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Dedication

To my children, Hope and Paul. I love you guys more than I can say.

Chapter 1

England, 1852

"This isn't going to work," Sophia murmured as Lorna fastened the violet veil around Sophia's face. "I'm never going to be able to do this."

"What have I told you about intention?" Lorna reminded her, dismissing her fears.

Sophia turned, her worried eyes encountering the loving eyes of her dearest friend. "I know, I know." She sighed, then recited, "Intention is everything. I must believe I can do this, and it will happen."

"Perfect, child."

Sophia smiled at the elderly woman, a woman who knew her better than her own mother. Lorna was small and thin, her hair liberally streaked with gray. She had an exuberance that shined in her brown eyes and a wisdom that Sophia someday hoped to achieve. Lorna started out as her nanny. Through the years she went from mother figure to spiritual advisor, mentor and dear friend.

"I wish I could be as confident as you," Sophia insisted. "This wouldn't be so difficult then."

"It won't be difficult if you believe," Lorna reminded her, scolding.

"All right, all right! I believe you. The party will be fun. I will have a good time. Everything is going to be fine." She chanted the words automatically, but her insides still felt like jelly. She took a deep breath to calm her frazzled nerves. "Why does Father have to announce the engagement tonight? Why couldn't we have just have a nice little dinner for the happy couple, instead of this fiasco?"

"Now dear, you know it was your sister's idea. She has the catch of the season. She wants to show him off."

"But Ethan Manchester? He's the devil, Lorna! Everyone knows about him — his reputation is legendary."

Lorna finished adjusting the veil on Sophia's head. She wore the costume of a fortuneteller. Sophia was unaware of her striking beauty; her strawberry blond hair, hidden by the veil she wore, covered everything on her face except for her eyes. Her sky blue eyes shined, heavy lashes fringing them. Violet gauze was wrapped around her full breasts, ending above her navel, then starting again at her hips to fall in graceful waves at her ankles. As part of the costume she wore no shoes, her toenails painted bright red. She wore bangles at her wrists and ankles, and a faux diamond winked from her navel.

Indeed, this was a far cry from how she usually dressed, preferring to hide her curves in plain gowns; her hair tied up in a haphazard bun. Having been on the shelf these past nine years, she did not feel the need to dress to impress.

"Have you ever met the man?" Lorna asked, placing a brush on a nearby vanity.

"No, every time he came to call I was in another part of the house."

"Then how do you know you won't like him?"

"Lorna, please! His sexual exploits are common knowledge. He leaves a string of broken hearts wherever he goes. Why, just before he set his sights on our poor little Meg he was rumored to have had an affair with Lord Wellington's wife! An affair with a married woman!"

"That may be true, but that was before he met Meg. Don't you think a man can change?"

Sophia shook her head passionately, the veil she wore fanning out behind her. "Not Ethan Manchester, not a chance. He's too much the scoundrel, a spitting image of his despicable father. I'm just afraid that he's going to break Megan's heart."

"Megan's a big girl now," Lorna reminded her as she fixed Sophia's veil again. "She thinks she can take care of him. She's being very stubborn about this, and I think she can change the man. I think you should give them a chance. There. All done."

Lorna smiled as Sophia turned around.

"Maybe you're right." Sophia caught her image in a mirror and frowned, pulling at the material around her bosom. "I feel naked," she complained, muttering through the veil that shielded her face.

"Don't worry, child." Lorna patted her on the back before pushing her out the door.

"Remember, go through the servants' quarters to the garden and enter through there. That way no one will know who you are. Hurry or you'll miss the whole party!"

Following Lorna's instructions, Sophia found herself in the middle of her father's masquerade. After a few minutes, an elderly woman dressed as Desdemona approached and asked, "Do you really tell fortunes?"

Hesitantly, Sophia said, "I read palms. Would you like me to read yours?"

Soon a small crowd of people formed around her. She found a small table by the entrance to the gardens and used that to do her readings.

A small man sat before her, a mask covering everything but his mouth and chin. His costume was garish, in loud reds and oranges, with large ruffles around his neck that made his head appear smaller than usual.

"What a lovely costume, my dear," the man drawled lasciviously. "Any prince would be pleased to have you in his harem."

He laughed at his joke, the high-pitched sound grating on Sophia's ears.

"Hands, please," she instructed.

"Of course."

He held his hands out, palms up, on the table. Trying her best to remain professional, Sophia touched his palms with her fingers. The man had small, pale palms, the skin clammy and the texture soft. She looked closer at the mounts and found cowardice, a bad temper, deceit and untrustworthiness. The bulbous tip of his thumb showed an aggressive nature and the way it jutted out from his hand showed a marked lack of self-control. She squelched a strong urge to pull her fingers away.

"Well?"

"Oh. Umm," Sophia's brow furrowed as she tried to find something good to tell him. "You have a strong head line, which means you are good at business."

She glanced up and found the man grinning arrogantly. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

"You must watch your constitution. Your life line is weak in places, showing a chance of illness."

She chanced another glance and found him frowning. She gulped, trying in vain to find any signs of positive qualities.

"You have a unique line here, which shows emotional intensity."

She didn't tell him it also meant a complex nature with jealousy and eccentricity. She was amazed, having never before seen so many bad marks on one single palm.

She sat back and let go of his hand.

"That's it," she said, forcing herself to sound gay.

"That's it?" the man repeated, apparently surprised. "Can't you tell me any more?"

He shoved his hand back into her face. Sophia stifled her revulsion.

"Well, let me see."

She did a quick scan before saying, "Travel lines! You have many travel lines. That means you like to travel and have gone on many voyages."

She held her breath, waiting for his reaction. When he smiled she released it. He stood and caught her hand in his, giving it a wet kiss before she could tactfully pull away.

"Thank you, damsel. I shall treasure this meeting for all time."

"I'm glad I could be of service," she answered, rubbing his spittle off her hand underneath the table.

She sighed with relief when he walked away and a woman took his place.

* * * *

Ethan Manchester stood out from all the other revelers at the masque tonight, his only concession to the theme being a sleek black mask covering his piercing blue eyes. The mask accentuated his long, straight nose and prominent cheekbones. A thin upper lip and full lower lip sat in a frown above his strong jaw. He wore black, from the top of his head to the shoes on his feet. Even his shirt was unfashionably black. The striking contrast between his somber attire and his sandy blond hair was not lost on the majority of the females present. From the youngest debutante to the oldest matron, they all craned their necks to get a look at him, some being so bold as to brush up against him as if by accident.

He felt their light touches, could read the invitations in their hungry eyes, and it disgusted him.

Ethan was used to his good looks by now and was comfortable with them, but it hadn't always been so. As a youth he'd been sickly, with a weak constitution. Skinny, all legs and arms, no girl looked at him twice. It wasn't until he took over his father's end of their import and export business, traveling extensively, that his health improved and his body filled out.

At first the new reaction from the opposite sex pleased him and he imbibed from the fountain of pleasure. Eventually the attention became a burden. All the women wanted of him was to be a prize, something they wore on their arm, like a jewel, a possession.

He decided to use them the same way that they were using him. He made it absolutely clear he was not interested in any kind of relationship. Interestingly enough, when he made it known that he was not looking for love the females could not get enough of him. They each thought that they would be the one to change him, to make him come to heel. How wrong they had been. He did enjoy them trying, though. No one would ever be able to control Ethan Manchester. No one. He was happy living the bachelor life.

At least that had been the case until six months ago. His father's death had spurred his mother into insisting he must finally settle down and raise an heir. He would get the old bag off his back by marrying the next debutante he laid eyes on. Then maybe his mother would retire to the country estate again and leave him alone.

Megan Pennworthy suited him just fine. She was young, pretty, and easy to please. It had taken next to no effort to get her to fall in love with him.

A smile here, a kind word there, and the engagement would be announced tonight.

One more problem taken care of.

"Quite a turnout tonight."

Ethan turned at the sound of the voice. It was Roger Waverell, his business partner in Empire Shipping and Export, the business both their fathers started years ago. They had been brought up together as close as brothers. Their fathers were friends. When Ethan's father, Albert, died, Roger's father retired and the two sons took over the reins of the shipping company. Roger was as tall as Ethan, the difference being his dark hair and warm brown eyes. They made quite a dashing pair standing together, oblivious to all the whispers behind fans and sultry looks thrown their way.

"My future father-in-law loves to throw a good bash," Ethan said, his tone, dry, his grin making half the women in the room moan into their fans.

Roger's answering grin sent the other half into a swoon.

"I still can't believe you're going to tie on the old ball and chain."

"Believe it. If it gets Mother off my back it will be worth it."

"Don't forget the greatest perk. I wouldn't mind having Megan Pennworthy in my bed every night."

Ethan took no offense from his friend's remark. They had no secrets, sharing many stories of their sexual exploits over the years. In fact, there had been quite a few wagers placed between the two over who would win the favors of a particular woman, their tastes for the opposite sex very

similar.

A small man in red and orange bumped into Roger, sending his drink to the floor.

"Bloody hell, Archie! Watch where you're going."

"A thousand pardons, oh prominent one," Archie sneered, adjusting his costume. "I would hate to get your pretty little costume all messy."

He chuckled at his own brand of humor, for Roger hadn't dressed for the occasion either, his only concession being a dark blue mask across his eyes.

"Get out of my sight you ugly rooster, before you get plucked," Roger growled, his fingers curling into fists.

Ethan threw his head back with a bark of laughter as Archie bristled.

"That's right, Roger. I do believe ol' Archie here looks like a bantam in his costume. I say Archie, are you a rooster – or a hen?"

"Someday you two are going to get what's coming to you," Archie promised, shaking his fist as he backed away.

Before Ethan or Roger could reply he turned and disappeared into the crowd.

"I hate that little weasel," Roger said.

"He's harmless, Roger," Ethan offered, taking a sip from his drink. "He's just like all the others who come into money. Doesn't know what to do with it all and starts flashing it around. He'll settle down."

"Are you sticking up for him?" Roger asked, incredulous.

"Hell, no. I hate the little bugger as much as you do. I'm just saying he'll disappear soon, so why let him get to you?"

"I hate it when you're right." Roger looked around the room. "I need a drink. There's a group over there. Maybe someone's serving brandy."

They made their way to a table in the corner by the garden door, but when they arrived it was to find a fortuneteller, not a refreshment table.

"Bloody hell, where's the liquor?" Ethan growled, his glass empty.

"What do we have here?" Roger drawled, and Ethan knew that Roger had found a pretty woman. Roger adored women. It made no matter what color the hair, or the age — as long as she was striking, Roger was interested. "This little fortuneteller's a real beauty."

Ethan glanced over as the fortuneteller looked up, their gazes locking for just a moment before she looked back down at the hand she was reading. The moment only lasted a split second, and yet Ethan felt his senses stir.

"I may have to have my fortune told."

Roger laughed heartily at Ethan's supposed joke, until he realized his friend wasn't kidding at all.

"Give over — you're not really serious, Ethan! You don't believe in that claptrap any more than I do."

"Fortune tellers are for weak minded people too afraid to make decisions for themselves. There is no such thing as fate. We create our lives by our willpower, nothing more."

Roger sighed. "That's more like the Ethan Manchester I know."

Roger moved to leave, but Ethan's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Not yet," he murmured, his eyes still on the fortuneteller.

Roger rolled his eyes. "She intrigues you." It was a statement, not a question. "Think, man. How will it look if you spend your time at your engagement party lining up a woman for the night?"

"Do you think I bloody well care what anyone else in this room thinks?" He shook his head, his blond hair glinting in the candlelight. "How much do you want to bet that I'll have this woman ready for my bed by the end of the party?"

"For God's sake, Ethan." Roger looked hard at his friend and found him

grinning unrepentantly back. "All right. I bet you twenty pounds that little fortuneteller will have nothing to do with you – and I sincerely hope I win."

"You're on."

* * * *

"I see you've traveled extensively, but all the trips have been fruitful," Sophia said, studying travel lines on the woman before her. She noted the woman's lifeline and said, "You should continue to travel, and your health is good. I see no problems in your future."

"That's wonderful news," the woman said, smiling. "Wait 'til I tell my husband. I've been wanting to take a trip to Africa for years."

"Then go ahead."

"Thank you so much. I must pay you for this information. How much would you like?"

"Yes, how much does being told a load of pretty little lies run these days?"

Sophia gasped at the callous words coming from a man dressed in black. She had glimpsed his eyes just a moment before, the heat and intensity from them forcing her to look away. Now he stood before her, arrogantly daring her to look him in the eye.

Blue eyes met blue. His eyes gleamed challenge, hers quiet dignity.

Sophia's back stiffened. She ignored the stranger as whispers erupted around the table, turning back to the woman seated before her.

"There is no charge," she answered in a firm voice. "This is just something I enjoy doing. I do not make a profit from it."

"A fortuneteller with a conscience? How amusing."

Sophia bit her lip behind her veil, holding back a sarcastic retort. Anger coursed through her veins. The woman at the table gave her one last understanding look before vacating her chair. The man in black boldly cut in front of the others and sat down.

They stared at each other, their masks firmly in place. Sophia could see more of the stranger's face, for his mask only covered his eyes. He was smirking, confidence oozing from his body language as he negligently sat on the chair before her.

"What do you want?" Sophia asked, her voice sharp.

"Why, to have my fortune told, of course," he replied, his voice honey smooth. "You are a fortuneteller, are you not?"

The challenge was in his voice, in the sardonic slant of his full lips, in his very presence.

"I do not tell fortunes, I read hands."

"I have two. Which one do you want?"

Chuckles and guffaws erupted as the crowd grew. Sophia was grateful for the veil covering her face as she flushed with indignation. Lorna had warned her about this, about people who did not believe no matter how many books were written or how many experts there were on the subject.

She took a deep breath, mentally centering herself.

"Let me see them, then."

The man in black held up his hands, turning them this way and that. He turned and showed them to the audience, eliciting more laughter.

Sophia gritted her teeth, determined to make him the brunt of the joke.

"Your hands and fingers reveal your great confidence in yourself, as well as your vitality," she pronounced with confidence.

"You could deduce that from my tan," he countered, placing his hands, palms down, on the table.

"I can see that from the length of your index finger. It's longer than your ring finger, indicating confidence. You are not a risk taker. The spaces between your fingers show your confidence, also. The position of your thumb shows that you rarely let someone get to know the real you. You

close yourself off from strangers."

By the time she finished everyone around the table was silent.

Another man standing beside the man in black said, "She's got you pegged so far, mate."

"She could have gotten that information from any number of places," the man in black replied. His gaze burned more deeply into hers. "Come on, fortuneteller. Tell me something I don't already know."

She was determined to be the victor in this skirmish. Sophia ignored the murmurs from the onlookers.

"Are you right handed or left?" she challenged.

"What difference does that make?"

"Just answer the question." She spoke harder than she intended, and the crowd murmured again.

"Right handed."

Sophia picked up his left hand. Heat from his hand seemed to travel up her arm, leaving it tingling. His hand was large, warm and solid. She swallowed hard. Trying to ignore the delicious sensations coursing through her, she examined the skin on both sides, the shape of the fingernails, the flexibility of the thumb.

"You have an earth hand, and a strong but flexible square thumb. This shows that you are practical and law-abiding. You are honest and deal fairly with others." She turned his hand over, studying his mounts and lines. "Interesting. You had a long period of poor health as a child."

The man in blue laughed and pounded the man in black on the back.

"She's been dead-on so far, old man. Even to your poor constitution. What do you think about that?"

The man in black leveled his friend a deadly gaze.

"Shut up, you ass."

Sophia smiled behind her veil as the stranger's blue eyes narrowed.

"Get on with it."

Sophia's eyes lowered to his hand once again. Now it was fun.

"Amazing. Your headline actually shows a great deal of knowledge. You have a good head for business. I take it you've been educated?"

The man in black's brows slashed as his friend laughed again.

"Tell me something about my future," he demanded.

Confident, Sophia set his left hand down and picked up his right. Again the current passing from his hand to hers was intense, as if his body was calling out to hers. By sheer willpower alone she focused on her reading.

"You are now physically fit, and I see no new illnesses in your future. Your work pleases you, and with one exception, you will not have any trials in that area. You will retire around fifty and have more than one residence."

She stiffened suddenly, her eyes opening wide with shock.

"Look Rog, I think she's trying to scare me. What is it, fortuneteller? Do you see an accident? An unfortunate end for me?"

Sophia shook her head, as if trying to clear her brain. Her eyes were wide with distress and denial.

"It can't be," she whispered to herself.

"What can't be? Come on, love. Give over."

Sophia's eyes flew to the man in black, and widened even more. She stood suddenly, almost upending the table and knocking over her chair.

"I can't do this anymore! I have to go," she mumbled, stumbling once before fleeing from the room.

Chapter 2

Her sight blinded with unshed tears, Sophia ran through the gardens and up the servants' stairs, not pausing for breath until she slammed the door to her room behind her. Gasping, she sank against the door, ripping at her veil until it was off and on the floor. She closed her eyes and moaned.

"This can't be, it just can't be," she whispered between gasps of air.

A knock on the door startled her so that she almost screamed.

"It's me, child. What is the matter?"

"Oh, Lorna!" Sophia turned and threw open the door, running into her friend's arms. "It was horrible! Just horrible!"

"Come now, it can't be all that bad," Lorna crooned, patting Sophia's back. "Let's go inside and you can tell me all about it."

Sophia nodded, letting the old woman lead the way back into the room. Inside, she flounced onto her bed, covering her brow with her arm.

"Didn't it go well?" Lorna asked.

Sophia lifted her arm.

"At first it did," she admitted. Her smile was sad. "I was having such a grand time. I really felt as if I was helping people. But then this angry man came along. He didn't believe I could do it."

Lorna perched on the side of a nearby chair. "I did warn you that not everyone is open to this."

"I know." Sophia sat up, facing her mentor. "I remembered your words. I decided to prove him wrong, so I went on with the reading. Everything was falling into place, until – until," she paused, her eyes closed as if in pain. "I saw it."

"Saw what, lamb? Did you see an accident in his hand?"

Sophia shook her head vigorously. She opened her tormented eyes.

"I saw this." She pointed to her own palm.

Lorna inhaled slowly with understanding. "You saw the mark."

"Yes."

Lorna told her years ago about the strange mark on her hand, the mark of the Fated Lovers. An extremely rare mark, not in any of the many books Sophia read on the subject of palmistry. Lorna, being a reader herself, saw the mark years ago, asking an old wise woman rumored to have mystic powers about it. The woman told her about the Fated Lovers Line. The half-heart mark over the heart line. The person's fated lover would have the other half of the heart, and the two halves would make a whole. They were fated to be together for eternity.

Sophia did not take the news very well, hiding herself away in her rooms for months after finding out. Lorna knew the circumstances behind her charge's strong reaction, of course. She had raised Sophia from an infant, Sophia's mother not the least bit interested in raising a child. Lorna had done her best, but knew the pain from being all but abandoned never left Sophia. Through the years she heard Sophia insist many times that she would never fall into the trap of marriage.

Yet there was someone out there in the world, fated to be her one true love.

It was the main reason she stayed in her father's house, happy to read about the rest of the world but not experience it. She did not ever want to meet the man fated to be her lover.

But now she had. Even though the encounter was brief, she despised him. He was a complete stranger, but he had the mark. The other half to her heart. He ridiculed her, trying to expose her as a fake.

Lorna forced a smile. "So, tell me about him. Is he handsome?"

Sophia fell back onto the bed with a low moan. "I suppose so. He was wearing a mask, but it only covered his eyes." *Cold, hard eyes. Eyes that tried to reach inside my soul.*

"What color hair?"

"Blond. Kind of. Sandy, you could say. In the light sometimes it looked quite light. He must spend a lot of time outdoors."

She remembered his remark as she'd studied his hands — *You could deduce that from my tan.* She moaned.

"What else? Short? Tall? Thin?"

"He's tall, imposing really. He was dressed all in black."

She shook her head, as if to shake his image from her mind.

"He looked like the devil, Lorna. He was simply horrible to me! He was condescending and arrogant and rude — he tried to make a laughingstock of me."

Lorna tsked, shaking her head.

"Sounds like a rocky start."

Sophia went still. "What do you mean by that?"

"You have to find him again."

"No!" Sophia exclaimed passionately. "Never! I bloody well will not go searching for him — he can remain lost for all I care!"

Lorna opened her mouth to protest, but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Excuse me," a maid said as she opened the door and peaked inside.

"The Master is requesting your presence downstairs, Miss. The engagement is about to be announced."

"Thank you, Dottie. I will be right down."

Sophia and Lorna exchanged looks as the door closed.

"Don't try to talk me out of this, Lorna," she warned, standing. "I have made up my mind. The fates can't be so cruel as to saddle me with a man

I find so distasteful. Besides, I still have free will. I can choose whether or not I want this man, and I don't. It's as simple as that."

She looked down at what she was wearing and sighed. "I guess I'll just have to go downstairs in this get-up. It's too late to change. Will you help me with the veil?"

Wordlessly Lorna stood and helped Sophia back into her costume. She stood at the door as Sophia walked down the hall, her spine straight with confidence, disappearing down the stairs.

"It's not at all that simple, I'm afraid," she whispered.

* * * *

"Pay attention, Ethan. This is more important than that little fortuneteller."

Ethan glared at Roger, but kept his mouth closed. After the fortuneteller ran off he tried to find her again, to no avail. She seemed to vanish into the crowd, leaving him feeling decidedly irritated. He had to find her again. He had to find out what she had seen in his hand. The compulsion was eating at him.

"Spill it then, man. What is so bloody important?"

"I just received word that the cargo destined for the Sea Witch was stolen."

Ethan swore and downed his drink in one gulp.

"We have to find out who is behind this."

"That's the fifth cargo we've lost in as many weeks. I want to know who's sabotaging our operations."

"I couldn't agree more, Ethan, but you know yourself that we'd have to go to India to find out. Right now you're pretty busy getting married and all."

"Then I'll just have to postpone the wedding, won't I," Ethan countered with a glare. "I'm sure that Megan won't mind waiting a few months."

Ethan bit back an epithet at Roger's knowing grin. He could read his

friend's mind after all these years, and knew what was coming next.

"You could always find that little fortuneteller and convince her to join you on the voyage. A last fling, you could say."

"Where is that girl?"

Ethan and Roger turned to find Edmund Pennworthy, the Earl of Suthbridge, at their side. Ethan fervently hoped the Earl hadn't heard Roger's last remark and was relieved to see the man distracted.

"Excuse me?" Ethan asked.

"My other daughter, Sophia. She still hasn't shown herself. Just like her, too. She's a bookish sort, doesn't take to these large celebrations. I'm sure the entire staff's been employed to search for her. Likes to disappear until the ruckus is over."

