

Prisoner Of Love

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Victoria Bellingham plunged into the clear blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Florida, feeling the silky warmth of the water glide over her bathing suit clad body. She wore scuba gear, a fact that would have amazed her just a month before, or even a week before. She had always shunned the water, not because of a natural aversion, but because it required the donning of a bathing suit. Victoria was a lush cream puff in a world of celery sticks. As a fat woman in a world that rewarded anorexia with television and modeling contracts, she had always hid her body under layers of clothing.

But then, on her thirtieth birthday, she had realized that she was hiding from herself, not the world, and she took a good, long look at herself, naked, in the bathroom mirror. Not so bad, she thought. Really, not so bad. She had excess curves, but they were only ‘*excess*’ if you were programmed to see them that way. Perhaps it had been coming for a long time, but all at once she knew that she was a fool to be ashamed of her body, and she went out and shopped for her first bathing suit in fifteen years-- a gorgeous tropical number with a plunging neckline. And then, on a whim she had trotted into a travel agency and booked a Caribbean vacation. She could afford it. She worked hard. Why shouldn’t she go?

It was everything she had never dreamed it could be. She was alone, but for the first time in a long time she was not lonely, because she had also discovered that she was pretty good company. Walking in the village one day, just a day before she had to leave to go home, she had succumbed to the lure of a sign that promised, **Scuba Lessons: Learn To Dive In An Hour!** And she had!

Victoria had mastered the basics of correct breathing and swimming with heavy tanks quickly, including the rules of safe diving. And now she was with a charter diving near the reported wreck of the **VICTORY**, a privateer’s vessel that had sunk in the late seventeenth hundreds.

The charter captain, Andy McCall, had been looking for the wreck for twenty years without success. Before setting out for the site where he expected it to be, he had given the group a short history detailing the events that had lead up to the fateful day of its sinking, July 23, 1777.

Victoria checked over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't out of sight of her companion divers, and turned towards something that had caught her eye on the sandy bottom. She could have sworn it glinted in the faint light from the surface, but she wasn't sure. She blinked as she swam toward the barnacle encrusted beam of wood, trying to clear her blue eyes in the misty goggles.

It was confusing to a novice diver, because everything looked so different under the water; the sunlight filtering down to a blue-green, watery haze. Currents shifted, pulling her back and forth, and she glanced nervously over her shoulder again. It would be dangerous to get separated from the others.

She peered back at the wood shard that jutted out of the sand in the middle of a forest of seaweed. Yes, there definitely was a glimmer! Something sparkled and winked, and she swam toward it; her heart pounding with mounting excitement. What could it be?

Pushing the heavy strands of kelp away as she hovered over the crumpled, wooden shape, Victoria realized that she was staring down at what appeared to be the remains of some kind of box. A treasure chest perhaps? Then she saw the faint glimmer again. It twinkled like a tiny, fallen star that had embedded itself in the white sand.

Victoria quickly pulled away the slimy, rotting wood to get at the gleaming, gold object. Tugging at it a second, it broke free of its sandy grave with no protest, and she gasped as she held it up before her, almost forgetting the mouthpiece of her scuba gear as the instinct to shout and scream about her fabulous discovery overwhelmed her.

It was a magnificent ruby and gold necklace. So thick and heavy it was, she could feel its weight even under the water. Its rubies were the size of buttons, and the intricately engraved gold was adorned with brilliant diamonds, too numerous to count. A huge ruby hung down from the V-shaped necklace; the biggest gem she had ever seen. It was the size of a pigeon's egg!

Victoria's hands trembled with the thought that what she held in them could be the very booty from the old Victory itself. Andy, the charter captain, had said that there was a fortune in gems aboard, the night it had gone down in a vicious storm off the western coast of Florida. Historical documentation had revealed no mention of any survivors, except for one cabin boy who, on his death bed as an old man, had sworn that great wealth awaited any man who found the wreck of the Victory.

Victoria stared at the magnificent necklace, mesmerized by its beauty. She **MUST** get back to the others and show them her find, she thought. After all, it meant that the rest of the lost treasure was sure to be close by, and knowing Andy McCall, he'd want to recruit a search party immediately.

As she gazed in awe at the prize in her hands, Victoria was disconcerted to note that it seemed to be growing heavier-- and it was getting warmer-- no, HOT! The rubies glowed like crimson fire and felt like burning embers in her hands. She started to shake, and her head whirled. Was she running out of oxygen?

She felt light-headed, but at least the gems weren't burning her hands anymore. They were just warm now, and they gave her such a feeling of comfort, like she wanted to stay down there forever. Her entire soul was filled with a kind of euphoria, and she closed her eyes letting herself float in a dream-like state that engulfed her with serenity.



The next thing Victoria knew, she was taking in a great mouthful of salty, gritty water! Coughing and retching, she opened her eyes, and was alarmed to find complete darkness surrounding her. A deathly cold enveloped her body, and she felt herself going under again, although she flailed around trying to stay on the surface. She was swathed in layers of wet, clinging fabric that twisted around her legs, dragging her down and down. Wildly, she thrashed around and kicked, trying desperately to make her way up. But, which way *was* up?

Panic gripped Victoria's stomach, and her lungs felt like they would burst if she didn't get some air soon. Where were her tanks? Where was her gear? She kicked again, praying that she was heading for the surface; under the dark water there was no up or down. The moment she felt the cool rush of night air on her skin she wanted to cry with gratitude. She took in a huge gulp of welcome air, splashing and stroking with her hands to keep herself afloat in the turbulent waves. What was going on? she wondered. Where was she, and why was it so dark?

She soon became aware of a great, looming shape near her and wild shouts in the darkness. A male voice cried out, "'Ere she is, Cap'n. We found 'er!"

Thank God for that, Victoria thought, coughing and expelling fishy, salty water with every choking gasp. She was chilled to the bones, and every time she caught her breath a wave would slap her in the face, sending her into another choking, coughing fit. The dark was so dreadfully disorienting, and-- Good God, she thought. It was night! How on earth had she stayed in the water until nightfall, and without her scuba tanks?

Strong hands caught her under the armpits and dragged her aboard some small craft, and then she felt a rope being looped around her, under her ample breasts and around her back. A strange feeling of weightlessness followed as she was jerkily hoisted from the small boat. She dangled like a prize salmon on a hook, but Victoria didn't care. She was just grateful that someone had rescued her safely out of that dreadful cold, dark water. She closed her eyes on her confusion, shutting out the blackness, the rough, masculine voices, and the odd curses that filled the air around her.

