



The Seven Deadly Sins  
and Virtues

# INDIGO WINDS KINDNESS



Brenda  
Williamson

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INDIEO WINDS

SEVEN SINS AND VIRTUES SERIES

KINDNESS

BY

BRENDA WILLIAMSON

*To Nancy, a cherished friend...*

## CHAPTER 1

A beautifully refined sculpture of perfection stood in demure obscurity behind the Duchess of Hempstead. Ash had never seen a woman so brilliant in design. Nor had he seen any exquisite creature so ripe for the picking. He deemed all men in the room blind, for none clamored around the beauty.

He continued to dissect all reasons why he shouldn't approach her. Hours lazily rolled by. His attention never wandered far as he witnessed her boredom. She hovered in the shadows of the Duchess. Then the Duchess spoke to the young woman and he saw a reason to advance.

From the eclipse of the massive column, she presented herself. Her grace and poise had all the earmarks of nobility. The manner in which she held her chin up pushed him to think of royalty, but when she bowed rather than curtsied to some request the Duchess made, he surmised her position to be no more than a lady's companion.

Nonetheless, his awe and attentive gaze stayed mesmerized by her movement, until she backed out of sight.

Ash blinked, and she reappeared. The majesty of the moment carried him forward.

She handed the Duchess a stemmed crystal goblet and lingered with a helpful offering of a lace-edged handkerchief. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. As her station was no more than a servant, he understood why no man planted himself before her. The echelon of society

had gathered, ye not a fop or milksop attending had the backbone to approach the delicious morsel for which he salivated.

Ash refrained from rubbing the taut ache pushing at his trousers. The throbbing hadn't stopped since he saw the tantalizing beauty. He debated how best to make headway as he realized the hours had swept by him.

"My darling man, you have been brooding far too long in this alcove."

His paramour slipped into place beside him with a heavy sigh. His compulsion to meet the enchantress was restrained by the arm Marguerite possessively looped to his.

"Will you not have one dance with me?" she asked.

He glanced down at her. Though her arm was coiled through his with all the excessive attachment of a snake, he still managed to wrest his limb free.

"Not interested."

"I have danced with near everyone here. My friends will think I came unescorted if you do not spend some time with me."

"I told you I would attend. I never said I would participate or socialize."

"You never said you would not, either!" she hissed.

Her stature put her close to his height. He could feel the fine spray that came with her words on his face. If she had meant anything more to him than fulfillment of physical needs, he might have looked for a way to please her.

His eyes went back to his prey. The succulent delicacy awaited his lecherous appetite. Having bred her to please the nobility, her parents would have seen her well educated, taught her all manners of comportment, and most of all, she'd be fully schooled in satisfying an almost-Duke's desires.

Aston had to laugh. He might not possess the title, but he used it to his advantage with the ladies. Until he or his twin brother married, the dukedom remained in limbo—his father's entailment had been specific. A most unusual circumstance, to say the least, which often led to debate by know-it-alls who thought the issue needed resolution in court. Little did his peers understand brotherly love, or appreciate he and Weldon held their friendship and sibling tie more important than property.

"Whoever are you staring at, darling?"

Marguerite nudged him from his reverie. How could he answer without blurting out the whole truth of the matter? He looked at the ripe quarry. His utmost wish required the unknown lady. With her, he could quench his thirst by drinking the cream from between her tender, milky thighs. His heart pounded with the exigency of the scheme he had debated far too long.

"No one." He exhaled some of the tension. "I guess I'm bored and merely dazed by the activity of this pompous crowd."

"They are not so bad, my darling. You are away so much you just do not know them like I do. If you would mingle with me, I could introduce you to the interesting ones."

He almost nodded out of fatigue then saw the trap as if written in blood on parchment. She had brought up marriage on many occasions. With a loose hold on his tongue, he could very well find himself bound down an aisle by some freakish accident, a mindless agreement when he sat at a weak moment not listening.

Marguerite had to go. He needed to be free of her. The only way to succeed at severing their relationship permanently would be to make it public.

"You know, the banns were read this past week for Lady

Meadows and Lord Carlton. They have been together only half the length of time we have.” She squeezed his arm.

“So the fool isn’t smart enough to avoid matrimony.” He chuckled.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make marriage sound so horrible. Other than a piece of paper and a ring on my finger, we are just like married people, you know.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but when we retire at night it’s to my bed, not separate rooms. I would wager hardly a wedded wife here is visited by her husband more than once a month.”

Ash understood Marguerite’s dilemma. She was a rapacious untitled woman desperately seeking a man of substance and station. He, on the other hand, had striven only to have her in his bed.

“Please consider what I suggest. If you are dead set against marriage I may have to look elsewhere.”

“Marguerite, I am not only dead set against getting married, I am appalled by the fact any man chains himself to one woman when he can have the pleasure of dozens.”

“A scandalous rake, you are.” She pinched her lips. “Just remember my warning.”

“I accept the compliment and your courteous finish to our liaison.”

“Ashton Sinclair, you know very well I have no wish to end our affair,” she purred while petting the lapel of his jacket. “You know I adore you ever so much. It will be a long while before I can give you up.”

“But you wish to be married, have a title, and the prestige of your husband’s name.” He raised a brow.

“It can wait.”

As much as he did have a good time portraying a



rapscallion, he didn't have it in him to dismiss the willing Marguerite. He had to make it more her wish than his, just to give her a reputation-saving explanation for her friends. He didn't love her, but he did *like* her enough to want that.

He caught sight of the petite lady with the china doll's face. Her powdered skin appeared so flawless, her white wig so perfect atop her head. He felt more than ready to meet her.

It was then a plan formed. The wicked and wonderful plan to rid himself of Marguerite melded perfectly with his soon-to-be intimate acquaintance with the beauty. He would ravage the young servant and have Marguerite catch him. She'd be mortified and never wish to speak to him again.

The real victim would be the lovely creature, but no doubt a future as a servant could be recoverable with some lavish gifts. Not the extravagant amount he gave Marguerite—no one could tax his purse strings as she did—but he would give her enough to forget the indecent event.

The ballroom stayed abuzz with chattering females and boisterous men; they had to be loud to hear themselves over the music. The flash of gowns swirling the room entranced if one stared without actually looking.

"Lady Buckram." Ash's brother presented himself in a low bow to Marguerite. "May I have the pleasure of a dance?"

Ash took Marguerite's fingers instantly from his arm and put them in Weldon's hand.

"She's all yours," he said without waiting for Marguerite to say yea or nay on her own.

His opportunity had come. Weldon would keep Marguerite occupied for the dance just long enough for him to meet the lovely angel. Then, hopefully when Marguerite

sought him out, he would have the young lady in a compromising position. It would run Marguerite off and end their long affair.

He navigated the room, circled the column of marble, and found the lady gone. He searched over the sea of young ladies for the one he wanted to meet; he couldn't believe he'd lost sight of her in such a short space of time after memorizing every detail he could from a distance for hours.

"Looking for me?" a delicate, soft voice whispered from behind.

At first, he thought it might be Emma. Haunted by her death, he often thought he could hear and see his sister's ghost. It comforted instead of concerned him. He had learned to appreciate how his mind could handle his grief in a constructive manner. Emma always consoled and directed his life in a way most suitable.

Ash rotated slowly while his mind processed the voice—Emma's had a youthful tone with a childlike innocence. He avoided the doubtful idea the woman he sought would seek him. Instead, he conjured an unmarried lady on the hunt for a prospective husband. He closed his eyes, ready for disappointment at the sight of some oversized matron wanting to dance. Even so, his heart thumped in anticipation.

He opened his eyes and faced a very real vision. He managed to keep his mouth shut even though his jaw dropped. Through all his observation, he hadn't noticed the lady looking his way, yet here she stood, gazing up at him with magnificent sapphire eyes, the planes and curves to her face coming together in brilliant harmony. Even God had to be pleased by this creation.

She spoke to him, and his mind went blank.

## CHAPTER 2

Mercy bit her bottom lip, feeling an embarrassing heated blush on her cheeks. She had thought she spied the gentleman watching her—a vulture eyeing his next meal could have been no less obvious. She never gave it a thought that his gaze might be aimed at someone, or something, else.

“Maybe not,” she said as his silence suggested she had been too forward.

“Wait.”

He gripped the fabric of her gown near her elbow. Mercy glanced over her shoulder. A pitter-patter stepped up her pulse. She had thought him the most dashing sight to steal glimpses of when he didn’t stare so intently at her. She had waited all evening for him to approach, and a zillion reasons why he wouldn’t had trampled over her wishes.

“I was, indeed, looking for you.”

“*I told you,*” the voice that had been urging her to speak to him whispered close to her ear.

She turned her head slightly toward the coolness brushing her cheek. No one stood near enough, and yet it felt strangely like someone had nudged her gently forward.

“Did you have a reason, or am I a distraction from your friend?” Mercy looked at the woman dancing with the handsome gentleman strikingly like this one.

"I need no diversion from that lady. She's of no importance to me."

Mercy couldn't believe the woman had no significant place in his life. When he looked beyond her a second time, jealousy sparked. She had wanted him to come to her earlier, but then she saw that very woman attach herself to his arm with a covetous familiarity the whole room noticed.

"She watches you like a hawk. Is she your wife?" She had to ask.

"Heavens, no!"

"*Heavens, no!*" The statement repeated in a feminine voice she couldn't accept as her imagination.

Mercy smiled, and resisted the urge to look behind her to see if someone stood listening to their conversation. She found the information much to her liking. Her mind floated easily toward her next move. The brandy she had consumed earlier loosening all restraint.

"Why, there you are!"

A shrill female voice Mercy fully did recognize made her turn her head. She watched her cousin Louise slither toward her with purpose.

"The duchess has been wondering where you wandered off to." Her cousin's little huff clearly did not take into consideration the man beside them.

"What does she want?" Mercy asked.

"How should I know? She doesn't confide in me all her little directives for you."

"I'll be along in a moment."

She let Louise leave in a dither, even though her cousin eyed the man next to her, waiting for an introduction.

"Maybe you would like to step out of the line of sight of our audience?" she suggested, boldly taking hold of his arm.

Not waiting for an answer, she led him toward the tall

glass doors to the balcony outside. Seduction needed solitude. Sex required privacy. Very new to both art forms, she labored over how to make the next move.

“The duchess will not be upset by your departure?”

“My cousin will tell her I received the message. She will be in a very heated snit. Then someone will cheer her up, at which point she will forget about me for a while. Surely, you’ve noticed the duchess is a trifle self-centered.”

“It comes with her position, I presume.”

He opened the door and bowed as she passed through before him. His breath caressed her cheek, and she felt a twinge of nervousness clench the muscles in her vagina. The spasms made her damp between the legs and ache in a way she was unaccustomed to.

“It’s your position that concerns me more. Are you not afraid you’ll lose your place in her house? For a servant such luxury isn’t always easy to come by.”

“I’m not a servant.”

“I meant no offense. Maybe you prefer the term lady’s maid or companion?”

Mercy wanted to laugh. The handsome gentlemen had given her more gifts of delight than he could ever be aware. He’d not think twice of sullyng a maid’s reputation, so it worked to her benefit not to answer him. She’d not have to lie, and it felt good not having to deceive him too much.

“I *am* a companion to the duchess, but I assure you my place in her house is extremely secure.”

Although she did wonder why the duchess kept her around—their personalities mixed like oil and water, and they clashed over the smallest details.

“Maybe you should have a shawl against the night air.” He unbuttoned his linen jacket.

“I’m quite warm.” Her fingers floated up to his wide shoulders. “You must also feel stifled in your jacket. I can

help you get your arms free.”

Her fingers slid over his thick muscles. Her palms glided down so the jacket dropped to the stone floor. She had marveled at the way he fit his clothes. All night, he had stood with a wide stance, his hands clasped behind his back. Just like a man of the sea. It captivated her.

He remained inflexible to her wandering fingertips. His build, the heat of the curves, the beat of his heart against her palm, mesmerized her. He watched with an amused twinkle in his eyes, and she laughed.

“You find me too forward?” she queried.

“I find you breathtaking.”

He had yet to lift a finger to her, and she felt she needed his participation for a more personal pleasure instead of for a strategic reason.

“You can touch me,” she told him with a daring push at all the limits of decency.

“And just how much do you want to be touched?”

His hands fit to her hips, squeezed lightly before slipping up to her ribcage. There, he pushed onward so his thumbs caught beneath her breasts. They pressed firm against her bodice. Her breasts swelled above the rim of ivory lace at the top.

Mercy breathed heavier. Euphoria swept her into a foreign world she had no experience with, and yet she had every sensation of lust forcing her to proceed. Her arms appeared too thin when lying on his strong ones. She felt as weak as a newborn kitten in his hold. The large pads of his thumbs made circling moves on the underside of her breasts. Each rotation took them closer to her spiked nipples. She pushed her chest toward him seeking his caress over the aching tips.

“Is this how you expected me to touch you?” He firmly rubbed the back of his knuckle over the jutting point.

She nodded, and then shook her head. She watched his eyes to see if he understood. She needed a scalawag with no scruples, a rogue with no morals. The more he stared into her eyes, the more she didn't need, as much as she wanted, this particular man to ravish her with his kisses.

"You want more?" He grinned.

Her head bobbed. The dizzy sway of her light inebriation shoved her totally to him. His arm swept up her back as a support and he bowed over her.

"I am happy to oblige, me beauty."

She giggled at his pirate imitation and became silent the moment his mouth fit over hers. His overall firmness had a gentle softness in one place—his lips. They were tender, sensual weapons to the destruction of her remaining senses. His arms changed their hold, and soon sinewy biceps turned, twisted, and flexed against her fingers.

"You taste delicious," he murmured, sucking her tongue into his mouth.

"Mmmm, must be the brandy," she hummed against his firmer, greedier pursuit of her breath.

His hand molded over her breast and kneaded. For her first kiss, she didn't think anyone could have done a better job.

"I'm beyond that, sweetness. All that's left is the flavor of you."

Mercy's skin came alive at the kisses sweeping to the corner of her mouth, over her jaw, and down her neck. He created tremors in her she could not still. He held her as she'd never been held.

The music wafting from the ballroom should have added to the ambiance of the seduction. Instead, it disturbed her euphoric splendor. It drew her from his sensual kisses to the reality of her life. She pulled free of the tender restraint of his arms. His eyes held questions she couldn't answer,

while his hands rose to pull her back into his passionate embrace.

“Wait, where are you going?” he called when she managed to slip from his grasp.

“Bring champagne to the gazebo along the pond,” she called back.

She hurried down the stone steps into a garden. The night air had a fragrance so utterly pleasing she stopped to sniff the roses. If he truly wanted her, he would come. She looked back with an awful dread. He just *had* to come, before she lost her nerve.



## CHAPTER 3

Ashton wiped his mouth and picked up his jacket. He could tell the temptress had consumed a great deal of brandy by way of her flavorful kiss. He didn't think it required more to bolster her uninhibited forwardness. However, if she felt she needed another sip to convince her to disrobe, he'd fetch ten bottles of any liquor she requested. The challenge of liberating himself of a mistress changed course. His mind set sail to acquire the hidden talents of a breath of rarity.

Donning his jacket for propriety, he slipped inside the ballroom and hunted out a servant.

"You, there, I need a bottle of champagne and two glasses," he ordered from the first man available to do his bidding.

"Shall I serve you here or on the portico, m'lord?"

"No service needed. Just bring the bottle and glasses. I'll handle the rest."

"Ashton?"

Marguerite's voice threatened to waylay him from his adventure. He began to take a dislike to the very presence of a woman he had fucked frequently since his return to England. She had become a millstone around his neck. The very idea of marrying her repulsed him more by the thought—more than the idea of marriage itself.

"Wherever have you been?"

She touched his mouth with the tip of her pointed fingernail. He could only guess his lips bore traces of the young lady's paint.

"You have been naughty," she continued. "When a woman comes escorted by a man to one of these affairs, she assumes she will not be discarded for another, especially a pretty servant."

"It was nothing." He took her arm and looked for the easiest way to abandon her for his new pursuit. "You know I can't stop them from flinging themselves at me."

"And just where did this moppet scurry off to after she kissed you?"

Marguerite straightened his cravat, brushed at his jacket sleeves, and wiped his mouth again.

"Probably took on with the vapors after her boldness wore off."

"You should wear a wig like the other gentlemen." She fingered the loose strands of his hair.

"Never again," he grumbled, taking her hand away from the queue tied with a black ribbon. "Times are changing."

"So, she meant nothing to you?"

"Honestly, Marguerite, I have no interest in any woman."