"I see."

Maybe the real reason she stays away is because she's too ugly to show her face, Ethan thought with contempt. He felt a light hand on his arm and looked down into Megan's adoring brown eyes; glad he chose the pretty one.

Megan Pennworthy's coloring was much like her mother and father's, with brown eyes and dark chestnut colored hair. Her eyes reminded Ethan of a gentle doe's eyes, framed with long lashes. Yes, this would be a good match. Megan may be a little young, being only eighteen, but he knew that would be an advantage. She'd have lots of childbearing years.

It didn't bother Ethan at all that the thought of sharing the marriage bed with this girl left him feeling nothing. Megan was not a woman men lusted after, she was an innocent. There were plenty of other women who drove men to lust. He was sure that after he impregnated his wife he'd be able to find one easily.

He caught a flash of violet from across the room and his heartbeat accelerated. Now, here was a woman he could definitely see spending some serious time with. It was her – the fortuneteller. She mysteriously reappeared.

As she moved through the crowd his eyes feasted on her. He hadn't gotten a very good look at her figure when she ran away earlier, and now his admiring gaze traveled over the tight-fitting material that wrapped her full bosom. She had an hourglass figure, obviously without the aid of a corset, as her bare midriff showed. He caught the twinkle of a jewel in her navel before the violet material picked up again to hug her hips, cascading around her legs to end at her ankles.

He imagined taking the jewel from her belly with his teeth. Oh, yes. He would have her. And soon. Maybe Roger was right after all.

"Sophie!"

Ethan was caught off guard at Megan's happy cry. She disengaged from his side and moved hastily through the crowd. His brow darkened as she made it to the fortuneteller's side, throwing her arms around her.

Bloody hell. They're friends.

Megan grabbed the fortuneteller by the hand and pulled her along through the crowd until they stood before Ethan. He was satisfied to see her eyes widen in shock when she looked at him.

* * * *

Oh God, not him. Sophia's senses exploded as she came face to face with the one man on earth she never wanted to see again. Buzzing filled her ears. *Is this some kind of cosmic joke? I'm not laughing!*

"Ethan, I want you to meet my sister, Sophia."

Ethan and Sophia exchanged shocked gazes before recovering themselves. Ethan was the first to speak.

"Charmed, I'm sure," he said, his voice husky as he brought Sophia's clammy hand to his lips. The contact sent lightening bolts of energy up her arm and she snatched her hand away.

Megan covered the faux pas with a delightful laugh. "Come now, Sophie. He's not going to bite."

Ethan smiled ferociously and Sophia's heart tripped. *Want to bet?*

"I'm sorry, Meg. You know how jumpy I get in these large crowds." She squared her shoulders and faced Ethan. "I'm pleased to meet you," she said in her most formal tone. "You've made my sister very happy."

Crazily, she wondered if anyone else could hear the hammering of her heart. It seemed it would jump out of her skin any minute.

"Excuse me for saying, but I hate conversing with a person when I can't see their lips move."

To Sophia's horror, Ethan leaned over, his knuckles brushing the skin of her cheek as he unmasked her.

"That's better. Don't you think, darling?"

"Yes, Ethan, much better. My sister seems to think she's without attributes but I happen to think she's quite lovely."

Ethan's cold eyes appraised her, making Sophia bristle. "Yes, she is lovely at that."

The Earl's arrival saved Sophia from further embarrassment, at least until he saw what she was wearing.

"Ah, I see my other daughter has finally arrived. Good God, child! Tell me you have more to that costume!"

"Papa," Sophia began, only to be interrupted by her mother, Beatrice.

"Sophia! What do you think you're doing in that costume? Your middle is showing!"

Sophia flushed with mortification as Ethan smiled. *He's enjoying this! The scoundrel.*

"What are you supposed to be anyway?" Beatrice demanded.

"I do believe she's a fortuneteller," Ethan replied.

Sophia threw him a hateful glare.

"A fortuneteller! What have I told you about all that nonsense, girl? I

strictly forbade you to do anymore of those readings, and here you are, flaunting it in all our guests' faces."

"Oh Mother, leave off," Megan chimed in, coming to her sister's defense. "Sophie is perfectly covered. I happen to think she has the best costume of the night. I think you're beautiful, sister. Don't you think, Ethan?"

Oh please, earth, open now and gobble me up! Sophia gazed at the floor; waiting, feeling Ethan's piercing eyes scan her from head to red-painted toenail.

"She'll do."

Megan playfully punched Ethan's arm. Sophia noticed that it didn't affect him in the least. "Stop teasing, you cad!"

"You know, now you're the one not playing fair," Sophia found herself saying.

Amazed at her own audacity, it was as if she was watching herself from some point far away.

"You've unmasked me, but still have yours on. Turn about is fair play."

Before she could stop herself she reached up, on tiptoe in fact, reaching behind him to untie his mask. The heat from their bodies mingled and she almost gasped from the sensation.

"There."

Heat radiating from their bodies made her senses leap. She noticed his dark frown. Fear and excitement leapt within her. She didn't know where this sudden dangerous mood came from. All she knew was that she had to get away from this man as soon as possible. She moved to leave, but her father's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Oh no, you're not disappearing again, child," he scolded. "Not until after the announcement."

He signaled to the orchestra and the music stopped. As the crowd murmured he lifted his glass.

"May I have your attention please, I have a special announcement to make. As you well know, Beatrice and I have enjoyed the tradition of hosting the first ball of the season for many years. This year it has an even greater meaning for us, for we also get to announce the engagement of our beautiful daughter, Megan, to Lord Ethan Manchester."

The crowd erupted into applause as Edmund raised his glass.

"To Megan and Ethan."

Sophia drained her glass as cheers and applause rang in her ears.

This is worse than my worst nightmare. My sister is marrying the man chosen by the Universe for me. I will never be free of him.

She plastered a smile on her face as congratulations went around, laughing and clapping with the others until she thought her face would crack from the strain. At the first opportunity, she slipped away.

This time luck was not on her side. A steel hand grasped her arm before she could get as far as the garden. She was spun around into Ethan Manchester's arms.

"Thought you'd get away from me again, didn't you," he snarled.

"Unhand me," she demanded with a gasp.

His grip tightened in answer. "Not until I get some satisfaction."

He dragged her into the hedges, away from the lights and laughter of the masque. Senses reeling, Sophia bit back a scream.

He faced her in the darkness, his features in shadow. All she could make out were his burning blue eyes.

"What is your game?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't act so bloody innocent with me. You knew I was your sister's intended all along."

"No, I swear."

"You thought you could scare me off with that act at the table. Pretending to see something horrible in my hand. I should box your ears for your impudence." He paused, his eyes narrowed dangerously. "So tell me—why don't you want me to marry Megan? Do you think to have me for yourself?"

She bristled at his insinuation. "Cad! You are the most arrogant, egotistical man I have ever met. You are the last man in the Universe I'd ever want."

"Good, because you're the last woman on earth I'd ever bed."

"Now that we've got that all cleared up, I'll be going."

Sophia moved but Ethan's hand on her arm stopped her. His grip was like iron; it's heat stealing into her flesh.

"Not just yet."

Sophia could not stand one more minute of his manhandling. She tore her arm away, eyes blazing.

"Must you be such a bully?"

"Only when there's a need. Now tell me, what exactly did you see in my hand?"

"What?" Sophia couldn't believe her ears. He actually wanted to know what she'd seen? After calling her a liar?

"Why should I tell you? You think I'm a fraud!"

"Just tell me."

They stared at each other in silence.

"You don't want me as your enemy, Sophie," Ethan warned, his voice deceptively soft.

"Only my sister can call me that," Sophia countered, again amazed at her

sudden courage.

"I'm almost family," he reminded her with a dark grin.

Sophia's heart skipped a beat. "You will never be family to me. Now unhand me!"

"Give me what I want."

Sophia stilled. There were a thousand implications in those words.

"You're mad," she breathed, angrier than ever. "First you try to denounce me in front of others, then you insist on knowing what I saw. Make up your mind!"

"Remember what you saw in my hands, Sophie? I'm supremely confident that you will tell me what I want to know."

His taunting smile was the last straw.

"Fine." Her eyes flashed. "You want to know? I'll tell you. You have a mark on your heart line."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Now let me go."

He didn't move. His eyes narrowed. "What kind of mark?"

"This is ridiculous!" Sophia was beyond exasperated. "All right, you prying jackass – you want to know the truth? I'll give it to you! It's the mark of the Fated Lovers."

Her announcement was met with a harsh bark of laughter.

"Bloody hell. Is that all?"

"That's all. Now get your hand off my arm."

"With pleasure."

Finally she was free. Without another word, she disappeared into the

darkness, feeling his heated gaze burning into her back.

Chapter 3

"Did you see Lydia Haversham? What was that costume supposed to be, do you think?"

"I know. And that mask – I've never seen so many feathers!"

Drivel. Pure and simple. Ethan's bored gaze swept over Megan and her friend, Felicity Clives, as they gossiped about last night's party. Megan insisted they be seen in public today to confirm the announcement made the night before. Ethan suggested a ride through Hyde Park, but Megan demanded a carriage ride instead.

Roger came along as part of the chaperone couple; his hat perched low on his brow to keep out the bright morning sun. Every bump in the road brought a low moan from him.

Ethan turned his eyes out to the side of the vehicle, secretly wishing for a good run with his favorite horse, Socrates. *So, this is what married life will be like – boredom, with occasional glimpses of freedom. Is giving Mother an heir worth the sacrifice?*

His attention was turned back to the occupants in front of him just as Megan warmed to a new subject.

"Did you hear the buzz about Sophia?"

"It's all over town, Megan dear," Felicity confirmed with a haughty nod. "Your sister was a smash. I know at least twelve men who want to call on her. No one can talk about anything else, except your engagement, of course."

"Of course," Megan agreed, grinning like a cat with cream. "I already have the catch of the season, and it's only just begun. I hope that won't put the other girls off their game, there are still plenty of leftovers available."

There she goes, talking about me like I'm a bloody leg of lamb. Ethan's jaw tightened.

"Do you think it was fair showing your sister off? I mean the pickings are already so slim. You wouldn't want her heart broken when her suitors turn elsewhere."

Megan laughed unaware of Ethan's close regard. "Sophie's firmly on the shelf, Felicity. She knows that. It suits her just fine, too. Why, she loves nothing more than to spend all her time with those dusty palmistry books she tries to hide from Mother."

"So your sister can really read hands?"

The question from Ethan startled the two girls, who thought they were having a private conversation.

"Shame on you, Ethan," Megan scolded. "You nearly scared us speechless."

That would take quite a scare indeed.

"Your sister. Does she really study palmistry?"

Megan sniffed before answering. "She does. Father thinks it's harmless, but Mother hates it. Forbids her from doing it, actually. Last night was the first time Sophie's ever defied her."

The two girls stared at him, waiting for him to speak again. He didn't, looking instead out the side of the open carriage, so they continued their conversation, only this time in hushed tones and with furtive glances.

Ethan's brow furrowed. Why did it matter to him whether Megan's spinster sister could read palms or not? Without thinking he looked at his palm. There was a strange mark in the middle, like half of a heart. Was that the Fated Lover's mark?

He shook his head, infuriated with himself. Lines were just lines — there was nothing else to them. He'd have to be daft to believe in all that hocus-pocus.

And yet — since the moment their eyes met he'd been unable to get her out of his mind. Those eyes. He could see them in his imagination. Blue as a spring sky fringed with long lashes. The rest of her face hidden from him,

those sultry eyes of hers pulled him in from the start.

Later, when she approached him with Megan, he was amazed by his body's reaction. He'd met beautiful women before, legendary beauties who had thrown themselves at him to no avail; but none stirred his senses like this one. Her figure was perfect, not too thin and not too fat. The straightness of her smooth shoulders, the full bosom hidden underneath violet material that would have been so easy to remove. That stone in her navel almost did him in.

He spent a sleepless night thinking of her. When he unmasked her he was surprised to find her not ugly at all. In fact, her beauty surpassed every other woman in the room, including Megan's. Creamy skin and full lush lips nestled above a determined chin and elegant neck. How he wished he could place his lips on her pulse point—just once. The heat that radiated from her body when she reached over to unmask him—it had taken Herculean effort not to pull her into his arms and damn the crowds.

His features darkened, the scenery passing by in a blur. Never before had a woman bothered him so much that he lost sleep over her. When he touched her in the garden he felt a jolt of reaction shoot through him. It was as if she could consume him. He knew that making love with her would be an earth-shattering experience.

Bloody hell! His narrowed eyes swung back to Megan. She caught his gaze and stiffened before looking quickly away.

Control. How he despised the word. His father, Albert, had drilled it into him since birth it seemed. Even as a sickly child Albert had sneered at him, telling him that his weakness was due to a lack of control and not because of any illness.

Ethan sat back against the soft leather seat, his gaze far off as horrible memories washed over him. Albert taking him to the stables, forcing him to saddle his horse unaided, then ride the poor animal until he'd fallen off from exhaustion.

When he lay on the ground, his clothes soaked with sweat, Albert had shown no sympathy.

"You're pathetic," he'd sneered instead. "No control at all. This horse has more control than you."

With a kick to Ethan's ribs he'd walked the horse back to the stables.

Ethan sat up, snapping himself out of his thoughts. *This is quite a coil. Engaged to one woman, lusting after her sister. It just isn't done! Ethan, get a hold of yourself. You are not a schoolboy anymore. Bring yourself under control .*

* * * *

Sophia moaned, turning over onto her belly in bed as Lorna threw open the drapes. Bright sunlight spilled into the room.

"Come now, child," Lorna called. "You've laid abed long enough. Time to face the day."

"Leave me alone." The words were muffled into a pillow, rendering them almost unintelligible.

Lorna approached the bed. "You can't live the rest of your life hiding your head," she scolded, throwing back the covers.

"Show me some mercy, Lorna," Sophia pleaded, rolling over. There were dark circles under her eyes.

"What happened, child?" Lorna asked with concern.

"I was up all night," Sophia explained as Lorna took a seat on the bed next to her. "I couldn't stop thinking about him. I tried, but no matter what I did, his image just wouldn't go away. I haven't told you the worst part yet. He's the man Meg's engaged to."

Lorna gasped. "You mean—the man with the Fated Lover's Line is Ethan Manchester?"

Sophia nodded. "I'm afraid so. Oh, Lorna! This is such a mess. How in the world am I going to ignore him when he becomes my sister's husband?"

Lorna's understanding, sympathetic eyes were almost too much. Sophia looked away.

"I can see how upset you are, child, but I also need to explain something to you." She placed a finger under Sophia's chin and turned her head so

their eyes met. "The Fated Lover's Line is a powerful force. It's not something you can ignore. I didn't want to tell you this before. You seemed so happy living your life sheltered behind these walls, alone. But once you meet your other half there is no going back. You must marry him."

"No!" Sophia broke from Lorna's grasp and jumped off the bed. "You speak madness! I cannot marry him. He's engaged to my sister!"

"If he marries Megan it will be a tragic mistake. All three of your lives will be ruined. Don't you see? He will never love her."

"He will never love me, either!"

"Yes, child, he will, if given time. And you will grow to love him, too." Sophia snorted in disbelief. "I speak the truth, child. He is yours. He cannot marry another. You must make him see this before it is too late."

Sophia burst into laughter. It was a harsh, crazy sound. "He's a blackguard, Lorna! He's incapable of love! Do you forget how many women he's had? I'm no match for him! Besides, I hate him! He accosted me after the announcement demanding to know what I found in his hand."

"Did he touch you?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"How did you feel when he touched you?"

Sophia went still. She couldn't get that feeling out of her brain. That warmth, that spark that arced between them every time they touched. He haunted her when she closed her eyes. His square face, long, straight nose, full lower lip, strong chin, prominent cheekbones were burned into her memory. Her guilty flush was Lorna's answer.

"It doesn't matter if you hate him or not. There's not that much difference between hate and love."

"I could never love him." The words were harsh, but barely heard.

"And yet you are inexorably drawn to him. You need his touch."

"I don't need anything from him! I want him to leave us alone! I wish he'd never set eyes on Meg!"

"Stop trying to fight this, Sophia." Lorna only used Sophia's given name when the situation was extremely grave. "It is stronger than the two of you. It is fate. Destiny. The sooner you make him see that, the better."

Sophia didn't reply, turning her back on her friend. Lorna sighed, then stood and crossed to the door. She opened it then hesitated. "The sooner you accept this the better, too."

The door closed with a quiet click.

No, Sophia shook her head vehemently. No! This is not happening. Megan will marry him and I will remain here, with my books. I will never read another palm again as long as I live.

That decided, she marched to her wardrobe and threw open the door.

Chapter 4

With religious zeal Sophia threw herself into her studies. She grabbed every book on palmistry she could find, taking them from behind other books, underneath cushions, even from under the window seat. Her blue eyes hidden behind spectacles, hair pulled into a haphazard knot at the back of her head, she poured over the volumes searching for anything that might explain the Fated Lover's Line. Sunlight moved through the windows as the day progressed, and still she was undaunted. Food was brought and left untouched. The teapot was emptied.

She found nothing. Not one word in any of the books she poured through referred to the Fated Lover's Line.

Dejected, she sat back in her chair and sighed. *It has to be here somewhere. I'm just missing it. Was it called by another name? Someone has to know!*

She stood, groaning from the protest of her aching muscles. Walking to the bell rope, she gave it one pull. She needed more tea, and strong at that, to get through the rest of the day. As she waited she crossed to the

windows, looking out at the fading sky and the bright colors of the garden. Usually when she felt morose all she had to do was gaze at the colorful flowers to feel her spirits lift.

But not today.

The door opened quietly.

"Dottie, would you be so good as to brew me a pot of strong tea? I'm afraid I didn't sleep very well last night."

"That's funny. Neither did I."

Sophia gasped, whirling around at the sound of the voice. Ethan stood in the doorway, his features dark and hooded.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just returned from a carriage ride with your sister."

Ethan stepped inside, closing the door behind him. Instantly Sophia's heartbeat accelerated. She tensed as his cynical gaze traveled over her, appraising her somber gray dress with a sardonic lift of his brow. He stopped at her glasses.

"Spectacles? Do you need them for reading, or to hide behind?"

Sophia crossed to the desk, feeling the need to stand behind it for protection. Whenever he was near her senses rioted. She hadn't missed the impeccable tailoring of his fawn colored riding jacket and dark brown trousers.

"It isn't any of your business, but yes. I use my glasses for reading purposes."

"Which you do quite a bit of, I hear."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"I hear a lot of rumors about you, too," Sophia countered. "Tell me, are

they true?"

Ethan shrugged, his grin not reaching his eyes. "I don't believe in rumors. I believe in finding out the truth on my own."

"Is that why you are here? To quell some rumor that you heard about me?"

"No."

"Then I see no reason for your presence, sir. Please close the door on your way out."

Sophia gazed at him another second before dismissing him and going back to the book on her desk. She moved to her seat and brought the large volume to eye level, hoping he would take the hint and leave her alone. Suddenly two large hands grabbed the book from her. She hadn't even heard him cross the room.

"Give me that!"

"Hmm," Ethan mused while looking over the book. "The Complete Work on Palmistry, by Master Reginald Smith. Sounds captivating."

Sophia lunged for the volume but Ethan easily held it from her. "Not so fast," he said with a wicked gleam in his eyes. "What are you so afraid of? I just want to see what interests you so."

He pretended to skim over the book, flipping pages and nodding as if in thought.

Not usually given to angry outbursts, Sophia felt her fury rise to new levels. Her fingers tapped a staccato on the smooth surface of her father's desk.

"You're mocking me."

"No, no, my dear. Never. I wouldn't think of mocking the sister of my dear intended." His voice dripped so much blatant sarcasm it made hackles rise on Sophia's neck.

"Get out of here," Sophia demanded, slamming her hands on the desk. "I

just rang for tea. Dottie will be here any moment and she will show you out."

"No, she won't." Ethan leaned across the desk, the volume forgotten, his face just inches from hers. "I told Megan I wanted to spend some time with you – to get to know you. She will make sure we aren't disturbed."

Sophia gasped. So, that was why no one came when she rang the bell rope. Suddenly it struck her – they were completely alone. Alarm raced through her veins. He smiled, but it never reached his eyes. She straightened, backing away from him until her back came up against the bookcase behind her.

"What do you want from me?"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to bite you – yet."

His sardonic smirk sent alarms ringing in her head. But instead of pouncing on her, he pulled up a chair and sat down.

"I wanted to finish what we started."

"What we started?" Sophia didn't move. "What do you mean?"

"Dear girl, stop being so obtuse. The hand reading, of course. You ran away before you could finish it."

She wondered why he was doing this. He didn't give a damn what the lines in his hands meant. He grinned. Sophia's heart leapt.

"If I do this for you, will you leave?"

"Immediately."

Cautiously, she moved and took her seat behind the desk. He held out his hand.

"Place it on the desk, please."

"Aren't you supposed to hold it?"

The question was asked innocently enough, but Sophia knew there was

nothing innocent about this man. She ignored his mocking grin.

"I don't need to hold your hand to give you a reading," she stated emphatically. "In fact, I could do a print and send you the results in the mail."

There was too much hopefulness in her voice. She narrowed her eyes when he smothered a laugh.

"I'm here. Let's get this over with now."

"If you insist."

"I do."

Sophia tried to concentrate but it was hard, having him so near. She squinted through her glasses, telling herself to think of him as nothing more than a client.

He reached over, lifting the glasses from her eyes.

"Give me those!"

She reached for them, but was too late. With one easy flick they sailed to the carpet behind him.

"If you break those I will never forgive you."

Ethan shrugged. "They're fine. Besides, I like you better without them."

Sophia didn't know why, but those words made her heart race faster. She scowled at him while retaking her seat.

"Let's get this over with."

She pointed at his lines, her index finger hovering over his palm as she talked.

"Your lifeline is very strong after the age of eighteen, indicating that a childhood illness has been remedied. These are travel lines, they show if you are a wanderer, whether the trips go smoothly or not."

She glanced up and found him gazing intently at her, not paying attention to the reading at all. She cleared her throat and lowered her eyes.

"This line is the headline. Its length and path show you to be levelheaded. You are a good businessman."

"The lover's line. Show me where it is."

Sophia's heart pounded faster. She cleared her throat again. "Here, over your heart-line."

"What does it mean?"

She looked away, unsure of how much she should tell him. She decided the less he knew, the better.

"The Fated Lover's Line is an extremely rare mark. It doesn't even show up in the books I've read. My spiritual advisor told me of it years ago."

"You haven't explained what it means."