Victoria felt her plump body scrape over a railing, and she was unceremoniously dropped on deck. Pushing herself up on her hands, she sat up as someone pulled the looped rope off of her. She could hardly see, the night was so dark, but above her appeared a light-- a faint, yellow glimmer that bobbed and swayed with the creaking motion of the ship she was aboard.

She shivered, thinking only of stripping out of her wet clothing, and having a long, hot shower. But when she glanced around, she froze in terror. A ring of men surrounded her, their expressions avid and feral, and like rats in a cellar, their eyes gleaming in the dim light of the lantern that one of them held above their heads. They advanced on her, and she shrank back until she felt her backbone hit the knobbly spindle of the ship's railing.

She was trapped!

Confusion whirled through Victoria's head, and she shook it, trying to clear the mental fog. As she did so, she felt wet hair slap at her neck and her hand went up reflexively to touch it. She looked down at herself, and discovered that she was clad in a long, white nightgown with a froth of limp, dripping lace at her throat. The last she remembered, she was wearing her lovely tropical swimsuit with scuba gear, and had shorter hair. '*Professional hair*', she had first called it, when she cut it to make herself appear more business-like. Good God! What was happening? Had she lost her mind?

Suddenly the men halted their advance upon her, and silence fell among them. They parted, like the sea before Moses. As they did so, a man, unlike any other she had seen in her life, appeared. He strode towards her, a glowering expression of anger on his handsome face. He wore skin-tight, black breeches that molded to his sinewy thighs, and knee-length, black boots that gleamed in the dull lamplight. Straining over his broad chest was a snowy white shirt with billowing ruffles at the throat and wrist. The neck was open in a V, exposing tanned skin.

When he reached Victoria, he grabbed her rounded shoulders with strong hands, and hauled her to her feet. He shook her roughly as she swayed, almost fainting in his rough grasp. "What in God's name were you about, Arabella?" he berated her. "Did you think that I'd let my prisoner kill herself before I got my ransom?"

He shook her again. "Lady Ansley," he added, spitting the words out like a bitter pill, "I'll not let you cheat me out of my reward!"

Victoria groaned and sagged against him, fear and a frightful sickness leaving her with no control of her limbs. For a moment she saw something in the man's eyes—worry or concern, perhaps? She wasn't sure if she could name it that. Then he swept her up in his arms and carried her across the deck and down some steps that led into a dimly lit hallway. Yes, *carried* her, she thought in wonder, as if she weighed no more than a kitten, he was that strong and virile.

Was this some kind of dream or nightmare she was having, Victoria wondered in her haziness. All around her the vessel seemed alive with groans and creaks of wood against wood as it tossed on the turbulent waters. The long passageway they ventured down took on all the aspects of a nightmare, every step threatening to take her toward some terrifying conclusion. What next, monsters or demons, or would she be tossed back into the black water, or thrown to the sharks? Lanterns mounted on the wall at intervals lit their way, and Victoria leaned against the man's muscular shoulder,

wondering which of the doors they would enter, and what-- God forbid-- awaited her there.

At last, he kicked open a door at the end of the hall and strode through it, holding her as easily to his chest as though she were a small child. On the far side of the room, he dumped her on a bunk and threw her a rough blanket.

"Strip your wet clothes off and wrap yourself in this," he ordered her in a gruff voice. "You'll have to do that yourself until your maid comes back from your father's ship with the answer."

"My... my father's ship?" she exclaimed. "What are you talking about? Where am I?"

Victoria's throat felt raw and sore with each attempt to swallow. She took a seat on the edge of the bunk and shivered in her wet nightgown as she impatiently awaited his answer. The man had turned his back, but whirled to face her, a look of snarling anger on his weather-worn, handsome face that made her draw back in a whimper.

"Do *not* try to tell me you have lost your memory!" he said. "Do you not think I will see through that, as I have every other ruse you have tried since I captured you, Arabella?"

"My name is *not* Arabella," Victoria informed him, "and I would appreciate it if you would not yell at me!" she said, with what firmness she could summon from her quaking body. "I am not deaf!"

"Fine," he returned. "I'll not raise my voice." Somehow the quiet menace of his softer tone was even more intimidating.

"I am not this Arabella... whoever she is. I don't know how I ended up in the water. I was scuba diving, and the next thing I knew I was..."

She was interrupted by the loud exclamation of disgust that erupted from the man the other men had called 'Captain'. "Lady Ansley," he said, "I suppose you have forgotten who I am, forgotten entirely that I am your abductor, Captain Alexander Sachervell? And I suppose that next you will be spinning me a pretty yarn, saying that you know nothing about the exchange that is to take place, the exchange of your lovely self for the birthright that your father stole from me, or at least a pretty equivalent in jewels?"

Victoria's stomach turned over. "Jewels? You mean, the rubies?" What had happened to them anyway, to the necklace? The last thing she remembered, she was holding it in her hands. She must have dropped it in her struggle to get to the surface.

The captain's firm lips eased into a sly grin. "Aye, I see you haven't forgotten *that*, at least. How reassuring, my lady. Yes, the Battisley Rubies! Hah!" His voice dripped with poisonous scorn. "How about renaming them the Sachervell rubies? That is what they are!"

"But... I found them when I was scuba diving on the floor of the Gulf..."

"Enough!" he shouted. "Get your clothing off and wrap yourself in that blanket, or I will do it for you. Do not think I wouldn't, and take my pleasure while I do. I will not have you sicken. I *will* return you to your father in good health, despite your efforts this night to kill yourself." He paused, and when he saw her frozen in her place and trembling, he said, "Go on, strip off, me girl. You are trembling from the cold." His voice sounded a little gentler as he told her to get warm.

"But I... I can't change in front of you!" Victoria protested.

“You *will*!” he said, his voice harsh again. “I don’t trust you out of my sight now. Everything you do from now on will be done with a guard. You have your choice, Lady Ansley. I either stay right here or I will bring in one of my men to watch over you... say Black Nate, a scurvy scum if ever there was one. T’would be a pretty prize for the blackguard to watch the likes o’ you slip out of your clothes. T’would fuel his filthy dreams for a year. It is your decision, lady.”

Victoria thought a moment, and then said, with what dignity she could muster, “I...I’ll change with you here, but you must turn your back.”