"So, where did she go?"

"How should I know?"

Ash kissed her cheek and led her farther into the room. It never ceased to amaze him how much tolerance Marguerite had of his digressions from her. Of course, a woman looking to title herself through marriage did not have the pleasure of berating him too harshly. She knew the conditions of his father's will.

"Lady Buckram." Lady Robards glided up to them. "What a lovely gown."

"Why, thank you," Marguerite bubbled. "I spent two

weeks at the dressmakers having it fitted and..."

Ash ceased listening. He smiled, knowing how much Marguerite loved it when people called her "Lady Buckram." He'd addressed her as such when they first met. Ever since, she insisted he introduce her so, and no one would think to question the dubious title.

Marguerite spilled out every detail of her wardrobe acquisition. It was perfect timing for him to slip away. He wanted the young lady in the garden, stripped and naked under him. He wanted to feel her petite body writhing with ecstasy. In it all, he wanted to feel more the man for having her accept him without motives.

He spied the steward with his bottle and glasses and met him halfway to the door.

"Thank you, my good man."

He took the items, dashed out the door, and hopped down the steps off the portico, heading blindly in the direction of a pond and a gazebo he had only his quarry's word even existed. His focus stayed true to his aspiration—all he cared about was whether or not the gazebo housed his conquest.

"I didn't expect you to be here," he said, stepping up onto the painted floorboards.

"And here I thought I had been extremely direct, m'lord."

She floated to him and took a glass.

In his mind, he heard words she never voiced. He felt things unique to her presence. If he had to vocalize the sensation, he might liken it to infatuation.

"I really shouldn't indulge." She giggled. "My head is already swimming from my intemperance. Alas, I'm still conscious, so a little more can't hurt. Besides, I see no need to be sober right now, do you?"

Ash's head automatically swung from side to side. He

liked they thought alike. He poured her glass full and then his own. He watched her sip the bubbly. Her laugh came softly when the fizz tickled her nose.

If he could have made the muscles in his face work into a frown, he would. He didn't like the face powders, the paint, or the white wig. The fad changed too slowly, as far as he was concerned. Even Marguerite exclaimed how naked she'd feel without her ostentatious pile of curls.

He set the bottle and his glass on the railing.

"Come here." He pulled the lady to him and held a hand to the back of her head. "You know this is nothing more than self-gratification?"

She turned her head and downed the rest of her champagne then tossed her glass away. The tinkle of crystal smashing on the stone walk brought another giggle; she placed a hand over her mouth to stop the vivacious sound.

"Your laugh is delightful." He clasped her fingers and removed them from in front of her face.

"I think I've had too much to drink, Lord...?"

"No more talk," he answered. "No names, no titles, and no words. Of course, those that you wish to whisper in the throes of rapture are excluded."

She unbuttoned his jacket. "Did I not already have this off you?"

Her lilting, provocative voice drew him to her sweet breath. She continued to amaze him with her straightforward seduction. He had sought her out, and she stood before him as the hunter who had found her prey.

Ash pushed the long curl of the powdered wig from her throat and kissed along the strained cord of her slender neck. She stretched the ivory column, giving him access. Behind her ear, he found a spot void of face paint with a hint of her natural hairline. If they didn't have to return to the ballroom filled with people, he would have pulled her

wig off and washed her face. He would have liked to know what really lay beneath all the layers of vanity.

"Can we get you out of some of this?" He tugged at her sleeves.

She looked dreamily up at him. She nodded, and he looked for the best attack on her clothes. Maneuvering behind her, he began the arduous work of fitting his fingers into the tight spaces between the hooks of her dress.

"That tickles." She laughed.

He kissed the back of her neck again and went down her spine until the chemise stopped him from touching her skin. Her giggles infused him with the kind of madness he hadn't experienced since the first time he bedded a girl. He'd forgotten the excitement, the thrill of youth, and the enthusiasm an attraction could contain. Fascination with any woman had been missing from his life for a long time.

"I plan on tickling you all over, sweet thing."

"I think I'll like that," she said with a husky shortness of breath.

She moaned with an invigorating velvet tone that made him want to hurry. Touching her buttery-smooth flesh would have been wonderful to enjoy all night long.

The powdered skin ended at the rim of her neckline. He had the dress open, and he could see the shimmer of milky pink outlining the corset's white ruffle of lace. Her small, well-shaped breasts rode high along the fringe.

"I would like to see you out of all of this." He swept his finger beneath the edge of the fabric and scraped over her nipple. "But I suppose the impracticality of our location should keep this brief."

"The party is in the house." She untied his cravat, unbuttoned his shirt, and fanned her hands over his chest. "No one would come this far from the gala."

"We did." He cupped her cheek and brushed at the white

dust on her jaw.

“Yes, we did.” She smiled.

“I said no names, but I would like to rescind that and know yours.”

Much of what he had thought about in the ballroom seemed to take on a life of its own. He’d get rid of Marguerite and make the delightful nymph his new mistress. He’d do more for her than he had ever done for his other dalliances. He’d house her in fine accommodations and bestow on her the treasures of his wealth.

“Hmmm.” She pondered the question as if it were a secret. “Miss James.”

She smiled while he lazily rubbed his finger over her ruby-painted bottom lip.

“Very formal for the informality of our endeavor, don’t you think?” He stroked the finger between her puckered lips and touched the tip of her wet tongue.

“We shouldn’t forgo etiquette altogether. The duchess would think me lax in my lessons if I were to allow you to address me any other way.” Her tongue swirled his finger. When she sucked on it, he lost most of his senses.

“Two can play your game, Miss James. Call me Captain Sin.”

“Sin is very appropriate, m’lord.”

He pulled his finger out of her mouth with some regret, but he needed two hands to shed the jacket. As he worked on his trousers, the lovely Miss James watched. The pupils in her blue eyes were dilated by the night and the champagne. She seemed in a trance until her fingers reached out and wrapped his shaft.

Little warning bells muddled his brain for a moment. He’d gone way off of his agenda. He found disturbing thoughts where he shouldn’t have even wondered. How

many men had she been with before him? How many times had she held a man's cock without batting an eye? How many times would he feel as if he cared about those things?

Ash shook his head, forcing away the waywardness of his brain. He drew open Miss James's corset and jerked down the chemise. Her pert breasts bounced out. The rounded globes were fuller than he first thought and seemed to swell under the probing of his fingers.

"So, Captain." Her voice purred with a sultry warm puff of air on his face. "What sinful commands have you for me?"

"I would never force a lady to bended knee, but I do have a desire to feel your lips caress where your fingers now do."

Her head tipped down, and his gaze followed. He looked at her small hand stroking him. His cock had grown large to her gentle inspection. Her fingers whispered like silk over the throbbing smooth-veined shaft. She squeezed the head as if it amused her to test the firmness.

Yet her moves seemed mindless, as if she were petting an animal. His pointing out her hold put a stop to them.

He had no wish to deter her exploration, and he watched her dazed blue eyes for something to explain her now wavering stroke.

## CHAPTER 4

Mercy knew exactly what he wanted. She had spied such a thing once or twice in her life before. Onboard a ship with lusty sailors and even an embarrassing time with one of the maids and a footman. Her curiosity over such an enterprise was piqued by the expensive swill she had consumed, and she lowered to her knees. She had a virgin vagina waiting to be speared by a lover. Her choice had always been for a decent, caring, and kind man. Instincts told her Captain Sin had all three of those characteristics, and then some.

Wrapping her lips over the head of his cock, she flicked her tongue under the rim of soft velvet. He jerked as if lightning struck. She liked she could touch a sensitive spot and gain a reaction. She had spied men with doxies when in port and knew only the basics of what he asked of her. From the deep animalistic moans, he appeared to like everything she did. Every little kiss and lick she put to his massive erection brought shivers and jerks to his body. His delight became hers.

She held the scrotum with gentleness. His sensitivity there gave way to a gasp so surprising she nuzzled her nose into the flesh and made him pant harder. It made her perspire with trembling nervous agitation. His fingers gripped the sides of her head firmer.

“Suck on my balls, sweetness. Take them into your



beautiful mouth.”

They being too big to take all at once, she twisted her head sideways and captured one large half of the sac. She followed his instructions and sucked on one side and then the other. Then she pulled away and studied his cock. It had an attractiveness she didn't understand. With the faintest touch, she cradled a hand beneath and brought it to her tongue. Fully wetting her lips, and producing an exorbitant amount of saliva, she put the fleshy crown into her mouth.

“Yes, perfect,” he groaned.

Mercy took more in than she thought she could. The silky shaft, wet with her spit, glided beyond all limits. She let her throat muscles relax, and the O of her mouth condition to the size of his voluminous girth.

He thrust it in and out several times, his fingers folded behind her head. She could only think to hold his legs. Beneath her fingers, she felt the muscles tense on the back of his thighs. Automatically she stroked them, more for herself than him.

“God, you are a heaven-sent angel, Miss James,” he groaned.

He drew back from her and completely came free of her mouth. He lifted her face with one hand, and she stared up at him. Her mouth remained frozen in a rigid sucking position.

“I want to be deeper than your throat can offer.”

She blinked, and unhinged her cramped jaw as his body descended in front of her. He pressed his panting lips to hers aggressively. Her body quaked with the thrill. He shook almost fearfully.

Mercy snaked her arms around his neck. Her aching nipples compressed to his inflexibility and tingled within the patch of yielding brown hairs on his chest. Her lips quivered to his awakening tongue curling around hers.

“As much as I want to kiss you, I can’t wait to dip inside you, sweetness.”

He placed his forehead against hers. She couldn’t see his eyes, they were too close. His ragged breath, however, blended with hers, and she nodded her consent. Somewhere in her head there had been a reason for doing what she was this night but she couldn’t remember it. She didn’t want to recall anything that happened before Captain Sin took her in his sinewy arms.

He lowered her to the wooden floor then rose onto his knees. His cock jutted out at like a yardarm. He pushed her gown up, and she felt his long fingers on her thighs. His sweaty hot palms stuck to her cool skin and gave her a shiver.

“Wait.” She pressed on her skirt slightly to stop its ascent.

“Regrets, my sweet?” His fingers folded around her calves and stroked behind her knees.

“I...no, but maybe we should...”

She had requested he wait because her senses had begun to clear. Handsome, self-assured, attentive—these qualities didn’t seem appropriate for a public debauch. He was too nice to use for her selfishness.

“Maybe we should what?”

He leaned forward to cup her face. She saw his green eyes grow cautious yet tender...and concerned. She couldn’t forgive herself. Nor could she back away from something proving to be much sweeter in action than in thought.

Mercy flung her arms around the captain’s neck. She would take his lust as adoration and steal the happiness for herself. With her lips dampened by his kiss, she pressed her sigh into his. With the fervor of a woman driven beyond excitement, she clung to him. He kissed her again the way

she hungered for, with deep, sensuous demands that stirred her heart, his amorous consideration traveling her face, from cheek to brow as he murmured inaudible endearments expressing his passion, encouraging hers. His hands, heated by the friction of roaming her back and her bottom, made flames of desire kindle into an inferno.

He left her mouth and moved to her breasts. She didn't dare look to see if they were crimson or any lesser shade of pink. Her flesh tingled as if fire burned beneath, and hot blood rushed through her veins.

Mercy trembled in anticipation and trepidation.

"I can't wait to dip my cock into the warmth of your cunt." His tongue gently bathed her nipple.

"Captain Sin..." She had to stop him, and tell him the truth.

"Shhh, no talking, no words, remember?" His mouth locked over hers, and his lustful probing reawakened the aching mystery within her that needed solved.

He was good at what he did. He drove away her slight inebriation so that her immediate thought was to drink more. He groped at her in the folds of her gown and her cotton pantalets.

"Too many clothes," he mumbled, rubbing the apex of her legs, making her squirm.

If every time he wiggled his fingers she leaked, she thought they'd drown by the end. Over the waistband held by a string, he drew her wet undergarment down. He fingered the rim of her cunt. It riveted her.

"Oh, no," she gasped. "Oh!"

Mercy went breathless, quiet, and rigid. The air she tried to expel caught in her throat. His finger fished between the wet folds and brushed over her sensitized clit. She could hear the suction of moisture on his thumb as he went deeper.

“Oh, God!” she cried. “Oh, God, Captain Sin!”

“How kind of you to link me with such a prestigious deity,” he breathed over her face. “But even he could not give such decadent pleasures as I surely must.”

Mercy’s heart stopped. The invasion had begun. She couldn’t think how to voice an objection when it felt so good to have his finger stroking her. He had parted the labia, played with her clit, and driven into the dark moist center. She would surely die from such sinful joy.

“I need a drink,” she blurted. “Yes, I need something to wet me.”

“Me, too,” he said, lifting his head from her breast and giving her a very wicked grin.

Then his head disappeared from her line of sight.

“Oh!” she gasped when he let her know where he had gone.

His lips fit over the mouth of her vagina, and she wanted to faint. The slurping and gulping were every indication he had his drink. He sucked, swallowed, and created a firestorm of unearthly pangs she couldn’t control. She shuddered each time he touched her receptive clit. He took that nub between his teeth and pulled. Her only worry came when the spasms racked her body. Would he draw blood from the responsive nubbin clinging to his tongue?

“Oh, yes!” she squealed as a pulse in his mouth met her throbbing button. “Oh, yes, yes, oh, Captain...oh, God, yes!”

“Come for me, Miss James. Come for your Captain God.”

Mercy jerked uncontrollably to the rapid thrusts he penetrated her with between the teasing licks. Her hips followed his kiss each time he began to draw back. The spontaneous move made her feel so vulnerable, so wanton.

“Ah, sweetness.” He pressed his face tight and a swirl of

air from his heated nostrils entered her.

“Please, no more,” she screamed. “Please...stop.”

“Not yet. I want to drink all of you.” His tongue tortured her with an exhaustive reproach. “Your cunt intoxicates me.”

Emotions welled in her as he continued to torture her quivering pussy. Her muscles never relaxed, and he brought her orgasm on a stormy wave fully cresting.

“You have a beautiful and delicious flavor, Miss James. I could sip your juices all night.”

A muted squeak burped from her lips. He didn’t seem to mind her drunken hiccups, and he delved into another area. He stroked the inside of her thigh, kissed the corded muscle stretched taut, and licked a circle around her mons. His teasing drove her toward insanity.

He lifted up, his smile so wide, the glint in his eye so feral she knew what came next. She relished it and ignored all trepidation.

She watched him crawl over her—his wide chest narrowing to his waist, short sable-brown hairs funneled into a strip to his navel. After the barren patch of skin there was the nest of dark, wiry hair forming a wreath around his tumescent cock.

His stare caressed hers with an affectionate imparting of his soul. From over his shoulder, she saw a halo of angelic mist hover. Blinking her eyes to dispel the illusion, she looked at the bright moon. A shower of light bathed the night in a soft white. Mercy deemed the entity to be her imagination caused by her delusional, inebriated state. No one could float, no one but a ghost.

“You have a faraway look in your eyes, me beauty.”

She smiled. An image of a gentleman pirate captured her heart in fantasy. In reality, she couldn’t allow anyone into her life. She had a course set well beyond convention.

Loving the rascalion bringing her delights had no place. Besides, he'd be thankful not to know her after that night.

Mercy reached up and touched his face. She found every creased line at the corner of his green eyes intriguing. The small lines off the corner of his mouth could have been deeper if he smiled more. Something about the way he smiled at her so much made her think he didn't usually grin with a silly tilt to his mouth. She found the feature adorable and endearing.

"You've been to the sea?" she asked, needing to expand their conversation.

"Aye, Miss James."

"I love the sea. The tall ships with their great sails are so majestic."

He kissed her fingertips while she played with his lips. She tossed his queue and tugged the ribbon off with a little laugh. The proud set of his jaw, and the lovely way his dimples formed when he smiled again had no comparison in her often-drab life. His dark brown hair swung to his shoulders and framed his tan face. She was sorry to have turned the mane loose because it now shadowed the very features she studied.

She put her hand to the side of his face. Every time she stroked his cheek, her finger touched a nerve in his jaw twitching and jittery, as if he were nervous.

"You are beautiful," he told her.

Mercy started to laugh. Lying on the old gazebo floor, her clothes askew, she felt far from beautiful. The way Captain Sin looked at her, she felt like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. He had peeled away the concealment of her body and aroused something feminine and fragile in her. She always believed she'd be strong to endure her life alone. He gave her a look at what if—what if things were different.

“Captain Sin, will you make love to me?” she asked boldly, putting her hand between them and touching his cock. She’d not worry, or fear him, because he had a kindness so true to her own heart she felt safe in his arms.

