girls were so upset. Grant, what have I done?”

“Your girls have to make their own mistakes. Did you understand what the innkeeper said? Angel rushed home for fear you’d be worried.”

“I’ve been worried since she left.”

Grant smiled. “I think she knew that.”

“We need to go right back, to be certain she’s all right.”

“No. Warm food and a bed is what you need.”

Patience made a weak protest, but Grant placed a finger to her lips before she finished. “I won’t be swayed. We’ll stay the night and return tomorrow. You’re exhausted.”

She was willing to admit, at least to herself, that she was.

In response to her silence, Grant made arrangements with the innkeeper, bespoke a bath, ushered Patience upstairs, and left her.

Not more than a half-hour later, he returned with a tray.

Patience was still in her bath, eyes closed. Steam rose around her face, wilting the auburn coil atop her head, her skin pale in contrast to the curls framing it. He placed the tray on the table knelt, and brushed the hair from her eyes. Her lashes fluttered. “I feel better.”

“Sure you do.” Grant took a dry towel and offered his hand. “Come on. Food’s hot.”

She rose, the towel as her curtain, and let him help with her nightgown, to a point. Mashed parsnips in mutton broth slipped easy down her throat. Then he put her to bed. “You’ll sleep six full hours and not a moment less. If you don’t, we’ll leave later in the morning.”

She gave him a disgusted look. “Where’s your room?”

“This is the only one available. I’ll sleep in the chair.”

“I’ve been thinking.”

Lord no. Not that. “We’re not leaving until you sleep,” he said.

“I know, but since I’ll never marry, I’ll never know what it’s like to experience what you said. You know.”

He knew. His body surely did. It snapped to attention the moment she mentioned it.

Patience rolled to her side, head in her hand. “I don’t want to spend my life not knowing.”

She scared him speechless. He put distance between them and got comfortable in the chair.

“This is the perfect opportunity for my education, Grant, tonight, here with you.”

“Damn and blast, Patience. They should have named you Eve. Go to sleep.”

“It should be you who teaches me, because we’re friends.”

Tell my body we’re only friends.

Grant wished he were dressed so he could run out into the night. And if he did, he would be screaming, because he would be insane if he ran now.

She came to kneel before him. “Please, Grant?”

Her throaty whisper made her all the more alluring. A man would have to be made of marble to withstand something like this. He closed his eyes. Perhaps if he ignored her.

She pulled his blanket away, ran her hands up his legs, and unbuttoned the placket on his trousers. When she stopped, Grant released his breath.

And Patience released him. She gasped. “That’s no little thing!”

He opened his eyes.

She was staring at his erection, eyes wider than saucers.

“It isn’t when you’re around.” He couldn’t even put it away at this point.

“But Grant, its huge.”

“I explained that, Patience. I told you it gets hard so—”

“Hard, yes, but it’s so long it practically reaches across the room. How much longer is it going to get?”

If her eyes got any wider ... “Patience.” He laughed. “Stop being so—”

“Look! It’s getting smaller.”

He tried to cover himself. “Because your foolish chatter distracted me from your foolish suggestion.”

“How does it feel when it changes size? Is it uncomfortable?”

He turned away from her and pulled the blanket over his shoulder. This was going to be a damned long night. “Get back into bed, Patience, and go to sleep.”

She pulled the blanket off him and put her hand on his thighs to turn him toward her. “No, now this is interesting, I want to see how it works.” She made quick work of removing his trousers.

God, he loved her. But he shouldn’t. Couldn’t. He could not afford to let himself.

Patience sensed his weakening resolve. With a finger, she stroked the hard-muscled length of his leg to his thigh, then along his rigid shaft.

He shuddered, ecstasy and panic assaulting him in turn. “You’d better stop, Patience.”

She ignored his warning, for she couldn’t have stopped if she wanted to. In a daring move, she palmed his throbbing shaft, then, when she closed her fingers around it, it seemed to fill her hand. “It feels alive,” she whispered, watching it.

“Sweetheart ...” Grant’s voice was hoarse. He shuddered again, then he raised his hips almost involuntarily. In a move of surrender, he put his hand over hers, as if to guide her. When she understood the unspoken instruction and did as he bid, he closed his eyes, the look on his face an agony. “Do you feel what I felt when you touched me that night on the settee?” she asked, the experience of him under her hand, the look on his face, causing turbulence in her own body.

“Yes.” He didn’t open his eyes.

“But for me it was the first time.”

He stopped her movement and tried to catch his breath. “I have never been turned inside out like this before,” he whispered. “No, don’t move. I don’t want to lose control.”

Patience stood and extended her hand. “Come, Grant. I want to lie with you. Just this once. You’ll never have to again.”

Have to? He’d die if he didn’t. And the thought of never again scared him to death. He followed her to the bed, watching as she removed the gown. When she held her arms open to him, Grant thought the pounding in his head, heart, and nether regions, nearly unbearable.

He groaned and gave up the fight.

He got in beside her, kissed her hungrily, and rode a sweet, high wave with each seductive movement of her body. He skimmed his hands up her legs to her waist, the sides of her breasts. Facing her, his body against hers, skin to skin, heaven.

“Grant, I never imagined ...” She slid her body along his, as if testing the experience.

He took her mouth again and again. He suckled her and teased her with his need against her apex, until she rose seeking him, moist and ready for his entrance. He didn’t want to rush her, to hurt her, but he was nearly past control.

Those mewling sounds low in her throat, and her gravelly voice urging him on, were driving him mad. God help him, he was on the verge of completion and he hadn’t entered her yet.

Patience whimpered. "Please now, Grant. I don't think I can wait any longer."

He poised himself above her. "It'll hurt at first. Then it'll be so good, so very good." As he teased her entrance with his hand, moonlight flooded the room, and he saw, reflected in her eyes, passion and more.

An army battering the door could not have stopped him at that moment, but the message in Patience's eyes did. Her look was open and trusting, and he didn't deserve it.

He loved her too much to ruin her. Too much to give her false hope. And there could never be marriage. Never.

With an oath, Grant jumped from the bed, stubbed his toe, and swore profusely as he limped across the room. As far across as he could get.

Shocked, disappointed, relieved, and on the verge of tears, Patience watched his agonized movements, his uneasy gait as he paced. His manhood in profile stood enormous and proud.

Why had he stopped? "What happened, Grant?"

"You deserve better."

She guessed she should be pleased. Except she felt like crying. She had ached so for his touch; she still did. By the looks of him, he ached as well.

That he'd relieved her need that night on the settee just by touching her made her wonder if ... Patience rose and went to him. They stared at one another, the tension between them so thick it was a wonder something didn't snap. She wasn't certain if she could ease him the same way he had her, but he'd said something about losing control a while ago. She touched his throbbing shaft to test her theory.

He jumped as if he'd been struck. "Don't," he said through clenched teeth.

She walked up behind him, put her hands on the taut muscles of his arms and kneaded them all the way to his rigid, set shoulders. "Just let me touch you, Grant. Let me bring you pleasure with my touch, like you did for me that night."

He turned to look at her in surprise. She teased him again with her fingers and he closed his eyes, releasing a long, slow breath. A yes.

She took his hand, led him to the bed, and lay down to receive him. Once again, he lay beside her, kissing her, touching her. He guided her hands to himself as he suckled her, whispered encouragement as he brought her pleasure, called her name as she stroked him.

She loved him so much. Surely they soared nearly as high as they would were they united in body. No other moment had been as splendid as this. They traded movements, blended rhythm, beginning slowly, moving faster, higher. Waves crashed, receded, flowed again. They rose the crests together to the very peak, then glided against the shore to rest.

Hands stilled but did not move away. Bodies shifted to be as close as any two could be. They shared slow, lazy kisses until, they succumbed to sleep.

When Patience woke alone, it was gone on noon.

In the pitcher, she discovered hot water, in the bowl, a cake of scented soap. Grateful for the privacy, for her face burned hot as her memories, Patience washed quickly, dressed and went downstairs. She couldn't quite look into Grant's eyes when they met. He indicated her breakfast before he went to order the carriage. She ate quickly then followed him outside. No good morning had been said before they were on their way.

They rode for a long time each looking out opposite windows.

"Patience, about last night."

She cursed her fair skin for revealing her discomfort, looked down and played with the gloves in her lap.

Grant cleared his throat. "There is something special between us. You said so yourself on the ship the night before we arrived. Unlike you, I think it's more than friendship."

She looked up at him.

"I think we could come to a comfortable ... understanding, one that would be equitable to us both."

A buzzing filled her head. "Understanding?"

"Well, yes. Since neither of us wishes to marry."

"You're right, of course, there is nothing equitable about marriage, but I don't understand."