Sophia's eyes met his and she could see the challenge in them. "It means you have the capacity to love only one person in your life. The person with the other half of the heart on their hand, she is your soul mate."

She could have taken those words and put them back in her mouth. She was so sorry they slipped out. Silently, she told herself to not say another word. Ethan's grin widened into a feral smile. Sophia stifled a groan, knowing instinctively what he was thinking.

"My, how intriguing. The soul mate line. This is priceless. I haven't heard such a load of horse apples in months."

"I don't care if you believe it or not," Sophia growled. "You are the one insisting I read your palm, not me. You asked me to explain the mark and I have. Now please leave so I can go back to my studies."

She started to stand but Ethan grabbed her hand.

"Not so fast," he said, his eyes narrowed. "Now it's my turn to do you."

"Let go of me!"

"Let me see your palm," he insisted, prying at her fingers to open her fist even though she struggled.

Sophia's apprehension turned to naked fear. He was trying to pry open the hand with her half of the mark. He can't see it. He just can't, her mind cried while she struggled with him.

"What is the matter with you, dear girl?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm as he held her wrist pinned to the desk with one hand while prying at her fingers with the other. "Afraid of what I might see?"

"Please, if you have any decency at all you will let go of me! This is not a game."

Her wild, frightened eyes had his grin fading. Now rough, he pulled her fist open and saw it.

"Bloody hell!" He jerked her wrist so that she sprawled across the top of the desk, sending books and papers flying. He gazed at her palm another moment before pinning her with his blazing eyes.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Nothing," she whispered, but her fear made her a liar. "Please."

Slowly, intently, he brought her palm to his, folding them together. The marks made a perfect heart. The energy from their hands was so intense it shot through them both like a lightening bolt, so strong it shook them and they broke apart, both breathing heavy. Sophia wasted no time bolting for the door, but before she could reach it Ethan's arms snaked around her waist, lifting her from the ground. She fought in his arms like a wildcat until his hold tightened around her, squeezing the air from her lungs, his breath harsh in her ear.

"You have a lot of explaining to do."

Turning, he carried her over to a settee, dumping her onto the plush upholstery. She scrambled to right herself, but Ethan's looming presence kept her from getting to her feet.

"I will explain nothing to you," she vowed.

Ethan crossed his arms and planted his feet. "Oh, but I think you will."

He leaned over her, placing one arm on either side of her so that she felt caught in a steel trap.

"You want me for yourself, don't you?"

"No!"

"This is just a clever way of trying to get Megan and I to break up. Well it won't work. Your trickery has been exposed. How I pity you. You'll try anything to ruin your sister's happiness."

"Bastard!"

"Bitch."

Her open palm cracking against his cheek rang like a shotgun blast. He stiffened, and for a moment Sophia feared for her life. He straightened, his hand going to the blossoming red mark on his cheek.

"I hate you," she breathed.

"Good. Now that we've taken each other's measure we know where we stand. I trust I will not have any more trouble with you, at least not until after the wedding."

He turned on his heel and strode out the door.

Sophia slid to the carpet, crying and pounding her fists.

"Damn you Ethan Manchester! The rumors are true! You are the most contemptible person I've ever laid eyes on!"

Even as she said the words, she knew deep inside they were false. When their hands touched, she knew for sure — that she loved him. Lorna was right; there was a fine line between love and hate.

He hated her. She told him the truth, all of it, and he threw it back in her face like so much garbage. There was nothing more she could do. He was

determined to marry Megan now, if only to prove her wrong.

Something glinted on the carpet in front of her watery eyes. Blinking, she reached for it. It was a piece of glass from her spectacles. They had been crushed during the struggle.

"Bloody hell."

Chapter 5

Pleading a headache, Sophia refused to go downstairs for dinner. Lorna brought her up a tray.

"How are you, lamb?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

She needn't have asked Sophia's red puffy eyes spoke volumes.

"It was horrible, Lorna, simply horrible. I told Ethan everything and he threw it back in my face. He accused me of trying to sabotage his engagement with Megan."

"But isn't that what you're trying to do, in a roundabout way?"

"No. At least, not really. If only he didn't have the mark! I wouldn't care at all. I'd wish them well."

"But he does have the mark," Lorna reminded her.

"Yes. And he's seen mine, too. He placed his palm over mine and the fit was perfect."

Sophia said it so miserably that Lorna bit back a smile.

"Then you must keep trying."

"No." Sophia shook her head in earnest. "Absolutely not. I tried. He's not convinced." She paused, thinking. "Lorna, if he has the mark, doesn't he feel the same thing?"

"What did you feel when he pressed his palm to yours?"

"It's hard to explain." Sophia's gentle brows furrowed. "It was like energy running through my veins. We broke apart and it was gone."

Lorna nodded. "He feels it, too, whether he wants to admit it or not."

Sophia was not comforted by Lorna's pronouncement. The fact that Ethan fought so hard against the feelings between them made her sink into a deeper despair.

"Come, eat. You must keep up your strength," Lorna commanded in her gentle way, pushing Sophia to the tray.

"I don't know why I should," Sophia grouched. "What difference does it make how I feel?"

"No pity, Sophia," Lorna scolded. "You know that doesn't do any good. I suggest you meditate tonight before bed. Maybe some answers will come to you."

"You're right, of course," Sophia said with a sigh.

The next morning Megan greeted Sophia with a bright smile. Sophia wished she could crawl into a hole and hide.

"You must help me with my wedding plans, Sophie," Megan announced, filling her plate with fruit from the buffet.

"I thought Mother was helping," Sophia hedged, horrified at the prospect of having to help her sister make the biggest mistake of her life.

"She is, but you as my maid of honor should be doing the lion's share."

Sophia choked on the toast she was chewing. Megan came over and thumped her on the back.

"M-m-maid of honor?" Sophia squeaked.

"Of course, who else would I have?" Megan took a seat next to Sophia.

"One of your girlfriends? How about Felicity. I'm sure she would love to." *Don't make me do this, please!*

"Posh! Felicity is only an acquaintance. You and I both know who raised me. You've been like a mother to me all these years. This is the least I can do to repay you."

"You don't have to, really."

Megan put her fork down and faced her sister with disapproving eyes. "You and I both know you'll never have another chance to walk down the aisle, Sophie."

Sophia flushed. "Because I chose not to," she reminded her sister.

"The point is, I think this would be good for you, so no more quibbling. You are going to be my maid of honor and that's that." She smiled impishly. "You know, Ethan has a friend. His name is Roger Waverell and I think he's going to be Ethan's best man. Maybe the two of you will hit it off. Stranger things have been known to happen."

It took all of Sophia's willpower to stay and finish her breakfast, Megan chatting happily beside her, not paying attention to anything but her wedding plans.

True to her word, Megan hounded Sophia the next week, wanting to make decisions on flowers, and music – the list was seemingly endless. Sophia wondered if the queen had planned such an elaborate wedding.

"We have to plan an engagement party first," Megan announced, closing the book Sophia was reading. "It has to be soon. I think a week from Saturday would be nice. We need to draw up a guest list and write out invitations, hire a florist and caterer – oh! Should we have a theme?"

"No more themes, please," Sophia insisted.

"All right, no more themes. It will just be a plain old dinner party. We'll have to send for the seamstress to design new gowns for us."

"Us?"

Megan smiled, her eyes narrowed. "Of course us, goose. You'll need a new gown, too. I want you to make a huge impression on Ethan's friend, so we can't have you gallivanting around in your matronly costume."

"Megan!"

"Well it's true, sister dear."

Sophia groaned. "You are the bride, Megan. You are the one who's supposed to shine."

"On the wedding day, that's true. For the engagement party I'll settle for us both looking our best."

Sophia took one look at Megan's stubborn chin and capitulated.

The next few days were hell for Sophia. Between Megan's incessant demands and fittings for the new gown, she didn't have a moment to herself. By the end of the week she thought she would go mad. The nights were the worst. She slept little, tossing and turning throughout the night, thoughts of Ethan mingled with a sweet torment that had her body aching with a need she couldn't name.

Lorna finally came to her aid the night before the party.

"Here," she said, handing Sophia a glass of murky liquid. "Drink this. It's a sleeping draught I made. At least you will get some rest tonight." Sophia put it to her lips, but Lorna stopped her from drinking it all in one gulp. "Easy, it's potent. Take only a sip."

Sophia nodded, taking a cautious drink before placing the glass on the bedside table. "What is wrong with me?" she asked.

"It's the mark," Lorna explained, tucking Sophia into bed. "It has great power. You've seen each other. You've touched. Your spirits are crying out for each other. You are in torment because you haven't been made one with him." She glanced uncertainly at Sophia. "I don't know what will happen if your souls are not joined."

"Could I die?"

Sophia's stricken face went right through Lorna's heart, but she knew she had to be completely honest with her charge. "I don't know for sure," she answered.

Sophia gasped in horror.

"Don't be too frightened, lamb. It will all work out, I'm sure. Ethan will come around. Just give him time."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then we will all be in a fine muddle."

"Splendid. Just splendid."

* * * *

Sophia tossed and turned, her covers thrown off hours ago.

"It's no use," she muttered, practically jumping from the bed.

The house was dark and quiet. She wondered what time it was, then heard the grandfather clock down the hall chime twice.

Wonderful. Another sleepless night.

Barefoot, she padded to the window, pulling back the curtain. A full moon shone bright, illuminating the garden below, making it shine with an eerie glow.

"I wonder if he's been suffering, too," she murmured into the night. "I hope so. I sincerely hope he's as miserable as I am."

Leaving the curtain open, she went back to bed. The crumpled sheets seemed to mock her. She strangled a cry of despair.

She noticed the glass beside the bed. *If a sip relaxes me, the rest will put me to sleep like a baby.*

She brought the glass to her lips and downed the contents, shivering at the bitter aftertaste.

Lying back on the bed, she waited. She looked out the window at the moon, tense. Soon she began to feel the effects, her eyelids becoming heavy.

Ah, sleep, her mind sighed as she drifted off.

* * * *

She walks in a mist. Covering her body is the sheerest gown of white. She dances, free, her hair billowing out around her creamy shoulders, floating like a soft cloud. She laughs, but there is no sound. The mist parts. There is another figure there, standing shrouded in the mist. She sees him, dancing over to him. He smiles as she dances around him, her come-hither touch feather light on his skin. His hand reaches out and captures her arm. Slowly, he pulls her to him. She comes willingly. His head lowers as hers tilts up, their lips meeting in a sweet kiss. She clings to him, her hair floating around them both, enveloping them in a world of their own. The gauzy material of her gown falls away. His large hands capture her breasts and she throws her head back, exposing her long neck to him. As his hands pay homage to her full breasts he nibbles her neck. Shivers run down her spine and she is mindless. He lowers her to the misty ground, covering her with his powerful body. She welcomes him between her thighs, crying out as he enters her. In ancient rhythm, they ride to the pinnacle of passion. She cries out as wave after wave of fulfillment wash over her. He pours his seed into her, and they are one.

Sophia sprang upright with a gasp, fully awake, her body tingling and slick with sweat, her eyes wide.

Across town, Ethan Manchester sprang up from his bed gasping for air, his eyes wide.

Chapter 6

Sophia paced the floor of the entry hall, prickles of fear dancing down her spine. Her hair piled on top of her head in an elegant coiffure, she wore a graceful gown of light blue satin, the color accentuating her eyes, making them appear larger than usual, and brighter, too. The material of her gown barely covered her shoulders, scooping low over her breasts. A dark blue velvet sash accentuated her narrow waist. Sapphire earrings danced at her ears, a matching necklace cascading to rest at her bosom.

Megan had insisted on the gown, personally selecting the style and material. Sophia felt like a princess, second only to the queen herself – Megan – who wore a stunning gown of pale pink.

The family assembled en masse in the foyer to greet guests as they arrived. It would be a private occasion with only fifty or so close personal

friends.

The only person missing was Ethan.

Suddenly the door opened. The sky flashed, silhouetting a masculine figure, rain slashing down in great torrents to obscure the man's features. He stepped over the threshold as the wind whipped his great coat around him, giving him a devilish appearance.

"Darling!" Megan cried as his face was illuminated.

She ran to him, yet purposefully kept her distance, not wanting her gown to be ruined.

"You're soaking. Let's get you out of these wet things."

She stood to the side as servants stepped in, silent and efficient as they took Ethan's outerwear before disappearing again.

Ethan greeted Megan with a distracted kiss to her hand, his eyes searching the room until he found Sophia standing behind her father. She stifled a gasp at the intensity of the look he gave her. It was as if he knew about the dream she had the night before.

He couldn't know about the dream. Could he?

Her eyes widened at the thought and his narrowed in response. With a strangled cry, she looked away.

Through sheer willpower alone Sophia made it through dinner. Seated on the other side of Megan at the head table, the maid of honor's proper place, she pushed her untouched food around on her plate, smiling woodenly as toast after toast was made to the engaged couple. She wondered if perhaps she drank too much champagne, her stomach clenching every time Megan looked at Ethan with adoring eyes. He lavished so much attention on his fiancé that it became a joke to the guests.

After dinner the guests mingled with their drinks. Sophia breathed a silent sigh of relief, knowing she would be able to make her escape soon. She clung to that thought like a drowning victim to a lifeline.

Minutes seemed to drag by. She waited, drawing back from the other revelers, anxious to make her escape.

"Edmund, old boy, where is our brandy and cigars?" an old crony of her father's bellowed above the din.

"I'm afraid we'll have to try something new tonight, old boy," the Earl replied with a chuckle. "Tonight Megan and Ethan hired a small quartet. Its music we're to be treated to, not spirits."

"Bloody hell."

Good-natured chuckles greeted that response. Sophia moved silent as mist toward the back door, praying to remain as inconspicuous as possible, but before she could sprint through the doorway Megan caught her arm.

"I know what you're doing," she whispered conspiratorially, maneuvering Sophia to the music room. "And you're not going to succeed."

"Whatever do you mean?" Sophia asked, trying to sound innocent.

Megan just chuckled. "Give over. You were trying to escape up to your room – don't tell me that you weren't! But I forgive you. I know how hard these functions are for you. I happen to know that Ethan's friend Roger has been unable to tear his eyes from you all night. Don't let this opportunity slip by."

Megan wasn't the only person to notice Roger's infatuation. Sophia noticed Ethan's dark scowl every time his friend so much as looked at her. She didn't dwell on why she was so drawn to him, to his direction time after time. His scowls bothered her no small amount. He shouldn't care a whit who looked at her! Why did he look like he was going to thrash his best friend?

Megan pushed Sophia through the door – right into Ethan. The contact was instantly explosive, so much so that they both drew their breath in, Sophia uttering a strangled cry.

"What's wrong?" Megan asked Sophia, not having witnessed the exchange.

"Nothing, Megan," Sophia hastened to explain. "I bumped into your fiancée and – and,"

"And I accidentally stepped on her foot," Ethan finished for her.

He turned to Sophia, his face a mask of indifference. "My apologies. Did I hurt you?"

"No, you didn't hurt me, thank you." Sophia replied her gaze fixed across the room. "I'm fine. If you'll excuse me..."

Head held high she rushed away, once again feeling Ethan's gaze brand her back.

"I say, she's a prime piece," Roger murmured from beside Ethan, his admiring gaze also following her retreat. "I've a mind to ask her to the Rothchild's ball next week."

"Touch her and you're dead."

"The devil you say! When did you get so bloody touchy?"

"Since I'm marrying into the family," Ethan rationalized, veins sticking out on his forehead.

He was baffled by these new feelings, this jealousy uncoiling in his belly. This new lack of control was eating him alive.

"You are marrying the sister, Ethan," Roger reminded him, his grin vanished. "That leaves Sophia for me. Who knows? If all goes well, we can have a double wedding."

Roger pushed by Ethan, sauntering over to where Sophia stood against the far wall. Ethan's blood pounded in his ears as he watched Roger smile at her, taking her hand for a kiss. Nothing else seemed to matter in that instant except the need to get Roger away from Sophia. He started to move, but Megan's hand on his arm stopped him.

"They make a striking couple, don't you think?" Megan asked, looking up at Ethan.

"Striking."

Megan gazed at him in confusion, wondering at his sour mood before wandering off again in search of Felicity.

Ethan held onto his control by the sheerest of threads. He knew he had no right to be furious. He just was. He wanted to thrash Roger for spending time with Sophia.

* * * *

Sophia stood at the end of a musical number. Making her excuses to Roger, she escaped unnoticed through the side door. Breathing great gulps of air she made her way down the hallway, her intention to get to her room as fast as possible. She desperately needed some time alone to sort out her chaotic feelings.

Throughout the first set of music Ethan continuously glanced her way, glowering at Roger who sat beside her. Before the set Roger asked if he could accompany her to a ball the Rothchild's were throwing next week. She accepted. Ethan's eyes grew more menacing after that. His gazes were so heated she thought she would go up in smoke.

What did he want from her? He was an engaged man; he made that crystal clear tonight. What she did with her own life was no concern of his.

And yet ...Lorna's warning kept ringing in her ears.

You must marry him. It will be a disaster if you don't.

What a bloody mess.

A group of servants carrying trays of champagne blocked her path. She ducked through a doorway and found herself in the solarium. This was one of her favorite rooms in the house. Her mother had built it years ago to counter the blaze English countryside, she claimed at the time. Now Sophia knew that the only reason her mother built the room was because she was angry with her husband, punishing him with the bills.

The room was never used by anyone beside Sophia, she was sure. Exotic plants bloomed in profusion; a huge round stone fountain with a jade nymph carrying a vase of perpetually spilling water filled most of the

middle space. The water gurgling in the fountain pool was filled with colorful carp. Turtledoves flew from tree to tree, the glass for the windowpanes and walls costing a small fortune. It was paradise, and Sophia came here many times to escape the bustle of her family's hectic life.

She perched on the side of the fountain, running her fingers through the water. Lightening flashed outside the windows, thunder following to send the frightened doves to flight. She sighed, relaxing for the first time all week.

"What kind of spell have you woven around me, witch?"

Sophia gasped, whirling around to face Ethan. He stood in the shadows, but she could make out the murderess expression in his eyes.

"Get out."

"Not until I get some answers."

"What are you accusing me of now?" she asked, her heart pounding.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

He strode into the room, stopping on the other side of the round fountain. The way he moved made Sophia's breath catch in her throat. His every gesture was what she craved. He grinned at her and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

"You wore white."

She gasped, her eyes going wide, fingers flying to her lips.

"You danced like a fairy maiden. You came into my arms. We kissed. I laid you down and —"

"Stop!" Sophia cried, eyes closed. She felt faint.

"Why? You and I both know what happened next."

Sophia's eyes closed as memories of that dream washed over her. Being held in Ethan's arms had felt so real, so right. But it was wrong. He's

engaged to another, to Meg. Her tormented eyes met his dark ones.

"You had the dream, too?" she couldn't help but ask.

"Of course. That is the way you planned it, isn't it?"

"No!"

"You wanted me to know what I'd be missing if I marry your sister.
Admit it."

"That's a lie! I would never – "

"Come now, Sophie. You read those hand-reading books; you've probably dabbled a bit in the occult, too. Placing spells, bubbling cauldrons."

"Never. I have never practiced any kind of magic, I swear! You are accusing me unjustly."

With measured steps he moved around the fountain, his steps slow and sure, a predator with his prey in sight. Sophia read the message in his eyes and fled in the opposite direction.

"Then how do you explain this?"

"It's the mark," Sophia explained, her blue eyes imploring. "It's stronger than the both of us. Our souls are demanding they be together. We are powerless."

"Good God, I think you've cracked a screw."

"I'm deadly serious. If you marry Megan you will have ruined three lives. Please, you've got to believe me. I didn't want this either. I was very happy on my own. I never wanted any of this!"

They made one full lap around the circular fountain when Ethan stopped for just a moment to laugh. It was a harsh, cruel sound. He advanced again, this time faster. Sophia had to almost run to avoid him.

"You mean to tell me that you dress up in the most beautiful gown I've ever seen and then want to be left alone? Why would you dress to

deliberately provoke a man — me — and then claim innocence?"

"Meg picked out my gown, I had no say in it a'tall. She wanted me to look pretty for Roger."

Ethan stopped suddenly. His face darkened to such a degree that Sophia thought that perhaps he had gone mad.

"He will never have you," he promised with a growl.

"Stop it, you're scaring me," Sophia breathed.

Unable to look at his face anymore, she moved to leave. A splash surprised her and before she could react his steel hand grabbed her wrist. Gasping, she was pulled into the water.

Ethan pulled her into his arms, their faces only inches apart. Sophia struggled, but it was no use. His power permeated her skin, setting her on fire.

"Damn you," he hissed before his lips met hers.

The instant their lips touched passion exploded between them. It was intense, the white-hot energy coursing through their bodies making them mindless. His tongue found its way through her teeth and she moaned, opening her mouth in acceptance. Their hands were everywhere, seeking, touching, and needing to feel the heat. His hand dipped beneath the silk of her gown, capturing a hard nipple. She cried out against his lips, knees buckling. If not for his strong arms around her she would have gone into the water lapping at their calves. They were like animals clawing at each other, their minds saying in unison — *this is what I was made for*.

"Ethan? Sophie?"

Megan's voice broke them apart. They clung to each other, breathless and dizzy from their embrace.

"What is going on here?"

Megan's demand was shrill in their ears. Sophia buried her face in Ethan's chest with a groan of despair. The sound of footsteps grew faint and the door slammed.

"Now look what you've done," Ethan growled.

Sophia's head snapped up her eyes wide. Abruptly he released her, climbing out of the fountain to go after his bride.

Sophia heard the door slam again. Standing alone in the fountain, lightening flashed and thunder rolled; frustration welling up so much within her that it was almost impossible to breathe.

Chapter 7

Sophia was a pariah. An outcast. Not only in society, but also in her own home. Word spread like the plague about the sister who tried to steal Megan's fiancée. Accounts differed depending on who the storyteller was. One account had her throwing herself at Ethan while naked in the water. Another had her threatening to kill herself if he did not make love to her there and then on the solarium floor. The one thing constant in all accounts was that Sophia threw herself at Ethan.

She cursed him. She didn't know how he'd done it, but he managed to put the blame entirely on her, exonerating himself.

The wedding was set to take place as soon as he returned from an emergency trip to India.

Felicity was Megan's new maid of honor. That cut the most. Ethan turned her sister against her. The sister who was more daughter refused now to speak to her, turning up her nose and flouncing away whenever Sophia entered a room. Megan wouldn't even let Sophia explain. Her loyalty was for her fiancé alone.

After first burning Sophia's ears with a scorching diatribe, her mother was also refusing to speak to her, forbidding her father to talk to her also.