“That’s better,” smiled the captain. “That sounds like my feisty little lady.” He turned to face the other way and busied himself at a table by the wall.

Victoria hurriedly pulled the wet gown over her head and used the blanket to scrub her puckered skin dry, quivering in the chilly, dim confines of the cabin. Some kind of nightmare this was, she thought. She had never dreamt this level of sensory reality before, and frankly, she hoped she never did again.

Sachervell started talking again. “Clever of you to chose the lesser of two evils, my dear,” he said. “I am, after all, though a privateer, still a gentleman of the high seas. Black Nate would have removed that lacy gown from you himself, and he wouldn’ta been gentle about it. He would have spilt his seed just gazing on your bounty.”

“Do not forget that I am the only one standing between you and my crew, not a one of which could be called a gentleman. I am afraid they want nothing more than that I should turn you over to them after I get the ransom, but I intend to return you to your father unharmed... as long as you co-operate, of course. They were on the point of doing something very nasty when they hauled you back up on the deck of the Victory.”

Victoria gasped, her mind racing. That was the name of the ship Andy McCall had been searching for for twenty years. It was the same wreck he had spoken of so affectionately-- the one that had lost the ruby necklace on its way to a watery grave. She had been handling those jewels when she lost consciousness.

The captain didn’t appear to notice Victoria’s gasp of recognition at the name of the Victory. “You have no idea how lovely you looked with seaweed draped over you, he said, “and that sheer nightgown clinging to your exquisite body, molding to your breasts, touching your curves with loving pleasure.” He took in a tremulous breath letting it out slowly, and cleared his throat. “If I hadn’t come along when I did, who knows what would have happened.”

The man ambled over and straightened a few papers on the table that acted as his desk, still keeping his back turned. “How long have I dreamed of soft shoulders, and glowing, sparkling eyes; perfumed hair and full breasts the color of ivory...”

Victoria hastily wrapped the blanket around her naked form and hopped back on the bunk. “You can turn around now. I’m done,” she said loudly, deliberately interrupting his detailed accounts of what he had missed being so long at sea.

He turned and surveyed her, his scrutinizing gaze lingering on the parts of her flesh not covered by the blanket. Victoria self-consciously brought her hand up to her neck, noticing again the long, wet hair. How had her blond hair grown so much longer, so suddenly? Surely, this was a dream.

“Arabella,” Sachervell said, his voice gentler than it had been. “You understand that since you have attempted suicide, I cannot leave you alone. I cannot allow you to

jeopardize my task. You are my prisoner, and will remain under my guard from now on.”

“But...” Victoria opened her mouth to protest, not against what he was saying, but against the weird assumption that she was this ‘*Arabella*’.

“No buts!” he said, moving towards her.

He was so close to her now, bending over her and planting his large hands on either side of her blanketed thigh, that she could feel his warm breath on her cheek as she turned her face away in confusion. She could feel the radiated heat of his body near hers. He had an air of authority about him and the appearance of one who demanded instant obedience. He dwarfed her with his size, the breadth of his shoulders, the thickness of his thighs.

“I am not Arabella,” she protested, trying to calm her tremulous breath.

“Stop your foolishness!” he thundered, his firm jaw tensing visibly. “If you think to confuse me, you will only earn my wrath! Arabella you were when you went in, and Arabella you were when you were pulled out! If you persist in this nonsense, I will dunk you back in the sea from which we hauled you out!”

“But...” Victoria gazed up at him, at his anger-darkened eyes under slanting brows. She was riveted by his expression, for she detected a depth of passion and desire that glowed like coals in his cool eyes. Maybe she *was* dreaming, and in her dream, she had conjured up this thrilling pirate to warm her with his lust. What other explanation could there be? It had been far too long with no man, that was all it was, surely.

He spoke again, softly. “I swear I’ll not harm you, my sweet Lady Ansley, but neither will I let you go without the rubies.” He reached out, and with one gentle hand, stroked her cheek, blazing a trail of warmth and comfort that Victoria was hard-pressed to explain, considering that the man had named her as his prisoner.

“If you give me your word that you will behave,” he added, “I will leave only young Georgie Mason to guard you. The lad is only twelve, but brave and loyal. However, if you chose not to behave, I will put Black Nate in with you, and I cannot guarantee he will honor my commitment to do you no harm. He has a love of ladies with your... voluptuous beauty, though never has he sampled one of your charms, nor a lady of your noble rank. That alone would cause him to want to... well, best leave that to your imagination.”

“I’ll behave,” Victoria promised, knowing she had no choice.

“Good, then I shall leave you to sleep. I will have your things brought down here, to my cabin. A good evening to you, Lady Ansley.” He nodded at her and turned towards the door.

“Where will *you* sleep, Captain, if this is your quarters?” Victoria questioned him, stopping him in mid-stride.

“Why, here, of course,” he replied, his smile lopsided. “I shall be sleeping right here, with you, to protect you from harm.”



Here!" she screeched. "But you said a boy... Georgie Mason would be..."

"That is only when I am busy, madam. Why did you think I brought you to *my* cabin instead of your own?"

Victoria didn't know what to say. She couldn't very well say it was because she hadn't known it was not her cabin.

"I will be sleeping here as usual," the captain went on. "Georgie will guard you when I have business on deck. I will be back, so remember to behave, my sweet, and do *not* try to beguile the boy with your wiles. He is too young to be seduced and will *not* be bribed. I rescued him from a life in the mines of Wales, and he is fiercely loyal."

Again, he nodded a farewell and left, locking the door behind him. Victoria instantly felt alone with her vulnerability and fear. Glancing around the room, she wondered what to do next, and decided that she had no choice but to crawl under the covers to warm herself. She was still feeling chilled from her ordeal in the ocean, and until Arabella's things were transferred, she had no other clothes. As she pulled the blankets around her shivering shoulders, Victoria tried to make sense of her strange situation.

What was going on, and what was she going to do about it? she wondered. She seemed to be having a dream, or a nightmare, about a pirate and the Victory, which was understandable since the ruby necklace was the last thing she remembered before losing track of everything. Problem was, the whole scenario was too real to be a dream-- the horror of drowning in the turbulent ocean, the terror of being cornered by a ring of toothless, smelly seamen, and the captain, with eyes like dark fire and a temper to match.

Yes, it was all too real.

The door to the cabin eased open, and Victoria peeked out from her covers with fear. A tow-headed youth poked his head around the corner, and when he discovered that she was awake, he sauntered in, his manner an imitation of Sachervell's arrogant bravado.