Grant crossed one leg over the other, examined the toe of his boot. "You want a house in the country. I have several. Pick the one you wish. It will be my gift to you. Live there with your kitten and rose garden. When I'm in England, I will come and ... stay with you. I will also give you a yearly allowance. Say, five thousand pounds." He finally looked at her. "If that isn't sufficient, we can—"

"Stay with me?" Something horrible was happening in the region of her heart.

Grant shifted uncomfortably. "Sleep with you."

It took a minute for Patience to believe she heard what she thought she did. "You are a black-hearted devil. You offensive, presumptuous, fool. You're asking me to be your lightskirt. Your mistress!"

"It's the perfect—"

"You miserable ... I could push you out the door and watch you roll down the hill, to land, hopefully, beneath the wheels of a passing carriage."

"Patience, be reasonable. Last night you wanted me. We wanted each other."

"I wanted you for my lover. I would never be your mistress. There's a difference."

"There certainly is. A house and five thousands pounds a year."

"Last night you refused to take my maidenhead even once, now you want to do that every night?"

"That's impossible. You only have one."

His merriment infuriated her. "Don't you dare laugh at me, you scoundrel. If you ever touch me again, I'll, I'll tell my aunt what we did last night." As if she would.

She'd like to kick him where Sophie said she should.

Stopping only for quick bites, personal needs, and team changes, they drove all day and into the night. Hardly a word passed between them.

When they arrived at Brian's, everyone was waiting. Patience, in no mood to be nice, ignored civilities and regarded Angel. "Still wearing traveling clothes, I see. Good. That must mean you didn't stop for the night. Now we can have the marriage annulled. Just as well." She turned to Dickon. "You may go."

To her consternation, the man laughed. "The marriage will stand." He leaned close to Patience's ear. "Angel expects a babe in seven months time."

Feeling suddenly light-headed, Patience slipped into the nearest chair. It's a bloody disease.

Angel knelt before her, so beautiful, so filled with remorse, but so obviously in love.

"Patience, please forgive me. Dickon and I have loved each other for so long. I don't care if Mama's angry, and Dickie will pay you the bonus she promised."

Patience's anger melted. She hugged Angel. "I don't care about the money, Angel. I care about you."

All their silent tension snapped.

The marriage, approved by Patience, was celebrated with happy chatter. In the midst of it,

Patience watched Grant nod a good-bye to Aunt Harriette and his father and leave the room. She retired shortly after.

Aunt Harriette came to see her. "How far did you travel, looking for them?"

"Scotland."

"Oh, my. I thought they'd be in a nearby town seeking a chapel. I've been beside myself. I never expected the trip to take so long. I don't suppose you stayed with friends of Grant's overnight?"

The question came with such a look of hope, Patience smiled. "We stayed at an inn in Gretna Green, the Queen's Head."

"Gretna Green. Oh my." Her aunt sat and pulled at her handkerchief. "Lady Caroline Crowley-Smyth has called asking for you. She saw you and Grant leave Wednesday."

Patience sighed. Lady Caroline Crowley-Smyth, just what she needed.

\* \* \*

Grant replayed their last hours over in his head. Where had he gone wrong?

In the carriage, after he'd offered Patience carte blanche and been refused, he'd wanted to bring her back to him, to keep this horrid sense of defeat from devouring him, but Patience's look said he'd gambled and lost.

Something told him it had been the largest stake of his life.

And now, after being called to the library by his father, he began to ponder the merits of mutiny. He liked even less that his father stood while he was made to, "Sit!"

Patience had also been called, which filled him with apprehension.

As if some form of consolation was necessary, her aunt patted Patience's hand as she sat beside her on the settee.

Grant's apprehension swelled.

The ormolu clock ticked conspicuously—like time running out. Lord, he wished he hadn't thought of that.

Brian cleared his throat as he paced, wrists crossed behind his back. He raised his chin as he stopped, staring his son down.

Grant refused to tug at his strangling cravat. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was about to face severe disciplinary action. But until today, his father had never cared enough about his sons to discipline them, so Grant didn't know what to expect.

His father rocked on his heels, cleared his throat, looked to Patience's Aunt for a nod of encouragement, and sighed. "Harriette and I have discussed this problem at length and have come to a conclusion."

Grant clenched his fists and ignored his heart's rapid beat. "Problem?"

Patience's forced laugh revealed her trepidation. "There is no problem, Aunt."

Damn, she was every bit as agitated as he. Oh, there was a problem all right. If only he knew what it was.

"There is a problem," Brian said, echoing his thoughts. "A serious one. The two of you have spent the night at a public inn." He looked from one of them to the other as if waiting for denial.

Grant had to give Patience credit; she was as devoid of expression as he. If she could keep this up, they'd be all right.

If that were true, why did he feel the proverbial noose tightening?

"The two of you were seen leaving here, alone, two days ago," his father said stern-faced. "Society matrons from one end of London to the other are holding scandal-hungry breaths and



rubbing idle hands in gleeful anticipation, Lady Caroline Crowley-Smythe at the lead.”

The noose cut Grant’s air; his world faded.

When his father squeezed his shoulder, it was all Grant could do not to knock away the tardy hand of fatherhood.

“There is no recourse, Son. You and Patience must marry.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Grant took a minute to stay calm. Then he shot from his chair. "Marry? Are you out of your mind? Nothing happened!"

He looked from his father's raised brow to Aunt Harriette's shock and raised his hands in surrender. All right, so composure was out of the question. He turned to Patience. "What in hell did you tell them?"

Harriette blanched. "What should she have told us?"

Grant could not believe he blushed. His face had not heated like this since he'd been a raw schoolboy caught contemplating the endowments of Bessie, the parlor maid. He turned from Harriette's scrutiny to pour himself a brandy.

"You stayed at the same inn, unchaperoned," Harriette said. "You were lucky there were two available rooms."

Grant wished with all his heart that he could give Aunt Harriette the confirmation for which her hesitation begged. He gave his father the slightest shake of his head.

Brian coughed and turned away.

Aunt Harriette sought her handkerchief as if it were a lifeline and patted her forehead. She regarded her niece with wide eyes. "Tell me you didn't sleep in the same room."

Patience stifled a nervous urge to giggle. She wanted marriage less than Grant, but his offer of carte blanche, combined with his furious refusal, induced her to grasp the closest weapon to hand. "In the same b—"

"Dammit, Patience! Haven't you caused enough problems?" Grant began to pace. To the window, and back. He stopped before his father, turned to her aunt, shook his head, and returned to the window.

After several quiet moments with his back to them, he turned to face her. The pain etched on his features was so keen, Patience had to look away to keep herself from consoling him. With her bald-faced revelation, she'd intended just-punishment not a life-threatening wound. Remorse blossomed in her breast.

"Suffice it to say, Patience, that I compromised you, but neither of us wants marriage. That has been clear from the beginning." He looked at Brian and Harriette. "You will have to accept the facts. We will not marry."

"You will," Brian said emphatically. "And you'll thank me, someday."

Grant's bark of laughter added to the insult, but Patience couldn't help agree. "I'm sorry Sir, but I won't marry. I saw my father destroy my mother as well as himself. I want nothing to do with a life dependent upon anyone else."

"Patience," Harriette said. "Your father was basically a good man. Had your mother idolized him less, she might have seen his weakness and prevented much of the tragedy. But you cannot let your parents' errors destroy your life. You have a right to marriage and children."

"My father's greatest weakness was his drinking. My mother could not prevent that," Patience said, "however much she tried. Do not ask me to live like she did."

"Grant does not drink to excess," Brian said, brows furrowed.

Grant, a snifter of brandy to his lips, stilled, shocked.

"Your son was intoxicated the night of the fire," Patience said. "I realized then that were I able to overlook my need for independence, I could never marry a man who drank."

Grant placed his brandy on the table and sat forward. "I drank that night because we

argued.”

“Fine, then every time we have a disagreement, you’ll drink. Thank you very much, but no. Besides, since that occasion, you have fallen even lower in my esteem.”

If he couldn’t tell her he loved her, how in the world could he convince her that he was drinking because he had discovered the frightening fact? After his offer of a *carte blanche*—his most recent fall from esteem—she wouldn’t believe him, anyway. Lord, he’d seen all the clues, but failed to note them. Of course, she’d despise a man who drank. “None of this is to the point,” he said, almost to himself. “I decided long ago never to marry. My mother taught me but one lesson. Trust no woman. She will destroy you.”

“All women are not like your mother, son. Most women love and care for their husbands and children. She wasn’t a bad woman, not really. And she certainly wasn’t representative of her sex. Ultimately, her desertion was my fault. I knew she didn’t want to marry me, knew she was in love with someone else. But I wanted her and no one else would do. I blackmailed her into marriage. Said I’d show the world what a charlatan the man she loved was. She had no choice. She married me, but she loved him.”

Brian turned his back to them all and took up the poker to nudge the fire in the grate. He stopped after a bit to stare into the flames. “When I went to her bed on our wedding night, she told me she had gone to her lover the night before, so he would be her first. It was a bitter pill to swallow, I can tell you.” Tired and beaten, he turned back to them and sat, as if he could no longer bear his own weight. “She laughed at my horror, and my love died at that precise moment.”