His pitying glances were almost more than she could stand. Servants frowned in disapproval, ignoring her requests until she had to fend for herself.

She lay on her bed two nights after the disastrous embrace in the fountain feeling sorry for herself. Yes, she could understand the reaction of her

mother. When had that woman ever understood her? But to see the hard look on Meg's face and her father's pity – it was almost too much.

Moonlight streaked across the dark room to her bed. She turned her troubled eyes to the window. Only Lorna understood. Lorna held her and let her cry. Lorna brought her meals when none of the staff would.

She sighed, closing her eyes. “When is this all going to end?” she whispered into the night.

A hand over her mouth was her answer. “Not for a while yet, luv,” a deep voice responded from the darkness.

She stiffened, eyes wide, a scream bubbling up her throat, for she did not know that voice at all.

The hand lifted for just a moment and she opened her mouth to scream, only to have a gag shoved in instead. She hesitated a split second before struggling, but was too late for that too, with the man who gagged her pinning her arms at her sides. A musty rug was thrown over her and her fear grew as she realized that there was more than one of them.

"Come on, Arte. 'Elp me roll 'er into this."

A sudden jerk spun Sophia around and around. With dawning horror she realized that she was being abducted, rolled into the rug for concealment. Dizziness washed in waves as she was spun around. She could barely breathe from the combination of mildew and the tightness of her prison.

"Open the window," she heard faintly from the top of the rug.

She did scream into the gag when they hoisted her up and over one of the kidnappers shoulders, the jolt so hard her ribs hurt and she saw stars dancing around before her eyes.

Who is responsible for this? Who would want me out of the way so much that they would forcibly remove me from my own home?

The first thought that came to mind was – Mother. But even her mother wouldn't resort to a dastardly deed like this. No, it had to be someone else. Ethan's name came unbidden into her mind, but she discounted that

as well. Ethan managed to look like the victim in all this. He wouldn't need to get rid of her, he already had.

Thoughts flew from her mind as she was jostled about like so much cargo. They seemed to walk for miles, every step of the way bouncing through Sophia's bruised ribs. She struggled to remain conscious, wanting to be able to gather clues that might come in handy later.

Movement stopped and she breathed a premature sigh of relief. She screamed again as she was thrown through the air to land on something hard with a solid thud.

"Watch it, Mort! The Cap'n said not to 'arm 'er."

"The rug cushioned 'er fall."

Sophia would have begged to differ. Her elbow throbbed where it landed first, breaking her fall. Gritting her teeth against the gag, she forced herself to roll onto her back.

"Look, it's movin'."

"See? I told ya, Artie. I didn't bruise 'er a bit. She'll be just fine as cream for the Cap'n."

Sophia did not miss the fact that her abductors had said the word 'captain' twice now. Brightness flooded into her prison. She looked up, squinting, to see a pair of beady eyes before the rug was dropped back into place.

"Yer right, Mort. She's still kickin' in there."

Chuckles faded away. She wondered what was to happen next. More movement was her answer, along with the creaking of horse's harnesses. She realized she was riding in some kind of wagon. Not knowing how long the ride would be, Sophia listened for clues, her ears straining to hear every sound. Maybe by recalling as much of this ordeal as possible, she'd be able to escape.

Her mind echoed the words, *escape. How in the world am I going to accomplish this?*

She vowed she would, her resolve strengthening as the miles passed. She would take advantage of the first opportunity that presented itself.

Her body had other ideas, succumbing to blissful unconsciousness. She had no idea how long they traveled before awakening when she was picked up and thrown over a shoulder again.

When I meet this 'captain' I'm going to give him a huge piece of my mind, she promised as her breath left her in short gasps with every step the man took.

She caught a whiff of salty air and stiffened. Sudden shock raced through her as she realized they were taking her to the docks. She tried to struggle in the cocoon of her prison. A firm hand on her back pressing her into his shoulder had her stopping soon enough.

"Don't worry yer perty little 'ead, luv," a voice said from beside her.
"One more ride an' we'll be there."

That's supposed to make me feel better? I think not!

Her abductors stopped.

"Ye go first, Artie. I'll 'and 'er down to ye."

Sophia heard water lapping against wood. She waited, bracing herself for what would come next, not really knowing, but wanting to be ready.

She still bit into the gag to keep from screaming as she was roughly passed from one man to the other. Suddenly no hands held her and she crashed onto a hard surface. Pain shot through her body and she moaned.

"Watch it, Artie! You could've drowned 'er."

"She's 'eavier than she looks," came the sullen reply.

She realized she was in the bottom of a small boat when it lurched as her captors settled in. Soon the rhythmic sound of oars slapping water greeted her ears.

I'm being rowed out to a ship. I'll be sold in some foreign land as a slave and no one will ever find out that's happened to me. The thought left her shivering in her moldy cocoon.

"Ahoy up there! Throw me a line!"

The shout brought her back from the brink of madness. She jolted as the boat hit against something hard.

Large hands went around her waist over the rug and she gasped as a rope was tightened around her.

"Take 'er up, boys!"

Slowly she was raised into the air, her screams dying in her throat as she spun in nothingness. Once she hit the side of the ship and groaned from the pain. Gratefully a pair of strong hands snatched her from the air, but before she could be thankful the ordeal was over, she was spun out of the rug, landing in a heap on the deck of a ship. So dizzy she could barely see, she took in great gulps of air.

"Ere she is, Cap'n, jes like ye wanted."

"Well done, Artie."

Sophia's head snapped around at the sound of the voice.

"You!" She meant to scream but it only came out as a weak squeak.

"Yes, me. I'm surprised you didn't guess. But I suppose you felt that no one would want you after all the lies I told to save my reputation."

Growling, she tried to stand. Her legs were still too wobbly and she crumbled back onto the deck.

"Damn you Ethan Manchester." She leaned over to rub the feeling back into her legs. "How dare you! I insist you take me back immediately."

"Back to what, Sophie? Ostracism? Your musty old books? I don't think so."

Sophia opened her mouth to retort, but her legs decided to get their feeling back – with a vengeance. She gasped from the pain.

"I should have warned you about rubbing your legs like that. It's best to

let the blood come back slowly. Less painful that way."

She glared at him, noticing how powerfully he stood on deck, his booted feet braced wide apart. In the torchlight she could see he was dressed in tight black breeches and a white shirt the wind plastered to his broad chest.

All he needs is an eye patch and earring. She stifled the urge to say the words aloud. Instead she turned away, ignoring him as best she could while trying to stand. With that accomplished she crossed over to him taking small measured steps, her nightgown billowing in the wind. When she was close enough her hand snaked out to slap him, but he was much faster, capturing her wrist in an iron grip. One quick movement was all it took for her to fall into his arms.

Her protest stopped when his lips captured hers in a hard, possessive kiss. Amid hoots and laughter his mouth ravaged hers, his tongue plunging in to take the prize. She groaned against the onslaught, her arms pinned at her sides by his steely embrace. Her head swam from the sensations that erupted when his lips met hers, but she was determined not to let his kiss affect her. She brought her teeth together and he hissed, pulling away.

"Viper," he growled, shoving her from him so that she sprawled on the deck.

"Take her to my cabin."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n."

Her chin tilted at a stubborn angle, she stood and dusted off her nightgown. She shook off Artie's hand on her arm.

"No need, Artie. I'll follow willingly. I have no way of escaping – yet."

Throwing back a hateful glare at Ethan, Sophia followed Artie down a flight of stairs out of sight.

Studying her surroundings, she was led to the stern-castle. Artie walked before her and she noticed that he was taller than her but very thin and had a knit cap of red over his head. The passageway was very narrow and dim.

"Ere ye go, Miss." Artie stopped and opened a door, standing to the side.

Sophia hesitated before going through the door, not sure what to expect.

When she looked inside she was relieved to find the cabin tastefully appointed. She stepped into the room, starting when the door slammed shut behind her, the key grating in the lock.

"No, Artie! Don't leave me here!" she cried, pounding the thick wood.

"Please, I promise I won't escape. Just don't lock me in!"

"Sorry, miss," she heard Artie's muffled apology before his footsteps retreated.

"Artie! Artie!"

It was no use, he was gone. Biting back tears that threatened to spill over her cheeks, she rested her head against the door. With a resigned sigh, she turned back to the room. It was sparsely furnished with a desk in one corner and bed in another. Before the bed was a sea-chest and in the middle of the room, a small round table. The walls were painted a sedate tan; the theme being continued with a comforter neatly spread over the mattress.

Sophia crossed to the bed; her mind too troubled to notice the softness of the quilt.

I wonder if anyone's noticed I'm gone yet. I wonder if anyone will even care. The thought left her depressed.

Forty-eight hours ago someone would have cared. Someone would have come looking for me. But not now, after the cutting job Ethan's done to my reputation. People will think I left on my own, not able to stand up to the whispers and gossip. They'll think I've slunk away, ashamed. It couldn't be further from the truth. When I get back I'll have even more problems to face, more gossip. I can hear them now – where did she disappear? Why is she back?

She growled in frustration, slamming her fist into the mattress.

Damn you Ethan Manchester! How dare you play with my life this way?

Her eyes opened with a strangled cry as she realized that Lorna would be frantic when she found her gone come morning.

Oh, Lorna! Please don't worry about me. I'll get back to you as soon as I can, I promise.

Chapter 8

Ethan cursed himself for a fool a thousand times over. He knew he should have left things as they were, but the thought of sailing without Sophia just ate at him. He recalled the bet he made with Roger at the masquerade – how he would have her in his bed by the end of the night – and used that as an excuse for taking her now.

That dream they'd shared. The memory of it was burned forever in his mind. Ethan would never forget it. He'd made love to numerous women, but never had he lost himself as much as he had in the dream. It was the most intense orgasm he'd ever experienced, and it had only been a dream! When he'd spilled his seed into her it felt as if his soul had left his body. He couldn't stop thinking about what the actual act would be like with her. He'd spent the rest of the night unable to sleep, his body aching with the need to find out.

Getting his body and mind back under control had taken the rest of the next day. By the time he arrived at the door of the Pennworthy Estate for his engagement party he'd felt like himself again. One look into Sophia's luminous eyes had brought it all tumbling back to him, hitting him like a hard punch to the gut. It had taken all the control and willpower he possessed to not confront her there in the hall in front of her family.

Watching her talk to Roger, sitting next to Roger during the music set, had been another test of willpower for Ethan. His ears seemed especially tuned to her voice, and every time she laughed his blood pressure rose.

He'd seen her make her escape. Certain he wouldn't be missed, he followed, watching her disappear behind a door when two servants walked by. He waited before following her into the room.

Seeing her there perched on the edge of the fountain looking like a mystical fairy nymph made his senses leap.

When he pulled her into the water he had no idea how good it would feel to hold her in his arms. Kissing her was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. Hot and intense, her body burning its way into his, everywhere her hands touched left a branding mark like hot iron. His hands felt on fire as they'd moved over her body, her skin firm yet soft, her lips full, her breath sweet.

His control snapped, his willpower gone. He knew he wouldn't have been able to stop from making love to her right there, if not for Megan breaking them apart.

Control. Damn that word! *A Manchester never loses control.* His father's voice echoed in his head.

Damn Albert, but most of all – damn Sophie for turning him into a weak, lovesick calf!

He would have her. He knew, after that earth-shattering kiss in the fountain that their coming together would be an explosion. His loins tightened at the thought, and it took all his concentration to remain on deck issuing orders for cast off. As his crew hurried to obey his shouted commands, his mind strayed again and again to the woman waiting in his cabin. He turned, facing the ocean, and took a deep breath of sea-salted air.

* * * *

Sophia's eyelids drooped, her head falling to one side, snapping her awake. She had no idea how long she had been imprisoned in this cabin, but she began to think that everyone had forgotten about her. Since that suited her just fine, she decided to go back to sleep. The sound of a key in the lock startled her so she was totally awake, her heart pounding. She watched warily as the doorknob turned, her eyes narrowing when she discovered it wasn't Artie.

"What do you want?" she demanded as Ethan turned and locked the door, placing the key in his pocket.

"This is my cabin. Now that we're finally out to sea I've decided to rest."

"We're out to sea?" She jumped off the bed to the small portal window, standing on tiptoe to get a glimpse of the receding land. "Oh, no."

She closed her eyes, her fingers curled into fists on the wall. Hearing him move behind her, she turned back to him. He was unbuttoning his shirt.

"Where are you taking me?" She took a deep breath and straightened her spine.

"India."

"India?" At his nod she gulped, her chin raising a notch. "Just what do you intend to do with me when we get there?"

He stopped, his shirt in hand, and looked at her. Sophia tried to ignore the fact that he was half dressed and kept her eyes on his.

"What an odd question," he remarked before folding the shirt. "What do you think I'm going to do with you?"

"Sell me on the black market."

His harsh bark of laughter made her bristle. "That's good," he admitted, wiping his eye.

"I don't find this amusing at all."

"Too bad, because it is. No. Sophie, I'm not going to sell you. What an amusing imagination you have."

"You still haven't answered my question," she reminded him, crossing her arms over her bosom.

Ethan's broad smile and the blatant look of desire in his eyes took her breath away.

"My dear, you and I are going to get to know each other. Quite well, in fact."

"I am not a harlot, like many of your other conquests," she declared hotly.

"Of course not. You're as innocent as they come." His voice dripped so much sarcasm Sophia's jaw tightened in response. "Too bad you didn't

bring your little fortuneteller's outfit. We could have so much fun with that. No bother, though. I'll buy you a new one when we get to Bombay."

"You conceited peacock. How dare you insinuate I am less than innocent?"

His mocking grin infuriated her. He obviously did not believe her. Well, he would rot before she would let him find out. She turned her back to him.

"You'll like India, Sophie. There are fortunetellers on every street corner."

"I told you before I am not a fortune tel—" as she shouted she turned back to him and stopped, words dying in her throat as he undid the fastenings on his pants. With a gasp, she whirled back around, his throaty laughter making her tingle all over. "Put your clothes back on," she demanded.

"I never sleep with clothes on. Too restrictive."

She groaned. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Come to bed, Sophie."

Her mouth went dry at the invitation. Slowly she turned, the sight of him lying in bed making her heart pound so fast she thought she might faint. She looked away.

"I will not join you in that bed," she promised, sounding firmer than she felt inside.

"Oh yes, I think you will."

She turned back to him. "You would take me against my will?"

Ethan shook his head, his blue eyes smoldering with promise. "Force won't be necessary, Sophie. You will come to me soon enough."

"You sound so sure of yourself."

"I am, and I have you to thank for my confidence. Weren't you the one who said we were destined to be together?"

She stiffened. "As I recall, you didn't believe me when I told you. You thought I was trying to get between Megan and you. You tried to expose me as a fake."

His narrowed, cynical eyes bored into hers. "Let's see where we are with all that, shall we? First, I still don't believe you. Second, you failed at trying to break off my engagement with your sister. We are still going to be married when I return from my trip." He ignored her gasp of outrage. "Third, I tried to expose you but you ran away before I could. There, I think that covers it. Now come here you dear girl, and let me make love to you. I'm too tired to do much else."

Sophia shook with fury. "I'd rather jump over the side of this ship than have you touch me."

She crossed to the sea chest and threw it open, ignoring Ethan's amused smirk as she rummaged around. Finding a blanket she took it to the farthest point away from him, a corner, flouncing down and covering herself.

"That doesn't look as comfortable as my bed," he offered.

"A bed of nails would be more comfortable to me than your bed, sir," she vowed, closing her eyes.

"Suit yourself."

The room was plunged into darkness when Ethan blew out the lamp beside his bed. Her ears alert, she heard him move under the covers. Silently, she cursed him.

"Goodnight, Sophie."

"Go to the devil, Ethan."

* * * *

Warm lips touched hers, moving slowly, cajoling, pressing with measured care again and again. She moaned deep in her throat, stretching, feeling a warm body pressed intimately to hers. The contact made her blood sing. She answered the kiss, her mouth opening, inviting the kiss to deepen. She groaned as her wish was granted, their tongues playing together. Her lips lost contact and she murmured in protest.

"You have the most amazing tongue, dear girl."

Sophia stiffened, her eyes opening with a start. Ethan lay above her on the floor, nuzzling her neck. A quick look at the window showed it was daylight. With a strangled cry she pushed him away.

"What is the matter, Sophie?" Ethan asked with mock innocence.

"You know quite well, you blighter," she answered.

She gasped and closed her eyes at the sight of his nakedness, his desire for her very evident in the morning light.

"Oh, God! Put some clothes on!"

His deep laugh was devilish as he draped her blanket over his lions.

"Come now, Sophie. It isn't as if you've never seen a naked man before."

"I haven't!" She was too stunned to care how she sounded. The size of him nearly made her swoon.

"I've made no bones about how much I want you, Sophie. You know that. It's just you and me, alone in this room. No one back in England will ever know what happens in here, you've my word. Why waste a prime opportunity? You want me, I want you. We're both adults. Let's make love." He leaned toward her again but she scrambled out from under him.

"No," she stated adamantly, breathing heavy. "That may have worked with your other women, but it won't work on me."

He grinned and she decided retreat would be prudent. She raced over to the desk to hide behind, but no matter how hard she tried she could not get it to budge.

"It's bolted to the floor."

"Oh." She stared blankly at the piece of furniture.

"So's the bed. In fact, except for the chairs, every piece of furniture in this

room is bolted down."

Sophia's heart beat so hard in her chest she thought she might faint. Her eyes met his knowing ones and she swallowed hard.

I do want him – like I've never wanted anyone in my entire life. But he doesn't want me; he just wants to pass the time on his ship with me. I'm nothing more than an amusement, another conquest. When the voyage is over he's going to marry my sister.

The thought was like ice water splashing over her head. She straightened her spine and looked him directly in the eye.

"I will not be made fun of."

"I'm not mocking you in the least and I'm through with playing games. I have to go on deck soon, so if you're not going to join me in bed I'll be getting dressed."

"Thank heavens! Finally, he's going to put some clothes on!"

He scowled and it was her turn to grin. That is, until he stood and the blanket fell away from him. She turned away with a gasp.

"Stop doing that!"

"What?"

"Parading around naked as a jaybird."

"This is my cabin and I will do as I bloody well please."

She squinted one eye open and found him before the bed wearing a pair of fawn colored trousers. Her anger rising to new levels, she turned to face him.

"You kidnapped me from *my* bed in *my* own home to go on this silly trip with you. I did not want any of this!"

"No, you just wanted to marry me."

It was as if he slapped her. Her eyes widened in shock, his narrowed

with derision.

"You're impossible," she breathed.

"And you are a tease."

No one ever called her that before. In fact, before Ethan, no man had ever looked at her twice. She found herself wishing fervently she had never met this man.

Finished dressing, Ethan crossed to the door.

"Wait!"

He turned, one slashing eyebrow raised in question.

"You can't think to keep me locked up in here all day," she announced, miserable at the thought of spending endless hours with nothing to do.

"Can't I?"

"That wouldn't be right. I—I have nothing to do. Nothing to pass the time."

"No books to read?" His voice was heavy with sarcasm but she ignored it, desperate to get out of this room somehow.

"No books, nothing! I need to have something to do to pass the time."

"Try thinking of ways to please me when I return."

The door slammed behind him, the key turning in the lock. Sophia ran to the door, pulling on the knob and pounding her fist against the rough wood.

"Bastard! Let me out of here!"

"Now Sophie, is that anyway to talk to the man you want to spend the rest of your life with?"

She gritted her teeth as his laughter faded away.

"Damn you, Ethan Manchester," she moaned, her forehead resting against the cold wood.

She turned back to the room, her prison. How she wished she could talk to Lorna. She would be able to put this whole bloody mess into perspective.

Listlessly she wandered to the desk, scowling at its neatness. Not a paper was misplaced. On a sudden impulse she went through the drawers, not knowing what she was looking for. It didn't matter anyway because she found nothing but ship manifests and nautical instruments.

Sighing, she wandered to the window, but the rolling seas soon made her too dizzy to stand. She stumbled her way to the bed, holding her head until the dizziness passed.

This is some predicament, she confessed to herself while rubbing her throbbing temples. Maybe it's best Lorna is not here. She'd probably tell me to go ahead and make love with Ethan, that he'll fall madly in love with me and insist we stay together. She snorted. I'll take my chances alone, thank you.

She looked down at her hand. There was the mark, the half heart over her heart line. She always knew it was there but had studiously ignored it all these years, preferring instead to believe, if she willed it hard enough, she would never meet this mysterious man. Her other half. She couldn't think of another person more mismatched for her than Ethan Manchester.

She yawned, having been unable to sleep the better part of the night. The bed felt warm, soft and inviting. With only a moment's hesitation she slipped beneath the covers, sighing with pleasure as the mattress seemed to cradle her.

She fell asleep with Ethan's masculine scent in her nostrils.

* * * *

"There's a rumor going 'round that you've a hot little number in your cabin," Roger greeted Ethan on the quarterdeck with a knowing smile.

Ethan scowled, ignoring his friend's remark, and barked out an order for tea.

"So it must just be a rumor then. If you did have a sweet little morsel in

your bed you wouldn't be biting the heads off the crew."

"Don't believe everything you hear, Roger," Ethan muttered, studying a chart.

"Let me guess. Your sour mood is due expressly to the fact we have to go on this trip a'tall. I just wager you'd rather be enjoying wedded bliss right now."

Ethan was spared a reply when Artie brought his breakfast. Roger helped himself to some tea as Artie placed the tray of sausages, orange slices and oatmeal next to Ethan.

"Should I 'ave a tray done fer yer lady friend?" he asked.

"So, it is true! You do have a sweet stowed away somewhere. Tell me, do I know her?"

Roger chuckled as Ethan instructed Artie to bring Sophia breakfast.

"Give over, Ethan. Are you going to share? It gets mighty lonely on board without feminine companionship."

"Right now I'm wishing I never brought her on board," Ethan growled as he poured tea into a sturdy mug.

Roger tsked. "Sounds like trouble in paradise. Tell me – who is she?"

He put his cup to his lips.

"Sophie Pennworthy."

Roger spewed tea across the deck. "Sophia Pennworthy! Are you mad?"

"I must be. Why else would I have her taken from her home and brought to me?"

Roger stared at Ethan incredulously. He knew Ethan had the reputation of being a cad, but never did Roger think that Ethan would stoop to kidnapping.

"You kidnapped Sophia Pennworthy?" Ethan nodded once. "Have you

lost your senses? Think, man! They'll have your head on a platter for this. How do you expect to marry Megan after she finds out you've dallied with her sister?"

"She won't find out. Remember, Sophie's in seclusion after that fiasco the other night."

"You mean, the night you kissed her in the fountain?" Roger reminded him. "And Megan walked in on the two of you?"