He lowered his head and pressed kisses against her neck.

“Yes, sweetness,” he rasped.

She caressed his erection. Her gentle, unhurried exam shifted to his pelvic bones. There, she tucked her fingers into the back of his trousers and pushed them over his ass. His cock kissed her legs as she massaged the downy cheeks of his bottom. She found the softness appealing. It sent a wave of enticing thrills through her limbs.

His knuckles brushed her belly. The wet ringlets of her pussy caught his fingers. His throbbing hardness brushed into the crevice of her wet folds and she flinched. She stroked his chest between the openings of his shirt as he rose over her.

She bit her bottom lip as she waited for what he would do next. Time slowed, moments stood still, and she stared at him. He stared back. For a minute, she wanted to be somewhere else. If it wasn’t for his persistent thumb rotating her nipple and drawing out a wicked desire, she might have bolted like a jackrabbit. His smile hypnotized and engaged her heart.

The captain started slow. He poked around her femininity, probing the entrance and teasing her so she scratched at him like some street harlot begging him not to stop. He pushed inside, and Mercy clenched her jaw tighter. She’d not plead for him to stop. She had asked for what she got.

He drew back and rammed again, plunging deeper. With the slow rhythmical stabs came pain, a sharp pain that felt as if her insides were tearing.

Mercy cried out and dug her fingers into his shoulders.

“Ah, sweetness, I am so sorry,” he whispered.

His body went still on hers, and she clutched tighter. Mostly so he couldn’t move away and see the tears on her face. As she drew inside herself, a depraved part of her awakened under the barrage of kisses and murmurs over her face. They weren’t exactly words, but more like emotions that spilled in low whispers. They were threads of tenderness cross-stitched over her sorrow. Each breath became a magical bond that inclined her to respond.

He marked her hairline by kisses. While her head itched, the wig remained fastened in place. He bathed her mouth with his tongue. She gagged once on the depths he took to exploring. A mumbled apology made her kiss him harder. She liked the way they could mouth each other’s lips and tongues, and find time to function in other areas.

The sting and soreness all numbed. He rocked on her as a ship rides the billowy sea. Her fingers went from digging into his shoulders to scratching the back of his head lightly. Her legs rubbed the sides of his. She lifted her hips to meet his and found it stirred the fire.

A spasm caught her unaware and muscles squeezed. Mercy tried to relax as the Captain grunted a painfully long moan. She thought she had hurt him, both because of the sound he made and the aggression with which he pounded his hips to hers.

Again, it hurt. Too rough, too fast, she couldn’t complain. It dispelled the twitching in her. She thrashed under him, trying to buck him off with a need to make the remarkable sensation stop. He saw it differently, and his ardor escalated. He rose up on his hands and continued to thrust forcefully. Each time she squeaked, she gripped his forearms firmly.

Mercy couldn’t catch her breath. Her voice whined betwixt the gasps she took for air. Then she shook, she



trembled, and the Captain froze. Buried to the hilt, he let out a straggled release of all his energy in a loud roar.

Exhaustion left her panting.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked.

She giddily laughed because she wondered the same of him—the noise he had made sounded so pain-filled. The constant swirl of the back of his hand on her cheek spoke a different tune.

Mercy shook her head. His question was an act of kindness she couldn’t reward with the truth. She rubbed a finger over his lips, and she wished to know everything about him. Where he was from, why were his eyes the color of the spring lawns, and what was his real name?

“Are you sure? Had I known you were a virgin I would not have...”

“You would not have...?”

“I meant I would have been gentler.” He wiped damp strands of the wig off her forehead.

“I thought you were very considerate, m’lord. Thank you.”

“Thank you?” He chuckled and rose off her. “I don’t think I have ever had a woman say that with such sincerity. You make me feel a cad.”

She took the hand he offered and tried to suppress her giggle. His stature had the magnificence of a stallion proud of his achievement. His cock hung large yet limp, as if it had gone to sleep. She felt the duly serviced mare and could only imagine what a sight they made as they stood in the remnants of their garments.

The captain had a much easier time in straightening his clothes—she had layers of twisted fabric to sort through. It didn’t help speed her along that he silently watched from the corner of his eye.

“Ashton!”

A voice shot at them from the dark. Mercy spun around.

The captain had a name. Ashton. It fit him. The woman he had been with earlier came parading toward them. She had come with others—Mercy should have known her cousin would seek her out. She had left word where'd she be with the first person she came upon on her way to the gazebo. What she never considered would be the number of people Louise would bring as witnesses.

The woman and the man resembling the captain stood with her cousin and all were wide-eyed. Mercy's gaze dropped to avoid the shocked stares. The captain pulled her behind him in a valiant effort to conceal her half-dressed body. She couldn't have loved anyone more than at that moment.

## CHAPTER 5

Ash rubbed a hand over his face. He had set himself up for this scene. He'd asked for it and got it with unexpected results—he hadn't anticipated Marguerite bringing spectators.

Miss James didn't make a sound despite the humiliating position in which he had placed her. She shuffled away from his protective hand, and he had to let her go.

"Weldon, it's not what you think," he said. "Well, maybe it is, sort of, but she's only a servant, no one of consequence."

"Everyone, we should leave at once." Weldon took Louise's arm and left, not noticing that Marguerite behind.

"I am very disappointed in your behavior." Marguerite stepped up into the gazebo and tapped his chest with the point of her finger. "I have been overly discreet and here you not only lower yourself to spending time with this little whore, you do it so openly as to disgrace your family."

"You knew I had come out here." He found it hard to contain his anger. "Instead of confronting me alone, you brought an entourage of witnesses."

"You will not be the only one to be an outcast. Your little fling with the girl will no doubt be a great upset to her family as well."

"I don't know her family, Marguerite. I brought her out here to prove a point to you."

He combed back his hair with his fingers and wheeled around to the tap-tap-tap of running feet. Miss James raced across the lawn. In the interlacing of shadows, he lost sight of her.

"I think we can fix everything just fine, darling. If you marry me, those others would never think to spread a rumor I would deny." She stepped toward him.

"I'm not going to marry you. Actually, if I had to marry anyone to save what is left of my scurrilous reputation, it would be the young lady I just wronged. However, since I don't wish to get married, and she's a servant, I see no trouble."

"I want to have some security, Ash. If you will not marry me, I will find another who will. I think Weldon would, if I nurture his infatuation. You do know he is interested?"

Ash laughed and buttoned his shirt.

"Marguerite, I don't care a groat whom you think you can marry." He tucked in his shirt and fluffed the ruffles. "If Weldon wants you, I won't stand in his way."

Her little huff as she walked away gave him satisfaction. He'd made his point very clear and, he hoped, final.

He straightened the rest of his clothes and stared through the framework of wood covered in ivy. Marguerite was right—his morals had fallen to a new low. Shame had a way of creeping in on his triumphs to make him feel less a victor and more a bastard.

He wondered if he shouldn't check on Miss James. Her boldness came from drinking but her humiliation had been all his doing.

*"She is very pretty,"* a familiar voice said behind him.

"She is beautiful, and what are you doing here?" He rubbed his temples, feeling the twinge of a headache.

*"She is the one."*

Ash turned slowly to look at the foggy apparition of his sister. Every time he thought he'd gotten through the worst of his delusions, she showed up to make him feel insanity had a hold on him.

*"She would make you a good wife," Emma said.*

*"I need no wife."*

*"You need her, Ash. All you have to do is believe."*

*"I don't want to talk about this."*

*"Oh? Then why am I here?" She floated around him.*

*"Only when you feel so lonely do you truly wish me here."*

*"I wish you here every day."*

*"No, you think of me every day. There is a difference."*

*"I have done a horrible thing tonight, Em. I hurt a beautiful woman needlessly, and Marguerite—"*

*"Do not concern yourself with Marguerite. I never did like her."*

The fog thickened, until he felt as if he could reach out and touch Emma. Her hands clasped his, and she looked up at him with a smile. That smile never changed, and he remembered what a happy young lady she was before she died.

Ash squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to wish her away. Her arms went around his middle, and she held him.

*"Even if you don't see me, remember I am always with you, dear brother."*

Chilled air swirled a shiver up his body, and he snapped his eyes open. He looked at the house, wondering about Miss James. What she would say if he whisked her away from her duties and married her? The idea had an absurdity that made him chuckle out loud.

He didn't want to be a duke, and he couldn't see insulting Miss James by asking her to be his mistress. Leaving well enough alone seemed best, no matter what Emma thought.

\* \* \* \*

Mercy felt stupid and confused by the sentiments she had allowed to filter into her soused brain. She had accomplished her scandalous act. She didn't want to think about how long someone might have watched them.

The house had become her prison. She opened the door to the kitchen and could not even allow herself to feel relief that she was inside. She wished to be in the arms of the rake so willing to take the blame for her leading him from the Garden of Eden. As Eve led Adam astray, Mercy had turned Captain Sin's sexual urges against him.

She stared out a window, wondering if she should go back and apologize for the embarrassing situation in which she had put him.

A hand clamped on her arm, and she was wrenched around.

"You horrible child!"

The duchess slapped her face so hard Mercy saw spots of white light twinkling in front of her.

"Not only are you an embarrassment to me, but that poor gentlemen will never live down the disgrace," her grandmother continued.

Mercy put a hand over the crimson heat radiating from her cheek. She waited for another attack with a defiant stare.

"You are just like your mother!" the duchess accused. "A willful, shameful whore!"

"I think nothing could give me greater pride, Your Grace." Mercy retorted, lowering her hand. "I should think it right I be like my mother in every way possible."

"In two months time, the duke will return to his position as Governor of Jamaica. You will go with him and marry

Lord Henry Cree. I will see that no one speaks of this incident. I will have you out of my hair for good.”

“Your hair!” Mercy yanked her wig off so her long mane came free. Not even the pins and combs could contain the mass of spirals and curls springing from her head. “This is what real hair looks like. You have nothing but the cropped bristles of a broom on your head!”

Mercy knew she had pushed the bounds of her grandmother’s tolerance too far. Instantly, the woman had a fistful of her auburn tresses. She towed her down the corridor and thrust her inside a bedroom.

“In the morning, you will be sent to stay with Louise until you are on a ship.”

The duchess pulled the door shut so hard the room vibrated. Mercy threw her wig on the vanity and flopped back on the bed. She had never truly understood the woman’s resentment. Raised by a nanny until she left to live with her father at the age of twelve, she had rarely spoken to the duchess.

She wondered about Captain Sin. She pondered how people came together intimately without a special bond between them. She speculated that maybe all were desperate to be appreciated for something. If she was sure of anything about the captain, it was that he had murmured some of the most wonderful, beautiful things to her. It made her feel more than special—it had made her feel loved.

## CHAPTER 6

**I**n the months following the ball, Mercy thought about Captain Sin—he had left her a most unusual calling card. Much to her cousin’s chagrin, the duchess didn’t disown her because of it. Nor did she journey to Jamaica for a wedding she didn’t want.

The unplanned pregnancy became Mercy’s reprieve.

She liked to spend her days in the gazebo. As she stood in the structure, she looked out at the mist settling on the pond. For a brief moment, she thought of the apparition she’d seen hovering over Captain Sin.

*If you are his Guardian Angel...* Mercy took a deep breath and stopped mid-thought.

A tingling pain started slow and quickly built to something she couldn’t tolerate. She doubled over and, off balance, fell to the lawn.

“Janel!” Mercy called to the servant clearing the breakfast dishes on the portico.

“Milady!”

“Go get help,” she shrieked, clutching her belly.

What Mercy knew of birthing couldn’t fill a teacup. She locked her jaw in anticipation of the next pain. It didn’t prevent her screaming the loudest she had ever screamed in her life.

Then everything faded, shadows surrounded her, and in the seconds of blackness taking her away, she felt a cool



stroke on her arm. The gentle caress gave her peace. She reached for the person she could not see, could not touch, and she thought of Captain Sin.

When Mercy opened her eyes, time had slipped away and she looked around her room. Someone had brought her to bed. She touched her protruding belly and discovered it had vanished. A headache blurred her vision. She looked for someone to explain what had happened, to tell her it had not been a dream.

"M'lady is awake." Jane picked up her hand. "How do you feel?"

"Like I was trampled by horses. The baby?"

"Just a minute and I'll get her."

Mercy struggled to scoot upright to a slouched position against the pillows.

"Here's the little angel." Jane handed her the baby. "She is the tiniest thing I've ever seen, and she has your hair, m'lady."

Mercy stared at the infant—so small, so fragile. She couldn't touch her, and covered her face with her hands to cry. She had never felt so overwhelmed by anything.

Wiping the tears from her face, she lifted her arms. She vowed to get strong so they could leave this place. She'd not subject her daughter to one minute of the duchess's cruelty.

"Give me that child," the duchess demanded as she entered.

Before Mercy had the bundle, Jane turned away and gave the baby to the duchess. It only took a nod, and the servant hurried from the room.

The baby wailed, and Mercy braced herself forward on her hands. The weakness she felt overpowered her resolve.

She fell back on the pillows.

"She needs me to feed her."

“She will be fed. We have someone to take care of her—she is too weak to have to suckle for every ounce she needs from you.”

She turned to leave and stopped at the door. Mercy held her tongue. The baby needed care, and she had to trust her grandmother might be right. It didn’t hurt any less to have the woman take her child before she held her.

Hours passed. Mercy slept and woke. Each time she inquired about the baby, excuses were given—the baby napped, the baby was being fed. The reasons looped from one to the other, and before she knew it a full day had gone by.

Determined to see and hold her child, she sat on the edge of the bed for a minute then stood. If they would not bring the baby, she would go and find her.

The room next door to hers had been for the baby. She had taken great care in making it the perfect nursery. It was empty, and appeared as untouched as it was the day before when she checked to make sure every item was in the proper place. She had loved the child inside her, and now she needed to feel that babe in her arms.

She walked slowly down the hall. She hardly had the energy to be out of bed, but panic drove her trembling limbs, pushed her to search the house. She felt a growing alarm in her heart. When she stopped at the staircase, she looked down to an empty foyer. No one seemed to be around. She wore only her nightgown, but while she didn’t want to embarrass her grandmother with her attire, she had to find her baby.

She looked down again and felt dizzy; she didn’t know if she could master the descent, but she would have to try.

“Where are you going?” the duchess snapped from behind her.

“I want my baby.”

“Your baby died,” she snapped, cold and unemotional.

“No, I saw her. You said I would see her soon.”

Mercy looked down the stairs. Dizziness swayed her, and she gripped the railing tighter.

“Why are you keeping her from me?” she asked, taking the first step down. “Why do you hate me so much that—”

Her foot slipped off the second tread, and she fell. Her scream echoed as she thumped down the marble steps and came to a dead stop at the bottom.

## CHAPTER 7

Ash looked over the rim of his mug as a man he only knew in passing approached.

“Lord Sinclair!”

He set the cup down.

“Lord Cree.” He glanced to the men around him and stood. “It is Captain Sin in these parts. The only thing I lord over is my ship.”

“Captain, then.” He motioned to a chair for permission to sit.

“I would not want to bother my friends.” Ash pushed back his chair and glanced at the men about him, already squiffy from too much drink. “Drink up, hearties, I shall return.”

“Aye, Cap’n, but don’t ’spect us to wait.” His first mate poured rum into his mouth from a distance, letting the liquid slosh down his shirt into his lap.

“That’s the spirit, Mr. Pettybones.” Ash clamped him on the shoulder.

“Aye, the lass will lick me clean.” Pettybones swung an arm to indicate the woman Ash had fixed an intent gaze upon for some time.

“You can give full report on that later.” Ash joined Henry Cree. “Let us take a place over in the corner and we shall get loaded to the gunwales while you tell me what brings you to this part of Jamaica. It is a might far from

England.”

He waved for the wench at the bar to fetch another pint of ale for himself and Lord Cree.

“I do not care to drink, Captain.” Henry held a hand up to stop the woman from setting the mug in front of him.

“Well, I do, do I not, me beauty?” Ash pulled the woman down on his lap. “Alas, the gentleman has business with me, I fear, but do not go far, lass, and I shall see to exploring your vessel’s hold.”

He gripped the woman’s jaw and kissed her as she pretended to put up a fight.

“Do not wait too long, Captain Sin,” she purred once released. “I have me some other mighty fine offers. One even proposed marriage, and a girl has to look out for her future, ye know.”

He chuckled as he followed the nod of her head toward some of his crew.