Grant jumped up and slammed his hands on the desk behind which his father now sat. “See here, man, what proof do you have that I’m your son?”

Startled momentarily, Brian finally smiled. “You are mine, make no mistake. You would not be in line to inherit otherwise. To satisfy your mind, I turned from her that night. One year from the date of our marriage, I consummated the union. To my dismay, she was telling the truth.”

“Why didn’t my mother annul the marriage for the reason you had not consummated it, so she could return to her lover?”

“Once she experienced wealth and social standing, she had no desire to return to her old life.”

“But I thought she was wealthy in her own right.”

“Not until her twenty-fifth year. By then she had two sons, two little boys she left with their bitter father on the very day she received her portion.”

Grant reeled as if struck. “You let us think our mother left us because she hated us. That we had done something to turn her away. Why didn’t you come forward with this twenty years ago?”

His father paled. “I had no idea you carried such guilt.”

Grant hardened himself against an overwhelming need to give absolution. “No, and by God, you didn’t try to find out how we felt, did you? Did it never occur to you that two small boys might miss their mother? Might mourn her loss?” Grant slammed his hands down on his father’s desk once more, in pure frustration, before striding to the window. He gazed at the garden, his back to them all. “Did you, for one moment, ever think those boys might need a word of kindness from their father? Especially after they were deserted by their mother. That they might have needed your love?” He practically spat the word *love* as he turned toward them, his look bitter. “No, of course not. Who did you think about through it all Father?”

Grant turned toward Patience and her aunt, a closed look on his face. Patience tried to be strong for him, tried not to let him see how she ached for his suffering lest he misinterpret it as pity. She knew him well enough to know he wouldn't want that.

Brian wiped his brow, his aged, white face etched with pain. Patience's heart went out to both of them.

Aunt Harriette went to Brian and squeezed his shoulder. "The mistakes we make that hurt our children are the worst mistakes of all. I know. If your sons ever forgive you, I expect you will never forgive yourself."

Brian raised a hand toward Grant then lowered it. "You and Shane were deserted by both parents," he whispered, as if just now understanding the depth of his sons' pain.

"Yes."

"But Shane had you."

"Damned right he did."

Brian blinked, cleared his throat and raised his chin. "Lady Belmont, Patience, I apologize for airing the Garrick Family's dirty linen in your presence."

Aunt Harriette shook her head, dismissing his concern. "Our linens were, of course, much whiter that day in Arundel, were they not, Patience?"

Patience kissed Brian's cheek then she went to Grant. His scowl was fierce. Anyone else would be frightened, Patience thought, but he'd given her worse. "And what was it you said to me and my aunt that day, Grant? 'There is love between you if you would but realize it?'" She took his hand, brought it to her breast as she leaned close to whisper, "The present and future will brighten, if you let go the past. I know."

Grant looked haunted as he pulled her into his arms. "The ever-practical Patience," he said against her hair. "What am I to do with you?"

"Marry her," Brian said.

"No!" they said together, releasing each other, their voices strong and sure.

Aunt Harriette drew Patience back to the settee to sit beside her. Without Grant's arms, Patience felt suddenly adrift.

Brian approached Grant. "Look, son. Your mother hated me not you. Eventually, with a great deal of self-flagellation, I considered what you just said—fifteen years too late and after I'd drunk and whored my way to old age." He turned in embarrassment. "Excuse me, ladies."

Pink faced, Aunt Harriette waved away his apology.

"By then, I didn't know where to find you, Grant. And there was so much ill-will between us, you wouldn't have listened, would you, if I'd wanted to talk?"

"No. I wouldn't have."

Patience saw now that Grant's aversion for marriage stemmed from the relationship between his parents and his mother's desertion. And hers had to do with the way her father's drinking destroyed her mother. How strange, given such parallels, that they should find themselves in this situation.

Grant sat, elbows on knees, head down, shoulders tense. Patience went to stand before him, until he looked up. He took her hand and relaxed against the back of his chair, pulling her down to sit on the arm beside him. Though he held her hand with the appearance of calm, the pressure of his grip said he needed her and, more than anything, she wanted to be here for him.

"So," Grant finally said, "My mother didn't want your children, whoever they were. She never hated me and Shane, precisely, she hated the reminder of you. After she left, you didn't hate us, you hated the reminder of her." He chuckled bitterly. "I can't help but wish you had

directed your bitterness toward each other. But I'm not an innocent child any longer. Your marriage failed because you did, because you forced my mother to marry you when you knew she didn't love you."

Grant shook his head. Lord, his mistrust of the married state was based on a set of circumstances, a jest dealt by fate, unlikely to be duplicated. Given his childhood experiences, he wouldn't make the same mistakes his parents did. And Patience ... He studied her face, so filled with concern for him. Then he looked at his father. "Patience is not like my mother."

"No, son. She's not. And you're not like Patience's father. Your pain, and hers, was caused by parents whose concern ran more to their own suffering than their children's. You have to learn to live with the mistakes your mother and I made, as Patience will have to deal with the pain she suffered because of her father's drinking. I hope with all my heart that we haven't all, among us, destroyed your lives.

Brian placed his hands, palms flat, on the desk and raised himself slowly. "I do not deserve your forgiveness, son." He cleared his throat when his voice cracked. "But I humbly beg it. I beg with all my heart for a place in your life and Patience's, and in the lives of your children."

At that, Patience pulled her hand from Grant's, her false calm shattered. "We told you. There will be no marriage. No children. Ever. We are grateful for the revelations you shared, are we not, Grant? But nothing can make us change our minds."

"Society will scorn you," her aunt said.

Patience laughed. "I care nothing for Society. So there is no problem."

"I care even less," Grant said. "Patience is right. There is no problem."

Aunt Harriette shook her head. "If you don't marry, the girls will be ruined."

Patience stilled. The girls. Her girls. As their chaperone, her standing in Society would become theirs. Doors would close, opportunities would end. A wave more frightening than the monster crest tossed by the phantom ship threatened to drown her and she found it difficult to take in air.

Grant chafed her hand as if he sensed how cold she'd become. "Those girls have survived thus far," he reassured her, looking into her eyes. "With this titillating bit of gossip, they will become celebrities, diamonds of the first water. Doors will open to them!" His bright smile was false, however, because the lines around his eyes did not appear, and Patience's breathing grew labored.

Brian cleared his throat. "Son," he said, a warning sympathy in the word. "The Duke of Graham approached me at Rose's wedding, asking permission to address Grace. I told him he needed to speak with Patience. I know his family, Grant, no matter how much he cares for Grace—and believe me, he does—they will not accept a daughter-in-law touched by scandal."

Excitement over Grace's good fortune shot through Patience almost as quickly as dejection over her own sudden lack of choice. And the irony was not lost on her. She had brought the girls to London to gain her independence. Because of them she had nearly grasped it. Because of them, she must let it go. If only her need to fight the inevitable did not remain so strong.

Grant read Patience like a favorite book. "I believe there will be a marriage," he said, standing. He regarded the fear in her eyes and needed to reassure her. "If two people can make a marriage work, we can. We know so many of the pitfalls, we'd avoid them like the plague."

"How can you marry a woman you don't respect? Two days ago you asked me to be your mistress."

Aunt Harriette gasped.

Brian chuckled.

“I meant no disrespect.” He ran a hand through his hair. “How foolish that sounds. I meant —” He shook his head, unable to give voice to what he meant; he feared the answer too much. “Patience, you, of all people, deserve happiness for a lifetime. You deserve commitment, vows spoken before God and man. Marry me, Patience.”

“But your drinking. It sickens me to see a man drink to excess, lose control. I can’t tell you what happened inside me when I realized you were drunk the night of the fire.”

He remembered her look and didn’t think he’d ever seen such haunting fear, not even the night she saved the Knave’s Secret from the Phantom. “Don’t you understand? I was drinking because of you.” He shook his head. “No. That’s wrong. Not because of you, because of me. I was so disturbed that you were angry with me, that I drank in a way even I find distasteful.” He couldn’t tell her he was drinking because he feared loving her. Not yet. “Marry me. Please.”

He placed his fingers against her lips to silence her then found himself tracing their shape. The distraction lasted until he realized where they were. “I ... care for you Patience. I care about your feelings. I will never drink to excess again. I promise you before my father and your Aunt as witness.”

Patience turned from his embrace. “I will never drink to excess again. If I heard my father speak those very words once, I heard them a thousand times.” But she allowed him to take her hand and to tug her toward the door.

“Patience and I must speak alone,” Grant told Harriette and his father. “If you will excuse us?”

They both nodded, their worry not masking the love in their eyes.

Patience had always wanted her aunt to love her. He had always craved it from his father. How ironic they should become certain of it at the very point their lives were so uncertain in every other way.