"Yes. No one cares where she is right now. It was the perfect time to take her."

"Against her will, man. She's not going to be thanking you, you know. She's probably mad as hell."

"She is, but she'll get over it soon enough."

Roger stared at Ethan's profile a moment before remarking, "Say, if the lady doesn't come 'round to you I may have a go at her. She's a prime piece, and I'd hate to let this opportunity slip by."

Ethan turned on his friend, his expression thunderous.

"No one touches her but me, understand?"

Roger's grin faded. "She's fair game, old man. You are engaged remember? You can't have them both. I can see it now – a double wedding. You and Megan, me and Sophia."

"Touch her and you'll regret it."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from you, Ethan. You've never been so possessive before. Not even with Megan."

Ethan turned away but not before Roger noticed how tense his jaw was.

"Are you sure you're engaged to the right woman?"

Ethan nodded once. "Yes. Megan will be the perfect woman to run my estates. Sophie is just a fling."

"I hope you're right, old boy, but I give you fair warning – if Sophia doesn't return your affections I'm going to have a go at her."

"Good luck, Roger. She's locked in my cabin and there she'll stay until we get to Bombay."

"Good God, Ethan! You can't mean to keep her locked in that stuffy cabin for weeks on end. Think of her health."

"She'll gain her freedom as soon as she gives me what I want. Until then she stays where she is."

Roger frowned. "You've never had to resort to blackmail before, old man. Why don't you just admit you're not her cup of tea and let her go?"

Ethan's furious gaze locked onto Rogers. "Drop it, Roger. The matter is closed for discussion. The woman is mine to do with as I please and you have no say over it."

"You don't have to be so bloody touchy," Roger sniffed before stalking away.

Ethan leaned against the rail, his hands gripping the wood so hard his knuckles turned white. He cursed himself for his foolishness. When he should be concentrating on who was hijacking their shipments, when he should have been looking forward to his upcoming wedding, all he could think about was Sophia Pennworthy. He knew kidnapping an innocent woman was a new low for him, and he hated himself for it.

He had no idea why he was so obsessed with this woman. Roger was right – he should have just thanked his lucky stars Megan forgave him for that indiscretion in the fountain. But no, he had to play with fire by taking Sophia to India with him.

Another loss of control. That kiss in the fountain had shaken him so much he'd been unable to think of anything else. All the lies he'd told afterwards were just that – lies, a cover up, a ruse. A desperate attempt to save face. Luckily everyone had bought it, including Megan.

He wondered about that. Megan had told him once how Sophia had pretty much raised her, and how much she admired her older sister for unselfishly neglecting her own life so she could make sure Megan had

everything she needed to succeed. It didn't make sense that she'd believe the lie Ethan told, that Sophia had come on to him in an effort to break them up. If Megan really knew Sophia she would have realized that it was not in her sister's nature to do anything of the sort. Sophia was a woman wise beyond her years, generous, and giving. Sophia would never have tried to seduce the man her sister was engaged to.

Ethan's thoughts turned back to the present. He knew Roger was right. He had no right to take Sophia from her home. It was reprehensible, as well as against the law.

What did he expect would happen? Sophia would fall at his feet, begging to be made love to? He shook his head, furious with himself when he admitted that was exactly what he'd imagined. When she didn't fall at his feet, he got angry.

Ethan Manchester did not have to force a woman. Women were easily won. Why did it matter so much that he had to have this woman?

Chapter 9

By the end of the day Sophia was ready to scream. She scared Artie half to death by talking so furiously when he brought her lunch that he backed to the door, plastered against it as she fired questions at him.

'Where are we? What is it like on deck? What's it like in India? How long before we get there? What language do they speak? Does anyone there know the Queen's English?' Finally he ran out the door, slamming it behind him.

Sophia put her hands over her face, fighting back tears of frustration. She promised herself that she would apologize as soon as she saw the poor man again. She couldn't be angry with him for his part in her abduction. He was only following orders.

Ethan's orders. Her eyes narrowed when she thought of how silly she must have looked to him when she insisted they get married. He must have laughed a good long time afterwards. Oh, how she wished she'd never met him!

As if she conjured him telepathically, the key turned in the lock and the door opened. Sophia turned her back on him when he came through the doorway.

"No warm welcome, Sophie? Haven't you missed me?"

"Does the deer miss the hunter when he leaves the forest?"

"Touché." Ethan's chuckles grated on her ears.

She refused to turn around, her spine rigid, even as she heard movement behind her. Finally the door closed, but not before her nostrils picked up the aroma of food. Her stomach growled in response.

"Come, Sophie. Before it gets cold."

She turned, sighing in dismay when she saw the table set for two. It looked perfect, down to candles and sparkling crystal. She couldn't overlook the person who sat negligently in the chair opposite. She turned back away.

"I'm not hungry."

"Come now, Sophie, I heard your stomach. You can't lie to me."

She whirled to face him, her eyes sparkling. "No, I can't lie to you — or anyone else for that matter. I've never been able to lie, you see. It's not in my nature. Now you have to believe everything I've told you is the truth! Now you have to take me back home."

Ethan's expression was shuttered. "We are well out to sea, Sophie. Even if I wanted to, which I don't, I wouldn't be able to take you back. Why don't you accept the fact that we will be spending the next twelve weeks or so in close company? It would make the trip so much more enjoyable."

The thought of spending twelve weeks in intimate contact with this man sent shivers of excitement through her. She knew she would not have the strength to resist him. She wondered how long it would be before she would share his bed with him.

"Sophie, you can't starve yourself. I forbid it. Now come and eat."

Her eyes widened. "You would order me about like one of your crew?"

"Bloody hell, Sophie. I'm not going to ravage you over the soup. I've more control than that. You have my word – now eat something before I bloody well shove it down your throat!"

She smiled as she approached the table, happy that she could make him angry. Ethan's eyes grew darker. She pulled out the empty chair opposite him and sat down while he uncovered dishes, serving them both. She didn't even protest when he gave her enough food for three men. Seeing him angry made her spirits sing. Relaxing, she found herself suddenly ravenous.

* * * *

Glowing, Ethan watched as Sophia ate, his eyes intent on every forkful she brought to her lips. He left the food on his plate untouched. Suddenly he remembered what he'd decided while up on deck. A plan of action was needed with this woman. His plan would be to charm her into accepting him as her lover.

He smiled suddenly and was rewarded with Sophia pausing, her fork in mid-air.

"How was your day locked in here? Not too stuffy, I hope."

Sophia's eyes narrowed. "Of course it was stuffy – and boring, too. Not a thing to do. I'm not used to inactivity."

"Well said! I'd be worried if you enjoyed yourself. Not many people would be in a good mood after the day I put you through."

Sophia eyed him as if he'd lost his mind.

"You do have to admit, dear girl, that I do want you here with me. I went to extreme measures to make sure. It's not my intention to treat you like a prisoner. I want you to think of this as an adventure – something that would happen to one of the characters in your books."

"Then why are you treating me like a prisoner?"

"For your protection, of course," he lied. "Unfortunately, in my haste to have you brought to me I completely forgot the state of undress you'd be

in. It never occurred to me to instruct Artie and Mort to bring along a change of clothes."

Ethan smiled as Sophia flushed at the reminder that all she was wearing was her nightgown.

"I have nothing to remedy the situation. We'll have to wait until we arrive in Bombay before we can find you something suitable to wear."

"But – but I need fresh air. I need something to do."

"I'll see what I can do, but I'm not making any promises. Maybe someone's brought some books on board. Probably not the kind you're used to, but beggars can't be choosy."

"What about going up on deck?"

Ethan sized her up and Sophia blushed from his steady perusal.

"I may have an idea for that, too, but I'll have to do more thinking on the matter."

He picked up his wineglass and held it up for a toast.

"Until then, I say this is a new start for us. Let us put our rocky past behind us and forge a future of civility, if not friendship."

Sophia hesitated just a moment before picking up her wineglass. Ethan's breath halted as she studied the glass in her hand, clearly pondering whether or not to believe him. His breath released when she raised the glass, clinking it with his.

"To a new beginning," she agreed.

Ethan's eyes glittered as he drank his wine. He noticed that Sophia only took a sip and he tsked, shaking his head.

"All of it, dear girl," he scolded with a grin. "This is the life of the sea. We seal our bargains with a hearty draught, not a tiny sip."

"But I'm not a heavy drinker," she protested.

"Do you want me to help you experience life on board ship or not?"

"Of course."

"Then drink up."

He waited, his breath caught in his throat, as Sophia stared at her wineglass. He watched as she picked up the goblet, bringing it to her lips. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, draining it in one gulp. He chuckled as she shivered.

"That's a girl. Now, what do you say to desert?"

* * * *

Artie arrived later to remove the dishes. He eyed Sophia warily as he cleaned the table, and she knew she should say something to him about the way she acted earlier. She approached him as Ethan stood and lit a cheroot.

"Artie, I feel the need to apologize," she started.

"Miss?" Artie asked, clearly taken aback.

"I'm afraid I was a bit too enthusiastic when you brought my lunch today. I pray you can forgive me. It's just that I'm not used to boredom."

Artie's wide smile revealed missing teeth. "I've never been apologized to before, Miss. My, this is a surprise."

"Then you accept my apology?"

"Why, o' course, Miss! Never you mind about a thing, ol' Artie be glad to answer any questions ya 'ave."

"That will be all, Artie."

Artie and Sophia turned at the same time. Ethan stood by the portal, his head wreathed in smoke, his eyes glittering. Artie beat a hasty retreat while Sophia wondered what happened to change his mood so drastically. She noticed his dark regard, confusion growing when he smiled.

"What kind of questions were you asking Artie?" he asked.

Sophia stared another moment before answering his question with one of her own.

"Did I step out of line, Ethan? Is it all right to speak to the men?"

"Of course it's permitted. You are not a prisoner here, you are my guest."

Sophia smiled her thanks as Ethan tapped out his cheroot.

"I'm afraid I scared the chap today," Sophia admitted. "I plied him with so many questions he went running from the room."

"Such as?"

"Such as, how long does it take to get to India? What do the Indian people look like? Do they speak English? I could go on and on."

Ethan grinned and Sophia felt her face grow warm. "I can tell you all you need to know, my dear. And more. I've been sailing to India and back since a lad in short pants."

"You have?"

Ethan sat on the edge of the bed and nodded. "My father started taking me on his business trips when I was a teen. Said the sea air would do me good. He was right – I no longer have that poor constitution you saw in my hand."

His reminder of how they met made Sophia swallow hard, reminding her of the other mark she'd seen – The Fated Lover's Line.

He patted the bed next to him. "Why don't you sit here? I'll try to answer all of your questions."

Sophia's mouth went dry. She shook her head vigorously. "No, I'll just use one of the chairs, thank you."

"Artie removed the chairs," he explained, gesturing behind her. "They were short a few in the galley. I told him he could have ours."

"Oh."

"Besides, I want to teach you how to play cards and you'd be too far away."

"Cards?"

"In the top drawer of my desk."

Sophia remembered seeing a deck when she went through it earlier. She opened the correct drawer and found them. It must have been the wine clouding her judgment, but she approached the bed and perched on the edge.

"Good."

He took the cards from her fingers before moving to the middle of the bed, settling in cross-legged.

"The first game I will teach you is whist."

He deftly shuffled the cards before dealing them out, giving Sophia no choice but to scoot into the middle of the bed.

The evening passed quickly. Sophia was surprised and delighted to find that Ethan was as good as his word. He remained a perfect gentleman all evening, patiently teaching her how to play. If their hands brushed occasionally, he showed no sign of knowing.

While playing he regaled her with stories of his voyages. He explained many things, answering her many questions easily. His storytelling ability was wonderful, she found herself alternately gasping or laughing, but hanging on his every word. Artie returned later with another bottle of wine before seeking out his own hammock.

Sophia found herself captivated by the charm and charisma of this man. She found herself envious of her sister's good fortune.

A while later found her yawning into her hand, and Ethan shook his head. "I see I've kept you up too late," he remarked, picking up the cards.

"Oh, no," Sophia insisted, placing her hand over his to stop him. "I'm

having a marvelous time, really."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's just a bit stuffy in here is all."

The wine gave her face a becoming glow, her eyes trusting.

"I'll open the window," he offered.

With one leap he was off the bed, undoing the latch and opening the frame. Sophia's drowsy eyes drank him in. When he turned back she looked away, but not before she could hide the interest in her eyes. He jumped back on the bed, sending cards scattering in all directions.

Sophia laughed, scolding, "Ethan! Look at the mess you've made."

"I do believe I have," he said with mock gravity. "Do you forgive me?"

"Of course. Now help me pick these up."

On their knees they moved on the bed, picking up the cards until they both moved to one, reaching for it at the same time. Their hands met, and stopped. They looked at each other, smiles vanishing. Her heart hammering wildly, Sophia tried to pull away. But when she did, Ethan's grip tightened. His gaze moved to her hand, studying the lines on her palm. He placed his palm over hers with deliberate care, the Fated Lover's Lines connecting with a jolt that made them both gasp for air. His fingers entwined with hers, he leaned close. Sophia's eyes closed just before his lips met hers.

She didn't pull away. The will to do so vanished. It was as if she had no will of her own. When Ethan's lips moved over hers she lost all control, all thoughts flew from her head. He drew her close, the heat from his body seeming to envelop her until she grew dizzy. He bore her down into the soft mattress, covering her body with his own. She welcomed the weight of him, her body coming alive under his. He growled against her lips, his hand starting at her thigh, pulling her nightgown up until it was bundled around her waist. She moaned against his lips as his hand traveled even farther up under her gown to capture a breast. She arched into his hand at the contact, gasping against his mouth, her body demanding his hands take her, his fingers exploring her soft flesh. His

palm rubbed a nipple and she cried out.

Their breathing ragged, he tore his lips from hers, taking a stiff peak in his mouth. Her fingers dug into his hair, keeping him there as he paid homage to her. His knee nudged her legs apart. They both sighed at how well he fit between her thighs.

A knock at the door broke the spell.

"Cap'n? The night watch needs you on deck, sir."

Ethan swore under his breath as Sophia gasped, scrambling out from under him, yanking at her gown to cover herself. He grabbed her hand, stilling her movements. Her large eyes met his, and then looked away.

"Bloody hell." He turned and shouted, "I'll be up in a moment, Jon."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n."

He brought his hand to her chin, tilting her head so that their eyes locked.

"Stay here," he commanded, his eyes dark with desire. "I'll take care of whatever it is and be right back."

Sophia shook her head and Ethan mumbled a curse. "No Ethan. I'm sorry. This shouldn't have happened."

"Sophie –"

"Just go." Sophia refused to meet his eyes, her head turned away. She gasped as he took her in his arms, his eyes blazing into hers.

"This is not over between us, Sophie. That I promise you."

He kissed her hard before releasing her and climbing from the bed. She waited until she heard the door close before jumping from the bed, hurrying to the window. Taking in great gulps of air, she wished the window were wide enough to slip through. Her chances were better in the frothing sea.

Oh Lorna, I wish you were here. I am not strong enough to stop him – I want him

too much. How can I resist him when we are fated to love? He has the other half of my heart. I know he will hurt me, like he's hurt so many others in the past. I know he intends to marry my sister when we return. If I have him now – as my lover, as my friend – how will I live without him again?

She closed her eyes but the tears still came.

* * * *

Ethan would have been able to read her mind and would have known what was in her heart, but he was unaware of this unique bond between them. As it was he stood at the helm, welcoming the cold night air on his heated body, his spyglass to his eye.

"Just a merchant vessel, Patch. No need to sound the alarm."

"Thank ye, Cap'n," Patch said with a relieved nod. "'ad trouble makin' out their colors, wit me bad eye an all."

Ethan turned and handed Patch the spyglass.

"I understand. By the by, who put you on watch tonight?"

"Cap'n Waverell, sir."

"Do me a favor, Patch. Next time you need help, send for Captain Waverell."

Patch colored and cleared his throat.

"Aye-aye, Cap'n. I done fergot your woman you brought on board. It won't 'appen again."

"Thank you, Patch."

Ethan walked away, but instead of going below he walked to the stern, standing at the rail. He couldn't get those words out of his head – *your woman*. They echoed through his consciousness like a ringing bell.

The thought of spending the rest of his life with Sophia sent delicious shivers racing up his spine, and that scared him beyond all reason. He'd actually had a wonderful time tonight playing cards with Sophia. He

found that he loved to make her laugh, her eyes sparkling at his old jokes. Not once had he encountered a woman so honest, so guileless. It was the best evening he could ever remember spending with a woman, an evening where he could be himself. Before he'd always had to be careful, closed off. With Sophia he didn't have to pretend to be someone else.

Damn it, Manchester! Stop thinking about this woman so much! He reminded himself of the promise he'd made to Megan, back home. He'd promised to marry her — not her sister — and a Manchester never went back on his word.

Another one of Albert's great sayings, drilled into his head until it was a part of him, like breathing.

He'd always been proud of his ability to keep his promises and his reputation in the business community was stellar. As much as it galled him to admit it, in this one instance he agreed with Albert. Ethan was known as a man of his word.

What would happen to his reputation if he returned from India and broke off his engagement? A scandal, that's what. Especially if he were to marry Megan's sister instead. He'd been the subject of gossip for so long it didn't bother him anymore, but a scandal would hurt his standing in the business community, and he couldn't afford to have that happen.

A thrill of excitement ran down his spine at the thought of marrying Sophia instead of Megan. *Blast it all! It just isn't done! Have I chosen wrong? Megan is pretty, a real catch. She's easy to please and knows how to throw a good party. She knows all there is to know about running a vast estate like Hawthorn Hill. I know I would never have to worry about her or the estates while I'm on one of my voyages.*

Sophie, on the other hand, is too bookish. What would people think if I broke off my engagement to marry her? I'd be made a laughingstock. Mother would be furious with me. A Manchester never goes back on his word. I've already made up my mind. Megan is the one for me. I'd never be able to show my face in Town again if I didn't keep my word.

Ethan stared out into the black night, unseeing. Sophia's scent was still strong in his nostrils. He could still feel her in his arms. His blood heated at the thought of having her again. He knew he had never felt this way

when he held Megan in his arms, and the one occasion she let him kiss her left him cold. He knew Sophia would never leave him cold. The urge to make love to her was almost uncontrollable, overpowering his reason.

He stilled suddenly, listening. Even though he was on deck and on the other side of the ship, he could hear her soft weeping. It was as if it came from somewhere inside of him.

With a muffled curse he struck the rail with his fist. Back in his cabin, Sophia jolted from the pain.

They were linked together more deeply than either wanted to admit.

Chapter 10

Ethan returned to his cabin, the only light in the room a single candle burning next to his bed. His empty bed. He turned to the corner and saw her lying in the same place as the night before, curled up into a ball. With a muffled curse, he crossed to his chest. His movements quick and jerky, he readied himself for bed, angry with himself for hoping against hope that Sophia would still be in bed waiting for him. He cursed himself for his weakness at the disappointment that went through him when he discovered she wasn't waiting for him.

Blast it all, get hold of yourself old man! The woman has you tied in knots. All she has to do is crook her finger at you and you salivate like some spoiled lap dog! You are the one in control, not her. Remember that. A Manchester never loses control. For once your despicable old man was right.

Ethan got into bed and blew out the candle. His eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness. As he gazed up at the ceiling memories flooded him, fresh memories of holding Sophia, kissing her full lips, his hands trembling as they moved over her firm body, his own body coming alive as never before under her gentle caresses.

Cursing silently in the darkness, his brow beaded with sweat, he admitted that no other woman had ever affected him this strongly. Fear washed over him when he admitted that he might not have the strength to remain in complete control when he was with her. Taking deep breaths to calm his rioting emotions, he vowed not to touch her again.

* * * *

The next morning Sophia pretended to sleep as Ethan moved around the room. After the door closed, she sat up on her makeshift pallet and sighed.

Another day without anything to do loomed before her. She folded her blanket and placed it back in Ethan's sea chest, taking the time to touch a neatly folded shirt of his before closing the top. She tried to do something with her hair, using her fingers as a makeshift comb. There was a small round mirror on a nail Ethan used for shaving and she went to it, trying to put her hair up, but without any hairpins it all fell back down.

Oh, what's the use? How can I look good for him when all I have to work with is my nightgown?

A knock at the door surprised her. The key turned in the lock, but Artie was the one who walked through the doorway.

"Good mornin', Miss," he called, tipping his head. "The Cap'n, he wanted me to bring these for ye."

Sophia's eyes widened at the bundle he carried in his arms. He crossed to the table, setting it down with care before nodding again.

"Thank you, Artie," Sophia breathed, itching to get her hands on the package.

"Yer welcome, Miss."

Sophia didn't even hear the door close behind him. She went to the package, eagerly untying the string. It felt like Christmas. There were books, three of them, and clothes, a pair of patched trousers, some socks, a flannel shirt and shoes with a hole in the toe. Sophia smiled, and then giggled. He had kept his word!

* * * *

On deck, Ethan experienced a sudden wave of pure joy. It came and went in a flash, leaving him wondering what happened.

* * * *

Sophia tore off her nightgown and hurried into her new clothes. The pants

were tight across the rump and about three inches too long, so she rolled them up. The shirt practically engulfed her and she rolled up the sleeves, tucking the extra material into the waistband. The socks were worn, but still serviceable, and the shoes were big, but not too large to be clumsy.

She twirled around the room in her new outfit, laughing, her hair flying around her face. With a burst of inspiration, she pulled the shirt out of her pants and ripped a strip off the bottom. At least now she would be able to put her hair back.

Sighing with contentment, she reclined on the bed and opened a book.

A while later the door opened again. Sophia put her book down, a smile on her face in thanks for Artie, but it was Ethan who stood in the threshold.

His face was unreadable, his lips in a thin line as he scanned her new outfit.

"I see you received the clothes."

"Yes. Thank you, Ethan. For the books, too."

He didn't reply. Their gazes locked across the short distance of the room.
"All right then. Come along."

"What?" Sophia asked, standing.

Ethan turned and headed out the door, then stopped, turning back. "You wanted to go up on deck, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes, I did."

"Then shake a leg."

A glad cry on her lips, she ran to him, stopping when she noticed his scowl. Without another word he turned, forcing her to follow behind him in the narrow passageway. She hurried, having to take two steps for every one of his. They moved up some stairs, stopping at the open hatch. The sun hit her face as they proceeded up the companionway to the deck. She closed her eyes and breathed the salty air. When she opened them again, Ethan was walking away. She started after him.

"Miss Pennworthy, how wonderful it is to see you," Roger called, stopping her in mid-stride.