“Ten of them could not satisfy you, Yvette, as you know I can.” He pushed the sleeve of her blouse from her shoulder and rubbed over the smooth skin. “Smartly, girl, be off to serve my men, and if you truly can get you a husband from the rabble, you best do so before we set sail.”

He lifted her back to her feet.

“Maybe if you were offering...”

“Forget that nonsense. I have no wish to take a bride and put an anchor around me neck.”

He turned his attention to Cree, ignoring the girl still standing next to him. She’d hit a touchy subject he’d not even joke about.

“What brings you in this place?” Ash asked once Yvette was gone.

“I came because I would like to enlist your help.”

“My help? What could I possibly do to help you?”

“I am to marry the granddaughter of the Governor of

Jamaica.”

“The pompous old Lord Hempstead has a granddaughter?” Ash lifted a brow, as he knew the governor and his wife. He’d heard mention of a son but never a son’s wife or children. “This lady is here on the island?”

“No, she was to arrive last week on the *Quester*. We have just gotten word the *Quester* was attacked by pirates and Lady Jamison taken prisoner.” He took a deep breath. “I have heard the rumors in England you are... Well, you have a ship and do things somewhat in the same fashion as the pirates. I would like to—or rather the governor would like to—commission you to get his granddaughter back.”

“What rumors?” Ash asked ignoring the fact there was a girl in trouble.

“M’lord?”

“It is captain, remember. The rumors about me—what are they?” He leaned back in his chair to hear the worst of what he should have already known.

“There is word you really are a pirate.” Cree’s tone went low.

“Whom did you hear this rumor from?”

“Your brother’s wife.”

“His wife?”

“You have not heard, then? Your brother wed Lady Marguerite Buckram about eight months ago.”

Marguerite had warned him she’d marry his brother if *he* would not wed her.

“No, I have not been back to England in a very long time.”

“I wish to join your crew if you will agree to go after my betrothed.”

Ash’s short burst of laughter brought no attention from the loud and rowdy patrons.

"You cannot be serious."

"Oh, but I am. I think it might give her a better impression of me, since our marriage was arranged by contract instead of emotion," Cree said seriously.

Ash rubbed the growth of beard on his jaw. "Tell me more. How does this plan of yours aim to impress the lady?"

"I was thinking if I were the one to rescue her... Well, maybe she would not see me as such a fop."

Ash rested his elbows on the table. He chuckled, low at first, and then he couldn't contain it.

"The high seas aren't a social, Lord Cree. We could pass another ship and never see it. Sailing the ocean is not the same as traveling a country lane, and finding one particular ship is about as easy as finding a whisker in the weeds."

"Sin!" a voice boomed across the room.

Ash stood at the resonant threat. No one would mistake the raspy harsh tones of Captain Cutter James. Nor could they miss his wiry red beard and head of hair. As Scots as the bones of his thousand ancestors, he clomped across the room in his kilt and high, tasseled boots.

"Captain James. What brings you ashore when I have just heard news you have taken the *Quester*?" Ash widened his stance and rested a hand on his hip near his pistol.

"What have you done with my bride, you filthy pirate!"

Lord Cree jumped to his feet to rush the man. Ash grabbed him by his coattails and held him back.

"And what bride might that be?" Cutter James folded his arms over his broad chest.

"The Lady Jamison, granddaughter to the Duke of Hempstead," Cree answered.

"Ah, ye're talking of me bonny lass, ye are—a beauty to be sure, and a prize for any man." James gripped the handle of the pistol in his sash. "Ya canna have 'er. She is mine to

keep as long as I see fit. Besides, what would the lass want wi' the likes of yer skinny hide? If she ha' the eye for any man, then t'would be more to her likin' to look over Cap'n Sin here afore she would gi' ye the time o' day."

"We have a marriage contract, and she belongs to me." Lord Cree challenged.

"James, you cannot hold the girl against her will," Ash said, thinking maybe he could reason with the man.

"The lass stays because she wants to, and for no reason more." He tilted his head. "Gents, I think me best choice is to take me grog to the far side o' the room."

"Are you going to let him just get away with that?" Cree protested as the Scotsman strode away. "He has kidnapped Lady Jamison. As a nobleman..."

Ash turned and grabbed Cree by his ruffled cravat. "I told you, this is not the place to be spouting out who I am. Now get up and get out of here before I let me man have sport with yer hide."

"You might want to see this before I go."

Cree pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to him. Ash looked over the decree from the governor.

"I get ownership of the Isle of the Indigo Winds Plantation?"

"A reward, Captain, the governor knows how you have been hard at work trading to raise the money to buy the island. He means to give you the place in return for his granddaughter."

Ash folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

"I will take this as proof of the offer."

"Then you will get her back?"

"For this..." Ash tapped his pocket. "...I would bring the devil to the gallows."

"You will attack his ship?"

"It's best you don't know the details. But it is obvious



the girl is on his ship, and he is not giving her up without a fight.”

“I still want to go with you.”

Ash thought of the girl. The governor’s daughter might be very grateful herself to be rescued. He’d not want Lord Cree around when he had the opportunity to take some pleasure with a nobleman’s lady.

“No. My plan does not include you. If it comes down to a fight, my men will back me. I cannot ensure your safety. So this is where we part company, Lord Cree. I will get word to you as soon as I have the girl safely in my custody.”

He nodded to his men as he walked past them. Single file, they followed him out of the tavern. Nary a one grumbled at the interruption to their shore leave, as he never asked it of them often, and when he did, their rewards were sweet.

“Mr. Pettybones, ready the *Indigo Wind* to set sail. Make sure she has full stores of powder and ball.”

“We on a mission, Cap’n?”

“We are going to steal a girl.”

“A girl?”

“Seems Cutter James has the governor’s granddaughter, and His Lordship has made a special request of me.”

## CHAPTER 8

Mercy hid during the battle—pirates were a bad lot, and she had no way to defend herself. She tried to change positions and knocked over a crate.

“Come out from there,” a man ordered.

It came down to get shot or going down with the burning ship. The whole vessel was about to blow like fireworks.

She crawled out of her dark corner and stood up.

Her heart lit with a fire she had set aside a long time back, but Captain Sin’s green eyes showed no sign of recognition. Granted, she did have on men’s clothing, and a hat much too large.

An explosion thrust her forward. Another loud boom resounded as the deck shattered and erupted in splinters around them. Mercy fell into the cargo. The crates toppled, and she couldn’t breathe from the weight of them pinning her down. After an eternity, Captain Sin pulled them off and lifted her.

“Time to go, m’lady.”

“Mercy,” she gasped.

“You need not beg for your safety, m’lady.”

“No,” she whispered, trying to keep her mind focused, “my *name* is Mercy.”

“Cap’n!” one of Sin’s crew yelled. “Cap’n, be y’ all right?”

“Aye. What of the others?”

He hoisted her over his shoulder and climbed the ladder to the main deck. She didn’t complain of the position, or of him smelling like bilge water. Truth be told, for a moment she wanted to hug him with every ounce of the exaggerated affection she’d developed for him over the past year.

“They’re back aboard the *Indigo Winds*, Cap’n Sin,” the man puffed, out of breath. “We’d thought you with us.”

“I did until I spied this little lady belowdecks.”

He carried her to the ropes still mooring them to his ship, set her down then immediately swept her up in his arms.

“Can you make it with the girl, Cap’n?”

Mercy twisted to get free.

“You have destroyed the *Red Raven*.” She pushed against him, and he set her down. “Where are Captain James and his crew?”

“Those left from the fight are in a couple boats headed for the *Quester*.”

“Why are we still aboard? No, don’t tell me.” She held a hand up. “Is that where you were taking me?” She pointed to the *Indigo Winds*.

“Yes.”

“Then whatever are you waiting for?” She hopped up on the rail to grab a rope.

“Wait, that’s not as easy as it looks.”

She swung away and landed off-balance atop the rail on the *Indigo Winds*.

“Grab her!” Captain Sin yelled as she teetered.

One of his crew rushed forward and pulled her onto the deck.

The captain didn’t swing but crossed on a plank as easy as if it were a wide road.

“She looks to been raised at sea, Cap’n.”

“Or raised in the jungles like a monkey.” He grinned at her.

Mercy tingled all over at his smile. Her mind filtered through the hazy past to the night she’d seen those handsome features up close.

“Come with me, m’lady.” The captain took her elbow and swiftly led her to the gangway. “Mr. Pettybones, I leave the care of my ship in your hands for the moment. Make a course for Jamaica, and keep a lookout for the *Red Raven*. Cutter James will not like losing the lady.”

He led her into his cabin and closed the door.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“I told you. It’s Mercy.”

She strolled around, touching the sailor’s instruments. A small oval mirror caught her eye; she stopped to look at the disarray of her attire and the sooty smudges on her face. She could understand why he didn’t know her. She wasn’t the pale, white-powdered girl he had met over a half year ago. She hardly even looked feminine, and nowhere as pretty as he had claimed she was that night. That he even knew she was a woman surprised her.

“I’m Captain Sin.”

She had dreamed they would meet one day, but her version never had him so forgetful of her.

“Did you kill the captain of the *Red Raven*?” She turned from her reflection to face him.

“No, the blackguard jumped ship with his men and either swam or took a longboat to the ship that followed.”

She watched him lean on the edge of the table to take weight off his leg.

“Have no worry, m’lady. The foul-smelling Captain James will not be a bothering you any more.”

“He doesn’t smell.” She pinched her lips. “Not always.”

She did recall times when he was sodden with grog and

hadn't bathed in a week.

"The old man turned your head, did he? Well, if that's not a new twist on things. I was paid right handsomely to rescue you, and you're beginning to sound ungrateful." He raised a brow.

"Rescue me? Who paid you?" She turned around, and her attention dropped to his torn pant leg.

"Lord Henry Cree. I believe he is your intended?" He picked up a sheet of paper from the table. "It says here that, by order of the Governor of Jamaica, on the condition of your return, he will reward me with the Isle of the Indigo Winds."

"So, you get a piece of land in return for me. My worth really is impressive." She sighed and looked in a bucket on the floor nearby. "I wish to wash up. Do you mind leaving me alone?"

The duchess hated her. The Duke hardly took notice. She found it hard to understand why they felt it necessary to interfere in her life. She lifted her chin and looked at the captain, as handsome as the day she first saw him. Her heart tugged a little with remembrance of his gentleness then ached as she recalled the death of their child. He never knew, he would never grieve, and she felt like crying because he didn't know her.

She had thought of him while she carried his child. Fantasies abounded in her dreams of him finding her and knowing the truth.

"I have matters to attend up on deck anyway." He bowed slightly and left her.

Mercy picked up a clean rag to wash her face. She looked in the mirror again, wondering if he didn't recognize her because he had drunk too much that night of the ball.

"Am I so forgettable?"

*"He has not forgotten,"* a voice said in her head.

Mercy turned around.

"Hello?" She looked around the small cabin.

*"He has never forgotten you, Mercy Jamison."*

"Who's in here?" She twirled about.

A knock at the door startled her, and she opened it to a man bringing her fresh water.

"Thank you."

He bobbed his head and left quickly.

Mercy finished washing and decided maybe the wig and face powder had concealed too much of her the night of the gala. She pulled off her hat and unbound her hair, running her fingers through the long waves. An ivory comb on the table caught her eye, and she tugged it through the tangled mess.

A tap at the door sent her stepping back to the porthole.

"It's Captain Sin."

"Come in."

Mercy held her breath. The day of reckoning had come. She'd listen to the voice and believe. He had to remember her, for if he didn't she'd surely cry.

## CHAPTER 9

As he stood spellbound by the lady in men's garb with the mop of long, gorgeous coppery locks. He couldn't recall seeing anyone so magnificent since...

He stopped and thought hard on the night he'd met an angel.

"You have not had anyone look at that yet?" She nodded at his bloody leg.

"No."

He studied her delicate features. She had a cute little nose scattered with the tiniest freckles. But the almond-shaped sapphire eyes—how could he have not noticed right off?

He took two long strides and grabbed her arms. The beautiful creature now had a glowing radiance instead of the sickly, ashen shading of powder caking her skin. Her neck had a pastel pearly lightness, like a polished conch shell, and pink tones dusted her milky cheeks.

"Miss James?"

"Yes." She blinked.

Her upturned face, the parted lips...

He bowed his head; their mouths met tentatively. He brushed her soft lips, feeling an overwhelming gratitude for having her in his arms and safe from the pirates that abducted her.

Except something didn't fit. Something he recalled from

the night of their scandalous introduction.

"James," he murmured, between greedily sucking up her kisses. "Cutter James is..."

"My father." She rubbed her hand lightly over his cheek. He lowered her to his bunk.

"I swear, sweetness, he was alive the last time I saw him."

"I believe you." She slid back, holding his shirt to bring him with her.

Ash held her head and kissed over her freckled nose and the silky bare cheek. He could content himself with kissing her for hours and never wish for more.

"Ouch."

He cringed and rolled over to spare his sore leg. She climbed over him, fetched the water and a rag.

"Do you have a knife?"

He reached in his boot and pulled out a thin sharp blade. She took it and cut open his pant leg then wet the cloth and soaked the dried blood to loosen the legging.

"This looks very bad, Captain."

"Ash." He took her hand. "Call me Ash."

"I recall a woman calling you Ashton."

"Come here." He crooked his finger at her.

She climbed up next to him.

"On board my ship I can only be known as Captain Sin—or in your case, Ash. In you, m'lady, I place a great deal of trust, though I do not know why. However, when you meet me on a street or at a soiree, I am Lord Ashton Sinclair."

"Then, Captain, I should tell you that in this cabin I am Mercy James, and anywhere else I am Lady Mercy Jamison."

He lifted his head and kissed her beautiful smiling lips. "So you are the granddaughter of the duke and duchess."



“Uh-huh,” she said without her mouth moving from his.

“You should have told me.”

“I had my reasons.” Her hair dripped over his shoulders like spiraled flames.

“We are much alike with our second identities.” He rubbed a hand over the dirty white billowy shirt she wore and cupped her breast. He folded his other hand behind her head and pulled her down.

She put a hand on his chest, and their kiss deepened. He felt alive again. His tongue slipped through the parted lips and tussled with hers. She tasted wonderful. He even gave Emma credit for understanding something he did not—he desired someone for more than sex, and Mercy wiggled right into place. He had carried darkness inside for years, and she brought light into his soul.

Ash caressed the length of her as she lay on him, buried his fingers in her coppery curls. She twisted her head to meet his lips as he kissed every spot on her face. Lost in insatiable lust, he nibbled her delicate earlobe, sucked on the warm pulse in her neck, and nipped her bottom lip.

He attempted to roll to the side with her and stopped at the contact of her leg on his wound.

“Damn!” he groaned.

Mercy moved out of his arms and looked at the cut. She picked up the bowl of water and the rag again.

“This is going to hurt more, so hold still.” She wiped carefully around the edges of the laceration. “How did this happen?” She dried the cut and looked about. “Needle and thread?”

“Cutter James was a might faster with his cutlass than my feet could move.” He chuckled. “So, he is your father. That is a strange bit of circumstance.”

“Only for you.” She smiled. “Now tell me where I will find the needle.”

"A leather packet in that truck." He pointed across the small cabin.

He watched her carefully thread the needle.

"You're all right doing this?"

"I've done it before. My father taught me to stitch a man without cringing."

She leaned with a hand on his thigh. Her fingers took a detour of inspection.

"If you are looking to stroke something, I can give you a better location."

A blush tinted her adorable cheeks. His heart would not still its thunderous hammering. She smiled, looked down, and jabbed the needle in his leg.

"Easy, me beauty, I will be needin' that limb."

"How long before we get to Jamaica?"

"Winds are good, so less than a day." He watched her carefully sew his flesh as if she were working on needlepoint. "You knew that, so why ask?"

"I was wondering if you could make the trip longer."

"If I trusted the duke, I would take my time. However, getting you to your grandfather gets me that plantation, remember?"

"It means a lot to you, does it?"

"I have been working toward that goal for years, only the more money I make the higher the price goes. I need to take what I can get as soon as I can."

"There, all done."

"Good." He watched her wash her hands. "Mercy?"

"We haven't much time." She stripped off her boots and breeches.

"No, we don't." He unbuttoned his shirt and tugged it over his head.

"I should like to spend the night with you." She stood in her pantalets and chemise.

"I'll not chase you away." He threw his shirt across the room and worked at getting his breeches off. His boots proved a problem.

"I'll help." She turned around and lifted his foot between her legs. "Give a push, Captain, or we will be doing this with them on."