Grant led Patience to the library and the chairs by the hearth. For a while they sat facing each other and allowed silence to flow over and around them and were comfortable with it and each other.

Patience settled chin in hand to stare into the fire.

His numbness had begun to be replaced with a heady relief.

He had wanted to stay with Patience the night he taught her passion. He remembered the pain of not being able to lie beside her. At the inn in Scotland, when he’d slept with her in his arms, he remembered joy upon drifting, joy upon waking. Finding her beside him every morning ... Now there was a life to contemplate. He extended his hand.

She rose and took it.

He pulled her onto his lap.

“Will you marry me, Lady Patience?”

“What? Marry the Marquess of Andover?”

She was masking fear with jest. He kissed her. “Will Patience marry Grant?”

“Must I?”

“You must—or there will be little bastard babies running all over England.”

She buried her face in his neck.

“We have to marry, Patience. For the girls.”

“For the girls,” she whispered, her fear like a living thing, her heart pounding. She stood, hands on hips. “I can’t believe you’re smiling when we’re in such a coil. Being forced against one’s will is not pleasant.” She batted dust motes.

“I’m smiling, Patience, because I find the prospect of being married to you ... intriguing.

Now that my arguments are, shall we say, of no consequence, I bow to the inevitable.”

“Fine for you. You’ll go back to sea and leave me to molder while you travel the world.”

“I love the sea, Patience. It’s in my blood.”

“Take me with you then? You said sailing with me was an adventure.”

“Patience, fire, flood and pestilence are adventures, but I would not invite them along on a voyage.” It wasn’t an ocean voyage she needed. “Listen, Patience. I know how much your independence means to you. Suppose we strike a bargain. Here and now. I’ll even put it in writing. I propose we become partners with equal say in our lives and our marriage.”

Patience was struck dumb, but only for a minute. “That’s ridiculous. It isn’t done. Is it?”

She was weakening and Grant was pleased. “Patience, it’s preposterous for a sea Captain to become partners with his crew, but I am, and I’m a good partner; ask any of my men.”

“With this marriage partnership, then, if I choose to go to sea with you, I can.”

“Well, as to that, I plan for you to be in a delicate condition very soon, and I would not want to risk your health or that of our child.” God’s truth, the thought of their children brought a warm stirring to his heart.

Her color rose at his words.

“I do love that blush. Remind me to make you blush while you’re naked so I can see exactly where it begins. I’ve always wondered.”

“You are a true scoundrel. Do you know that?”

“Yes, and you are a true hellcat. And do you know that I am partial to hellcats?”

“Just partial?”

“Fond, perhaps.”

“I might be fond of you too, especially after our night at the inn.”

“That was nothing compared to what we’ll find in each other’s arms as husband and wife.”

She reddened again and looked away. “Will you forgive your father, Grant?”

“I want our children to know their grandfather, Patience.”

“I’m glad. Now. Let’s put this partnership on paper.”

\* \* \*

As she stepped from Brian’s house on the morning of her wedding, Patience saw a bottle-green coach with white velvet bows on the doors and white carriage horses bearing snowy plumes on their regal heads.

Grant, handsome in dove gray pants and black frock coat, top hat tilted roguishly, bowed and took her hand as she reached the vehicle. “My Lady.” He kissed her inner wrist, a promise in his dancing black eyes, and handed her up before he got in and sat beside her.

“Scoundrel,” Patience said smoothing his lapels as the horses sped them on their way. “I suppose if a woman is forced to marry, it is best the groom be tolerable looking.”

Grant’s bark of laughter calmed her. “Vixen,” he said as he teased a curl amid the white rosebuds in her hair. He relaxed against the velvet squabs, took her hand in his and held it, their silence comfortable.

“I have a surprise for you,” she whispered as the carriage slowed.

He raised a brow. “Considering other surprises, I wonder, with no small bit of anxiety, what it could be.”

“I’m wearing bosom inserts today. Just for you.”

The carriage door opened upon his look of delight and reaching arms, and he growled his frustration.

When Patience stepped down, she gasped. He’d found her a country church in the middle

of a green field. The sun broke through the clouds blessing the small Gothic structure with slanting beams of radiant light.

Life beckoned and showed new promise as, hand in hand, Grant and Patience climbed three steps to their future.

The stone-arched chapel was filled to capacity with wedding guests—including four scoundrels, one being the minister who would perform the ceremony—and a profusion of multi-hued, hot-house flowers.

Cherubs gazed from above, doves cooed in the eaves, and sunlight splintered a rainbow through an honor-guard of stained-glass window.

As they pledged themselves to each other, Patience saw Aunt Harriette dab at her eyes, and Brian handed her his handkerchief. Four scoundrels beamed with the pride of brothers.

After the ceremony, sitting across the carriage from Grant—her new husband, God help her—Patience found him already ordering her life, for the carriage clattered away from London, rather than toward it. “Where are we going? I expected to go back to Brian’s. The girls will need me. You said I could decide—”

Grant shook his head. “This is our honey month, Patience. A time for us. Aunt Harriette will watch over your chicks. For the next few weeks, you are mine alone. No let me correct that, for we belong to each other, do we not? I would like to be alone with you, to love you at my leisure. Would you like that? Because if not—”

“I do,” she whispered. If only they could love each other.

He smiled, pulling her close. “Good. Now, I seem to remember you wanted a house in Sussex by the sea, with a kitten and a rose garden.”

“Grant St. Benedict, it’s bad enough we were forced to marry. If you offer me five thousand pounds a year, I’ll crack your skull.”

“Patience, I venture to suggest that no one could force either of us to do anything. We chose to marry. No don’t interrupt your husband, for I owe you an apology. That morning in Scotland, in my own misguided way, I was asking you to spend your life with me. I would have been true to you, Patience, forever, even without speaking vows. I was wrong, I know, and it was badly done. And after I asked you, I saw how vulgar the proposition. ‘Twas only stubbornness made me argue.”

He took her hand. “What I am about to admit, I do so knowing full well you are the only person likely to understand my motive. I wanted a lifetime with you without the frightening verdict of marriage attached.”

She looked earnestly into his eyes. “Now you’ve been sentenced, how do you feel?”

“Set free,” he said, surprising her. “How do you feel?”

“I wanted to be independent.”

“And I. But, Patience, isn’t independence being free to choose the life one wishes. I stood my ground so long for wanting independence, I denied wanting you.”

Patience nearly denied the hope surging within her. But wanting someone was not loving them. She crossed to him and settled herself in his embrace. They spent a long, lazy time kissing. Patience relaxed, free of restraints for the first time since she’d met him. It was right to be here, to love him. If only he loved her back.

The thought was sobering. “Where are we going?”

“To our house in Brighton. Snowdrop is waiting for us. Summer will bring your roses.”

“Is it a cottage?”

He tilted his head, his look apologetic. “The house is, perhaps, larger than you would have



chosen. I am partial to it, but if it's not what you want, I will buy you a smaller one, whatever, wherever you wish."

He would do that for her? To choose one's own house would seem independent, but she was not fooled. She had a choice only because he allowed it. She was shackled. Good and proper.

If only she didn't love him.

Grant pointed to the cliff in the distance. "There it is."

Patience gasped as jagged turrets and endless crenellations rose and sprouted from the landscape to become an edifice worthy to shelter a king. "A little larger than I would have expected? It's a blooming castle."

"I was afraid you would notice. Do you think we might fill it with children?"

"I don't think an army could fill it with children."

"Never the expected answer. I can't wait to show you every priest-hole and secret door. I have favorite hideaways, the armory and the library. My ancestors are entombed in the chapel."

"Company. How delightful."

Grant kissed her in the very hungry, very demanding way he had done in her bed that night at the inn.

In a distant part of her mind, Patience decided that passion might be a very good argument against independence, passion with Grant, that is.

They had advanced into the realm of near-completion by the time the carriage came to a stop. Disappointment shone on Grant's face as it pounded in Patience's breast.

In a whimsical haze, she met the servants and chatted with the housekeeper. Then finally Grant led her upstairs. She'd no more than gazed at the master suite, before a magnificent creature of a man filled her arms and heart so full, she could hardly remember a time when he hadn't.

Grant had never been so glad about losing a fight in his life.

He was determined to bring Patience with him on a slow, sensual journey, as determined to show her his love as he was terrified to tell her of it.

They dined in their private sitting room. "This meal is to keep up your strength, Patience," he said. "You will have need of it." Grant removed the covers to reveal lobscouse and plum duff and to fill the air with spice.

Patience laughed. "Will you lick my fingers clean?"

The heat in his gaze was answer enough. He stood and took her hand.

She followed willingly, seeing suddenly the truth that had been plaguing her. This man was her destiny. Smiling or scowling, his mouth begged for her kisses. His black eyes haunted her sleep.