Sophia flushed at the intrusion. "Hello, Mr. Waverell," she replied formally, her eyes on Ethan's retreating frame.

"Please, call me Roger."

"Roger, then."

"May I call you Sophia?" he asked, linking his arm through hers and steering her away from the quarterdeck. "I think it would be best to dispense with formalities, seeing as how we're shipmates and all."

"That would be fine," Sophia mumbled, turning to look behind her at Ethan's unreadable face.

"Wonderful! Let me start off by saying how well you seem to be taking being kidnapped and all."

Sophia's head snapped around. "You know about that?"

Roger's smile faded for just an instant. "Yes, I'm afraid I do. I need to go on record right this moment by saying that I had no idea of Ethan's plans to waylay you and bring you on board. I would have been totally against it. As it was, I wasn't informed of your presence until we were well out to sea."

"Really."

"Yes. When I found out I told Ethan to take you right back where you belonged, but he wouldn't listen, the rake." Sophia gazed back at Ethan. "Tell me, is he treating you well?"

"Who?" she asked, distracted by Ethan's dark scowl.

"Manchester. Is he treating you well? I heard a nasty rumor that he was keeping you locked up like a prisoner in his cabin."

Sophia turned and glared at Roger. She didn't know why, but his not-so-subtle accusations ruffled her feathers.

"You heard wrong, sir," she corrected him, bristling. "He has been a perfect gentleman. As you can see, I am not a prisoner."

"Oh yes, I can see that," he hastened to assure her, silently berating himself for his faux faux. "May I say, you look smashing in your seaman's garb."

Sophia flushed from his apparent interest. Again her gaze was drawn to the quarterdeck, where Ethan stood so proud, so unreachable, his hair blowing in the wind.

"Sophia?"

"Oh — excuse me," she mumbled, embarrassed at having been caught staring. "You were saying?"

"I was saying that there's always a large celebration when we get into port, and it would be my pleasure to escort you to whatever parties are thrown in our honor."

"Tell me about the parties. Are they fun?"

"Yes. Last time we were there Prince Raji threw one for us. He's a real gentleman. At least his twenty wives seem to think so."

"Twenty wives!" Sophia exclaimed. "Yes, I do believe I remember reading about that somewhere. These Princes can have as many wives as they want, can't they?"

"As many as they can afford," Roger corrected, pleased that he finally had Sophia's undivided attention.

"I see. And the wives — they accept this?"

"They do. It is a great honor to become a Prince's wife. They live a life of luxury, never having to lift a finger. Servants are at their beck and call. They have scented oils rubbed into their body and are clothed in the finest silks."

"Amazing. Tell me, the Prince's home must be large to accommodate so many."

"It's a bloody castle. I think Prince Raji's palace has sixty rooms, each one decorated finer than the last. He has a separate wing for the servants, too. The main rooms themselves are decorated in gold leaf and real gemstones..."

* * * *

Ethan watched the pair with hooded eyes, jealousy coiling in his belly. Sophia smiled at something Roger said and Ethan's frown deepened. He fought the urge to go down to the main deck and pull Sophia all the way back to his cabin, locking her securely away. This jealous streak was new to him. He knew his feelings were wrong, he knew he had no right over this woman. He was a man who ruled his life by common sense, his emotions not a part of his decision making process.

He decided to think about Megan, the woman who waited for him. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, but try as he might all he could see were Sophia's blue eyes and soft smile. His eyes snapped open.

It's just because Sophie is here and Megan is back in England. If Megan were with me, I wouldn't think twice about Sophie.

He knew he was lying to himself. He looked down at his hand. That strange mark on his palm stood out, as if reminding him it was there. He knew Sophie had the same mark and that they fit together perfectly.

Light laughter drifted by, catching his attention. He looked up to find Roger strolling with Sophia on the lower deck. Their backs were turned to him, but Roger turned and gave Ethan a smile that turned his blood cold. He'd seen that smile hundreds of times before. Roger only smiled that way when in hot pursuit of a conquest. Ethan swore viscously and turned his back on the pair, berating himself yet again for his weakness where this woman was concerned. He couldn't seem to help himself – he wanted her.

Ethan managed to hold himself in check the rest of the day through sheer willpower alone. That evening he instructed Artie to set the table for dinner, complete with wine and candlelight. As he waited for Sophia's return he gazed unseeing out the window. He wasn't quite sure why he was doing this and didn't delve too deep into the answers.

The door opened and he turned to find Sophia standing in the doorway.

Her eyes were wide as she gazed at the elaborately set table.

"Did I interrupt?"

"Not at all." Ethan turned from the window.

"I was waiting for you. Shall we dine?"

"Oh, heavens," she mumbled, her face blossoming in a blush.

He could see that she was remembering clearly how last evening ended.
His chiseled features gave nothing away.

"This is quite awkward. You see, Roger asked me to dine with him."

"In his cabin?" He couldn't help it; the words came out clipped.

"Yes."

"I see." Ethan's face remained impassive as Sophia stared at him, steeling himself from the disappointment in her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

Ethan's smile was brittle. "Don't be. You run along now, I'll be fine. It's bad manners to keep the host waiting."

Sophia nodded, not moving. They stared at each other for another moment, each silently wishing she would stay.

"I'd better be going then."

Ethan bit back the words to make her stay, watching as the door closed behind her.

"Bloody everlasting hell."

He crossed to the table and picked up the wine bottle, bringing it to his lips for a long pull. With the bottle in his hand, he stalked out of the room.

* * * *

When Ethan returned to his cabin it was quite late. He found Sophia

curled up in her corner, fast asleep. Fighting the urge to wake her, he turned around instead, going straight to Roger's cabin. Not bothering to knock he entered the dark room, crossing to the form in bed.

Roger woke with a start when Ethan hauled him up by his nightshirt.

"What did you do to her?" he demanded.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Roger stammered, blinking, his mind still dull from sleep.

"Tell me! What did you do to her? If you touched her I'll – "

"Hold on, Ethan," Roger gritted, struggling with him to gain release from Ethan's strong fists. "Give me a sporting chance. Let's talk about this first."

Ethan swung at Roger's head and missed. Roger hurled himself at Ethan's middle, tackling him onto the floor. They struggled until Roger pinned Ethan down on the rough floor planks.

"That's enough, Manchester." Roger pushed him harder against the floor. "I did not make love to Sophia."

Ethan went still. Roger fell off him onto the floor, gasping for air. He knew how lucky he was, for he'd seen Ethan in the ring at White's and knew what he could do to a man with his fists. Staggering over to his bed, he lit a lamp, then sat on the edge, panting.

Ethan was still on the floor, breathing heavy. He wondered why he wanted to throttle Roger so much. He'd been Roger's best friend since childhood and they had never come to blows. Confusion ate at him even though he still had the urge to punch him.

"Want to explain what just happened?"

Ethan sat up, meeting Roger's narrowed eyes. "I don't know," he admitted, running his fingers through his sandy hair.

"We've never come to blows over a woman before," Roger reminded him. "Hell, Ethan. We've never come to blows at all."

"I know that."

"Why don't you face the fact that you have strong feelings for this woman?"

"Sophie?"

"Damn it Ethan! Of course, Sophia. You've never felt like beheading me before when I've competed with you for some lass's affections. Why is this one so different? She doesn't want you, so now it's my turn. All's fair in love and war, so they say."

"But she does want me."

Roger laughed and Ethan scowled. "I was wondering when you'd notice, old man," Roger said at length, after he stopped chuckling. "Gad, I don't know how many times her eyes went to you today. The girl couldn't hide her emotions if she tried. She'd never make it through a season with the Ton. Too damn innocent."

"I wouldn't subject her to the Ton. They'd eat her up and spit out her bones."

"Good analogy." Roger paused in thought. "But that doesn't solve what's going on here, Ethan. Either make the woman yours or she's up for grabs."

"Roger –" Ethan growled, but Roger interrupted him.

"You can't have it both ways. Admit you have feelings for her! For the love of God – is it so hard for you to do?"

Ethan refused to answer. He wasn't about to tell Roger about the Fated Lover's Line. Hell, he still didn't believe it himself.

"It's complicated," he conceded at last.

"Oh yes, I haven't forgotten about the little woman waiting for you at home. I also haven't forgotten that they're sisters, although they couldn't be more different. So what's it going to be? Or should I say, whom?"

"You know I'm engaged to Megan," Ethan reminded Roger bitterly.

"I do remember. But Megan isn't here, is she. Sophia is. You went to extreme lengths to bring her on board, as I recall. That is telling. Don't you think her family back home is looking for her at this very moment?"

"Bloody hell." Ethan figured Roger was right. Sophia's family was probably frantic by now.

"So take Sophia to your bed and enjoy your voyage. When you get home you can let Megan down gently. I'm sure with all this charm you have a reputation for having she won't be too brokenhearted."

"A Manchester never goes back on his word."

Roger's eyes widened. "Is that what this is all about? For God's sake, Ethan! That was your old man's saying, not yours. You don't have to live your life by that anymore. Albert is dead! Live your life on your own terms."

"No, Roger. What would happen to my reputation if I jilted Megan? Sophie would never be able to handle all the responsibilities that go along with being a Lord's wife. She's been sheltered too long. Megan is the better match; she'll be able to run the estates. She's the right choice."

"For employee maybe, but not for wife. Hell and fire, Ethan, your description makes my skin crawl. A wife is for having children with, for sharing your life. Who cares if she can host a bloody party?"

"There are plenty of loveless marriages, Roger," Ethan reminded him, his voice curt. "You know that. Megan is a common sense choice. If I want heat in the bedroom I'll get a mistress."

"I know there are loveless marriages, Ethan. I seem to recall your parents, for one." Ethan's heated glare was ignored. "Yours doesn't have to be that way. Do you want to end up as miserable as your parents were? Think, man! You have a chance at a good life. Don't be a sod and throw it all away."

"Just when did you become a romantic?"

Roger made a sour face. "Me, a romantic? I'd rather catch a disease. We aren't talking about me, we're talking about you."

"Well stop talking. You're not going to change my mind about this, Roger."

Ethan stood and dusted off his clothes. "Sophie is a fling, that's all. Once I've had her I'm sure I'll grow tired of her."

"Now you're the one who sounds naive."

Ethan pointed his finger at Roger. "And I'm giving you fair warning, Waverell. Stay away from her."

Roger stood and faced his friend. "Sorry, chap, but I can't do that. You see I kind of fancy her myself. I say, let the best man win."

"Roger —"

"And don't bother coming 'round to make mincemeat out of my face again. The door will be locked from now on."

Ethan glared at Roger one more moment before turning on his heel and stomping out. The door slammed behind him, the key turning in the lock.

Chapter 11

Ethan spent a sleepless night, his conversation with Roger echoing through his head. It was becoming harder and harder to rationalize his feelings as nothing but sexual. Roger had reminded him in no uncertain terms that he was already spoken for. He knew he should let go of Sophia and the challenge of winning her affections. He just didn't want to — yet. He had never felt such strong feelings for a woman before. He wanted to explore them before the chance was lost forever and he was doomed to a loveless marriage.

His eyes strayed through the blush of dawn to where Sophia slept, blissfully unaware of the tortuous thoughts flowing through Ethan's head. It was almost too much to bear, laying here in this huge bed alone. He fought the urge to take her in his arms and bring her to his bed — and to hell with the consequences.

He turned over onto his flat stomach, steadying his nerves. His inner voice was unrelenting.

Isn't that why you brought her on this ship in the first place? Isn't that why you had her taken from her home? Why isn't she in your bed right now?

He knew the answer to that question. Because she didn't want to be his mistress, she wanted to be his wife. Oh, she wanted him, he knew, but she fought and struggled with it. She was angry with him because he laughed at her silly story of a Fated Lover's Line.

He turned and gazed at her, his eyes narrowed.

I have made my choice. Sophie will never be my wife, no matter how hard she tries to get me to change my mind. But I will try to have her accept me as a lover, at least for the rest of the voyage. Roger will not have her.

He sprang from bed and dressed, then went to where Sophia lay.

"Wake up, Sophie," he said, gently shaking her shoulder.

"Mmm, Ethan," she sighed, her lips curled into a soft smile.

She stretched, her eyes closed, and went back to sleep.

"Sophie," Ethan tried again, this time shaking her more forcefully.

"Wake up. Come with me."

Sophia's eyes opened, she stiffened at Ethan's grin, suddenly suspicious.

"What is it?"

"Come with me and I'll show you."

Sophia stared at him for another moment, suspicious. "What do you want to show me?"

"I'll show you when we go above deck. Hurry or we'll miss it." His tone was implacable and had her to her feet.

"It's a good thing I slept in my clothes last night," she grouched as he

dragged her out the door.

"I knew you would."

She fell silent, following him as he took the stairs to the main deck, not stopping until he pulled her up the stairs to the quarterdeck.

"Morning, Mort," he said to the man who stood at the helm. "I'll take it from here. You can go below."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n," Mort said before hurrying down the stairs.

"What is going on?" Sophia asked skeptically, noticing that they were completely alone, most of the crew either still asleep or having their breakfasts in the galley.

"Come here."

Ethan grinned at Sophia's confused expression. His hand was extended toward her, never wondering if she might not take it.

She did. He pulled her before him to stand at the rail.

Placing both hands at her waist, he whispered in her ear, "Watch."

The sky turned from deep purple to rose and she was captivated.

Silently they watched the sun rise. Sophia stood in front of Ethan, his arms wrapped negligently around her waist. She leaned back into his strong chest, and he reveled in the warmth of her body. His chin came to rest on the top of her head. He savored the feel of her pressed innocently against him, her warmth mingling with his in perfect union. He was at peace with himself for maybe the first time in his life.

Neither spoke, afraid to break the spell.

* * * *

Sophia was completely lost in the moment; the sky changing colors second by second, water sparkling reflections until her eyes watered from the intensity. She breathed in the salty air, inhaling the scent of the man holding her. She closed her eyes, wondering how it would feel if there were no obstacles put before them. She wondered how things would have

turned out if she had met him first. Her eyes flew open when she realized that she couldn't have him—he was engaged to her sister.

I can't do this to Meg.

She started to pull away.

"There you are!"

Ethan and Sophia turned at the sound of Roger's voice, each wondering what might have happened if they hadn't been interrupted.

Sophia noticed Ethan's gaze narrowed at Roger's innocent smile.

"Good morning, Roger," Sophia said in her most proper voice, stepping from Ethan's embrace, feeling the animosity between the two men hang heavy in the morning air. Above her head Roger's grin widened and Ethan's face grew darker.

"I've been searching the ship for you, my dear," Roger declared. "I would like to share the morning repast in your sweet company. May I say that you look very fetching this morning? A sight for sore eyes, don't you know. Please tell me you haven't eaten yet."

"I haven't."

"Then by all means, come with me."

Roger took Sophia's hand, pulling her away from Ethan. As he started down the steps, he turned and nodded shortly.

"Manchester."

"Waverell."

Sophia glanced back behind her, confused at the change between the two friends. There was no opportunity to ask Roger about the problem though. His verbal bantering was nonstop through breakfast.

* * * *

Roger was determined to keep her entertained so that she wouldn't start asking pesky questions. By the end of the meal he succeeded in keeping

Sophia silent, her questions unspoken. How would he be able to explain that the reason Ethan was not speaking to him was because of her – that they were both competing for her affections? It was too crass, even if it were true.

"Would you like to go for a stroll on deck?" he asked as they exited the galley.

"No thank you, Roger," Sophia said as sincerely as possible, not wanting to hurt his feelings. "I think I would like to retire to my cabin and read for awhile."

"You mean, Ethan's cabin," he bit out, angry.

"Yes, Ethan's cabin," Sophia murmured, her face pink.

"I wish he would let you have a cabin of your own. I hate to think of you in that close space with him. It isn't proper, I tell you! Why, he's engaged to your sister. It just isn't right."

Sophia's face blossomed until it glowed.

"Yes, well," she stumbled, swallowing hard. "There's not much I can do about it."

"Why don't you bunk with me?"

"Bunk with you?" Sophia echoed in shock. Her hand went to her throat in surprise.

"Yes, I do believe that would be a splendid idea. I promise to be every inch the gentleman, Sophia. I would never try to compromise you. Unlike my ex-friend."

"Ethan has been a gentleman, too," she argued, but the words sounded hollow.

He didn't believe her, frowning. "My dear, you don't have to lie for him. I know Ethan better than you do. We're close as brothers. I know why he kidnapped you and brought you on board. He wants you as his lover."

"Roger!" Sophia exclaimed, mortified. She glanced around. "Really, you

should be more discreet."

"Why? Everyone on board knows what your purpose is. The only difference is that I know you haven't succumbed to Manchester's advances. Everyone else thinks you share his bed."

"I've heard enough of this." Sophia started to brush past, but Roger grabbed her, pulling her resisting body into his arms.

"Manchester will never marry you," he said, his voice husky and low. "He's made that abundantly clear. Me on the other hand, I'm unattached. I would like the chance to prove to you that I could be a good catch."

"This is absurd."

Her words were barely out of her mouth before Roger's lips crushed hers. His mouth was firm, as if he'd done this a million times before. He was pleased Sophia was acquiescent in his arms. He pulled her closer, deepening the embrace, amazed at his body's reaction to her.

When Roger finally lifted his lips from hers he smiled, supremely confident.

"I'll have your things moved in to my cabin immediately," he announced.

"Wait just a minute," Sophia breathed, breaking free from his embrace. "I never said I would move in with you."

"There's no need to be coy with me," Roger assured her.

"I am not being coy, sir," Sophia argued, angry at what he was assuming.

"You don't have to worry about me, my dear. I'll wait until you're ready. I will be a proper gentleman – until you want me to be otherwise." His insinuation left no question about his intent.

"This is all happening too fast," she protested, shaking her head. "I can't think."

"You have no idea how happy that makes me."

Sophia stared at Roger's confident grin. "I'm sorry, Roger. I must take

some time to think about this," she said, pushing past him in the narrow companionway.

"Take all the time you need, my sweet," he called after her. Once she was gone he turned, whistling all the way back to his cabin.

Ethan was on the quarterdeck studying a map with the first mate when Sophia burst through the open hatch to the main deck. He knew immediately that Roger had kissed her. Pure rage surged through his veins, so strong it took his breath away. It took all his control to remain where he stood and not go below to murder his friend.

Sophia turned suddenly and their eyes locked. Even though her hair was tied back at her nape a tendril escaped, fluttering over her face. Ethan itched to touch it, to tuck it back in place.

Why?

The words startled him because it came from inside his head, but it wasn't his voice.

Why are you doing this to me – to us?

His eyes widened. Sophia looked away and the spell was broken.

* * * *

Sophia spent the remainder of the day on deck, wedged between the gunwale and the deck housing. Confused, her mind was a jumble of disjointed thoughts. She'd let Roger pull her into his embrace only to see what it would be like to be kissed by someone other than Ethan. Just as she'd suspected, Roger's kiss had left her cold.

Damn Ethan Manchester for making me want only him!

Her entire adult life no man had ever wanted her, had ever shown an interest in her. Now she had two men who wanted her in their beds. Neither man had offered her the civility of marriage either.

All the books she'd read were no help to her now. She wished she had someone to talk to, like Lorna. She wished that she were more like Megan, or even her mother – wise to the ways of men.

Closing her eyes she breathed deep, letting all the frustration and doubt out with every cleansing exhale.

She spent the rest of the day offering the crew palm readings. It helped her get her mind off her dilemma. Artie was nice enough to go below and fetch her books, and she spent some time reading when the men were too busy with their chores to spend time with her. Her meals were even brought to her, using a rolled piece of canvas sail as an eating surface.

Studiously ignoring the man whose overwhelming presence commanded attention, she determined to be stronger, to not give in to him.

* * * *

Ethan tried to ignore her and failed miserably. It seemed his eyes had a will of their own, continuously straying to where she was. He told himself that he was just looking out for her welfare, but knew that for the lie it was. The crew gave him funny looks, some even offering to go to her on his behalf and talk to her, thinking they were having a lover's spat. He remembered the feel of her in his arms just a few hours before and his body leapt in response. These new feelings scared him more than anything Albert had dished out. His palms sweat whenever he thought of touching her. He knew he had to get his traitorous body back in line.

Nightfall found her in the same place. Ethan went to his cabin, determined to put her out of his mind and get some sleep. The emptiness of the room seemed to shout at him as he lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling.

A feeling of despair washed over him so intense it left him gasping. He rolled to his side, forcing his eyes closed. Images of her sitting on deck with the wind blowing through her hair danced behind his eyelids.

Cursing himself for his weakness, he sat up. He knew if he were more like Albert he would have left her on deck to freeze.

But he was not his father.

Throwing the covers aside, he reached for his clothes.

He found her just where he envisioned her, curled up into a ball, shivering against the cold. Without a word he took her in his arms and carried her back down to his cabin. He closed the door behind him with

his foot and crossed to the bed, placing her on the warm covers.

Not waking from her stupor, she murmured, burrowing into the warm blankets. He got in next to her, still fully clothed, and threw a cover over them both. She immediately sought out his warmth, burrowing into his side. With a sigh, he held her close, reveling in the feel of her body pressed to his.

Chapter 12

Sophia awoke to the warm sensation of human contact. Her eyes blinked open and she stretched, stopping when she felt something warm and solid across her chest. With a strangled cry she jumped from bed. Ethan was out in an instant on the other side; going for the guns that were kept beside the bed at all times.

"What is it?" he demanded, checking the pistols for ammunition.

"What is the meaning of this?" Sophia cried.

"The meaning of what?" Ethan asked, distracted as he went for the door.

"This!"

Ethan stopped and turned, his eyes widening as she pointed to the bed.

"We're not under attack, are we?"

"I don't have the foggiest notion what you're talking about."

Ethan sighed, dropping his pistols to his sides.

"You." He gestured. "You shot out of bed like it was on fire. Mind telling me why?"

"We shouldn't be sharing a bed," she insisted, the words sounding hollow in her ears.

"You're not serious."

Sophia huffed, her hands on her hips. "I did not ask to be in your bed, sir!"

"No, you didn't. I took pity on you shivering in the cold."

"Pity!" she said with a gasp. "You should've left me there, I would have been fine."

"If I would have left you there you would have froze to death."

"That's going a bit far, don't you think?"

"I've seen men die from exposure before, Sophie."

Ethan's thunderous expression bore into hers but she was too angry to back down.

"But to put me in your bed? Why didn't you just put me in my corner?"

"You were shivering. I needed to warm you up fast."

"My, how quick you are with your answers," she sniffed.

"Bloody hell." Ethan looked at the ceiling, the tick in his cheek pulsing wildly. *This is what I get for doing the right thing? For saving her life?* He shook his head. He turned back suddenly, shouting, "Look at you!"