Ash laughed and put his foot against her bottom. He gave a gentle firm shove, and the boot came off. They did the other, and then she spun around between his legs. He embraced her with a blend of affection and desire. Involvement was a serious, dangerous, and foreign word. It had tagged to it commitment, responsibility, and trapped. None seemed important to avoid when she smiled.

"We will at least have tonight." She put a finger on his bottom lip.

Her blue eyes became sad, and he remembered Cree. She was to be another man's wife. It left him confused as to what to do about that.

He didn't want to think about the outcome of their lives right now. He had always lived for the moment, and with Mercy in his bed, he didn't want to waste a minute on thought. He kissed her fingers as she played with his whiskers.

"I don't much like this," she said.

"Neither do I, but shaving it off always seems a chore." He pressed his lips to the warm pulse in her neck. "You taste absolutely amazing."

"You taste salty." She giggled.

"The sea air," he smiled. "You have a bit of a salty taste as well, and I'm going to take my time devouring every succulent inch of you, my sweet Mercy."

"Yes, oh, yes." She fingered his silky waves of brown hair.

"Lift your bottom, sweetness, so I can get you out of

these bloomers. I want to feast on your delicious thighs.”

He gathered the cloth, and she raised her hips. He was fumble-fingered with excitement.

“I can’t wait to have your gorgeous legs wrapped around me. I want to reacquaint myself with your luscious cunt and see the pretty pink folds.” He lowered his head and breathed a rush of warm air into the slit to watch it contract. “Beautiful,” he murmured, kissing a knee and staring up at her.

He parted her folds, caressed the wetness of her labia, and pressed her clit.

“Open your legs wider,” he commanded.

Her breathing grew heavy. He swiped a finger through the parted flesh. Propped up against the headboard of his bunk, he watched her face.

“Watch me,” he told her. “Open your eyes and see how I delight in devouring your sweet juices, Mercy.”

He opened her; her hot cunt twitched in protest at the coolness of the surrounding air. Her clit throbbed, and she squirmed with stifled moans he could tell she tried not to voice.

“The dewy rose is winking, and I have yet to do my best.”

He sucked the mouth of her entrance. His tongue played in the folds, flicking over the labia, circling the clitoris, and jousting with the sphincter. Her cunt tried to lock on and catch the tip.

Mercy gasped. Her body trembled. He nipped at her clit, tugging and drawing the hardened knot out. Her breath became unsteady; she moaned and whined with uncontrollable urgency.

Furiously, he sucked at her gushing cunt. Her hips pumped against the intrusion of his tongue, letting him in deeper.

The ship rocked them gently. Ash's hum echoed in the passage he held wide with his two fingers and loudly drank all the juices expelling from it. Drenched in perspiration, he felt his heart hammer his ribs so hard his chest hurt.

When the second shudder of her body came, he lifted over her and prodded the contracting entrance.

"Scoot down, sweetness. I would not want you banging your head."

She wiggled below him. The length of his heavy throbbing cock slid along the inside of her leg. A nervous laugh bubbled in her throat, and he smiled at the twinkle in her eyes.

The head of his cock pressed against and fit inside the folds. The passageway retained a rigid tightness, and though it shamed him to have taken her virginity, he felt a little pride in believing that maybe he'd been the only one she'd ever been with.

"Pull your legs up along my sides," he suggested.

She slid one soft limb up along his hip, and it gave him the space to sink into her.

He drew back, and each thrust was careful so as to let her insides adjust. She stretched and accommodated him by the third stroke. With her legs curved around him, he fit better. Her heels dug into the muscles of his ass, and he fucked her hard at her encouragement.

Her kisses dappled his face, and their climax came together with an intensity he'd never known. Her arms held him close for a very long time as they both panted with exhaustion.

Ash pushed his hand up the side of her face and into the luxuriant auburn curls. His palm lay gently over her ear, and he leaned on his elbow, watching the sparkle of her eyes, the blue more radiant than sapphires. To describe her beauty, he lacked words. He'd miss her, but he couldn't see

how he'd make her life better by keeping her.

When a shudder of her body vibrated against him, he wasn't prepared for the hiccupped sob.

## CHAPTER 10

Ash turned to his side, bringing her hot body with his. He coursed his hand along the curve of her hip, up under her ribs, and latched onto her luscious breast. She covered his long fingers and lifted them to her cheek.

She didn't mean to cry or let emotional upsets disturb a second of her time with him. The loss of her baby still weighted her heart, and it caused her more pain because she couldn't share that with him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She massaged glistening sweat into his skin. With her eyes downward, she traced the grooved muscles of his abdomen.

"You are upset with me?" He pulled his head back to get a better look at her. "Regrets?"

"No regrets." She kissed him. "I was thinking how like my mother I must be." She swept her fingers back and forth over the middle of his chest.

Ash captured them and kissed the tips.

"What was she like?"

"I don't know, not really. She was taken to the gallows the day I was born."

"The gallows!" he croaked in a voice filled with surprise.

"They hung my mother for piracy."

He released her hand to caress her arm as she spoke.

"I was told she begged for mercy. Not for herself, but for me." She ran a slim forefinger beneath the short dark lashes of her lower eyelid. "They kept her in prison until I was born, and then I was given over to my grandmother."

"And your grandmother named you Mercy?"

"No. I was told my grandfather insisted, since it was the last thing my mother said to him." She turned her head to look up at him. "A servant said her last words were 'My child is my redemption, and she is my mercy.'"

"How was it you learned your father was Cutter James?"

"Stories, rumors—and then one day he came to see me. I was sitting in church and this man came up behind me. He asked if I was the granddaughter of the Duke of Hempstead. I told him I was, and he told me who *he* was." She took a deep breath. "I knew it was true because by that time I had found a journal my mother kept.

"Over the course of several years, I met with him, and then one day he said he'd never be able to return to England again. He said it was dangerous for pirates to put foot ashore because the hempen halter waited for each and every one."

"He feared the hangman's noose?"

"No. He confessed later it was to trick me into going with him." She sighed. "Bitterness seemed to rule him. I honestly believe he loved my mother very much and he wanted revenge for her death. I couldn't fault him, but he learned he need only have asked and I would have gone, regardless. The duchess never cared for me."

"How is it you ended up back at her house?"

"I felt I might be missing something. I lived aboard the *Red Raven* with him and his crew for five years. I grew from a child to a woman on a ship with men. Very decent men, when you know them."



“And the night of the gala?”

Mercy didn't want sadness to overrule the happiness she felt. Everything about that night reminded her of her dead child.

She followed the path of dark hair on his chest and stroked his cock. It jumped to her caresses, and she slid a leg over his lap. Before she could ask him to be inside her, he stood, and lifted her. He impaled her sore channel, yet she hummed with the pleasure of him filling her.

She draped her arms around his neck and behind his head, wrapped her legs around his hips. The cabin door gave him the only space to press her back to something solid, and there he held her. His hips performed the dual role of anchoring her to the flat surface and teasing her insides with the length of his cock. She could feel it hit deep and penetrate every muscle trying to hold it back from her womb.

“Am I hurting you?” he grunted.

“You can never hurt me.”

She kissed him hard and fervently so he'd fuck her with all his vigor. Each bump of his body, she whimpered. Her body shook, and her limbs weakened as all the blood rushed to her cunt. Her clit quivered on top his shaft and the sphincter of her anus tweaked in uncontrollable spasms. Her orgasm came heavy. She could feel the juices of her body squishing between them.

Ash didn't climax with her, and she thought it a bad thing. She felt incompetent as he held her racking body, her nipples raw from scraping his hair-covered chest.

“Hold on,” he said and carried her to the table.

With one sweep of his arm, he sent everything to the floor. He set her on her feet and turned her away.

“Lean over the table, sweetness. I want to do this from the back.”

She obeyed and lay on the worn smooth table, her bottom up and her legs parted. He dipped his fingers into her wetness. For a minute, she didn't feel him, and then he rubbed the creamy substance up the crack of her ass and into her anus with one finger.

"Oh!" she gasped with the awareness of where he meant to put his cock.

Her fingers curled over the edge of the table. His curled inside her and stretched the hole. He rubbed and fingered her until she relaxed. He poked the head of his cock in, and her instincts made her jump.

"Easy, sweetness. There might be a little discomfort at first, but I assure you, it will be fine."

He thrust in slow short strokes. Amazing as the sensation was, he fit too tight, and she clenched her jaw not to let him know it hurt. She wanted so greatly to please him.

However, he sensed her discomfort—or she thought he must when his large hands fastened to the fold in her hips. He moaned a strained release, and she shivered to the hot fluids spurting to fill every crevice his cock hadn't occupied.

She lay still on the table, wondering if she shouldn't have done something to participate. He pulled her up and scooped an arm under her legs.

With her head leaning against his, she took the splash of intoxicating kisses as the answers she needed. His happiness rained on her like a wonderful summer shower.

"How about some sleep?" He smiled.

She nodded, but when he put her in the bunk, he didn't join her.

"Are you not coming?"

"In a minute. Close your pretty eyes and get some rest."

Mercy did so gladly. The day had been long, the night

stretched far into early morn. Before she drifted off, she watched Ash shaving. She could see the reflection of his mouth and lathered jaw. He had grown more handsome than her mind could conceive. In all her fantasies of loving him, this came the closest to feeling real. She had a lot she wanted to tell him about the past months. Yet she couldn't, even though it was something he had a right to know.

## CHAPTER 11

Ashton paced the length of the ship, his mind heavily weighted by his emotions. Once on the quarterdeck, he stared into the horizon and their destination. He could not see Jamaica, but he knew it lay there in the predawn Caribbean fog.

His men had already left with a note for the governor; he and Cree would be at the dock when he took Mercy ashore. He needed to wake her soon to give her time to make herself presentable. He had found her clothes in trunks taken from the Red Raven and had them taken to his cabin.

The sun began to rise behind them. It cast a glow on the white-capped dancing waters. The air had the warmth he enjoyed, but the chill of his conscience hung on his back.

*"Do not let her leave, Ashton. She needs you,"* Emma's voice whispered.

He turned his head and looked at the ghostly image of his sister, her pretty face of a substance he couldn't touch.

*"She is betrothed to Lord Henry Cree."*

*"She could be yours. She has already given you her body, her affection, and her heart. What more do you want from her?"*

*"I want her to be happy, and I can't see her wanting to live on my ship or on the Isle of the Indigo Winds. She has come to marry Lord Henry Cree."*

*"She doesn't even know him."*

"She wants marriage. I can't give her that. I can't give her the life she deserves in England because it's not what I want." He slapped his hand on the rail, watching the dock come into view. "Mr. Pettybones!" he yelled.

"Aye, Captain?"

"Go to my cabin and inform Lady Jamison we will be docking soon."

"Aye, Captain."

He ignored the peculiar expression on the man's face. He could read his thoughts, and didn't need Emma piping up from behind.

"Coward," she hissed. *"Never did I think I would see the day you were afraid to face someone."*

"This is where the lady and I part company. I am doing her a service in not making her face me with the embarrassment of another night of indiscretion."

*"Poppycock! You're the one who can't face the love that sparkles from her eyes like precious jewels."*

The ship eased up to the old dock amid the fleet of others. He scanned the area and saw none that might belong to Cutter James. By taking the man's daughter, he had put himself in more than a pickle with the pirate, and he'd have to watch his back.

"Captain Sin, Captain Sin, over here!" Lord Cree shouted from the pier.

Ash looked back as Mercy emerged from the passageway. The morning sun glinted off her copper curls, nested atop her head. He looked away, afraid she'd see the depression creeping over him. He'd not let her go thinking for a moment he had anything but the highest regard for her.

All night, as he made love to her repeatedly, she had displayed uneasiness in talking about the past year. He felt as if she wanted to tell him something but she never did,

and he didn't push for answers he might not want to hear.

"I'm nervous," she said, taking the elbow he offered her. Her fingers tightened on his arm, and he felt her anxiety as if it were his own.

The gangplank dropped with a thud, and he helped her down even though he had observed knowledge she could manage on her own. He just wanted to steal the last seconds he could of her touch.

"Lord Henry Cree, may I introduce Lady Mercy Jamison." He released her arm.

"It is my honor, m'lord." She curtsied, giving her hand to Cree.

"Your trip has been an awful one, I know, but now you are safe, and will have a full day to rest up before the party tonight. We have so much to talk about."

Ash saw her weary smile. He should have let her sleep more instead of indulging in every pleasure of her body he could manage.

"Lord Sinclair, thank you for bringing my granddaughter safely back to us. I would like to invite you to the party tonight." The governor came forward and grasped his hand.

"I am sorry, Your Grace, but I have business aboard my ship."

Suddenly, Ash felt a jab in his back, almost shoving him into the duke.

*"Go! You must go! It is important to her."* Emma's voice rattled in his head.

"Your brother just arrived a few days ago from England," the duke continued. "He is staying with us, and I would like you to come and do so as well."

"My brother is here?"

"Yes, he brought his wife and daughter."

Ash kept his surprise to himself. Marguerite had been

very busy if she had a baby.

*"You have to see them,"* Emma insisted again. *"How can you not?"*

"With you at the house we can finalize the transfer of the deed," the duke said.

"I have things to take care of here first, so if you don't mind, I'll join you later." He looked at Mercy, and her lashes fluttered to her cheeks.

"We will see you tonight, then." The duke nodded to Cree. "Let us see Lady Jamison home so she can clean up and nap before tonight."

Mercy looked back at him as they left. His chest tightened with regret. He nodded a goodbye, and she turned her attention back to Cree.

He stood as if in a trance and imagined her running back to him. If she begged him just a little he'd forget the plantation and take her to sea.

*"You are a foolish man, Ashton Sinclair."*

## CHAPTER 12

Ash took the baby from his brother's arms and studied the infant's sleeping face. It made his lungs constrict with a strange emotion.

"This is your niece Emma," Weldon said.

"It's a good name for this sweet thing. Our sister would have been proud to have her as a namesake."

"It was Marguerite's idea."

Ash caressed the soft cheek and watched the baby's mouth pucker in her slumber. He had told Marguerite he'd like to name a daughter after his sister someday, although at the time he believed he'd never have a child. Unfortunately, she had misconstrued the comment as offering hope.

"A truly beautiful child."

He ached with an emptiness in the pit of his stomach as he handed her back to his brother.

"Ashton, I am sorry," Weldon waved for the nursemaid to take the child. "I should never have told you to leave England and not to come back."

"You did what you thought you had to do."

"We're brothers and should always remain loyal to each other no matter what our indiscretions."

"Weldon, you know I wouldn't stay away from England just because you ordered me to, so don't fret over it with misplaced guilt. I was simply busy, and now I have news I



think might prove beneficial. For returning the duke's granddaughter from her perilous abduction by pirates, I've been rewarded with the indigo plantation I told you about. I understand you're here to make a trade agreement."

"I really came because I wished to mend our differences, Ashton. I have brokers capable of handling my business. However, it does seem luck has been following me of late."

They descended the stairs to the gathering of guests. Ash looked up to Mercy's voice, and he watched her cooing over the baby. Her face glowed with happiness, and her joy hit him as hard as a knife in the gut.

Marguerite appeared.

"What are you doing with my baby?" she demanded.

Ash as well as Weldon retraced their steps two at a time in response to her loud anger.

"I was just looking at her," Mercy explained.

Marguerite wrinkled her brow when Mercy offered her the baby, and the nursemaid took the child instead.

"She's very pretty," Mercy said quietly.

Ash noted her nervousness. She clenched the front folds of her dress, and she appeared to be trembling. Marguerite could be obnoxiously rude, but he never would have thought Mercy couldn't handle it.

"What are you shouting about?" Weldon asked Marguerite.

"Why is our child being paraded about for all to drool over? You are a duke, and your daughter should not be some spectacle for amusement."

Weldon took her arm. "I brought her out to show Ashton."

"Then why was *she* holding the baby?"

"I am sorry to have upset you, Your Grace." Mercy glanced at Ash and then down. "Please excuse me, I have forgotten my handkerchief."

Ash glared at Marguerite. He saw nothing about her he liked anymore. She looked hideously out of place in her white powdered wig and heavily caked face. In Jamaica women wore no more fashionable accoutrements than was necessary—the heat had a particularly brutal effect on face powder and rouge.

“You better take your wife to fix...” He flicked his hand at her face. “The humidity here makes one sweat more.”

Weldon took a hissing Marguerite away, and Ash hurried down the hall to Mercy’s room. He tapped on the door.

“Come in,” she answered.

“Lady Jamison?” He looked around to be certain they were alone.

“Oh, Lord Sinclair.” She waggled the small bit of lace-trimmed cloth in her hand before tucking it up her sleeve. “I found my errant handkerchief lying on the floor.”