"Lady Ansley, you be awake!"

"Yes," she whispered, her sore throat making her voice a rattle of sound.

“Cap’n Sachervell sends his regards, ma’am, and this.” The boy advanced into the cabin, holding out a pewter mug that was filled with a liquid, blood-red in the flickering lantern light.

Victoria sat up in bed. “What is it?” she croaked.

“Brandy, ma’am. Cap’n says, drink it down. It’ll help the salt-water throat you ‘ave.”

She took the mug from the lad’s outstretched hand. He was blond and slim, small for his age, with a sly grin. He seemed completely at home in the captain’s cabin, and went about straightening things and tidying the captain’s belongings.

As he wandered around, she noticed the room for the first time since entering it. It had dark teak paneling with brass fitting and dark green upholstery on the one comfortable chair. Bookshelves lined the walls, and the mahogany table was littered with curled-up maps and a brass instrument that probably had some nautical significance.

Victoria sipped the brandy, feeling it sear a scorching trail down her ragged throat and into her stomach. A comforting warmth spread through her. “George,” she said, setting down the mug, “What is this vessel? A re-enactment of the original Victory, or something? Are you all actors?”

“My lady?” The boy’s pale eyebrows knotted over his light blue eyes. “Cap’n said you got a knock on the head, and I was not to mind you if you acted kinda strange. Guess he was right.”

Okay, Victoria thought. If these people were actors, they were all remarkable! Even the boy was letter perfect. She decided to try again. “Do you think Captain Sachervell is angry that I... um, tried to escape?”

Georgie plopped down in the green upholstered chair. “Not angry, milady. But he was worried near to madness when he heard the ‘*man overboard*’ call, and Mr. Lowell, the first mate, said it was you. I suppose he feels more responsible, you being his father’s cousin, and all.”

Victoria gasped. Cousins? The brandy she had been sipping went down her throat the wrong way, and Georgie came to her rescue, pounding her on the back with enthusiasm. She realized that if she was to not make any gaffes while she was taking part in this dream, or whatever it was, she had better learn more about who she was supposed to be, and why she was there. These lunatics were insistent that she was Arabella, so she had better be Arabella, or she might end up locked in the hold in chains, or worse, forced to walk the plank!

The lad was a virtual chatter box, and when Victoria found a tactful way to inquire about why the captain felt he was owed the Battisley rubies, he willingly told her the tale he had heard.

Years before, Arabella Battisley’s father, Walter, had dared his cousin, Colin Sachervell to race him. Colin was conceited about his riding prowess, and betted everything he owned on the race: his estate, land, money, everything! He lost, and his family was left impoverished. Colin Sachervell died soon after, a broken man.

His son, Alexander Sachervell, joined the Royal Navy at age fourteen, a step he was forced to take to support himself. He should have been educated at Eton and Oxford, preparatory to taking over the family estates, but his father’s improvident gambling had left him with nothing. A bet was a bet, though, and if the end result was harsh, still no one thought of blaming Walter Battisley for claiming what was rightfully his.

Many years later, however, a groom of the Battisley house, in his cups, claimed that on the morning of the race, Walter had him make up a special mash for Colin's mount. He was of the opinion from the horse's subsequent performance that the mash contained a dose of some drug that caused the animal to get sleepy and stumble. When Alexander Sachervell found this out he was furious and swore revenge, which he was now taking by kidnapping and offering for ransom Walter's only child, Lady Arabella Battisley.

Victoria grew sleepy listening to the convoluted tale, and when Georgie left his chair to trim the wick on the lantern, she fell into a deep sleep. She only slept a few hours and when she awoke, everything was dark. For a moment, she forgot where she was and wondered why the hotel bed felt so lumpy and uncomfortable. Then she remembered. She wasn't even in a hotel, let alone on dry land!

Victoria sat up in bed and peered through the blackened interior of the cabin. She was so thirsty her throat burned. She moved and groaned her body aching where the rope had been tied around her ribs. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness she spotted a bottle on the table, and licked her dry lips in anticipation of retrieving it. A figure was curled up on the floor by her bunk, and she thought that poor Georgie must have gotten tired of guard duty and laid down for a nap.

She slipped off the bunk, careful not to disturb the sleeping child, and wound the blanket more securely around her. She tiptoed across the cabin and reached for the bottle. At that moment, the ship lurched and Victoria was thrown off balance, stumbling sideways and knocking over the bottle. It rolled off of the table and hit the floor with a loud bang.

"What the..." A male voice startled her, causing her to whirl around. A shadowy figure rose up from the floor, up and up until it reached its full height. It was not the small, slim Georgie, as Victoria had thought it to be, but his imperious master! For a second, she considered hitting him over the head with the bottle and making a run for it, and she even bent down to pick up the bottle with that thought in mind.

Sachervell must have read her thoughts. "Oh, no, you don't, my sweet!" He lunged forward to stop her from swinging it, just as the boat lurched again. He had intended to get a hold of Victoria's arm, but instead, he got a handful of blanket. As he staggered backwards, it pulled away from her, leaving her stark naked.

She screamed and made a swipe at it, but he held it behind his back, a devilish glint in his eyes. "Give that to me!" she demanded, her hoarse voice trembling as she tried to hide her nakedness with her arms.

Just then, the clouds parted and a shaft of pure, white moonlight shone through the portal, settling on Victoria's plump, curvaceous form and lighting up her pale skin until it glowed like ivory. She heard the captain's quick gasp, and saw to her alarm that he had tossed the blanket aside and was advancing toward her.

"Don't come any closer!" She backed away, but was stalled when her bottom butted up against the table.

"Or what?" he said, his breathing heavy, his eyes glittering. "How nice that being second, or third cousins, or whatever we are, does not make what we are about to do sinful. Oh, my sweet, dear cousin!" He moved closer to her.

"Go away," Victoria said as firmly as she could.

He reached out, speaking in a soothing tone as he did. "Come, my sweet, don't deny the fire between us. Give me one chance to show you how warm my admiration for you has become."

He pulled her to him, imprisoning her in his strong embrace. She felt her blood pound through her veins as she tried to pull away from him. His hot mouth closed over hers as he kissed her in a way both demanding and sensuous, plundering and arousing. His hands traveled the silky skin of her back down to her rounded bottom and he gripped her harder, holding her firmly to his hard body with powerful hands.