"What!" she cried, jumping.

"Are you or are you not fully clothed?"

Sophia gazed down at her outfit before answering.

"I have clothes on, yes."

"Am I clothed?"

Sophia looked at him, standing rigid on the other side of the bed. His murderous eyes glittered as he waited for her to notice that he was wearing a pair of dark blue trousers. She wasn't about to point out that his chest was bare.

"Yes."

"That should tell you something." Sophia's confused eyes met his.
"Nothing happened."

"Nothing?"

Ethan swore his eyes closing as he struggled for control. His eyes opened, his furious gaze pinning her again. "Do you think so little of me that I would take advantage of you when you're practically unconscious?"

She jumped back with a strangled cry when he vaulted over the bed in one leap, taking her roughly into his arms.

"When I make love to you, you will know it," he promised, his blue eyes glittering into hers. "You will feel every touch, and you will know ultimate pleasure."

"I will not be used," she breathed, amazed by her audacity.

"I could take you right here, right now, whether you say yea or nay. You know that, don't you Sophie?"

When she didn't answer right away he shook her.

"Yes," she gasped.

"The entire crew thinks I've already had you. Only Roger knows the truth. Soon my patience will be at an end. When that happens you will be mine in all ways."

His blue eyes burned into hers, so intense that she couldn't look away. He let her go and walked away. She stood still as a stone, watching as he rounded the bed and grabbed his shirt and boots. His movements were stiff with anger as he dressed. When finished, he strode out the door, slamming it behind him.

Sophia sat on the bed, a bit shaken. She behaved abominably, accusing Ethan of taking advantage of her when he was only trying to keep her safe from harm. It had been a stupid idea to sleep on deck. If the cold hadn't gotten her, one of the men might have. These men were not society's cream; they were just barely civilized. Ethan protected her,

saving her from a slow, cold death. She repaid him by acting the shrew. He could have taken her virtue any time, but he hadn't. That spoke volumes.

I don't blame him if he never speaks to me again. All these conflicting emotions, I hate them! I want him one moment and hate him the next. Blast this bloody line anyway. I never wanted any of this. I wanted to have a nice, ordinary, quiet life. Why couldn't Ethan have left me alone?

She knew the answer before finishing the question – because he has no choice in the matter either. Their palms proved that they are fated to each other, whether for bad or good only the Universe knew. They could only hang on for the ride.

She stood and took a cleansing breath. She accepted what the markings on their hands said, but knew Ethan did not. She knew he fought it with all his considerable strength and stubbornness. She wondered what it would take to prove to him that he didn't need to fight it, that the sooner he accepted his fate the better. A sad smile crossed her lips. Ethan was as stubborn as they come. He would not readily come around.

A growl from her stomach turned her troubled thoughts to breakfast. She went to the door expecting it to be locked and was surprised to find it open. She found her way to the galley, stopping at the doorway when she noticed Roger at the table.

"Sophia!" he exclaimed when he looked up and saw her.

Her heart beat erratically with apprehension as he stood and approached.

"Good morning, Roger," she managed to get out of her suddenly dry throat.

"My dear, I can't tell you how glad I am that you're still speaking to me," he breathed, bowing formally over her hand.

She pulled her hand from his. "Why wouldn't I be speaking to you?"

"Because of my unsavory behavior yesterday," he explained, ushering her to the table and pulling out a chair. "I was completely out of line. My only defense is that I am completely captivated by your charms."

Sophia took the offered seat, grinning despite herself. "And you sir, are a hopeless womanizer."

"Point taken," he admitted, completely nonplussed at her remark.

He seated himself opposite her. "You have me pegged. You can't blame me for trying, can you? I see this wonderfully captivating, beautiful woman, who's at the mercy of a scoundrel like Manchester, well, I just forgot myself."

"Watch your words, Roger," Sophia scolded as a plate of fruit and bowl of oatmeal were placed before her. "Ethan saved me from an untimely death last night by bringing me in from the cold on deck. I had fallen asleep and he came looking for me." She eyed him squarely. "I noticed that you weren't anywhere in sight."

"How could I have known? I was waiting for you in my cabin, my dear. In fact, I was up all night. The bags under my eyes can attest to that."

Sophia noticed no dark smudges under his eyes and wondered if he'd been trying to draw her attention to his good looks.

He had.

"But again, I apologize. I realized my mistake in the wee hours of the morning when it finally occurred to me that you weren't going to show."

He placed a sun-browned hand over hers.

"The proposition was improper. You are a lady, and as such should be treated with utmost respect."

"I'm relieved you realize that, Roger," she remarked, withdrawing her hand to pick up a steaming mug of tea.

"Oh, I do now. These unusual surroundings did me in, I'm afraid. If we'd been back home I never would have forgotten my place."

He paused for effect, his brown eyes beseeching her. She wondered idly how many women those puppy dog eyes had taken in.

"Could we start anew?"

"I don't know, Roger," she murmured, pushing food around on her plate.
"I'm not sure I should trust you again."

"I promise to be a perfect gentleman. We will just be friends, you have
my word."

Sophia couldn't help but grin at his sincere expression. She knew it for the
lie it was. She had taken his measure. A little voice inside her head told
her that it might be good to keep Ethan jealous.

"Apology accepted."

Roger blinked at her simple announcement, flashing her a smile that
would have made any other female swoon.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "I know, after breakfast let me take you for a
stroll on deck. There are some very interesting clouds starting to form
from the north."

Sophia barely listened as Roger regaled her with his many stories as she
finished her meal, bemused at the effort he was making to win her over.
She thought just for a moment of telling him that he was wasting his time,
but couldn't bring herself to hurt his feelings. After all, Roger didn't know
about the Fated Lover's Line. Unless Ethan mentioned it, and he didn't
believe it himself so why would he say anything to anyone else?

* * * *

After they finished their meal she joined Roger for a stroll on deck. Ethan
saw the two together and his jaw tightened. The intensity of his jealousy
was like a pain in his chest, almost doubling him over. As he gasped for
breath Sophia turned, her eyes filled with worry and concern. How
strange that she knew he was in pain. She closed her eyes and at the same
time the pain was gone. She opened her eyes and smiled, then turned
back to Roger, leaving Ethan not knowing what exactly just happened.

"Cap'n, I've got news from the lookout in the crow's nest."

Ethan turned to his first mate, Jon.

"What is it?"

"We've a storm comin', sir."

"What direction is it coming from?" Ethan asked, all thoughts of Sophia and Roger gone.

"North, sir. It looks like a bad one."

"How far out?"

"The lookout says about twenty miles, Cap'n."

"I see." Ethan's brows slashed in thought. "Tell the men that we're going to try to outrun it. Have everything lashed down."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n."

Ethan turned to the north as Jon hurried away. The clouds on the horizon looked deceptively tranquil, but he'd sailed enough to know that looks were oftentimes deceiving.

* * * *

Roger's eyes were on the gathering clouds when Sophia asked him about the sudden activity on deck.

"Sophia dear, I'm afraid I've got to take care of some droll ship chores," he apologized while steering her to the companionway. "Would you mind returning to your cabin for awhile? I won't be good company right now."

"Of course," she answered, her eyes questioning. "I understand."

"That's my girl," he said, practically pushing her down the stairs. "I'll come check on you later."

He sent her below before she could wonder at his abrupt change of mood.

On the quarterdeck Roger approached Ethan.

"A storm?"

Ethan nodded once. "A bad squall, according to Smithson in the crow's

nest."

"How far out?"

"About twenty miles north."

Roger's face was grim.

"We'll be lucky if we can outrun it."

"I gave the order for the crew to lash everything down."

The two adversaries looked at each other; their differences put aside for the sake of The Enchanted and everyone on board. They spent the rest of the day on deck going over maps and checking wind speed.

* * * *

Sophia curled up on Ethan's bed reading until her eyes started to strain. She rubbed them, and then looked out the window. The sea seemed to be going by much faster than normal, the waves more pronounced. A movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention; she turned to watch a lamp swing from a chain connected to the ceiling. It swayed with the roll of the waves, but she never noticed it swing like this before.

A glance at the clock bolted to Ethan's desk told her it was way past dinner. She stood, swaying with the rocking of the ship, and made her way to the door, throwing it open. Men were running back and forth. Too many of them for her to go out.

"Excuse me. Excuse me," she called, but no one turned to her, all too busy to stop. Finally she spied Artie and grabbed his arm as he shot by. "Artie, what is going on?"

"Just some precautions, Miss," he said, trying to pull from her grasp.

"One more thing – is the galley closed for the night? I'm afraid I let the time get away from me."

Artie shook his head. "No food tonight, Miss. Everything's been packed away."

He pulled free and hurried down the passageway. She closed the door

and leaned against it, confused.

Packed away? Why would someone go through all that effort just to have to unpack it in the morning?

* * * *

Ethan's concern grew as clouds roiled above, thunder sounding in the distance. A cold wind lashed his face, tearing at his clothes.

"It's gaining on us. We'll never outrun it now." Roger had to yell to be heard above the wind even though he stood next to Ethan.

Ethan swore under his breath before yelling back, "Better tell the crew to get below before the storm hits."

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine. Just get the others taken care of."

Roger nodded once before going below. Soon Ethan was alone. Wind pummeled him as he turned his back on the storm to steer the ship. Gritting his teeth, he lashed himself to the helm before taking the wheel in his strong hands. The wheel bucked under his firm grip, threatening to spin out of his hands. Only his strength kept it under control. Rain came suddenly, slashing down in a great torrent, stinging as it hit his body. Within seconds his clothes were soaked, plastered to his body. Water ran down his face, stinging in his eyes. He couldn't afford to take his hands from the bucking wheel to wipe it away. It was impossible to see anything in the downpour.

Suddenly he heard it. His name being called. His heart pounding in alarm, his eyes searched through the sheets of the squall. He heard it again, a cry of terror.

"Sophie!" he screamed, his lungs burning from the effort. "Where are you?"

Images of Sophia being swept overboard assailed him, leaving him panicked. Lightening flashed above his head, thunder ringing in his ears. He opened his mouth only to have it filled with salty rainwater. He spit it out as lightening flashed again. It was impossible to hear anything above nature's wrath, and yet he heard the cries again. Muttering an oath, he

tore the bindings from around his waist, staggering from a blast of wind as he tied the wheel down. Lightening flashed above him as he struggled down the stairs to the main deck, wind so strong he almost lost his balance. He searched frantically but found no trace of her. Fighting his way to the companionway the ship rolled under his feet, the deck slick and treacherous. Barely able to stay on his feet, he stumbled down the stairs and with a burst of strength threw open the door to his cabin.

Lightening flashed, illuminating the interior for a brief moment and giving him enough time to see Sophia's terror filled eyes. Darkness enveloped them as the lightening ended, thunder crashing in its wake. He didn't see her run to him, but suddenly she was in his arms, clinging to him. The ship shuddered and creaked, the sound so loud that words wouldn't have been heard. No words were needed as Ethan took Sophia's face in his hands, relief flooding through him as he lifted her face for his kiss. She wrapped her arms around him, opening her mouth for his complete possession. He tore his lips away and picked her up, carrying her to his bed. He fell onto it as the ship scuttled down a huge swell.

She was on top of him, tearing at his wet clothes, her mouth once again on his. Their mouths were demanding and hot, their tongues mating.

Lightning flashed and thunder crashed as they were caught up in a primal storm on the bed. When Ethan finally pulled her beneath him they were naked. He was impatient and she wanted him to be. She needed his roughness, crying out when his lips captured an engorged nipple, nipping with his teeth. His mouth moved to worship the other, as Sophia's fingers tore at his hair, mindless with need. Her thighs parted and he filled the space between them, not hesitating as he filled her completely, breaking through her maiden's barrier with a strong thrust. They both cried out at the rightness of their joining, their bodies singing with sweet sensations.

He bit her lips then licked the marks as he moved within her, his strokes powerful and long and smooth. She clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as he moved above her, their breaths and moans lost in the savage power of the gale. A warm heat built within her until she was straining against him, her legs wrapped around him as he moved inside of her, his strokes swift and deep. She found her release in waves of glorious rapture that left her weak and spent. He heard her cries above the din of the storm, her muscles contracting around him as he poured his seed into her with deep, powerful strokes.

The storm did not abate, lightening and thunder crashing all around them. When Ethan could catch his breath he kissed her long and thorough. Still hard, he started to move again, sliding and panting, her moans of pleasure captured by his mouth. He took his time, savoring each powerful thrust. Sophia's legs caressed the outside of his thighs as he moved, the sensations building in each until they were once again mindless, clinging to each other. He drained himself again, her moans and cries echoing his as she found her release.

* * * *

They stayed in the shelter of the bed wrapped in each other's arms until the storm finally blew by. As the seas quieted, Ethan moved to leave the bed. A hand on his arm stopped him.

"Where are you going?" she whispered, her eyes barely able to make out his strong profile in the darkness.

"I have to check on the ship. If there is any damage we have to take care of it right away."

It was hard to make out his features in the dark. Sophia released him, her eyes following him as he put on his damp clothes. When he was dressed he leaned over, giving her a quick hard kiss.

"Stay here. I'll be back as soon as I can." He strode through the room and out the door.

Chapter 13

The sun was beginning to turn the horizon pink, storm clouds far off in the distance. Ethan and Roger inspected The Enchanted and found minimal damage. The crew rode the storm out well, with one injury to report when a crewman had fallen from his hammock. Orders for repair were issued for the ship's carpenter and soon the crew was busy making the necessary repairs. Ethan, Roger and the first mate, Jon, took readings and plotted a course. Soon The Enchanted was headed in the right direction, having actually been blown closer to India. They would arrive sooner than expected.

It was hard for Ethan to keep his mind on the task of inspecting the ship,

his thoughts filled with Sophia and the sweet lovemaking they'd shared. He still marveled at how well they fit together, at how right it felt to take her in his arms. The feelings were too new, too fragile. He knew he had to get a hold of himself or he would forever be reduced to a lovesick fool.

As Jon went below to get some maps Roger turned to Ethan, his eyes narrowed. "So — you've had her, I see."

Ethan nodded once. "I have."

Roger swore. "Does that mean you will take her to wife?"

Ethan laughed; it was a hard, grating sound. "Never," he said, wiping an eye. "Where the devil d'you get such an idea?"

"She's an innocent, Ethan. At least she was until you got hold of her." Ethan shot Roger a nasty glare. "You can't trifle with her if you have no intention of marrying her."

"When did you become so bloody protective?" Ethan shot out, one eyebrow raised.

"I don't dally with innocents. The women I bed know there are no strings attached. Sophia is different; she's been sheltered and doesn't know how to hide her emotions."

"You mean, she's not jaded, like us."

"Precisely."

Ethan was silent, continuing to stare at him.

"I see I'm not making any headway." Roger leveled his heated gaze at Ethan. "Then I am still going to pursue her myself."

"The devil you say! You go anywhere near her and I'll —"

"You are engaged to be married, Ethan," Roger cut in, his tone implacable. "That means Sophia is still available and I will still take her — even after you have left her used and abused."

Ethan's fist shot out and connected with Roger's jaw, sending him

sprawling to the damp deck. The thought of anyone holding Sophia other than him had Ethan seeing red. Especially Roger.

From the floorboards Roger felt his jaw, moving it back and forth.
"You've lost your touch, old boy. My teeth aren't even loose."

"Very funny."

Roger stood, dusting off his clothes. "On that we do not agree. None of this is amusing at all." He looked at Ethan. "I give you fair warning, Manchester. I will be watching you. As soon as you make a misstep I'm taking your place. Sophia Pennworthy is going to return from this trip with a respectable marriage proposal – yours or mine, it doesn't matter which. She will not be ruined because of your selfishness."

Ethan stared into the distance as Roger stalked away. He wasn't about to let his best friend know how much these new feelings confused and upset him. A Manchester never revealed his true feelings to a competitor, his poker face legendary. Roger was now the competition, competing for Sophia's affections. Sure, they had made love, but that didn't mean anything.

His mind screamed – *no!* Making love with Sophia was the closest he'd come to a spiritual experience. His fingers shook when he touched her, and when he heard and felt her release his whole being rejoiced.

Get a hold of yourself, Ethan, you are still engaged to another. Roger could still steal Sophia away and where would that leave you?

Empty.

* * * *

Sophia sat in a chair at Ethan's desk and wondered what could be keeping him. Her mind raged from one extreme to another, one minute sighing wistfully from the memory of Ethan's lovemaking, the next minute raging for giving in to him.

Damn this bloody line anyway. I can't seem to think straight anymore. He is the other half of my heart and yet I don't really know him a'tall. I have to find a way to get him to accept me, to accept this whole situation.

The door opened and Sophia gulped, not sure of how to welcome him. He seemed to fill the doorway, his hooded eyes boring into hers, seeming to look into her very soul.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

The question was asked without emotion, almost like, how-do-you-do? But his eyes gave away his simmering emotions.

"You were gone so long, I—"

"But I'm back now, aren't I?"

The door closed behind him and Sophia's heart pounded in her ears. She stood, straightening her spine as he advanced. She felt like a fly caught in the web of a spider, and the spider was getting ready to devour her. A prickling sensation ran down her spine and she shivered, not knowing if it was from excitement or fear.

"You look cold. Why don't you get back in bed?" It wasn't a question. It was a command. She stiffened, her eyes narrowing. "And before you do, remove your clothes." He smiled but it was cold.

She swallowed, her chin tilting as she faced him. "I am not a whore," she announced, her voice shaking, "that you can order me around. When I feel like giving myself to you, I will. I will not be forced into anything against my will."

She watched him as he crossed to the other side of the bed.

"Don't my feelings come into play at all? What if I feel the need, will you lie with me? Or make me beg you?"

"What has gotten into you? Why are you being so difficult?"

"Difficult. I thought you were the one being difficult, my dear. Making me so mad for you that I almost lose my mind. Just being in the same room with you stirs my senses to the breaking point." He glared at her but she refused to look away. "And what kind of spell are you weaving on the men of this ship? They all come at your beck and call! Have you woven your witch's spell on all of us, or just me?"

"You act as if this was all my fault, my doing," Sophia growled, her hands in fists at her sides. "I keep telling you that it's not! I did not make any of this up; I have not woven any spells! This is out of our hands — both of us, not just you! I didn't want any of this to happen! I can't control this anymore than you can!"

"My life was in perfect order before I met you! I curse the day I ever laid eyes on you!"

He reached out and grabbed Sophia by the arm, pulling her onto the bed. She gasped but the sound was covered by his mouth as he kissed her with all the pent up emotion within him. She answered his lips with her own, claiming Ethan as much as he claimed her. They broke apart seconds later, each breathless from the heated embrace. Ethan was the first to recover, climbing from the rumpled covers to stand over her.

"I think we understand each other now," he said, still breathing hard.

"Oh yes," she nodded in agreement, her voice laced with bitterness. "We understand each other perfectly. You will continue to try and steal my soul while I continue to give it freely."

Ethan scowled at her announcement, his brows together in a dangerous slant, but she went on, her chest almost bursting from her frustration.

"You don't have to do this, you know. You needn't steal something that is already yours. The Universe has decreed it so. We are already one in the eyes of God."

"Are you telling me you love me?" Ethan asked, his eyebrows lifted.

"Yes."

He smiled, but it was a mocking gesture. "Don't love me, Sophie. You'll just get hurt. You see, I'm incapable of love."

"No, you're not. You have within you the potential to love greatly. It is in your hand. The Fates have said it is so."

Ethan scowled. "Are you still going to try to convince me of that?"

Sophia nodded, her chin set.

"Bloody hell. Next you'll tell me that you are the person I will come to love."

He was sarcastic and caustic, but Sophia's resolve did not diminish. She would show him the error of his ways. Her father had told her many times through the years, always with a loving smile, how stubborn she was. She silently thanked him for it now as she stood and faced Ethan.

"It's the Fated Lover's Line. We are two halves of a whole. We are fated to be together."

Ethan's eyes rolled to the ceiling before coming to rest on hers again. "Then it's going to get mighty cozy, what with me marrying your sister and all."

"You can't marry Megan, Ethan."

"Oh, really? And who is going to stop me?"

"The Universe."

Ethan threw back his head with a harsh bark of laughter. "Gad, that's rich. That's the biggest difference between us, Sophie. You believe in fate, in outside forces shaping your life. I believe in hard work and discipline. We will never see eye to eye. The only place we will ever be compatible is in bed."

Sophia's stubborn chin refused to budge. Ethan turned and walked out the door. Sophia hit the mattress with her fist when the door clicked shut.

"Damn you Ethan Manchester! I will show you how very wrong you are."

She threw off the covers and went to her clothes, pausing with her shirt in her hand.

With her eyes focused on the ceiling, she prayed, "Help me, please God. Help me show him how to love."

She couldn't stand the thought of being cooped up in that stuffy cabin a moment longer and decided to go on deck. The air was cool and fresh, helping to cool her rioting emotions. She chanced a glance at Ethan, who

was going over a map with the first mate, Jon. His eyes met hers and narrowed. With a jaunty toss of her head, she looked away.

She found a sturdy perch on top of a crate and faced the wind, straightening her spine and crossing her legs. She closed her eyes, breathing deep, welcoming the cold air into her lungs. In lotus position, she raised her hands to meditate.

She dismissed the anger she felt, letting it flow through her and out again to be absorbed by the Universe and turned into energy. Chanting her mantra, she let all other thoughts flow out of her mind, given freely to the winds.

She didn't know how long she had been meditating before a shadow fell over her. She thanked the Universe before opening her eyes.

"Hello, Roger."

"Hello, Sophia." Roger's face showed worry and concern. "How are you?"

Sophia smiled before answering. "As well as can be, under the circumstances. I take it Ethan has informed you of our new arrangement?"

"My, how tactful you are," he replied dryly, crossing his arms in front of him as he leaned against the crate. "But yes, I know you now share his bed."

Sophia flushed at his candidness.

"Yes, well — that seems to be all we share."

"I want you to marry me, Sophia."

"What?" she breathed, inhaling in surprise.

"I mean it. You know that Manchester will never marry you. I hate to think of you being ruined. No one will even look at you when we get back to England."

"No one cared much about me before we left, either."

"That was just a small infraction, Sophia. It would have blown over in a

day or two. This – this is different."

"Yes, it certainly is. This time I'm stuck on a ship filled with nothing but men for months on end. I'll be ostracized for life."

Roger scowled at her self-deprecating grin. "This isn't a laughing matter. You will be ruined."

"Roger, I appreciate your concern, I really do. But you needn't be so worried. I was a social outcast before this happened and it didn't bother me a bit. I enjoy solitude and a good book. I hate crowds. They're too stuffy."