“I thought I might escort you downstairs.”

“No, I think I should rest for a little longer.”

“Mercy?” He took her arm. “What’s wrong? Marguerite has always been loud and ill-mannered. You shouldn’t take what she said personally.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what has upset you?”

She tilted her face up, and her teary eyes held secrets. He tried to put his arm around her shoulders, and she backed away.

“Come, they’re waiting for you downstairs. We’ll walk slowly.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Ash squeezed her fingers as they folded into the crook of his arm. He didn’t say anything about her watery blue sadness, or why she appeared so upset because of Marguerite.

“Will you go to England more now, to visit her?” she asked.

“Marguerite? Hardly, now she’s my brother’s wife,” he blurted out without careful thought. “You know about her and me?”

“Yes, but I was talking about the baby.”

“Well, aren’t I the bacon-brained buffoon.” He laughed. “Nay, m’lady, on both accounts. If anything, I will be living my life out on the Isle of the Indigo Winds. I’ll have a plantation befitting a king, and I will enjoy the work, the challenge, and the slower pace. The way of pirates is ending.”

“Will you marry...someday?”

“Nay, never, m’lady. I have no desire to have a ball and chain about me neck. I would rather drown with an anchor about me throat than to go the slow route with a nagging female ordering me about.” He layered his speech with pirate jargon just to see her smile.

She giggled and squeezed his arm.

“You fall into the pirate cant so easily. Which is it you prefer, really—the way of your crew or that of a gentleman?”

“Ah, my dear lady, I have had the good fortune to be part of both worlds and tasted the bounties from each with equal enthusiasm. You have been in both places as well and know the answer to that question yourself.” He bowed and kissed her knuckles. “Your groom makes his way to claim you, and this must be our parting.”

“Ash?”

Her gaze dropped quickly from his when Lord Cree arrived.

“Lord Sinclair, it was good of you to fetch my bride.” Cree took her elbow. “Come, my dear, I have people to introduce you to. Excuse us, Lord Sinclair.”

Ash waited until Mercy had disappeared into the crowd. Then he aimed for her grandfather. The Duke had the deed to his land; all that was needed was a simple signature on a piece of parchment, and the transfer would be complete.

“Governor.” He bowed.

“Sinclair, about the plantation. I think it best if we conclude things tomorrow. I have my granddaughter’s wedding in the morning, and then we can sail to the island and make the final transfer.”

“That sounds like a superb idea,” Lord Cree said, walking up with Mercy. “You wouldn’t mind if my lady and I were to make it a wedding trip and stay a few days, would you, Lord Sinclair?”

“I would be honored to have such guests.”

Ash looked to see if Mercy displayed any hint of regret about her upcoming marriage. He needed something from her beside unspoken feelings if she wanted him instead.

*“I say again, you are a fool, Ashton Sinclair, an utter fool to let her marry that pretty, puffed-up toad.”*

He ignored Emma. He’d be more the fool to have Mercy spurn any declaration he might make.

## CHAPTER 13

Mercy painted a smile on her face, grinning like a porcelain doll. She had often wondered, during those days of mourning the loss of her baby, if “Captain Sin” would have changed his view of marriage knowing he had a child.

During the wedding ceremony, she had a secret wish for him to sweep her out of the room. Had she been braver, she might have begged him to take her away. Unfortunately, she had grown to care about him, and he wanted a piece of land, not a wife.

They all set sail immediately after the wedding on the *Indigo Winds*—the very name of the ship told her how much he coveted the island. She and Henry were given the captain’s cabin for the two-and-a-half-hour journey. She felt at home, and yet, looking at her husband, almost sick.

His hard stare raked over her with a rapacious hunger. She had thought she could handle this moment when it came, but now she wasn’t so sure.

“I have waited all day for this moment.” He put his hands on her shoulders and smoothed the lace shawl covering them. “You know, at the wedding, I could think only of what it would be like to see you naked.”

Mercy closed her eyes as his sour breath wafted over her face.

“I was surprised at how beautiful you are.”

He wrapped an arm around her back and slid his other hand down her bodice, not stopping until he cupped her breast. She whimpered when he squeezed too hard. He stopped, and raised his fingers to her mouth. He stretched her lips to the side, felt her teeth, and shoved his thumb inside to massage her tongue. He folded her lip up and down, a curious examination she didn't understand.

"This is how I pick out a slave girl," he commented with a low chuckle.

Mercy held her breath. Bought and paid for, she had no recourse. He finally stopped torturing her mouth, and her eyes snapped open at his sudden grip on the front of her gown.

"The little dark girls always struggle. I like it when they fight."

His wicked grin startled her. She didn't understand. The man she had met at the dock had turned evil, as if possessed.

He yanked her bodice open to the sound of pearl buttons dancing on the floor then swung her around and threw her on the bunk.

Mercy scrambled to sit up as he came at her, but her foot caught in the hem of her gown. Henry tore open his shirt and pinned her down with his body. She squirmed, she twisted, and she prayed.

"Let go of me!" she demanded.

He dragged her arms over her head and locked her wrists in one hand. Her chemise came open at his violent jerk on the material. She squeezed her eyes tight as he stared at her exposed breasts.

She might shut out his lustful gaze, but he had other ways to remind her of his presence. His touch on one breast escalated her struggles. The smoothness of his gentleman's palm swirled over her naked flesh. Unlike Ash, Henry had

never done anything to resemble work, let alone lift a hand to a chore to make his skin rough.

Fear welled up inside that made her shriek. His firm tugs on the gown opened it wider. She screamed again, and seconds later someone pounded on the cabin door.

“Lord Cree, is everything all right?” Ash demanded.

Mercy heard the latch jiggle. She prayed for him to help her—and for him not to see her.

“Lady Cree?”

Henry got off the bed and pulled her up. She tried to gather her clothing over her nakedness, but his fingers dug into her flesh.

“Tell him everything is fine.” He squeezed her arm until she cried. “Tell him you fell out of the bunk.”

She bit her lip.

“*Cry out for Ashton’s help,*” the feminine voice said in her head.

“Everything is fine, Lord Sinclair.” Mercy trembled. “I—I fell out of the bunk. I’m sorry to be a bother and will try to be more careful.”

He didn’t question her.

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Lord Cree paced the room. Mercy gathered the front of her clothing together. She watched him open a trunk he’d brought, and when he took the pistol out, he aimed it at her face.

“Did he bed you?”

Mercy shook her head so fast it made her dizzy.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she questioned.

“When I contracted for you as a wife it was on the understanding I would be getting a young virgin with a proper upbringing. You are nothing more than a whore, and it was God’s punishment that your baby did not live.”

He backhanded her in the face. Mercy fell against a

cabinet. Henry grabbed her upper arms and forced a kiss on her, the burn of her cut lip worsened. Her vocal cords quavered with the a new scream as he kissed down her throat.

“You make another sound, and I will kill whoever comes in answer,” he warned and put the pistol on top of the trunk.

He slurped over her collarbone, her breastbone and bit her nipple until it hurt. Stripping her clothes off, he pushed her roughly to the bunk, where she cowered. She drew her legs up and held them while her very new, very cruel husband undressed. She had no right to refuse him, and she had no idea how she might get away.

Henry was a poor sight in his stockings and shoes. His legs were skinny as a chicken’s, and nothing about him was remotely close to being as manly as Ash. He was barely erect as he pushed her onto her back and grabbed her legs to drag her to the edge of bunk.

Mercy kicked. He smacked her again, and she flopped dizzily to the bed. When she rolled over, it became the worse mistake she could have imagined. He grabbed her legs again and without the care Ash took, he rammed his thin cock into her ass. The pain was not as bad as the humiliation. He seemed hurried, and yet he took time to hold her up and feel her cunt.

“Please, don’t do this to me,” she begged.

She bit into the bedding, and inhaled the scent she and Ash had left from their lovemaking. Henry continued to hump her like a dog for a long time. His puny cock seemed unable to function normally, and the curse he let out he accompanied with a sharp slap on her ass.

“Let me get that cunt ready,” he growled.

His fingers dug into her, and though she hated him, her body responded. She bucked with the spasms and hoped it



would dislodge the two fingers he shoved within her. She panted, exhausted and submissive to his hand-fucking. She cried mutely, and thought of Ash. His kind, gentle ways would never allow him to hurt any woman the way Henry did her.

“That is so nice,” he groaned. “You are all wet and slick inside, just the way I like.”

He pulled his cock from her and flipped her over.

Mercy kicked, catching him in the groin. While he howled, she tried to reach the pistol. If she killed him, it would be the noose for her but she didn’t care.

Henry gripped a fistful of her hair. He yanked her away from the pistol and threw her to the floor. She tumbled to a stop against the door. He bent over and clamped a hand around her neck.

“You want to play rough?”

He hauled her up with one hand under her jaw. His fingers tightened on her throat and he struck her again in the face. The blow snapped her head back against the wood, knocking the mirror to the floor.

Minutes or hours later, she opened her eyes. Cold, naked, and sprawled out on the cabin floor, she hurt from head to toe; every muscle, every joint in her body throbbed in pain.

Grunts, whines, and a squeaky sound claimed her attention. She blinked until she could see the bunk, and Henry’s body suspended over someone. She looked at the brown arm hanging over the side of the bunk. It flopped as if broken while he grunted and fucked their servant girl Lani.

She closed her eyes and, far off, heard someone shout, “Land ho!”

When next she lifted her head, more time had passed. She was alone. She struggled to get up, and each muscle

protested so it took nearly five minutes for her to stand. She stumbled through the rags of her clothes and fell against the table. Her face hurt, and when she finally got her eyes open she was looking into the cracked surface of the mirror.

She staggered back in horror.

## CHAPTER 14

The duke and Lord Cree were busy with a discussion, and Ash saw it as his opportunity to check on Mercy, who hadn't come up on deck the entire trip.

"M'lady, we've reached the Isle of the Indigo Winds," he said at the door.

"I am going to stay onboard," she answered. "I do not feel well—seasickness."

Ash opened his mouth to say she hadn't been seasick before. He couldn't believe she had ever suffered from the malady.

"Mercy, can I come in?" He touched the handle and waited. "Everyone is on deck."

"I told you I'm not well."

"Go in, Ash." Emma nudged. "*She needs you desperately.*"

He opened the door and caught Mercy by surprise, clutching a blanket around her nakedness. He'd been in fights, and never had he seen anyone more battered than the woman before him.

"What did he do to you?" He shut and bolted the door.

"I fell out of the bed."

She kept her face down, and her lovely long coppery hair obstructed his full view.

Ash gripped her chin and lifted her head.

"I will kill the bastard."

She cringed and pushed his hand away.

"You can't. I beg you, do not get involved. He's my husband, and he has rights."

"He is an animal and has no right to abuse you. I'll make him fish food when I get my sword against his gullet." He grabbed the latch on the door.

"Ash, please!"

He kept his back to her, afraid she'd get him to change his mind. The man didn't deserve to live. No one who would hurt his Mercy should ever hope to breathe a second longer than it took for him to get to them.

*"She needs you to hold her," Emma whispered. "She doesn't need you to add more upset to her life."*

He turned around.

"Have you seen what he's done to your face?" He circled her, taking in the bruises on her arms, her back, and her shoulders.

"It's over, Ash. I angered him, and I shouldn't have. Please leave Henry to me. I'll make sure he never does this again."

"How?"

"Trust me?"

"God, Mercy." He gathered her against him and held her. "I want you to come ashore so we can get someone to tend your bruises."

"I can't—I look terrible. What will people say? My grandfather, your family—please, Ash."

"I will not accept no. If you don't wish me to kill your husband, you'll do as I ask."

"Can't we just forget about this? It's over."

"The hell it is!"

He looked at her, all broken, and his fists clenched in hatred of Lord Cree and his brutality.

"You can tell them the same lie you told me—you fell.

Elaborate, if you must. I don't care if you say you bounced off the bunk and hit the table, the trunk, and the floor. Say you did it two or three times. You will go to shore if I have to hoist you over my shoulder and carry you the whole way."

"Ash, it's not right. I've married him of my own free will and you can't—"

"I will damn well do what I please on my own ship. Hours from now, I will damn well do what I want on my own island. If you want to hide your face, fine. You must have veils and the like."

He stared at her, struggling not to wince at her distorted features.

Mercy nodded. He took a step to hold her, but she backed away.

"Please." She turned her back to him.

"I'll see you on deck within the quarter-hour then?" He couldn't keep his anger out of his tone.

She nodded in heart-wrenching defeat.

Ash left her to fix herself the best she could. He had contained the rage growing inside every time she spoke. Her limpid blue eyes were dull and void of hope. He could no more leave her to her own defenses than he could a battered pet or a squalling babe. He'd murder Lord Cree, and no one could stop him.

On deck, Mr. Pettybones approached.

"Cap'n, we've lowered the longboats and are ready to go ashore."

"Thank you. Governor, you'll go in the first boat with Lord Sinclair and his family. I'll soon follow with Lord Cree and his wife." Ash nodded to the man who had added new meaning to the word *evil*.

"My wife is not feeling well," Lord Cree said. "I have sent Lani to stay with her until I return from the island."

“She must be feeling better.” Ash nodded, tight-jawed, as Mercy emerged from the passageway.

The thought of killing Lord Henry Cree obsessed him, especially when his eyes closed for a minute, and he recalled Mercy’s marked flesh.

## CHAPTER 15

Mercy lifted a hand to shield her face from the bright sun. The black veil did little to filter the direct light, and it made her eyes burn with its intensity. Ash stayed at the rail as Henry approached her, and she stiffened her back not to flinch.

"I told Lani to stay with you in the cabin." He looked back at the black girl behind her. "She was given specific instructions, and if she can't manage to follow them—."

"Touch her, and you will not wake from your next sleep," Mercy hissed. "Touch me again, and I assure you if I do not kill you I know men who will."

"You think your lover will travel this far to protect you?" He laughed and glanced at Ash.

"Someone should have told you before now, Lord Cree, but I was not on the *Red Raven* by force."

"So, you slept with the pirate and you think the man gives a hoot for your well-being." He chuckled. "Pirates only want what they can steal and what amuses them for a time. He won't care a whit for your fate now that he doesn't have you in his bed."

"Do you know how Cutter James got his name? He was born in a small town in Scotland. When he was twelve, a man scooped him off the beach and forced him to work on a ship. He was in many fights. He won most with the edge of his blade. If a man didn't die immediately, Cutter would

cut him repeatedly. He is not known as a butcher for being nice.”

“As I said, my dear, no pirate is going to give a second thought to a whore.”

“Maybe not, except I wasn’t his mistress. I’m his daughter.” She took a deep breath. Now, shall we go and see this plantation I’ve heard so much about?”

“You are lying.”

“Ask my grandfather. But, no, I will resolve this right now.” She strolled over to Ash. “Captain, would you tell my husband who my father is? I’m afraid he was misinformed, and he doesn’t believe me.”

“M’lady?” Ash looked puzzled but didn’t question why she wanted the secret out. “The lady’s father is the pirate, Cutter James.”

Henry grumbled and climbed over the side of the ship to get down in the longboat. Ash took Lani’s arm and helped her over the side next.

Mercy stood back from the rail, and when he came to her, she put her hands up to stop him. Each time he looked at her, she saw the pain in his green eyes. She felt his affection too deeply—she daren’t have him think for a minute she wished her husband’s death. She could never live if Ash were hanged for murder.

“Lady Cree?”

“Please don’t look at me with such concern.”

“I can’t promise you that.” He held his hand to her. “I hope you had a good reason for giving him more fuel for his hostility.”

“I told him how my father got his nickname.” She squeezed his hand. “He’ll think twice before initiating another such incident.”

\* \* \* \*



Mercy watched uncontainable excitement deepen the lines around Ash's mouth and fan from the corners of his green eyes. He had worked long and hard for the island of his dreams.

Her grandfather signed the parchment and handed him the deed. She wanted so much to wrap her arms around him and congratulate him as everyone else did.

The baby wailing from another part of the house drew her mind away from the revelry, and as everyone sipped wine and made toasts to Ash's new empire, Mercy slipped away and followed the sound. She wanted to hold the baby so desperately. So many times she had awakened in tears for the child she lost. So many times she wished she could make everyone see how much holding that new life would mean to her. Marguerite's wrath would be nothing in comparison to her mental instability if she ignored an infant's discomfort.

She found the room and watched from the doorway. The nursemaid paced, patting the baby on the back. She hummed and cajoled but nothing worked.

"Good evening, m'lady. Would you like to hold her?"