Victoria felt herself grow dizzy with inexplicable yearning as his hands caressed and stroked her, and his mouth worked wonders on her lips. But then he lifted one callused hand to cup her naked breast, splaying his thumb over the sensitive nipple, making it harden beneath his masterful touch. She came to her senses and summoned all her strength to push him away.

"You... you said I was safe!" she exclaimed, blushing from her nakedness.

Sachervell closed his eyes and clenched his hands into two tight fists, fighting his arousal. Then he retrieved the blanket and tossed it to her, not meeting her gaze. "I did," he answered her, "and I meant it. I still mean it. I will take no woman against her will. I apologize, my lady. My only excuse is that your loveliness overwhelmed me. The provocation was just too great!"

Right, she thought, wryly. What a great actor this man was. It must be being away at sea too long that caused his arousal-- if she bought his story that this was all real-- because she couldn't remember ever having that affect on a man. Victoria wrapped the blanket around herself. "I was thirsty and was reaching for the wine. I didn't mean to wake you up."

Stiffly, Sachervell took the unbroken bottle from her hand, pulled the cork and handed it back to her. As she slaked her thirst, he restlessly prowled the cabin.

"I blame myself for what just happened, my lady," he said, pacing. "The reason I will allow no one but myself or Georgie Mason to guard you is because we are the only two I trust not to take advantage of you. I would not have you think me uncivilized."

Victoria sniffed in disgust. "Oh, no, it's completely civilized to keep prisoner a woman who had no part in your quarrel with someone else. And then, you force your unwanted attentions on her... yes, that's very civilized!"

She found herself taking on her part with more and more ease-- gusto, even-- and adopting the more formal rhythms of his eighteenth century speech. Could it be that-- but no, that was *ridiculous*. She remembered the moment when she held the ruby necklace and the strange drifting feeling she had experienced. Could she have drifted in time, back two hundred years? Impossible! But how many more explanations were there?

The captain was speaking again. "I'll not force my... ah, unwanted attentions on you again, my dear woman, but I will still hold you until your father capitulates, whether you think my actions uncivilized or not. And I promise you will not be harmed. You can return to your bed now. I will disturb you no more this night."

He pointed to the bunk, and Victoria went to it, curling up among the blankets again as he lay back down on the floor next to her. Sleep was a long time coming as she replayed every moment of his ardent kiss and passion-filled caresses, but finally she slumbered. When she awoke the next morning, it was to find Georgie tidying the cabin,

reverently folding the blanket the captain had slept on as though it were precious to him.

Over the next few days, Victoria was forced to the conclusion that she had, indeed, traveled back in time. There was no other *logical* explanation. Why and how she still did not know, although she knew that it had happened while she held the ruby necklace. Her main concern now was how she was going to get back to her own time, as she no longer had the necklace in her possession.

Victoria had also wondered what had happened to her appearance during her journey back in time, and had finally found what passed for a mirror on board ship, a polished metal plate. She didn't know what she expected to see when she gazed at her reflection, and was immediately surprised, and relieved, that she looked the same-- same plump, blue-eyed face, same small chin, same dimple-- except for the length of her blond hair.

It was much longer, and it curled into soft ringlets to her shoulders. Eventually, she got used to the length and took to tying it back with a black ribbon she had found on the captain's desk.

The Countess's clothes fit her to perfection-- the girl must have been as rubenesque as Victoria-- but Victoria was a little shocked at the immodesty of the fashions of the time. She wore a filmy white muslin gown with a snug, black, laced bodice that pushed her ample bosom up even though she wore no bra. This scant outfit brought many unwanted gazes from the dozens of seamen who manned the ship, particularly the captain who hardly spoke to her, though he watched her constantly; a ravenous hunger in his gaze that both disconcerted and thrilled her. His eyes followed her everywhere she went, and when she was on deck, he lost the thread of conversations with his first mate, able to see only her.

Sometimes, she watched him in return when he didn't know she was near. He was lean and fit, sun-bronzed and muscular from years at sea, and he worked as hard as any of his men, scaling the rigging, hoisting the sails, lending a hand wherever needed. And though he didn't say much to her, he treated her with courtly good manners, and slept by her bed every night without ever approaching her improperly again.

Occasionally, Victoria would lay awake at night listening to his heavy breathing. She suspected that he was remembering her naked body against his and the kisses that still stirred her just to think of them. Would she ever forget the feel of his strong, warm hands gliding over her body, and the deep longing to be touched by him again, against all reason? He had left his mark on her soul with his touch.

Most days, Victoria spent the time strolling the deck, finding the gentle ocean breeze and rolling motion of the ship soothing and invigorating at the same time. Georgie, her main source of information and a much-needed friend, was constantly by her side with stories of the Captain and his adventures. Sachervell had come through the brutal Navy system, condemning its harshness as inhumane. Though he expected unquestioning obedience from his men, he tempered his command with a surprisingly gentleness.

As time went on and days passed into weeks, Victoria became accustomed to life at sea, but still she wondered when and how she would return to the future. What had happened that morning under the Gulf waters as she held the Battisley necklace, and why her? Had they lain on the ocean bottom for over two hundred years, waiting for her to touch them? It just didn't make sense. She didn't understand.

After a week and a half at sea, Victoria awoke one morning to the sound of a commotion. Sachervell's voice, usually controlled and even, was raised. Sending Georgie from her room, she dressed quickly and rushed up on deck to investigate the uproar. Sachervell was standing against the railing with a few of his men watching a man in a rowboat who was heading back to his ship on the horizon. When the captain caught sight of her, his expression darkened.

"*You!*" he thundered. "Here is what your father thinks of his daughter!" He held up a scrolled piece of paper, and waved it in her face. "*Here* is his answer!"

Victoria took the paper from his outstretched hand and unrolled the sheet. In a scrawling script, it was Arabella's father's answer. It read:

Captain Sachervell,

So you think you have the right to the Battisley rubies, do you? Think again, fool! Your father was an even greater cull than you. If he hadn't the sense to know a rigged race, then he deserved to lose. And you have done me a service by kidnapping my impudent baggage of a daughter from me. I wish you luck with her, for she is a shrew and would drive a man to villainy faster than poverty ever could.

May I suggest, my good man, a regular whipping-- interspersed, if she pleases you, with regular rough bedding-- until she is grateful that you stop. I would have done the beating myself, but her mother, may her soul rot in Hell, refused to allow it, and she was like her daughter. She made my life a living hell until she died last year.