Grant St. Benedict Garrick, her husband, her soon-to-be lover was as beautiful inside as out. Patience Kendall had married, not the Captain, not the Marquess of Andover, not the illusive Saint ... but Grant.

Whatever his name, his soul was the mate to hers.

His kiss was deep and achingly slow. Her heart beat faster and her body quickened. "I believe," he whispered into her mouth, between touches of his bottom lip to hers, his breath teasing, "Our union was destined."

He did feel the same.

She removed his frock coat and waistcoat, but when she boldly stripped him of his shirt, he raised a shocked brow. "Saucy wench. You have overpowered me. Have your wicked way with

me, then.”

“I believe I shall, if you will teach me how.”

“My pleasure. But you should know first that I love you, Patience,” he whispered against her lips. “I love you so damned much.”

Her heart expanded. Tears filled her eyes. “Oh, Grant, I love you, too. I have for so long.”

His triumphant shout was muffled as he kissed her with blazing passion.

His husky voice purred desire through her in high, warm waves. She combed her fingers through the black curling hair on his chest, abrading ever so lightly. She rubbed her cheek against that very mat, inhaling his spicy scent. “I wanted to do this the day Wellington fell in the ocean.”

His eyes smoldered. “I would have let you.”

“I wasn’t ready then.”

“Are you now, Patience? Shall we finally ... dance, my love?”

\* \* \*

Two weeks into their honey-month, Patience and Grant walked the snow-dusted rose garden of Andover Castle.

“Did you know,” she asked as she pulled her scarlet velvet cloak about her, “that I thought of you as two different people on the ship? One was the ‘snarly Captain,’ nasty and mean, with not an ounce of caring. The other was ‘Grant,’ loving, warm and thoughtful. I thought I had you figured out until I met the Marquess. Now he was ‘My Lord,’ aloof and disdainful, but he didn’t stay around much. Of course, there was the illusive Saint. Only your friends called you that.”

“Those were not friends, they were social leeches. The men who call me Saint don’t know a thing about me.”

“Obviously.”

He slapped her bottom.

“I did like Grant the best, but now they’ve all blended.” She sighed. “There’s no mystery anymore.”

Grant gasped, turning a calculating glance upon her as he tossed her over his shoulder, his hand connecting with her bottom at each step. “I’ll show you who is no fun anymore.”

“Oh goodie, it’s the Captain.”

At the tower, Grant came face to face with a messenger.

Without putting her down, Grant read the missive. “Time to go back to London, Lady wife.” He slapped her again. “Grace’s Duke has been called to Scotland. She would like us to be at their wedding.”

“Do you intend to carry me all the way?”

He put her down and handed her the note.

She held it to her heart. “Rose, Angel, and now Grace. All married. I feel like a mother.”

“I’ve certainly done my part.” He kissed her. “Let’s leave now and surprise them. They won’t expect us until Saturday.”

“If we leave now, we’ll arrive in the middle of the night?”

“We’ll sneak in and surprise them at breakfast then.”

It was four in the morning when they arrived. Anxious for the cozy bed in Grant’s old chamber, they tiptoed up Brian’s wide staircase like mice in a scullery. At the top, they stopped.

Brian was kissing Aunt Harriette in a very passionate, familiar manner inside the doorway of her bed-chamber. They were both wearing nightclothes.

After whispered good-nights, Aunt Harriette’s door closed and Brian turned. He blanched when he saw them and put a hand to his heart. “God’s blood, you shouldn’t sneak up on an old

man like this.”

“In the library,” Grant said.

With a tilt of his head, he indicated her aunt’s door to Patience. She knocked.

Her aunt opened it and squealed.

“Aunt Harriette, we would like a word with you in the library,” Patience said. “Now, if you please.”

Harriette and Brian, looking none too dignified in their dressing gowns, sat on the settee holding hands. Patience wanted to giggle at their guilty expressions.

She’d been so caught up with Grant, she hadn’t noticed that their attachment had bloomed into love.

Grant cleared his throat exactly as his father had done and sat behind the desk. “I think the conduct my wife and I witnessed this evening is indicative of the need for another wedding. We promise, you’ll thank us someday.” He nodded for emphasis. “What think you, wife?”

“I’ll bet our night in Scotland was nothing to your night here.”

“Patience!” Grant said.

“Aunt, your conduct is shocking. We should have left a chaperone for the two of you.”

“What about you and Grant?” Harriette said.

“Don’t turn the tables. But just so you know, I was a virgin until my wedding night. I didn’t want to be, but Grant chose the night at the inn to be noble.”

Grant glared at her. “You make it sound like a character flaw.”

“I’m very proud of you, Grant, even if my niece is not.”

“Thank you, Aunt.”

Brian chuckled. “I think you deserve a medal, son.” He looked at Patience. “I love your Aunt, Patience, and I would like your permission to marry her. And just so you know, your aunt was a virgin until your wedding night too.”

Her Aunt gasped. “Brian!”

“Now I know where Patience got her blush,” Grant said.

Patience kissed them. “I would be honored to have you as my ...” She grimaced. “Father-in-law-uncle?”

“I would be pleased to have you call me Father. Your aunt will always be your aunt, of course. But we want very much to be grandparents to your children.”

“We’d like that,” Grant said. He kissed Harriette’s cheek and shook his father’s hand.

“Now, I’d like to get my wife to bed.”

“We’re working on those grandchildren,” Patience said.

Grant rolled his eyes, took her hand, and knew he had everything he wanted. He turned to his father. “You said we’d thank you someday. You were right. Thank you.”

THE END

## CAPTIVE SCOUNDREL

(Formerly: Lady Faith)

Knave of Hearts, Two

by

Annette Blair

Excerpt

England, The Bognor Coast, May 1817

Prologue

The staccato of horse's hooves shattered dawn's silence. Fear clawed at Justin Devereux's soul, rage engulfed him. He could roar his fury to the heavens, but no one would hear him. Not even God.

"Damn you to hell and back Catherine Devereux!" he shouted. Slowing his mount as the carriage trail disappeared, Justin took stock of his surroundings. Though he couldn't see it beyond the thicket, he approached the sea, for he could smell the brine and hear the burgeoning murmur of waves in the distance.

Despite his impatience, he urged his horse slowly on through field madder and budding gorse. Tender-leafed oaks, ironically, augured new beginnings. Would to God it could be so.

Then he saw it. An old winding trail, its grasses recently trampled by carriage and horses. A family of rabbits scattered as he quickened his pace. For the love of God, he thought, let those tracks be left by the coach carrying Beth.

Two years ago, kicking and bawling, his daughter, Beth, had taken his heart in her wee hands the moment he gazed upon her. Before her birth, he'd thought his life a living hell. Now, without her, he truly knew what hell was. He would find her, he vowed, or perish in the doing.

Upon clearing the thicket, he froze.

A coach and four stood perilously close to the edge of the cliff, its horses snuffling, ribbons of early-morning fog swirling about them. The chanting, "see, see, see," of Rock-Pipits along the ledge stepping down to the sea imparted a false sense of serenity.

Heart pounding, Justin dismounted and began to make his way toward the unfamiliar conveyance. Sensing movement, he whipped about and came face to face with Catherine, his wife, more's the pity. His brother stood beside her. "I should have known you would be involved in this, Vincent," Justin said.

Vincent bowed from the waist, a sneer nearly grotesque on his dissipated features.

Catherine smiled. "We have what you want, do we not, my dear?"

"I have come for my daughter, as was your plan."

"Our daughter."

Justin laughed and knew by Catherine's look, his insult hit home. "Since before her birth, Beth has been mine, and you've been more than content with the arrangement," he said. "Never even held her, damn your selfish hide." Fighting an overwhelming urge to wrap his hands around his wife's perfect, white throat, Justin flexed his fingers to affirm his control.

"Come now, dear brother," Vincent drawled, mocking the familial endearment. "You cannot remove a child from her mother."

"I can, if the mother would have it so. When she found she carried, she said bearing a child would ruin her, said she would—"

“Justin!” Catherine's face blanched.

Vincent threw her a startled look.

For a moment Justin was relieved. Beth's conception must have predated their intimate alliance, else Vincent would have known Catherine's feelings. Then it occurred to him that Vincent's shock might stem from the fact that he... “Beth is mine, and mine alone,” Justin said. “Enough. Where is she?”

“Safe,” Catherine said.

The word reassured him, likely because he wanted it so, but he didn't trust her, trusted Vincent even less. “She's a babe, Catherine. Do not use her as your pawn. Besides, I'm on to you. You left a trail a fool could follow. Keeping Beth is not your plan, we both know that. What you want is freedom without the disgrace of divorce. Fine. Give her to me and you keep the protection of my name. With my title and wealth at your disposal, the ton will forget my defection soon enough. I will take Beth and go away. Forever.”

Catherine raised her chin, a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

“And you, Vincent, will have your heart's desire,” Justin said.