Mercy couldn't say no. She swept across the room and took the child in her arms without another thought. She held the precious, squalling infant to her aching bosom. Hugging her, she walked about the room talking—of silly things, fun things, and childish things she remembered doing.

"Go take a walk, get some air. I'll tend her for a while," she told the nurse.

The woman looked delighted, and as the door closed, Mercy's fingers flew down her dress to unbutton her gown, to unlace the ribbon, to unhook her corset. She needed to feel what she had missed giving a baby the nourishment of

her body and her heart.

She moved the rocking chair close to the window and sat with her back to the door. The baby fussed until her dainty lips latched onto her breast.

*"You have your babe back in your arms, m'lady. Never let her go,"* the feminine voice murmured in her mind. *"Never let Ashton's child out of your sight again."*

"My baby died."

*"Your baby lives, and you must reclaim her."*

Mercy released the ribbon on the baby's chin and pushed back the pretty white cap.

"No, it can't be." Her chest tightened on a burning scream. She brushed her hand over the copper curls, and the image she had in her mind became a reality in her arms.

*"See, your baby is not dead."*

"No!" She fought the delusion. "It's not possible."

*"Do you not feel the love of your baby at your breast? I have helped keep you ready for her."*

"No, my baby died." she repeated, trying to make herself believe it, although she never had.

The baby fussed and cried. She couldn't give her what she needed.

Her mind drifted, her fingers stroked the tiny soft cheek. She held the precious bundle in her arms and cried. She had thought the worst was over, her life on a downhill plunge. She couldn't stop the world crushing her like a heavy foot on her chest. The weight became unbearable. She had lost a baby, married a man who despised her, and given up her only love.

## CHAPTER 16

“Mercy?” Ash took the baby from her arms and put Emma in the cradle. He lifted the veil she wore to hide her bruises.

She stared without seeing, her glazed blue eyes empty. He tried to snap her out of it, but she didn’t move. She sat as if she were breast-feeding Emma.

“Mercy, what’s wrong?” He fixed her clothes and picked her up.

The farthest room at the end of the hall was the master suite. He laid her on the bed and sat next to her, holding her hand.

“Mercy, talk to me.”

He touched her cold lips with his then jumped up to Lord Cree’s shout. He stepped into the hallway.

“Sinclair! Where is my wife?”

“I was just coming to get you. She has been taken ill.”

Cree went into the room, and Ash left. If he started to consider the man might be responsible for Mercy’s condition, he’d kill him. Mercy had asked him not to interfere, and he would do this one thing for her.

He went downstairs and returned to the drawing room.

“Is something wrong?” Weldon asked.

“Mercy, I mean, Lady Cree has taken ill.”

“Should we wait for her?”

“No. I know your wife is anxious to get back to

England.”

Weldon hugged him. “You send the shipment, and I’ll put the money in your accounts as we discussed. Now, come say goodbye to your niece.”

The nursemaid was dressing the baby. Ash picked her up and looked at her head full of beautiful copper curls.

“M’lord, you might want to watch, she—” The nursemaid’s warning came too late.

Ash held Emma away and laughed.

“Weldon, your daughter has marked her territory.” He cradled the baby and took the towel to wipe her belly and legs. He looked at the heart-shaped birthmark on her chest. A birthmark known as the kiss of an angel.

“Are you not ready to go yet?” Marguerite demanded in her usual nasty tone.

He couldn’t wait for her to be gone.

“Ashton was just christened by Emma,” Weldon said with pride.

“How disgusting.” Marguerite was not amused. “Get clothes on that baby before she catches her death in this drafty room.”

“Marguerite, it is near a hundred degrees today. Emma couldn’t catch cold if she lazed about naked all day wiggling her ten pretty fingers and toes.”

“Whatever.” She waved a hand at him. “I will wait on the veranda where I might get half a breeze to find me.”

He said nothing as the woman took quick long strides out of the room.

“Marguerite is nervous around the baby,” Weldon explained. “She’s afraid she will drop her or something.”

Ash kissed Emma’s forehead. “Back to your Papa, sweetness.”

He went to the foyer and paced, waiting for those going back to Jamaica to ready themselves. When Cree joined

them, he made no comment as to Mercy's condition so Ash sent a woman to look after her until he saw clear to go himself.

It took almost two hours to get everyone back aboard the ship. He officially relinquished command to Mr. Pettybones without ceremony and returned to his new home.

Cree sat on the veranda sipping a fruity drink as if all were right with the world. Anger still boiled in Ash, and he ignored the man as he jogged up the steps to the porch.

He opened the door of the master suite, peeked around the edge and saw Mercy lying in his bed, asleep and alone.

*"She has the wrong husband,"* Emma's voice whispered. *"If you had listened to me, you both could have been happy."*

"Hindsight does me no good now." He sat on the side of the bed and lifted Mercy's hand into his. "She's married, and unless I kill her husband, she will leave with him.

*"You love her."*

Ash swallowed the lump in his throat. His green eyes watered from the heart-wrenching pain in his chest. "I suppose I do."

*"Things will right themselves."* Emma's ghostly hands covered his. *"She belongs with you."*

\* \* \* \*

Ash spent as much time as he could with Mercy. She lay for three weeks as if in a trance. Sometimes her blue eyes were open and sometimes they remained closed. He watched her ugly purplish bruises fade into sickly yellow blemishes on her fair skin. The swelling of her face disappeared, and still she didn't get better.

Lord Cree hardly came to the room—he sent Lani, and

she tended to Mercy with gentleness and care, persuading her to take as much nourishment as she could manage. Ash felt safe attending business only when the girl stayed in the room.

“Leave us alone, please,” he told Lani when he returned from checking the indigo fields at the end of the third week.

The door snapped shut, and he kissed Mercy’s fingers.

“You must wake up.”

“I’m sorry about the baby,” she mumbled.

“Mercy, look at me.” He patted her cheek. “Come on, open your eyes, and let me see those beautiful blue sapphires.”

Her lashes fluttered and went still.

He leaned over and pressed his mouth to hers. He kissed her without reservation and continued doing so until she responded with sobs.

“Where is my baby?”

“Mercy, the baby was Marguerite’s, and they’ve left. Everyone has left. Well, except your husband. Cree is waiting to take you home as soon as you are well.”

“I need to hold my baby.” She looked around. “Can I hold my baby now?”

“Mercy, you have no baby. When I found you, you were holding Emma.” He smoothed back the coppery curls from her forehead. He could see how one might think the baby belonged to her. More surprising was that she talked as if she’d actually had a baby.

The fingers that had stroked him with love and adoration glided into his palm, and he turned her hand to plant a kiss on the delicate, almost-transparent skin of her wrist. Even when marred on the outside, true beauty radiated from her heart.

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with my wife, Sinclair.” Cree crossed the room and studied her. “So,

you're awake. Now we can get off this godforsaken island. I don't think I've felt one breeze since we arrived."

"It is unusual weather. Generally, there are afternoon storms that cool things considerably." Ash said, standing so he towered over the man.

Cree said no more on the subject, and over the next two days, Mercy's condition improved. Ash looked in on her once each day and no more, afraid it would cause problems with her husband.

On the third day, she joined him as he stood on the veranda watching clouds tumbling in the blue sky. He jumped at her hand touching his back.

"I will be leaving tomorrow, Lord Sinclair."

She glanced toward her husband, sitting at the end of the porch smoking a cigar.

Ash tried to think of some way to keep her there.

"Your hospitality has been exceedingly generous, and I am sorry I was such a bother." She bowed her head with subservience. "Too much excitement for me, I suppose."

He lifted a finger to touch her face then put his hand behind his back to clasp it in the other.

"You are always welcome, Lady Cree. It was my pleasure to have you stay, and I am sorry I did not get the chance to show you more of the place. Perhaps on your next visit."

She could never return, and they both knew it.

"I can see why you wanted to live here, m'lord. It is a paradise, and has renewed something in me I was afraid I had lost."

"Yes, I felt that way once when I told someone about the white sands and the crystal waters. I am not so sure I can feel that way now, though, when..." He looked over her at Cree. "Maybe I will take a stroll today and see what I've forgotten."

“Be happy, Ash,” she whispered.

He swallowed hard. Emotions claimed his voice. Tears burned behind his eyelids. He was going to miss her terribly, and he only now realized it. She had been sick for nearly a month with hardly a word to him, and now he had no chance to get to know her any more than he already did.

Yet he loved her. A gale upon the sea and a wind in his soul, he didn’t know how he could let her go, without anything more than stolen moments to remember her by.

He gave her a smile, so her memories of him would be pleasant ones.

Mercy hurried away down the steps.

“My lord,” she told Cree, “I am going for a walk along the beach. I will try not to fritter away the whole afternoon there.” She laughed and lifted her skirts to cross the patches of weedy sand.

Ash strolled along the porch and ignored everything about her except the direction she went.

“Let go, dammit, let go,” Ash muttered to himself. He wanted to curse the day he’d ever met the woman, and he couldn’t even do that.



## CHAPTER 17

**I**t didn't take long for him to find her—she had left a trail in the sand anyone could follow.

"I thought here would be better to say our goodbyes." She smiled.

Ash trudged across the sand and swept her up in his arms.

"Like minds always have the best of plans."

He shuffled across the beach and headed into the dense vegetation. Mercy hugged his neck. Her sense of independence returned as she recovered the ground she had lost since the death of her child. Ash, the dashing buccaneer, the charming and seductive rogue, Lord Ashton Sinclair, the master of the Indigo Winds Plantation, had no more room in his life for her or a child than he did any woman. Nevertheless, selfishly wanting all she could have from him, she clung to him for their final bittersweet embraces.

She placed her hand on his cheek, not realizing she had sand on her fingers. She smiled and brushed his skin. She kissed his bristly jaw and delighted in how her lips tingled.

"How does this look?" He turned around so she could see the lush tropical grasses swaying in the breeze.

"I don't care where." She nipped his ear. "I can't even think about anything other than you."

"I will try not to distract you, then."

Ash put her on her feet and fingered the edge of her collar. The faint shadows of bruised skin still upset him.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" He rubbed her neck. "If you want to stay, I mean, until you're feeling a hundred percent..."

She cover his mouth with one hand.

"No words, no regrets." She replaced her fingers with her mouth.

"I can kill him for you," he whispered against her breath.

"Can you really?" Her blue eyes watered like a stormy sea. "You could murder someone so easily?"

His mouth twisted to the side, and he shook his head.

She thought it might have been a lie. She stepped back from him, feeling the gap between what she knew of him and who he really was when they weren't together.

"He doesn't deserve to breathe the same air you do," he said. "Truthfully, I could kill him with only one qualm—how it would distress you."

The air around her suddenly felt cool. Goosebumps spotted her arms.

*"Do not question your love for him,"* the voice whispered to her. *"Go to him. Tell him how you feel, and how you will always feel."*

Mercy stumbled forward as if someone had given her a shove. The momentum sent her into Ash's arms, and he hugged her so tight she thought she'd burst. His kisses rained down on her face. So sweet, so desirable, she felt she was his in so many ways.

"Every curve," he whispered, "makes me ache to have you naked."

Her nipples tightened into hard knots at the suggestion.

"Then undress me, Captain Sin."

His fingers flew down the row of buttons along her

spine. Kisses dashed over her shoulder. The dress dropped easily since she had purposely left off her underthings.

“What, pray tell, have you been up to in your pretty head?” He pulled her dress past her elbows. “You have plotted this moment to every detail.”

He lowered his head and swept his lips across her collarbone. His whiskered chin scratched her breasts. He caressed her neck with kisses. He claimed her mouth. Mercy could have cried with the happiness he lavishly created inside her.

Playfully fencing with her tongue, he licked her lips. For the longest time, he fastened their breaths together as one and moved hungrily on her mouth. She cried for the joy and for the sadness the coupling would bring.

“If ever you need me, Mercy—I don’t care how trivial the reason—you may be sure I will come to you.” He held her face. “Any reason at all, do you understand?”

She nodded and closed her eyes to the sweetest kisses, the softest touch, and the outpouring of his heart as he whispered over her body.

She turned in his arms, dropped her head back onto his muscled shoulder. Everywhere his hands touched, she felt flames licking at her skin. When they covered her breasts, squeezing and kneading the supple flesh, she moaned with him.

“If I touch a sore spot, I want you to tell me.”

She twisted her head and kissed him with a sigh then tilted it to offer the length of her neck to his lips. As a tremor shuddered through her limbs, he feathered one nipple with his thumb.

“Such ripeness deserves utmost consideration,” he whispered.

In the sling of his arm, she lay arched. His breath came like a firestorm, scorching the ache while he cupped her

soft flesh and forced it up to his lips. He squeezed as his tongue slurped and swirled. She groaned raggedly when he tugged her taut nipples with his teeth.

“Mmmmm,” he moaned, biting harder. His hot palm slid down her belly into her damp ringlets. “What splendid beauty.”

A teasing breath rushed over her burning red nipple.

“It would only be right for me to make your other bud shine with such splendor.”

He attacked her other nipple. His finger strumming over her clit was a torture far worse than his kisses on her aching breasts. He wasted no time bringing her to orgasm, nor did he allow her an adjustment before pressing inside. He plunged his fingers to the depth of his palm.

“Oh, Ash,” she whimpered.

She rocked to the rhythmic pace he created. His kisses slurped wetly over her entire breast—over, under, and around, he covered every square inch. She strained to bounce her body higher off his fingers so each downward plunge would make them penetrate to her very soul. He drew her to him. Her head thrashed, slamming into his shoulder. In the throes of completion, she panted heavily.

Ash held her head against his chest. His arm encircled, holding her upright. She could smell his scent, strong and intoxicating. His dark hair shadowed his expression as he lowered his head, his smile wickedly exciting as he followed her down to lie on the trampled grasses.

“The taste of your skin, the smell of your hair, everything about you makes my body hunger for yours.” He kissed each word down her belly.

His lips circled her navel, tickling the tiny hairs. He swirled his tongue into the dip and out and made her skin shiver. His loose hair fanned over her hip and she stroked the soft mane while he worked his magic on every fiber of

her being.

“Ash, we haven’t much time,” she reminded him.

He came up over her like a great wave. Their bodies melded perfectly, his cock connecting to her womb. He rode her, mastering the tempest of their lovemaking as expertly as he commanded his ship. The slap of his skin on hers woke every nerve. His kisses came aggressive and as needy as hers. There could be no intimate talk, no cuddling in the end, and it made every touch so important. She felt his strong back, his sweaty neck, his narrow hips undulating with hers. She would never forget him or their times together. She would love him all her life.

Their climax came hot and turbulent. Ash shook, and she clung to him with silent tears rolling, mixing with the dampness on his shoulder. He held her a long time. When he let go and got up, it seemed as if only a second had passed.

Mercy dressed, planted a kiss on his lips, and backed away.

“Goodbye, Ash,” she whispered before hurrying from him.

\* \* \* \*

Mercy sat on the porch and watched the people bustling along the streets of Jamaica. When she had left Ash on his Isle of the Indigo Wind, she left her heart with him. She had no need of it any longer. There would never be a need for her to love anyone ever again.

Her husband’s loud and angry voice took her into the house. He had not attempted to touch her again since her threat. What she couldn’t get out of her head was his comment about her baby being dead. He had known all along she’d had a child. She felt a strange puzzlement

regarding her marriage.

She went to the partially opened door of her grandfather's study and listened.

"Hempstead, you lied about your granddaughter's father," Henry said. "I heard Baron, money, lands, and most importantly you said there would be a sizable dowry. I should have taken the indigo plantation, for all Mercy is worth."

"I may have misspoken on the matter of the dowry, but I assure you the man is a baron."

"Mercy's father is a pirate, and I will be a laughingstock in England. Coupled with that bastard child she had it will be the end of me."

"I assure you, my wife took care to give away that baby before anyone knew of it."

Mercy took a deep breath.

"Emma" expelled with a rush of air.

*"I told you."* An apparition of a girl dropped in front of her. *"Now you must get her back and you must let Ashton help you."*

"He doesn't believe me." She trotted up the stairs and shivered at the contact as she passed through the ghost. "He thinks I'm crazy. Besides, he doesn't want a baby."

*"It is so unfair of you not to trust his love."*

"He doesn't love me." She paused. "No, no, I know he doesn't love me. Not the way I love him."

*"Does he not?"* the ghost said sadly. *"Maybe it is you who doesn't love him enough to give him a chance."*

"It breaks my heart to be so helplessly in love with him."

*"Then you know what you should do to test his deepest feelings for you."*

Mercy didn't have time to question her sanity. The ghost, whether real or imagined, supported her quest and

gave her the confidence she needed.