In other words, fare thee well, young cousin. I leave these waters a happier man, and will sail back to England, rather than go on to the Indies as planned. The farther from Arabella I go, the better. I only intended to sell her off in marriage to some wealthy plantation owner, anyway.

As for her maid, I shall keep her with me for my own pleasure. She is a plump and comely lass, and will warm my bed again tonight, as she offered to, rather than to be forced to return to my daughter's service.

Cordially,
Walter Battisley
Earl of Ansley'

Victoria was aware that Sachervell watched her face intently, but she could summon no reaction worthy of the feisty Arabella. The girl was condemned as a shrew? What did that mean in this time-- that she refused to be bullied, that she spoke her mind?

She glanced up from the paper and into the captain's angry eyes. "So, what will you do now?"

He seemed disconcerted by her mild question. His men were glaring at her in a menacing manner, but with a word he dismissed them to their duties, then beckoned for her to join him.

Victoria stood at the wooden railing, relishing the bracing, salty wind that filled the sails as the men raised them. They were evidently setting sail for somewhere, but she didn't feel concerned or worried in any way. For some reason, her spirits had lifted with the Earl of Ansley's rejection.

“You seem not in the slightest concerned that your father does not want you back, Arabella,” the captain said with a perplexed frown. “I expected a hellion like you to be ranting and raving, and throwing things.”

Victoria smiled. “I have no interest in throwing things.”

“But are you not angry that your father will not ransom you?”

“Not really.” She took a shot in the dark, and said, “We never got along anyway. I wouldn’t have expected him to part with the jewels to get me back.”

Sachervell stared out to sea, squinting at the horizon. Ansley’s ship was hoisting sail, and the crewman that was rowing back was now a bobbing dot in the foam-speckled blue of the Gulf waters. “I am loath to attack his ship and claim the rubies,” he said at last. “You needn’t deny that he has them. I know he does. They were to be a part of your dowry, were they not? The dowry he was to take to trade you for with a plantation owner?”

“Aren’t you a pirate?” Victoria asked curiously. “Why don’t you want to attack him? Most pirates would in a situation like this.”

“I am a privateer, my sweet, much different in reality. I attack no English vessel. Spanish ships are as plentiful as sharks in these waters, and the plump purses of Spanish *grandees* are what we seek.”

“I would think that Battis... er, father’s treatment of your father, and now, of you, would not have deserved any consideration.”

Sachervell cocked one eyebrow at her and gazed at her speculatively. “My, you are a bloodthirsty wench, aren’t you?”

Victoria bridled at being called a ‘*wench*’. She drew herself up and said, “Why do you say that?”

“If we attack your father’s ship, people will get injured or killed... maybe even your father.”

“Judging from this letter,” Victoria waved the parchment scroll, “I think the old goat deserves whatever he gets, don’t you agree? I say we attack at dawn!”

“That’s my lass,” he said, eyeing her with grudging respect. “Shall we get your ruby necklace, then?”

A thrill raced through her body at the thought of joining the captain in such a bold enterprise. “Yes,” she answered, tossing back her head in defiance, feeling her long hair flutter in the wind. “Let’s go get them. The Battisley rubies will be ours.”



They spent the rest of their day, and long into the night planning their attack. They would chase down the Earl's ship, and take the jewels by force. The Golden Gryphon was no match for the Victory, which had been built as a swift fighting ship armed with cannons. Battisley had foolishly left behind his protection, a man o' war ship like the Victory, when he had traveled to give his answer to Sachervell. Now, as he lumbered back to his fleet he was as vulnerable as a great, fat cow faced with a lion. Battisley's arrogance had led him to depend on Sachervell's known aversion to attacking British ships.

The Victory's crew were working at a fever pitch, chasing the Gryphon for all they were worth and readying their guns. Victoria paced the deck, fearful that she had given the captain the wrong advice. What if he were wounded-- or killed?! Or, what if he killed Battisley? He would become a murderer to the Crown and be hanged if he ever returned to British soil.

But, it was too late to turn back now. Sachervell strode about the deck, shouting orders and ignoring Victoria completely in his intense concentration. She felt useless and angry that she could not help him defeat her *faux* father, who sounded like the worst scoundrel ever to be a peer of the realm. An idea took seed in her mind, then grew and bloomed. She would *not* be useless-- she would do her part to recover the ruby necklace for Alexander Sachervell-- for her love.

Just before dawn, cannon fire announced the commencement of the battle. It waged fast and furious with the occasional ball crashing onto the deck of the Victory. And then, after a vicious cannon volley from their guns, a shout of triumph went up from the ship's crew. They had snapped the mainmast of the Gryphon, disabling her. She would barely be able to limp anywhere, and she was ripe for the plucking.

A half hour later, the first mate, Jamie Lowell, shouted, "All hands, prepare to board the Gryphon!" It was the call Victoria had been waiting for.

Hearing the scrape of wood against wood, she darted from the shadows to see the most breathtaking sight she had ever seen. The Victory was hard against the Gryphon, and the crew had lashed the privateer's vessel to the merchant vessel and dropped

anchor. They swarmed over the railing like wharf rats abandoning a sinking ship, cutlasses drawn and ready for a fight.

Victoria joined the melee, her movements now easier in the stolen trousers and blousy shirt of a crewman. The captain was commanding the takeover, and he glanced her way once, then twice. His face contorted in rage as she took hold of a rope and swung over the railing to the Gryphon. Thank God, she thought, she had taken gymnastic courses when she was a child, and was still in good shape.

“Arabella!” he roared. “I should have known I couldn’t trust you!”

Victoria’s heart plummeted as she realized that to Sachervell, it looked like she was trying to escape, even to a wounded ship like the Gryphon. Her blue eyes widened at that reality, but there was no time to explain as the men of the Victory swarmed behind her, pushing her forward; the smell of cannon shot and charred wood assailed her nostrils.

Shaking in her shock, Victoria made her way through the pitched battle that raged around her. She was single-minded in her determination, and knew, instinctively, where to find what she was looking for. Making her way to the lower deck where the cabins were situated, she hurried along the hallway, dim with acrid smoke, until she came to a teakwood door. The brass plate on it announced the occupant’s name, ‘*Battisley*’, Victoria’s father in this strange life. He would have the jewels with him.

She tried the doorknob. It was locked. She rattled it frantically, furious that she would be denied her treasure, after all that she had gone through to attain it. She wanted desperately to hold the necklace again, and then give it to Sachervell herself.