Upon hearing those words, Catherine preened the slightest bit.

Justin shook his head. “I hate to be the one to break it to you, Catherine, but you are not Vincent's objective.” Studying his brother, Justin continued to address Catherine. “This man's singular goal in life is to remain my heir. And he has effectively accomplished that by separating us forever. Divorce would do the same, of course, but it would ruin you both.”

Vincent gave him a smile and nod of acknowledgment.

Justin wanted to plant the bastard a facer. He turned back to his wife. “Now we will never produce a legitimate male heir.” He lowered his voice and leaned close. “Not that I've been inclined in recent years, as you well know.”

Catherine paled.

He hated himself for that. Though he was stuck in the mire with them, he would debase himself no further to brawl at their level. He sighed. “I want my daughter, and I want to be left to raise her in peace. Where is she?”

“Safe away from here,” Catherine said.

God, how he wanted to believe her. “Where?”

“In the—”

Vincent growled and backhanded Catherine across her face, felling her with the weight of the blow.

“Bastard!” Justin snapped, and packed every ounce of his frustration into the punch he dispensed, causing Vincent to stagger and fall. Justin gazed with satisfaction at his brother in the dirt, then he lifted Catherine and touched her swelling cheek. “A lover who beats you. Good choice, Cat.” He sighed, examining her face. “Tell me where Beth is.”

Vincent groaned, and stood, rage contorting his features. “I'll make you sorry until the day you die.”

“I am all atremble,” Justin responded dryly, unable to look away from his wife's cut and swollen lip. He loved this woman once. What a fool he'd been. “Where is she, Cat? Where is Beth?”

“In the bloody coach,” Vincent spat.

Shock jolted Justin. He tasted the bitterness of bile in his throat as he raced toward the coach.

“No!” Catherine screamed.

A shot rang out.

Gulls shrieked and took flight.

The horses reared and bolted.

A cry escaped Justin's lips. He lunged and grabbed the coach's bracings. Prayed for strength, but couldn't stop its forward surge. The horses scrambled for ground where there was none. Justin dug his heels into the dirt. The cords in his arms knotted and tore.

All was lost.

But he could not give up.

"Beth!" he screamed as he was dragged over the edge and toward the sea-washed rocks below.

\*\*\*\*

## Bio: Annette Blair

A New York Times best selling author for Penguin Books, Annette Blair left her job as a Development Director and Journalism Advisor at a private New England prep school to become a full time writer. At forty books and counting, she added cozy mysteries and bewitching romantic comedies to her award-winning historical romances. Now she's stepped into the amazing world of self-publishing.

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## Excerpt

### Falcon's Curse

By

Rainy Kirkland  
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### Chapter One

Summer 1711

The gray mist floated silently on the Caribbean waters, pausing now and then to grow in strength then moving onward to the island drums that beckoned it home once more. Distant thunder rumbled its approval as the thick tendrils crept steadily inward cloaking the island with fear and uncertainty. The rhythmic drums intensified and the clouds lowered. As the last remnants of silvery moonlight vanished, Samantha Chesterfield slid closer to the edge of the stone balustrade that encircled her balcony.

“Tis the last time you’ll humiliate me, Falcon,” she vowed, angrily wiping her tears with the back of her hand. Bawdy laughter floated upward from the inn below and her anger flared anew. “And you’re more the fool to think a locked door will detain me.”

She tucked her long hair carefully beneath a battered woolen cap. Black breeches and a dark shirt completed her garb. Grateful for the dense mist, she swung her leg over the railing and reached for the nearest branch of the massive cypress tree that stood beside the inn. The muscles of her shoulders and back throbbed in protest bringing fresh tears but her resolve stood firm. It was not the first time she had used the old, gnarled branches to escape her father’s wrath, but tonight, with stiff muscles and no moon to light her way, she progressed slowly until she reached the lowest branch. Pausing to listen to the rhythmic message within the drums, she wiped the sweat and tears from her face. Why, she wondered wearily, did Kabol always seem to send for her when Falcon was in a temper?

She slipped from her perch and edged away from the inn, careful to avoid the flickering patches of light that spilled from the lower windows. Samantha moved through the yard, blending first with one shadow then another until the inn was no longer visible. The cool moss beneath her feet was a welcome relief from the humidity that plastered the tattered shirt to her skin and sent trickles of sweat down her back. She navigated the narrow trail that led to the island’s swampy interior with a sure step, ducking beneath the thick clumps of sodden Spanish moss and soundlessly pushing the large palm fronds from her path.

As she neared her destination, the hollow beating of the island drums faded. The dense foliage opened to reveal a small clearing where the damp earth had been raked clean. In the flickering firelight, she could see the ancient skulls that guarded the circumference of the circle and the sun-bleached animal bones that lay scattered on the ground before her. Their mystical patterns had taken years to unravel, but tonight she read their secrets with ease.

She dropped to her knees then rocked back on her heels to wait. The hunched figure on the other side of the fire remained motionless and a smile touched Samantha’s lips as she watched her silent companion. More bones than flesh, his image little resembled that of a dreaded



shaman. Yet on the island, the wizened old man was respected by all. He could stop a heated argument with a glance, calm an angry mob with but a few whispered words. Even those who sailed with Falcon on the Sea Hawk gave Kabol wide berth while they were in dock.

Samantha tried to stem her impatience. Why did he not acknowledge her? Taking slow, deep breaths, she willed her mind and body to relax as she gazed into the small fire below her. The night birds ceased their chatter. Only the crackling flames dared to disturb the unnatural silence. Time ceased to exist as the colors of the fire blended, then separated only to blend once again. Mesmerized, she watched the dancing flames give way to a growing image. A face appeared. Green eyes, dark hair; the features were hazy but they belonged to a man – a man she had seen each night for months. Gooseflesh covered her arms and ran down her neck. To have the strange, shadowy image haunt her dreams was one thing, but to see it mystically appear within a living flame was another. The image flickered, growing then fading, only to reappear. Panic soared through her veins as the image teased its way in and out of reality never becoming completely clear. It beckoned. She felt its strength even before its hand reached out to touch her.

Cowed by her lack of control, Samantha closed her eyes tightly and pressed her forehead to her knees. Then it was gone, leaving an aching emptiness in its wake. Her body trembled despite the fire and heat of the night.

She looked up to find Kabol watching her intently, his dark eyes puzzled. Slowly, the wrinkled black man rose and moved before the fire. His hands danced lightly over the flames and a fine powder sifted through his fingers. Red, green, and blue lights instantly shot out in all directions illuminating his shrouded figure against the darkness of the night. Abruptly he gave a tired grunt and squatted back down on the damp earth.

“He tried to come to you. Why did you turn away?”

Samantha’s eyes widened with amazement. “You saw him? He truly existed? How did . . . ?”

“Nay,” Kabol interrupted softly. “Twas not my doing. You called forth the image only to deny its existence.”

Samantha bit back the protest that sprang to her lips.

Tell him, her mind pleaded. Tell him that the image heeds no master but comes and goes at will. Tell him of the haunted nights and restless sleeps. Tell him of your fear. She clasped her hands tightly to stop their trembling as pride defeated common sense. “Why did you send for me?”

Kabol watched her inner struggle. Such power, he thought, but so stubborn. “You will be leaving soon.”

“Aye.” Samantha gave a wary sigh. “Falcon is anxious to be back on the sea. He has the patience of a child.”

“A well-learned child does not mock its elders,” he scolded gently.

Her spine straightened and her chin tilted indignantly. “At ten and six I am no longer the child that ran to you in tears because of her father’s cruel words.”

Kabol heaved a deep sigh. Although she pretended indifference to her father’s rejections, to his observant eye her pain was tangible. “What has happened this time to toss you out of favor?” he prodded gently.

“When am I ever in favor?” she sighed. Her fingers rubbed the nagging ache in her shoulder. Touch alone told her it would be many days before the stiffness left.

“But this time?”

Samantha pulled off her cap spilling silvery hair to her waist. As her fingers toyed with the

cap's frayed edges, her shoulders slumped forward and Kabol thought of a wilted island flower left too long in the sun.

"Somehow the latches on the birdcages were left open," she said softly.

"Somehow?"

She shrugged. Finally the silence weighted more than her guilt. "I read the clouds wrong. I thought the winds had returned and we would be gone."

"So you set Falcon's prize game cock free to roam the island thinking the deed would not be discovered? It is a wonder that you are still with us, my child."

"Tis not natural to teach birds to kill one another," she defended. "An animal should kill for food or protection, not to line the pockets of the greedy."

Kabol shifted closer to the fire and wished again that he might work his magic to bring father and daughter together. But the tapestry of time was already woven and even with his power he knew better than to alter the threads.

"The winds will return at midnight." His prediction seemed to hover over the fire then seep into growing mist. "Falcon's ship will sail with the morning tide."