She went to the balcony. The lack of stairs would not hinder her departure. Lifting her gown to put a leg over the side, she looked down at the horsedrawn cart ten feet below.

She spun her head around as the door creaked open—and she jumped.

“Mercy!” Henry yelled at her as he looked over the railing. “Mercy, I order you to come back!”

“I am going to get my baby. Marguerite has my daughter, and with the help of my father, I will get her back.”

## CHAPTER 18

"I did not expect you back so soon, Mr. Pettybones." Ash took the folded letter from him. "What is this?"

"We no sooner dropped anchor than a boy was waitin' with this for ye," Pettybones said. "I hope ye don't mind—I read the message and thought ye would want this as quick as possible, bein' it's from Lady Cree."

"She still thinks my brother's child is hers." He said after reading the note. He looked at Mr. Pettybones. "She has enlisted the help of her father."

"Your ship awaits your orders, Cap'n."

"We have to get to the *Fairfax* before Cutter James does."

"Should be no problem, Cap'n Sin. Heard tell she didn't set sail till early this mornin'."

Ash picked up his jacket. "Then let us hope we can have full sails within the hour and a good wind at our backs."

He ran with Mr. Pettybones down to the beach. He even helped row the longboat out to the ship.

"Get underway, Mr. Pettybones, and set a course to bring us abreast of the *Fairfax*." He gripped a rope and looked out on the empty sea.

"*She is a pretty little baby.*" Emma said from behind him.

"Yes, she is, but what will happen to her when pirates board the ship and fight to take her. Mercy's delusions are



going to get someone killed.”

*“Or she will get your daughter back.”*

“She is not my daughter.”

*“The baby is yours. You thought of Mercy the moment you saw the child’s hair. What of the birthmark? Does it not look familiar?”*

“You’ve known all along about the baby?”

*“Aye, me brother.”* she giggled.

He turned to face her. “Em, I have thought you a figment of my imagination, but you are real.”

She smiled, she laughed, and then she disappeared.

*“I am as real as you let me be,”* her voice sang on the rising wind. He looked up at the sudden whoosh of sail taking a full head of air.

His eyes stayed on the horizon all day. When they found the *Fairfax*, they found another ship and it flew the Jolly Roger. He hadn’t beat Cutter James, but his arrival looked to be well-timed.

Cutter’s men held the crew at bay on the *Fairfax*. Ash grabbed a rope, twisted it around his arm, and swung aboard.

“Blast ye, Sin, this be a private doin’, and ye werena invited.” Cutter’s sword swished the air, and Ash jumped back.

“We need to talk,” he grunted as the next swing sliced his knuckles. “About Mercy.”

“What about me lass?”

“I’ve come to help her get our baby back.”

“Aye, I hear you be the scoundrel that defiled me daughter.”

“I love your daughter,” he admitted quietly.

“Then, let’s us see what she has to say on the matter.” Cutter waved his sword for Ash to go first.

Their steps quickened at the sight of Henry Cree holding

Mercy by the throat, a shield between him and Cutter's crew. He must have figured out where his wife was headed and boarded the *Fairfax* before she sailed.

"Let her go!" Ash demanded.

"Here, have the bitch. I took her in payment for her grandfather's gambling debt on the basis she would come into money from her titled father. Except she's nothing more than daughter to a pirate and whore to you."

Ash's eyes narrowed on the man as Mercy was shoved at him.

"Do not look so shocked, Sinclair. I know you fucked my wife both before and after we were married. I was willing to overlook her affairs until I learned the duke lied to me about her being the daughter of a Scottish nobleman."

Cutter stepped forward. "The man oughtna to ha' promised me sweet lass in such a way, but me title is no lie."

"Father?" Mercy looked at him puzzled.

"I meant to tell ye, lassie." He scratched through his wiry beard. "I am a baron. It means nary so much as bein' captain of me ship, but 'tis the truth of the matter and I canna change it."

Mercy smiled. She didn't want to be happy her father was of noble birth, but it had special meaning that her mother had not loved or married so far beneath her as the duchess had led her to believe.

"Now, what say ye, Mercy lass, to me cuttin' up yer husband for fish food?" Cutter lifted his cutlass in front of the man's face.

Mercy's mouth would not move. She couldn't say yea or nay to the idea, and it made her turn to Ash for help. His arm went about her shoulders, and she could have cried with the dilemma she faced.

"I think it better he seeks an annulment," Ash said. "Speaking as one gentleman to another, would you not agree, Cree?"

Henry's eyes turned black and dangerous. Mercy shuddered.

"I would rather my peers hear a sad tale of how she died amongst cutthroats." He drew his saber from its sheath.

Ash lifted his sword. Blood still dripped from the tap Cutter gave to his knuckles.

"Stand back, m'lady." He pushed her toward her father. "It appears your husband wishes an immediate dissolution to your marriage."

Mercy whimpered as steel clashed and a dangerous ballet took them around the deck.

Her eyes traveled between the duelers to her baby.

*"Have no worry, m'lady. Ashton is a good swordsman."* The ghostly shape of a young girl formed next to her. *"My brother will live up to the honor of his name and the trust you have shown him."*

"Are you real?"

*"I am a spirit staying in this world until Ashton has more happiness than sadness. You are the cure for his loneliness and his heartache."*

"Who are you?"

*"I am Lady Emma Sinclair."* She curtsied. *"It is so very nice to meet you formally, Lady Mercy Jamison. I am sorry I could not help you the night of the ball, but..."*

"You were in the gazebo."

*"I assure you, I did not peek. I just wanted...I needed to see you to be sure."*

"Sure of what?"

*"Sure that your eyes reflected the instant love my brother Ashton poured from his soul. He really could not help it. He has never loved anyone except his family. Our*

*mother's death as well as mine took away the only females he had ever been close to, so he has always been afraid to grow attached to another lady until you caught his eye."*

Mercy gasped when the sword swung close to Ash's head. She squeezed her eyes tight when Ash, at the same time, skewered her husband.

"He's won!" Mercy cheered to Lady Emma, but she was gone.

Ash rushed up to her and hugged her tight.

"I'm sorry." He kissed the top of her head. "I know you asked I not kill him."

She tilted her face up. "Do you think it awful of me if I say I'm not?"

"I will never have anything but the highest regard for what you think, my sweet Mercy." He bowed and kissed her lightly on the lips.

His arm circled her back, and he guided her to his brother.

"Weldon, I know this is going to sound strange and there is no easy way to say this, but Mercy believes that baby is hers."

"What?"

"How dare you!" Marguerite shot Mercy a hateful stare. "You cannot possibly believe your little whore's wild story."

"I would be easy wi' the name-callin'." Cutter tapped his sword on the deck in warning.

"Yes, I believe her," Ash said.

He took Mercy's hand, and she squeezed tight, thankful for his faith.

"Weldon, if you can say for sure you saw Marguerite give birth to the child, that you were there, outside her door, and heard the wail of a woman in pain, then I will accept the child is yours."

“Noooo!” Mercy tried to break the hold he had on her.

“Marguerite didn’t have the baby at home,” Weldon answered. “She went to France with friends. But that doesn’t convince me.”

“Did you have sex with her when she was growing with the babe then?”

“No, and how dare you ask.”

“Weldon, you have to see something.” Ash unbuttoned Mercy’s shirt. “I need to show them this,” he told her.

She stared up at him, and his slight smile gave her hope. She trusted him with all her heart.

He folded back the cloth to show just enough of the top of her breast where the birthmark was. She’d strip naked if it would help get her baby back. Ash stepped away and she saw Weldon’s brow rise in surprise.

“Marguerite, how do you explain that our daughter and Lady Cree bear the same mark?” he demanded.

“Coincidence. Yes, yes, the girl is part Scot and so am I. Maybe we even have a branch of the family in common.”

“Beggin’ yer pardon, m’lord, but might I have me a say?” A scruffy man with a pegleg hobbled forward.

“Sure ye can, matey. All is equal amongst friends and foe today,” Cutter James declared. “Especially since I still ha’ me cutlass, right, lads?” He thrust the weapon in the air to cheers behind him.

“Yeah, let One-stick Jack ’ave ’is say!” a man shouted from the crowd.

“Jack, huh?” Ash asked. “Well, One-stick Jack, what did you want to say?”

“Only that *she* cannot have no babe of ’er own,” he informed them, nodding at Marguerite. “She were goin’ to have a babe once and done got rid of it, and she messed up her innards.”

“How do you know this?”

Ash slid his hand down Mercy's arm to hold her fingers laced in his. She trembled like a leaf on a tree in the windiest storm. He had done the best he could to get to the truth, and yet it wasn't enough. The pirate didn't look the sort who could know anything about a noblewoman.

"Why, that there woman is me wife Ada," he answered. "What I know 'bout 'er would curl yer short hairs." He nodded to Mercy. "Beggin' yer pardon, Miss Mercy."

"Forgiven, Jack." She smiled.

Marguerite's nostrils flared, and she turned bright red.

"The man is lying. I have never seen him before in my life! They have all plotted to take my child."

"Emma is my baby!" Mercy screamed. "Just because I know the man doesn't mean he would lie for me."

"Pirates would do anything for money," Marguerite snarled.

"Rightly so, Ada," Jack laughed. "But then look at what a pirate's wife has gone and did. You stole Captain James's granddaughter."

"It is a lie, and I will say no more to you. My name is Marguerite Sinclair and I am a duchess. Weldon, please make them all go away." She turned to the nursemaid behind her. "Give me that baby, and we will go to my cabin."

Mercy squeezed Ash's hand so hard he had to pry her free. She had never known she could feel such fear.

"No." Ash pointed his saber at the nursemaid. "Move to the other side of the duke with the baby. One-stick Jack, do you have anything more to add to support your story?"

"Ada also said she were goin' to get rich men to take care of 'er, and damn if she din't find the top o' the shit pile." He nodded to Weldon. "Beggin' yer pardon, Yer Grace. Can't rightly change an old tar's foul tongue even when 'e is in such fine comp'ny."

"Weldon, I do not know him, I tell you. You cannot believe a filthy pirate," she pleaded.

"I ain't no filthy pirate. I took me a bath twice this year!" he declared, and all his compatriots agreed. "I can prove what I say, m'lords. She 'as a scar on her right side where she were cut by a man in the tavern she worked at. Right nasty, it were, and didn't heal up proper, so 'tis all lumpy."

Weldon stepped back as if Marguerite had the plague, and Ash let Mercy go so she could approach the nursemaid.

"Give her the baby," Weldon ordered.

Mercy held the bundle snug against her breast. She looked at Weldon and couldn't help but see the love he had for her child.

"Thank you, Your Grace." She rose up on her toes, and he leaned so she could kiss his cheek.

"I am sorry for your pain." He cupped her face and touched the baby's cheek. Then he turned to Marguerite.

Mercy hurried back to Ash's protective arm.

"You are a despicable, loathsome creature." Weldon glared at Marguerite. "It was a mistake to marry you, and I am glad that I am not your husband."

Marguerite spun around to look at each of them. Mercy only wanted to be away from everyone.

"You are a fool, Jack," Marguerite hissed. "You need only have come to me in private, and I would have given you a fortune for your silence. Now you have ruined everything."

"I 'spect the duke won't begrudge me some coin for the news he be not obliged to keep you, eh, m'lord?" He grinned.

"I think a reward is very fitting." Weldon took Marguerite by the arm. "You can have her back as well." He shoved her to Jack and took out a leather pouch he

tossed to him as well. “It will not be enough to keep her long, but you likely already know she’s a costly bitch.”

“You cannot do this, Weldon! You married me,” she wailed. “Please, Ash, help me. I took care of your child when your whore wanted nothing to do with it.”

“My child?” He looked down at the baby. “Is it really true, Mercy?”



## CHAPTER 19

Ash didn't really need her to answer. His sister wouldn't lie.

"Yes, Captain Sin. She is a gift you left me that night in the gazebo."

Ash looked at the men tossing Henry Cree's dead body over the side. He looked at Marguerite and reflected a moment on all the reasons he had never wanted to marry. Then he looked at Mercy. Her warm smile bounced like bright sunrays from the child to him. She had been generous with her heart all along. He had done a great disservice to her by not accepting responsibly for the affections he had greedily taken.

A cool nudge to his back made him smile, and he knelt on one knee before Mercy. His fingers laced with hers over the baby.

"Mercy, would you honor me with your hand in marriage?"

"What are you doing?" Marguerite shrieked. "You said you would never marry, and I deserve the position more than she does."

"Ash." Mercy bit her bottom lip and shook her head. "You don't have to do this."

"There is neither a good time, a right time or a proper time anymore, m'lady, but it is time I take a wife. Who better than the one who bore my child." He stood up and

bowed to Cutter James. "With your permission, Baron Jamison, I would like to take care of your daughter for the rest of her life."

"It's Cap'n James," Cutter reminded him. "But me daughter has a mind of her own, and I'll not stand in her way. I warn ye, if ye're thinkin' ye might be givin' her back after ye've tasted her anger, I'll be sendin' you into the drink with that other'n."

"Father!" Mercy held the baby out to him. "You must promise Captain Sin you will not fight with him ever again when he is my husband."

"Fight? When have we ever fought, Sin? Tell her 'tis just some friendly sport we engage in from time to time to keep our minds sharp and our aging bodies from stiffenin' like a corpse." Cutter laughed.

"Speak for yourself, James. I am still a man in my prime. So, how say you, m'lady? Can you stand to have me around every day?"

Cutter held the baby and put a finger on her nose. He gave Mercy a shove.

"Go on, lass. Ye best be tellin' the man ye're in love with 'im so ye can get busy on a dozen more young 'uns I can spoil. You and wee Emma are the spittin' image of yer mother, and I surely do miss that fiery hellion."

Mercy took Ash's hands and looked at them. He saw the blood and felt panic rise in his chest.

"So, will you marry me?" he asked again.

*"Give her a chance to gather her thoughts, Ashton. You heard her tell her father she would consider it."* Emma stood to one side of him.

"Stay out of this," he and Mercy said in unison.

"Mercy?" He looked at her curiously.

"I'm sorry. She's right. I shouldn't delay in giving you an answer."

“You hear her? You hear—”

“Emma,” she finished his sentence. “I’ve seen her, too. I think she has been watching over me like a guardian angel ever since the night of the ball.”

“I know she has been watching over me.” His eyes filled with tears.

*“Tell her how you feel,” Emma prodded. “She needs to hear the words.”*

“No, I do not. I have always known.” Mercy moved close to him. “I love you, and, yes, I will marry you.”

*“Tell her now, or I will haunt you forever,” Emma warned. “She’s told you, and my time is done with her. Only you can see and hear me now, Ashton. I swear, if you do not let me leave this world, I will become the greatest pestilence since the locusts on Egypt.”*

He didn’t need her voice rolling around his head anymore and smiled. It felt good to accept the deep love and happiness Mercy brought into his life. He had a daughter, and it would change his future forever.

“My sweet, sweet Mercy, you deserve far better than me, you know.”

She tilted her face up as he drew her into his arms.

“Your daughter was a gift I clung to with shameful greed. Your kindness to me since has been a virtue I have treasured. I am the one humbled by your offer of marriage because I know it is something you never wanted.”

“Not until you.” He bowed his head close to her face. “I fell in love with you across a crowded room. A rake by my actions and a fool for letting you get away—I should have been strung up on the yardarm of my ship. Not even the Isle of the Indigo Winds should have gotten in the way of us being together.”

“Now you have both.” She smiled.

“I love you, Mercy.” He kissed her. “I love you,” he

repeated as he straightened to see her smile.

Cutter handed him the baby, and he took his daughter in one arm while holding tight to Mercy with the other.

“Ye just remember I’m trustin’ you to take care of me girls,” Cutter James told him. “Speakin’ o’ which, will England be your home again?”

Ash looked over at his brother. “No, I still have no wish to be the duke. I will leave that to Weldon. Besides, Mercy likes to go barefoot, so I thought I would keep her that way as well as pregnant.”

“Oh, you did, now.” She nested into his arm. “Just how do you figure on accomplishing that when you’re at sea?”

He covered her hand where it rested on the baby and kissed her.

“No more sailing the seas, my love. My adventures from now on will be with you on the Isle of the Indigo Winds.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**B**renda Williamson lives to write and create stories containing timeless love with sensual, sexy, and spicy themes. Forgoing household chores most of the time, she has a great husband and one son who put up with her many long hours hidden behind a computer. For contemplation she sits on the porch swing and watches nature inspire from her country home. With eight of cats, two dogs, and a quiet day, things can't be more perfect.