The door flung open abruptly and she was faced with an elderly man who stood in the doorway with a treasure box under one arm, and a sword clutched in his hand. He was portly, and panting for breath; his red nose and rotund middle attesting to a lifetime love affair with the bottle.

“I’ll never hand over the...” he shrieked, his blue eyes blazing with fire. Then, comically, his face seemed to droop as his jaw fell open.

“Arabella!” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “My... my dear, sweet girl!”

So, he did recognize her as his daughter, Victoria thought as she stared at the man. That answered one question she had. But the bastard had sacrificed her to his own lust for the jewels, and that she could not forgive.

“I’m not your daughter,” she said, her voice hardly recognizable as her own. “You gave me up to Sachervell, remember?!”

“That... that was not my doing, daughter,” Battisley stuttered. “I would have sent the jewels, but I did not believe Sachervell would send you back.”

Victoria shook with anger that a man could be so vile. “So, you were going to abandon me to my fate?”

“Not at all, my dear. I... I was going to send my man o’ war back to rescue you.” The earl trembled, and he paused to inspect his daughter’s strange attire. “What are you doing dressed as a seaman? Don’t tell me Sachervell has made you one of the crew. The swine!” He seemed more angry at that than anything.

“No, he’s been very kind.”

“I’m glad to hear of it, daughter,” Battisley said heartily.

Something crashed overhead and he whimpered, dropping the cutlass in his fear. Victoria picked it up, gazing at it in wonder and hefting the weight of it.

A visible sweat broke out on the earl's forehead. "What are we going to do?" he whined. "I never thought Sachervell would attack the Gryphon! Perhaps he will kill me!"

"I doubt that," Victoria said. "All he wants is the ruby necklace."

Battisley glanced at the box under his arm, and a sly look stole over his unprepossessing features. "Is that so? Then why don't you tell him to come here and get them. You go on ahead and bring him down here."

Victoria shook her head in disgust. "Do you think I'm a fool? You only want me to bring him down here, so you can summon your crew and kill him."

Fury blazed over Battisley's pocked face. "And what if that was my intention? Have you turned traitor against me, girl?! After all that I have done for you!"

"Done for me?" Victoria stifled her outburst. For a moment, she had felt like Arabella Battisley, and a feeling of scorn had washed over her. The man in front of her could not have been a *real* father, a loving father, if he would trade his daughter's well-being for a ruby necklace. Arabella must have lived a cold, unloved existence with a monster like this for a father.

But there was no time to avenge the girl's miserable life, or browbeat the old man over what could not be changed.

"Hand over the necklace," Victoria demanded.

"Never!" Battisley backed away from the door, cuddling the box like a baby.

"It's my dowry," she said, advancing toward him, her hand outstretched. "Give it to me!"

"I won't! Unnatural girl, you'll not marry any of the men I choose for you, so you'll die a wretched maid! And you'll not have your dowry."

"Give it to me! You stole Alexander's birthright from him, and he needs it. I love him, and I will give him my dowry, whether he wants me or not!"

"I do want you," a low voice throbbing with passion said from the shadows of the doorway.

Victoria whirled around to find Sachervell standing just outside the door, an expression of overflowing love in his dark eyes.

* * * * *

That night, in the dark cabin of the captain's quarters, Victoria wearily slipped the shirt over her head and tossed it aside in preparation for bed. She didn't hear the door open behind her, and proceeded to pull off her trousers.

"I'd like to see this on you, Arabella. Put it on."

Victoria twirled at the sound of Sachervell's voice, but all she could see in the pale stream of moonlight was his hand and a glittering mass of blood-red gems. The man, himself, stayed concealed in the shadows.

She reached out and took the necklace, quaking with fear. Would it grow heavy again and burn in her hands, hurling her back to the future? Oh God, she didn't want to go back.

Not now, or ever!

"Put it on." His voice was commanding, but gentle.

Victoria placed the exquisite necklace to her throat, and with trembling hands, fastened the clasp. She was aware of her partial nakedness and the fact that the captain could see her, but that didn't bother her. What worried her more was the necklace and its mysterious power of time travel. She felt the weight of it laying on her throat, and held her breath in anticipation.

"You are beautiful, my lady!" Sachervell said. He took a swift intake of breath, and stepped from the shadows. His strong hands reached out and caressed the jewels, then his fingers dropped and he outlined the shape of her breast, teasing her nipple into a tight bud.

Victoria gasped and threw back her head as a shiver of ecstasy raced down her spine. The jewels were just cold gems, and she hadn't been flung back to 2001. Was she destined to stay here? Should she follow her instincts and her passions, and give herself to her handsome pirate?

She knew the answer and in the darkness, she smiled.

"You are enchanting," the captain murmured, huskily. He pulled her close and gazed down into her eyes. "You fill my body with a longing I haven't felt for... it seems a hundred years."

Victoria giggled. A hundred years! Funny he should use that expression. She felt his grip tighten, and she returned his gaze, peering into his dark, passion-filled eyes. "Oh, Alexander, I love you!"

"I love you, too, Arabella," he breathed.

"Please call me... Victoria."

"Victoria?"

"Yes," she replied. "It's a nickname my nurse-maid gave me as a child because I never liked the name 'Arabella'."

Sachervell stroked her rose-petal cheek. "I understand, it has a bad association with your father, am I correct?"

Victoria nodded, and leaned into his soothing hand, kissing his palm. Although she had lied, she was relieved that he now knew her real name.

"I will call you what you wish, Victoria, my love," he said, closing his mouth over hers. He unleashed the full force of his ardor, the passion that had been building in him for the sensuous woman he held in his arms. She closed her eyes and felt the tip of his tongue begging admittance as he traced the outline of her sensuous mouth. Parting her soft lips, she gave herself up to the swirling storm of his desire.

Sweeping her up into his muscular arms, Sachervell carried her to his bunk, and laid her on the blankets gently as if she were the most precious thing in the world to him. Pale moonlight danced over her white breasts, the dusty rose of her nipples twin peaks of arousal.

"Victoria, my sweet prisoner, I have needed you, wanted you for a long time, and now you will be mine." His hungry eyes caressed her body as he took in every detail of her womanly form.

Victoria reached out to him, beckoning the captain to come into her arms. "I want you, too," she whispered. "I want to feel you close to me..."