"I shall never understand him," Samantha sighed wearily. "He possesses more than ten men could spend in a lifetime, yet he still is not sated."

"Mayhap your father worries of the day when he will no longer have your eyes to guide his ship. Mayhap he fears that without your 'sight' he would fare not better than St. Martin."

"How can you even think that?" Samantha jerked to her feet and began to pace before the fire. "Falcon's faults are many, but his skills as a captain far surpass those of St. Martin. And whatever his circumstances, he would never resort to the buying and selling of human flesh for a profit as does that whoremonger. You do me a grave injustice even to speak my father's name in the same breath with that Bastard." Her soft voice was threaded with anger.

Kabol smiled. She had grown, he thought with satisfaction. Now she questioned and argued with strength. The metamorphosis was nearly complete. Her eyes looked past the face and into the soul; her mind was strong and true. The shy, awkward child was slowly being pushed aside by the striking beauty that sat before him. An intense sense of satisfaction seeped into his aging bones. But now the time was nigh, he felt a moment's reluctance to let her go.

Reaching deep within the folds of his cloak he withdrew another handful of the magical dust. Again the flames danced in a frenzy of colors. "The hour is at hand," he declared firmly. "You must leave me."

"But I just . . ." The words died on her lips and she quickly resumed her position before the fire. Panic filled her slender frame. Could she do nothing right? Her outburst had displeased him. Now he was sending her away.

"You must find your other half." His words were a mere whisper above the crackling fire.

"You must find the sun."

"Other half?"

Kabol watched the emotions play across her face. Blue eyes that always danced with laughter and mischief now clouded with confusion.

"You are the moon," he continued patiently. "Silver is your metal. Your hair is the color of moonlight dancing on the waters and you carry the scent of life. You hold within you great powers, my child, but alas, you are only the moon."

Instinctively Samantha touched the tear-shaped medallion that hung around her neck. The delicate crystal encased a mystical silver liquid, and as it lay warm against her skin, each breath caused the medallion's interior to shimmer in a never-ending motion. Kabol had placed the

talisman around her neck the night they met and for eight years she had not removed it.

“You need to find the sun. Without the sun the moon may cast no light.”

“But where . . .”

Kabol silenced her with a glance. “’Tis not an easy task, my child, but you have within you the talents to see it through. You must go now, for Falcon has discovered you gone. Do not return to me until you have found the sun.” With a grace that denied his years, Kabol rose then vanished into the mist that crowded the now-dying fire.

The night air hung heavy and hot, yet Samantha huddled closer to the fading embers. Her mind spun with confusion and she clutched her knees closer to her body. Why a riddle? Why now? A wave of loneliness washed over her. She glanced about the shadowed clearing but found no peace. Wearily she stood. The puzzle would have to wait for, as always, Falcon came first.

\* \* \*

Cursing the fog that hampered his steps, Falcon made his way down the narrow, rutted street to the Silver Serpent. The stately, whitewashed tavern stood two stories tall but set within the steep-pitched, red-tiled roof, a small set of rooms towered above the rest. He glanced up at the darkened windows and his scowl deepened. Tonight the bawdy laughter that spilled forth from the inn grated on his nerves and the usually welcome aroma of roasting goat assaulted his senses. With the fog the inn would be more crowded than usual and that did not please him. His head ached. And those damned drums. If he ever found them they would be instant kindling – voodoo curse or not.

Roughly he shoved the inn’s swinging doors, causing them to snap back on their hinges. The startling clap pierced the merriment and a hushed silence filled the crowded common room. Oil lamps swung from the ceiling timbers casting shadowy images on the startled faces.

Falcon gave a growl of disgust and flexed his shoulders, anxious for a fight. His loose-fitting shirt could not disguise the solid, muscled flesh that lay beneath. And although short in stature, an aura of strength surrounded him. A path cleared before him as he crossed the crowded room to his empty corner table. His menacing scowl kept anyone from approaching as his eyes coldly swept the dimly lit room.

“Marie!” he barked. “Will half the night be gone before I get my meal?”

The robust maid gave him a curt nod and scurried to the hearth. Her ample bosom swayed as she sliced the roasted goat flesh with a large knife. She ladled vegetables from a boiling kettle onto the huge tray and filled a tankard with ale. Balancing the heavy fare, she slowly made her way back to Falcon and carefully placed the meal before him.

“Have you seen the Curse tonight?” he challenged softly.

“Nay, Captain.” Her voice quivered as she busied herself wiping the oaken table. “Not since you carried her through.”

Falcon watched her closely judging her words for truth. “Then she should still be there, should she not?” With careless ease, he leaned back on his chair. “Marie,” he commanded, a sardonic smile touching his lips, “fetch her for me.”

Marie’s dark skin paled. For a heartbeat she stood frozen with fear. But as Falcon’s glare hardened, her limbs found movement and she fled to do his bidding.

“Madre de Dios, let her be there,” she whispered over and over.

A commotion at the door took Falcon’s attention from the retreating girl.

“It is raining!” Dancer shouted. Standing just inside the entrance, he shook the fine drops of moisture from his curly hair. “The winds have returned!”

A chorus of rowdy cheers sounded and mugs were filled all round. Dancer slowly made his

way through the crowd pausing now and again to share a word or issue an order. Reaching the back, he straddled a chair at Falcon's table. A giant of a man, his broad shoulders flexed straining the damp fabric of his shirt as he casually rested his forearms on the back of the chair. His sharp features were softened by warm brown eyes and a rakish smile.

Scowling at his brawny quartermaster, Falcon grabbed the tankard of ale and downed half the contents with one gulp.

"You look little pleased with my news," Dancer stated. "I thought the idea of leaving would cheer your sagging spirits."

"We sail on the tide." Falcon's voice was flat, giving no hint of inner feelings.

Dancer turned and called Falcon's orders to the crew and another chorus of cheers sounded.

"I understand I missed quite a spectacle earlier," Dancer continued, turning back to Falcon. "Did you really beat her until you drew blood or do the gossips speak falsely?"

"Have you so little to do with your time that you give heed to vicious island rumor?"

Dancer's smile grew. "What did the wench do this time?"

Falcon pictured the Curse lying in a crumpled heap on the floor of her bedchamber, her eyes bright and brimming with tears. Would that he could turn back the hands of time. He'd never leave her like that again he vowed silently. The next time he'd bind the cocky wench in chains.

"She's missing." Falcon's voice was hard and threaded with anger.

"Falcon, the island is too small for her to be missing." Dancer chuckled. "I'd wager she probably heard your angry bellows and decided to lay low until your temper cools."

"Her chambers are empty." Falcon stared blankly over his mug. "And she is not on the ship. She's in the swamp with that scurvy mongrel, Kabol. I know it sure as I know my own name."

Dancer's easy smile disappeared. "I thought you forbade her to go there again."

"I ordered her! But does she obey? Why I'd flog a man for less and she knows it."

Dancer shifted uncomfortably. "How long?"

"An hour, mayhap less," Falcon shrugged.

Dancer made to rise, his intent clearly to go after her.

"It is not necessary," Falcon stated from behind his tankard. "Marie has gone to fetch her."

"On a night such as this you would send my Marie into the swamp?"

"Nay," Falcon belched, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "The girl is no fool. She will sit on the wood's edge and wait for the Curse to return. Then they will concoct some fantastic story that I am supposed to believe."

"So you are content to do nothing but wait?" Dancer's tone clearly sounded his objections.

Falcon rocked back on his chair and his eyes took on a glassy hue. "Aye, mayhap the fates will smile on me tonight and the wench will lose her step in the quicksand that lines the path."

For a moment Dancer could not gather his wits. For years Falcon had complained at having a daughter instead of a son. He had even gone so far as to dub her his Curse. But never before had his words wished her true harm

"You've been too long with the drink, my friend." Dancer's voice was stern and he pulled his chair closer. "'Tis your daughter, Elizabeth's child, you prattle about."

Falcon slapped his tankard down on the table. "Don't speak the name of that witch in the same breath with my Elizabeth. Elizabeth was good, an angel . . ."

"They are mother and child!"

“Nay,” Falcon argued. “She is a spawn of the devil. She sees into the future and plays with black magic. If it wasn’t for her, I could have persuaded Elizabeth to join me all those years ago. But, nay, she wanted a proper home for the child. ’Twas that damned babe that cost me the finest thing I ever owned.”

Dancer’s thoughts raced back in time. He had met Elizabeth Chesterfield twice, and although it had been more than a decade ago, the memory still burned brightly. A delicate thing, she looked as if a puff of air would carry her off. But her looks had been deceiving, for no matter how difficult, whenever Falcon sent a message, Elizabeth traveled to meet him. Until . . . Dancer felt his skin grow cold with the memory of that last night. The Sea Hawk had slipped past the English ships and docked off the coast of Falmouth. Impatiently, Falcon had waited for Elizabeth to join him at the posting house on the edge of town. But Elizabeth had not come. At the appointed hour an exhausted and ragged Samantha had appeared. Her frightened, whispered words still echoed through his mind. “Mother won’t be coming. She’s dead.”