She didn't have to finish the sentence, for he was beside her in seconds, muttering endearments in her ear as he pulled her against him, cradling her soft bottom. As their lips hungrily sought each other out, she pulled his shirt from his breeches, and thrust her

hands under the smooth fabric. Feeling the heated skin of his muscular back, she heard him moan in desire as he kissed her neck, working his way down over her breasts.

Victoria gasped in an agony of wanton lust as the tip of his tongue flicked over her sensitive nipple, sending thrills of passion down her body to her most secret places. He teased and nibbled, before finally enclosing the pink bud in his warm, moist mouth. She savored the erotic sensations of his hands and lips worshipping her body with caresses, murmuring enticements to him, urging him to further liberties on her warm flesh.

Sachervell's hands wandered over Victoria's figure as though he was memorizing every inch of her by touch. He stroked the soft skin of her thighs with one callused hand as he seared a path of hot kisses across her silken belly towards her soft, pulsating mound that ravenously awaited him. His lips imprisoned her in a web of growing arousal, driving her mad with desire.

"Make love to me, Alexander," she moaned, squirming beneath his torturous tongue.

Her wish was immediately granted. Positioning himself on top of her, Sachervell gazed down at Victoria in the dim lantern light that aided the fast-waning moonlight. She could feel his need and joyfully surrendered herself to his exquisite lovemaking.

He gave her everything he had, filling her with his passion, his long-denied lust. His seductive, persuasive movements were more than she could take, and she immediately felt herself shudder as her aroused body took away all her control, lifting her to the heights of passionate ecstasy.

They moved together in an elegant ballet of rhythmic dance, until their bodies became one, joined in a mutual giving and taking of pleasure and desire. Suddenly, she stiffened as he pushed deeply into her and she felt a thrill of intense, sweet joy course through her heated body, lifting her to heights she had never experienced before. Then, as if his body responded to her, Alexander cried out as his body shook, rocked with passion and throbbing fulfillment.

Victoria wanted to cry, the sensations were so sweet, so unexpected. She had wanted to give herself to this man, because he had been so patient, and tender, and she had come to care for him, to love him. But to find that those feelings translated to such a burst of pure erotic satisfaction was a dazzling surprise.

They lay together, sated for the moment, but neither wanting to part from the warmth of the other. Victoria pulled a blanket up over them, and slipped her arms around Sachervell's shoulders. "I love you," she whispered.

His body tensed, and for a moment she wondered if she had said the wrong thing, but then he lifted himself on one elbow and looked down at her with a serious expression on his rugged face.

"Do you mean that, Victoria?"

She smiled, her lips curved in an expression of deep tenderness. "Of course I do. You're a special man, Alexander Sachervell."

He swallowed hard. "I... I thought that taking you from your father would be the most wicked thing I had ever done in a life full of wicked things. How can I deserve this... how can I deserve you? I have never felt any woman give of herself like you do, with no reservations, and with every fiber of your being. I want to share that forever, but I don't have any right to ask that of you."

“Love gives you the right to ask anything of me,” Victoria said. “I want to spend forever with you, too. I want to love you always.” As she said it, Victoria knew that was why she had traveled back in time, why she was the one to find the Battsley rubies.

“I want you to be my wife...”

“Oh, Alex, I will!”

“Wait!” the captain said, holding one finger to her lips. “I haven’t finished. We will sail tomorrow for Bermuda. There will be someone there to marry us, and I will give up my ship to Jamie Lowell, my first mate. We can settle in Bermuda. I have connections there, and we can make a life for ourselves.”

“I’ll go wherever you want me to go,” Victoria said. “But you don’t have to give up the sea. I want you to be happy.”

Sachervell looked at her lovingly. “I’ll be happy, never fear. If you like, we can leave those plans until later. All that I insist on right now is that we marry, and soon. We will sail tomorrow for Bermuda.”

Victoria smiled. She remembered from Captain Andy’s lecture, so far in the future, that the Victory had gone down in a storm because it lingered too long off the coast of Florida. Her time trip had changed the path of fate. By her calculations they would be to Bermuda before the storm hit.

“Sounds perfect to me,” she said with a smile.

“We will take your necklace and live like lords!” Sachervell said. “You’ll be my prisoner for the rest of time. I’ll never let you go.”

“I’ll never ask to be released,” Victoria said, throwing her arms around the captain’s neck. “I’ll be your prisoner of love, forever!”

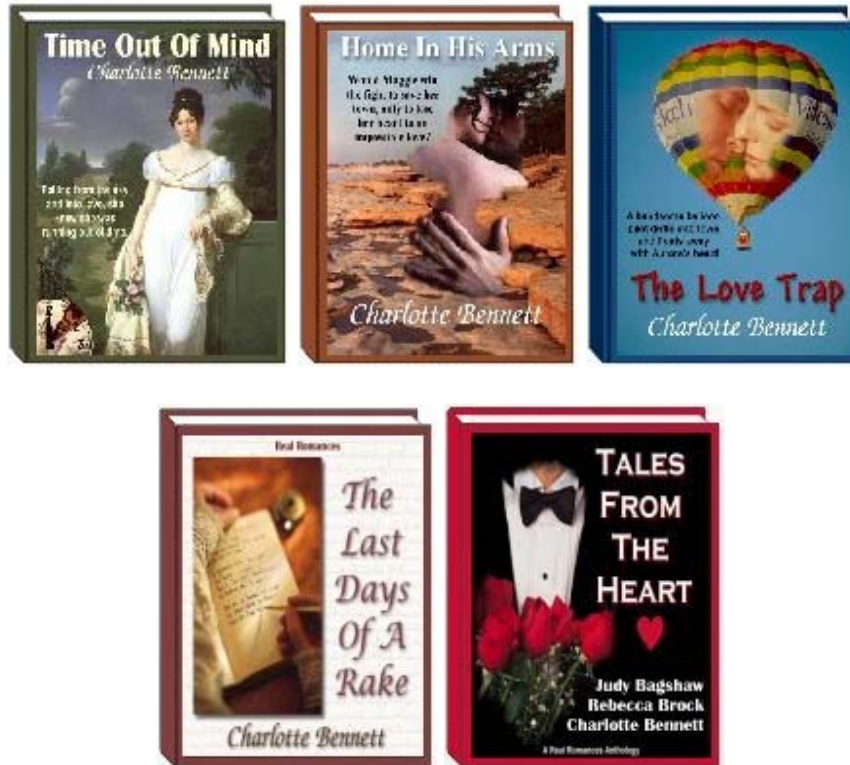
THE END



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