Falcon had taken one look at the tiny child who stood before him and his curses shook the rafters. He saw not his daughter, but the messenger of despair. He never asked how a child of eight had managed to travel the great distance or of her welfare. He had simply stood and walked out.

Dancer had watched the pain eat at Falcon’s reasoning until the friend from his youth became the embittered man who sat before him.

“If your true wish is for the Curse to be gone,” Dancer said quietly, “then why not send her back home to your brother Edward? Let him be responsible for raising her in the proper English fashion.”

“Never,” Falcon snarled. “I’d sooner cut off this hand before I’d give anything I possess to that bastard. We are brothers, two with mirrored faces, yet fate saw fit to pronounce him the elder.” Falcon’s eyes glittered with hatred. “It was ten damned minutes of life that gave that bastard the right to lay claim to everything.”

“But since the Curse is such a trial, send her back to Edward. Let her wreak havoc with his life.”

“I need no advice from you,” Falcon spat. “The Curse is mine and I’ll do with her as I damn well please. And when I find her tonight I’m – “

“Going to do what, invite me to share your table? Why, thank you, Falcon. I accept your kind offer.”

Samantha settled gracefully into the remaining chair and tried to ignore the silence that had invaded the room upon her entrance. She could feel Falcon’s anger and tonight even Dancer seemed in ill humor.

“Where have you been?” Falcon growled, noting her dry shift and cap.

Remembering her humiliation from the afternoon, Samantha’s chin raised as she assumed an attitude of remote indifference. “Why, Falcon . . .” she drawled innocently. “Has it been so long since you locked me in my chambers that you have forgotten the incident? Did you not, just moments ago, give Marie permission to release me?”

As if on cue, Marie silently appeared at the table and produced three crystal goblets and a bottle of fine brandy.

Samantha smiled sweetly and reached across the table to pull Falcon’s untouched plate before her. “It was thoughtful of you to consider my hunger. Aren’t you eating?” she questioned, taking a dainty mouthful.

“Don’t push me any further, Curse, or the seat of your pants shall become smartly

acquainted with my belt.”

“As you wish,” she smiled innocently. “When do we sail?”

“I’ll not have you going into the swamp again. Do you hear?”

Samantha wiped her mouth with the edge of her sleeve, “Aye, in fact I’ll wager half the island heard.”

“Then heed my words. ’Tis not a safe place for the likes of you.”

She returned her father’s glare, refusing to lower her eyes in defeat. “’Tis the safest place on this island.”

“Falcon speaks the truth, Curse,” Dancer interrupted quietly.

Her stomach knotted and she stiffened under Falcon’s withering stare. “What a pair of hypocrites I sit with,” she snapped. “If I followed your asinine orders, neither of you would be here today. Would you have had me sit and watch, dear Father, the time your belly was split open with a sword and your life flowed freely upon the deck? And you . . .” Her anger turned toward Dancer. “When you shook with fever so hard that ribs cracked, were you sorry then that I ventured into the swamp? Would you have wished me no knowledge of the yellow powder that cured you?”

The stem of his glass snapped between his fingers and Falcon looked down to see his blood mingle with the wine that spilled on the table.

“Madre de Dios,” Samantha swore softly, reaching for his hand.

Falcon flung her arm away with a savage jerk. “Do not touch me!” he bellowed, rising from the table. “This is the last time you will disobey my orders. You will not venture alone into the swamp again, or with Dancer as my witness, I’ll have you tied to the capstan and flogged. Fifty lashes should go a long way to curb your wanderings.” His ultimatum complete, Falcon flung his chair against the wall and stormed from the tavern.

Samantha sat as one made of stone, seeing nothing, feeling nothing. He hadn’t even wanted her to touch him. Her throat tightened and her eyes stung. Masking her inner turmoil, she lifted her wineglass in a silent toast to her father’s retreating shadow. Two could play his game, but try as she would, she could still feel Dancer’s silent disapproval. It was not often that he sided against her and tonight she felt his betrayal more keenly than Falcon’s ire.

Resting her elbows on either side of her plate Samantha’s head dropped to rest on clenched fists. Her chest grew tight and she struggled against the tears that threatened anew. She took several deep breaths before raising her eyes to confront Dancer.

“It is not my wish to disobey him, but he should not ask the impossible of me.”

Dancer raised a brow but said nothing.

Samantha pushed the food away in disgust. “Mayhaps I should have tempered my words,” she conceded, shrugging her weary shoulders. “But he should understand. You should understand. Why do you fight me on this? I am completely safe when I venture into the swamp. Do you truly think that there is one on this island, save perhaps St. Martin, that would dare to harm me? I have you and Falcon standing to my left and Kabol on my right. What fool would risk the anger of all three?”

Dancer watched a familiar mutinous look settle over her delicate features. She didn’t even reach Falcon’s shoulder in height, yet she was the only one who openly dared to challenge him. “Falcon has made a stand in front of his crew, Curse. The next time he will not back down. If it comes to that, there will be little I can do to save you.”

Samantha placed a fleeting kiss on his weathered cheek. “You speak as a doddering old man,” she whispered, giving his thick gold earring a gentle tug. “But I know for a certainty that,

despite Marie's objections, you still bed more than half the wenches on this island."

Samantha dodged his threatening swing and left to seek her bed. But for Dancer the light sound of her laughter lingered long after both she and the brandy were gone.

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Samantha paced restlessly finding no comfort in the plush surroundings of her chambers. Rich ivory silks from India covered the walls. The ornately carved teak furniture glowed warmly in the light of the single candle that reflected in the crystal panes of the French doors. A large arrangement of wildflowers in a variety of yellows and oranges provided the room's only touch of color.

Muffled laughter from the common room below filtered upward to her third-floor sanctuary but tonight it offered no peace. Her mind replayed the angry confrontation with Falcon over and over again.

Not bothering to disrobe, she extinguished the candle and listlessly flopped back against the pillows on her bed. Tonight, no moonlight illuminated the miniature portrait she cradled lovingly in her palm.

"How did you succeed, Mama?" she whispered. "How did you make him love you?" Silent tears traced a path down her pale face. "'Tis not possible for me to please him. We took half a score of ships last voyage and still he is not content. We must sail again with the tide." Clutching the portrait close to her chest, Samantha curled onto her side. "What words of wisdom did your death rob from me?" she sobbed brokenly into the pillow. "Do I ask too much? All I wish is for Papa to love me."

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Falcon's Curse is available for download at all major retailers.

Awards and Accolades:

SEA SCOUNDREL

1997 RWA Golden Heart Finalist

1991 A Heart of the Rockies Award

1991 A Dallas Area Romance Authors Award



## Annette Blair Booklist

Jewels of Historical Romance Anthology, Feb 2013  
Holy Scoundrel, January 2013  
Tulle Death do us Part, July 2013  
Moving Pictures, Sisters of Sprit Anthology, Jan 2013  
Cloaked in Malice, July 2012, New York Times Bestseller  
Jonquils in the Snow, Mammoth Book Ghost Romance, Aug 2012  
A Winter Heart Novella, Aug 2012  
Proper Scoundrel, May 2012  
Captive Scoundrel, May 2012  
Sea Scoundrel, May 2012  
Butterfly Garden Audio Book, April 2012  
Jacob's Return Audio Book, March 2012  
Untamable Rogue, January 2012  
Unmistakable Rogue, January 2012  
Unforgettable Rogue, January 2012  
Undeniable Rogue, January 2012  
Butterfly Garden, Oct 2011  
Skirting the Grave, July 2011  
Kissingate Magic, Mammoth Book Scottish Romance, January 2011  
Jacob's Return, May 2011  
Vampire Dragon, April 2011  
Fall in Love Like a Romance Writer, February 2011  
Naked Dragon, January 2010  
Death by Diamonds, July 2010  
Bedeviled Angel, August 2010  
You Can't Steal First, Hot Ticket Anthology, Sept 2009  
Larceny and Lace, Aug 2009  
A Veiled Deception, January 2009  
Never Been Witched, Feb 2009  
Gone with the Witch, May 2008  
Sex and the Psychic Witch, August 2007  
The Scot, the Witch & the Wardrobe, Dec 2006  
You Can't Steal First, Hot Ticket Anthology, May 2006  
Scoundrel in Disguise, May 2006  
My Favorite Witch, January 2006  
The Butterfly Garden, April 2005  
The Kitchen Witch, Oct 2004  
A Christmas Baby, Oct 2004  
An Unmistakable Rogue, Oct 2003  
An Unforgettable Rogue, Oct 2002  
An Undeniable Rogue, Mar 2002  
Thee I love, Oct 1999  
Lady Patience, Sept 1999

Lady Faith, March 1999

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