"You can't go back to your books now," Roger pointed out. "Not after all of this. You will never be content to let the world go on around you, especially when Ethan marries your sister. He will be a constant reminder of your great adventure. How will you feel when they bring their children around?"

Sophia felt a piercing pain in her chest at Roger's words. Ethan looked up from his map; his eyes riveted on her. Was that concern she saw in his eyes? Sophia closed her eyes and breathed deep until the pain ebbed.

"Thank you for the kind offer, Roger, but I can't marry you. I can only marry Ethan and if he doesn't want me, well –" she shrugged her shoulders.

"You deserve better, Sophia."

She laughed, but it was a bitter sound. "I deserve just him, Roger. Do you remember the night we met? When I was dressed as a fortuneteller?"

"Yes."

"The reason I ran out was because I saw a rare mark in your friend's hand. It's called the Fated Lover's Line. It's extremely rare, not even in all the books I've read."

"What does that have to do with what's happening now?"

"I'll tell you." She held up her hand and pointed to the line. "I have the same line."

"The devil you say!"

Roger grabbed Sophia's hand and brought it closer to his face. The two failed to see Ethan's narrowed eyes as he watched the pair from his perch.

"Yes, I see it now."

"Ethan has the other half of the mark. Together they make a perfect heart."

Roger released her hand and Ethan went back to his maps.

"But what does it mean?" Roger asked.

"It means we are fated for life," Sophia explained. "If he marries Megan he will be ruining three lives."

"Have you told him this?"

Sophia nodded. "He doesn't believe me."

"Of course not." Roger scowled in thought. "He doesn't believe any of this. I didn't either, truth be told."

"But now?"

"Now I'm willing to take a second look, but I'm not as stubborn as your lover."

Sophia blushed, the term 'lover' too new for her. "I have to convince him that he has to marry me."

"You think you will be able to do that by sharing his bed?"

Sophia shrugged her shoulders again. "What else can I do? We are fated to each other. I have to do whatever it takes, Roger."

Roger sighed with a shake of his dark head. "Good luck, Sophia. You're going to need it." He took her hand again, and again Ethan's gaze was pulled to them. "My offer still stands. I will still marry you. Think about it."

"Thank you, Roger." He squeezed her hand once before letting go. When he glanced up at Ethan their heated gazes clashed before he looked away.

Chapter 14

They arrived in India a few weeks later. Ethan still treated Sophia with derision during the day while making intense, passionate love to her every night. She knew he was fighting a huge inner battle, that he had feelings for her. She knew he wasn't ready to accept his feelings yet. She accepted his embraces while trying her best to ignore him during the day.

She found she couldn't stand the look of pity in his eyes. She knew he scorned her insistence that they be married, but she was not about to give up.

Three lives depended on it.

The Enchanted was docked and the crew hurried to unload their cargo before going ashore on leave. Sophia was glued to the window in Ethan's cabin, on tiptoe so she did not miss any of the bustling activity.

The door opened and Ethan came in. His arms were full of a creamy yellow material that turned out to be a yellow muslin gown with matching shoes and parasol.

"Where did you get this?" Sophia asked, her fingers caressing the soft material.

"You can't be seen on the streets in that."

"Thank you." On impulse she stood on tiptoe and placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

"Hurry up, I'll not be kept waiting."

She bit back a grin at his sour expression. Nodding, she picked up the dress as he strode out the door. She was surprised to find a complete set of undergarments along with the dress. Soon she joined Ethan on deck.

The men still left on The Enchanted turned to stare. It seemed that when

she was on board in her seaman's garb she hadn't garnered a second look, but now in her new outfit, the men were rendered speechless.

The dress looked as if it were made for her, hugging her bosom and waist, filling out around her hips to fall in graceful pleats at her tiny slippered feet. The material was light enough to wear in the heat of the day and her parasol shielded her face from the bright sun.

Ethan's face grew dark as she approached and smiled. She opened her mouth to speak but he grabbed her elbow, ushering her down the gangplank to a waiting carriage. He helped her inside, climbing in after her. It was only after she settled in that she noticed Roger sprawled negligently on the other side.

"Good day to you, Roger," she greeted gaily, her eyes bright with excitement and interest as she gazed out the window.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from the throngs of humanity dressed in bright colored clothes. Animals wandered between the surges of people, sounds and smells assailing her senses. She felt completely alive; all her senses attuned to the scene before her. Her blood sang in her ears.

"I said you look lovely in that dress."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Roger." Sophia's eyes darted to his for just a moment before returning to the window. "Ethan bought it for me. Isn't he wonderful?"

She missed the exchange between the two men, Ethan giving Roger a warning look.

"He's a bloody saint," Roger murmured.

The trip to the hotel went by too fast for Sophia. She gasped and pointed throughout the trip, exclaiming over everything she saw. Ethan sat back brooding in a corner while Roger explained Indian culture to Sophia.

They checked into the hotel and a brightly dressed bellman escorted them to their rooms. Sophia gasped at the suite, the rich appointments and bold colors harmonizing into a perfect setting.

"My, how wonderful," she breathed, her fingers skimming over the gold

leaf trim on a desk as Ethan tipped the bellman.

"This is where Roger and I stay when we come to Bombay," Ethan explained, closing the door behind him.

They were completely alone. That fact was not lost on Ethan as he watched Sophia move about the suite, innocently exploring. His hooded eyes followed her every movement, taking in her tightly cinched waist, generous bosom and slim fingers. He cursed silently as he admitted that he'd never seen a more alluring woman in his life. He didn't seem to have any control when it came to this woman. He felt like an inexperienced lad, needing to have her two or three times a day. Sometimes that wasn't enough. All she had to do was look at him with those trusting blue eyes, or laugh at some joke, and he struggled to restrain himself.

What bothered him the most was how he lost complete control whenever he held her in his arms. Before Sophia he had always prided himself on his supreme mastery, playing the woman he was making love to like an expensive violin until she begged for release. He was always able to keep his mind detached, remaining in complete control – even to the final moments when he would withdraw, not wanting to be saddled with a string of bastards.

With Sophia he hadn't been able to withdraw once. It was as if she drew him in and held him inside with her body. He was powerless. The thought troubled him no small amount, realizing she could very well be with child right at this moment.

He tapped down a sudden, swift wave of happiness, surprised at his body's reaction. *Damn! I've lost control again.* He vowed he would not touch her again.

"Ethan, is something wrong?"

His thoughts cleared and he found Sophia standing before him, her delicate brows furrowed with concern.

"Nothing is wrong," he insisted, willing his hands to stay at his sides. "I'm just thinking about the task at hand."

"You mean, finding out who has been sabotaging your shipments."

"Yes."

Feeling like a man on the brink of insanity, he crossed to the other side of the room to put as much distance between them as possible. He came to a stop next to the bed, his eyes widening in alarm at how large and luxurious it was. His pulse leapt at the thought of sharing that bed with Sophia for maybe weeks on end. He knew he would never want to leave it as long as she was with him. With an oath he turned away, willing his body back under control with sheer willpower.

"I could help you with that, you know."

Ethan's head shot around, his brows raised in question. Could she read his mind?

"I can help find out who's been trying to ruin you," she clarified, her delicate brows raised in confusion.

The silent question in her eyes remained unanswered.

"How would you be able to help me?" he asked, his lips thinned with skepticism.

"I could ask the hotel help," she offered. "Or I could do some readings and tell you what I find."

Ethan's chuckle made Sophia blush. "You and your silly ideas will stay right here where I can keep an eye on you," he commanded with a sneer.

"You don't have to be so bloody cruel," Sophia whispered, suddenly angry herself.

"I can't seem to help it," he answered with a casual shrug.

She turned away, but not before he saw her tears. He took a deep breath. He felt like a heel, but now he was back in control.

"But what am I to do while you're gone?" she asked, her spine straightening.

"Why, what you've always done, my dear. Read your stuffy books. I'll have the staff send by a dozen. That should keep you occupied for a few

hours."

She gasped. It was as if he struck her. With an insulting smile he brushed past her, closing the door firmly behind him. She heard the key turn in the lock and let her breath out in a low hiss, shaking her head.

Why is he doing this? Why is he suddenly so mean, cruel and unforgiving? He hasn't locked me in for weeks – why is he starting to again? Doesn't he trust me? I thought his attitude was changing, I guess I was just being naive.

* * * *

Ethan joined Roger in the hotel lobby. The two men still were not speaking to each other unless absolutely necessary. The bellman hailed a cab for them and they traveled to the shipping office in silence.

Empire Shipping was in the heart of Bombay, set amongst the thriving bazaars where merchants traded, haggled and bartered goods like silk, vegetables, fruits, livestock, rice and tea. Dogs and cows ambled between throngs of people, little boys armed with sticks chasing them away from lean-to shops. The air was dry and dusty, smells of unwashed bodies and animals mingling.

Once inside the dim interior of the office Tipu Mohammed, their overseer, greeted them.

"Ethan-Sahib, and Roger-Sahib, welcome," Tipu greeted the men with a low bow.

Roger and Ethan bowed in return.

Tipu, it's good to see you," Ethan said with a smile.

Tipu had been overseer when Ethan's father ran the line. It always amazed Ethan that Tipu never seemed to age, looking the same as when Ethan was a teenager. He was shorter than the two Englishmen, but normal height for an Indian, with pitch-black hair, dark skin and dark eyes. He wore the traditional kurta, a tunic with loose pants and head covering.

"You are a sight for sore eyes," Roger said, shaking Tipu's hand.

"I wish we could have this reunion under more pleasant circumstances,"

Tipu said with a frown. His English was clipped and perfect.

Ethan took a seat by the small but neat desk.

"Yes, let's get right to it. The captain of the Sea Witch reported their cargo was stolen before it was able to be stored away. The entire cargo disappeared from the wharf, even with guards posted."

"Yes, I recall this mishap." Tipu nodded, sitting behind his desk.

"What have you been able to find out?" Roger asked, leaning against an old filing cabinet.

"Not much, Roger-Sahib," Tipu said, shaking his head. "Everyone is being very quiet about this. No one knows who could be behind the theft."

"Has there been anyone new to the shipping industry?" Ethan asked.

It was common knowledge that many other countries were trying to gain a foothold on the British East India Company, the company Empire Shipping did exclusive business with. The French were rivals, as well as the Russians and Afghans.

"No, I would have heard," Tipu answered.

"What about the Punjab? Are there any new Princes or Sheiks? Has anyone inherited a title lately?" Roger quizzed.

Tipu shook his head. "No, Roger-Sahib. The rulers are all in good health. There have been no changes."

"Then I think we should go back to the beginning, when the first shipment was stolen. We'll work our way forward from there."

"As you wish, Ethan-Sahib," Tipu nodded, pulling files out of drawers in his desk.

An hour later there was a definite pattern emerging. Someone was indeed sabotaging their shipments, and they were the only company being targeted. The thieves took only tea—everything else remained untouched. Since tea was the major cargo exported by the company, it was damaging.

Roger and Ethan left the office and decided to separate, hoping to mingle with the crowd to find clues. Ethan ended up in a local drinking establishment nursing a warm drink, his ears straining to hear the conversation going on around him. This being India, there were so many different languages being spoken that it was hard to make them all out. Some of the locals were suspicious of this white man, their conversations hushed.

That didn't deter Ethan from his mission though. He drained his glass and left, blending into the crowd. He knew they needed someone to investigate for them, someone who would be able to come and go unnoticed.

He stopped suddenly, a dog yelping at his heels. *That's it*, he thought with a sudden burst of inspiration. *Someone is coming and going unnoticed, tipping off the other thieves as to where and when the shipments will be most vulnerable. It has to be an inside job.*

He turned to find Roger.

It was late when he returned to the hotel. He stood outside the closed door and sighed, cursing his weakness once again. He could already feel his body's heightened response to her and they weren't even face to face yet.

He brought his traitorous body back in line by reminding himself that he was in control, his father's words strong in his head. His willpower and reason were superior to anything Sophia tried to do or say.

He opened the door and stepped inside. Sophia sat at the window in an overstuffed chair, book in hand. The light from a nearby lamp seemed to glow around her. Her hair was pulled back into a sedate knot at her nape, but some tendrils escaped and curled around her face. She looked like an angel, an innocent angel sitting there. She didn't look capable of manipulation; she didn't look as if she could ruin his engagement.

Looks could be deceiving, he reminded himself as he turned away, shrugging out of his jacket.

"Here, let me help."

He stiffened as Sophia's hands touched him. Even through the material of his coat he could feel the heat of her light touch. Alarmed, he hastily pulled away.

"I am perfectly capable of doing this myself," he growled, relieved when her hands fell away.

"I'm sorry. I just thought I'd help," she mumbled. "Did you discover any leads?"

He went to a pitcher and basin on a nearby washstand, pouring water into the bowl. He purposely refused to answer, splashing water on his face.

"I talked with the bellman today when he brought me room service," she said in her very best neutral tone. "He told me the strangest tale. It seems that women have been disappearing, too. About ten have vanished in the last few months. The magistrate has been investigating, but so far there are no leads."

"Prostitutes disappear every day," Ethan murmured, folding the towel he used to dry his face, his movements jerky and deliberate.

Come on, old man pull yourself together.

"These women aren't prostitutes, they are from prominent families. Most of them, anyway. Servants have been disappearing, too. People wake up one morning and find that instead of six servants, they now have five."

Ethan's smile didn't reach his eyes. He knew Sophia had no clue as to why he was in such a sour mood. She had no idea how innocently alluring she was, how all she had to do was touch him and he'd melt. It wasn't her fault he was so weak where she was concerned. He could hear his father's derisive laugh ring in his ears.

Fighting the urge to cover his ears with his hands, he gritted his teeth until his jaw twitched from the effort.

"My, you have been busy today. Here I thought you spent the day happily reading your books."

Sophia flushed crimson from his sarcasm.

"Tell me, detective, what else were you able to discover from drilling the bellman?"

"I was only trying to help," she whispered, her eyes narrowed in response to his sarcasm.

"Well don't. I don't need an amateur soothsayer meddling in my affairs. I am perfectly capable of finding the culprits myself."

He paused, his teeth clamped together so that the muscles of his jaw ticked.

"Come here."

Sophia's eyes widened in question.

"I said, come here."

His tone brooked no argument. With slow measured steps she crossed the room, coming to a stop in front of him. Her eyes were wide and guileless, completely trusting. With a muttered oath he drew her roughly into his arms, his mouth crushing hers. She answered his need with her own, meeting his passion with her eager body.

Even as his body hummed with need, his hands ripping at the fastenings of her gown, he told himself that he was in control. He would have her as a release for his pent up frustration at not being able to find out who was behind the sabotage. She was only a vessel for his use, handy, available. There were no emotions involved.

Yet when he was done, when he found his release and lay with her in his arms, he felt a great sense of peace. The rightness of the moment was unlike anything he felt with any other woman. He admitted to himself that they were perfect together in bed. He would never feel this way with another, not even Megan.

But there was more to life than good sex. Oh, sex was important, and he was as healthy as any other man, but in order to have a good life one needed a good woman to help with the running of the household. It was a partnership, a merger.

Roger's words echoed in his head — *You want an employee, not a wife*. Ethan shook his head to clear the thought away. Roger was wrong.

Ethan looked at Sophia in sleep, her gentle features in perfect repose. He admitted his willpower was gone where she was concerned. He would stop fighting his body's reaction to her and enjoy her for the rest of the trip. He vowed to drink from her often enough to quench his thirst for good. By the time they returned to England he would be tired of her and ready to marry her sister.

Chapter 15

The next morning Ethan gave Sophia a thorough kiss before leaving her for the day. Delighted that he had not locked her inside, she decided to spend some time in the plush lobby of the hotel, picking a chair in an inconspicuous place to read and observe people. It thrilled her to think that she was actually in India, of all places. She wanted to experience as much of the culture as possible, wishing that she could go out into the streets and wander through the bazaars she had seen on the way to the hotel.

She noticed the dresses the women wore, the saris. It looked like a very long piece of colorful cloth that was wrapped around the body. She wondered how it was done and how it all stayed together. Dupattas covered the heads of the women, a length of fine cotton that looked very comfortable and cool to wear in the hot Indian sun.

She held a book before her but the words blurred, her ears perked to hear all the sounds of the bustling lobby. Languages seemed as diverse as people. She wished she could understand them all.

She stayed as long as she dared, sighing wistfully as she went back to her room, the evening sun in the windows.

* * * *

A few hours later Ethan returned to the hotel. Giving a curt nod to Roger, he made his way to his room. He sighed with satisfaction. It had taken a lot of planning, but the trap was set. They would know by the end of the week who was responsible for all the stolen cargo. A shipment of tea was due from a plantation north of the city to one of the warehouses. They

would be ready for any attempts by the thieves. The only people who knew of the trap were Ethan, Roger, Tipu, and the local law.

Ethan opened the door, letting it shut behind him. Sophia stood, a glad smile on her full lips. Without a word he crossed the room and took her in his arms, amazed at the way his body always responded to her.

Finally lifting his lips from hers, he said, "I have good news."

"You found the thieves?" she asked, nibbling on his jaw.

"Not yet, but by the end of the week we should," he murmured, nibbling her earlobe. "Until then, I thought I'd show you the sights."

"Oh Ethan!" Sophia gasped, pulling away. Her eyes were wide and bright with joy. "Do you mean it?"

Ethan's senses rioted and he couldn't help but grin. "Yes. Tomorrow I plan to take you to the bazaar and get you that fortuneteller's costume I promised you."

Her merry laughter filled the room as she threw her arms around his neck. Their lips met, and it was a long time before either had another coherent thought.

The next days passed in an idyllic blur for Sophia. Ethan showed her that side of him that she had only experienced once before, on his bed playing cards. His dry sense of humor left her gasping for air, and his smile, when he dropped his defenses and smiled genuinely made her lose her breath. He was a perfect companion and tour guide, showing her all the sights she wished to see, plus a few that were surprises. He laughed at her when she tried a spicy chapata, laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes as he handed her a glass of water. He was perfectly at ease with her, dropping his defenses so she could see that side of him that few, if any, had ever seen.

His eyes darkened with appreciation when she tried on her new churidar, pajama-like trousers and kurta, a collarless tunic worn over the pants. The material was soft thin cotton in a light mauve color, with lace edged cutouts in geometric patterns around the collar. He also gifted her with three new gowns complete with matching parasols and slippers. She felt like a queen in her new clothes, having worn the old, drab,

serviceable matronly gowns of a spinster for so long.

Ethan was attentive and amusing. He was the perfect gentleman in public and the perfect lover in private. Sophia had never known such happiness, savoring every precious moment of this new charming man.

The end of the week came, the day the shipment was to arrive. Ethan gave Sophia a lingering kiss before leaving the rumpled sheets, walking in full naked splendor to the dresser for his clothes. Sophia watched from bed, her body still humming from his lovemaking, her appreciative eyes on his tight buttocks as he moved. Her eyes caressed him, moving up his straight spine to his wide shoulders and tawny head, his hair grown long and shaggy. Her eyes traveled back down again, not pausing until they came to his heels.

A sudden surge of possessiveness welled up within her. It felt satisfying to know that he was hers alone. Even if he still hadn't come to realize it yet.

She was morose when he left, her books no comfort. She found suddenly that she wished to experience life, not just read about it. With a forlorn sigh she looked out the window, realizing that Roger was right. Now that she was experiencing this grand adventure going back to her father's study for days on end with nothing but books for company was a dismal fate.

What am I going to do? Everything has changed. I'm not the same person I was before. What will become of me when we return to England?

Selfishly she prayed for a few more weeks to have Ethan to herself. She would worry about what was to happen later.

* * * *

Ethan and Roger crouched behind bales of tea in the stuffy warehouse. The local law enforcement was there, positioned around the perimeter of the warehouse both inside and out, stationed near the entrances. Lighting was dim, one lone shaft of light streaming from the ceiling, showing dust particles floating in the air. The sun would set soon and then they would catch the culprit.

Roger checked his timepiece. "Almost nine," he whispered.

Ethan nodded, his eyes scanning the room before him. There was no movement to be seen.

* * * *

Sophia tried on the Indian outfit Ethan bought her. She smiled as she fingered the soft material, remembering how impatient he'd been to get it off of her. She wore it now in hopes that when he returned he would have good news regarding the thieves. They would celebrate, and the outfit would come off again.

The door opened with a soft click and Sophia turned, a smile on her lips. But a strange man stood in the doorway, a cloth covering half his face. Icy shards of fear shivered down her spine.

"May I help you?" she asked, her heart hammering in her throat.

The man approached her with rapid silent footsteps.

"What is going on here? Who are you?" she cried, her voice shrill.

She tried to dash past him for the door but he grabbed her arm in an iron grip. She struggled but was no match for him. He placed a cloth over her nose and mouth. She struggled, gasping for air but only breathing in the sweet, cloying scent of whatever was on the cloth. Soon she felt dizzy, the room spinning before going black.

* * * *

At the warehouse Ethan sat upright, his heart hammering, fear overwhelming him.

"Sophie," he breathed, breaking out into a cold sweat.

"Ethan, get down," Roger hissed.

Ethan couldn't respond. His lungs burned as if he couldn't breathe. A strong odor assailed his nostrils and he shook his head.

"Chloroform," he muttered, standing. "My God – Sophie. Sophie!"

"Good God, Ethan – settle down," Roger commanded, standing and placing his hands on Ethan's shoulders.

Ethan's breathing was ragged. Terror overwhelmed him. He didn't know how he knew – he just knew Sophia was in grave danger. He shook off Roger's hands.

"Sophia – we've got to get to her," he said, checking his guns. "Before it's too late."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about? Look, Ethan – the sun has set. The thieves will be here soon."

Ethan looked out the dirty windowpane at the bright colors. They moved, and he swore.

"That's not a sunset, that's a fire! The bloody warehouse is on fire!"

All hell broke loose as men ran for the exits only to find they were locked from the outside.

"The thieves must have found out somehow," Roger muttered, throwing himself against the door.

"Get out of the way," Ethan ordered.

Taking a deep breath he lunged at the door, throwing himself against it with strength he never knew he possessed. It broke free of its hinges and crashed to the ground. Just in time, for the entire warehouse was engulfed.

Ethan pulled Roger behind him coughing as he headed for horses tethered nearby.

"We've no time to lose," he said as he ran. "We've got to get back to the hotel."

Roger saw his horrified face and didn't ask questions.

Together they rode to the hotel, Ethan vaulting from his horse at the front entrance. He raced through the lobby, not stopping until he stood in front of the door to his room. The door hung open, the room empty.

It hit him like a hard punch to the gut. Sophia was gone. Someone kidnapped her – the same person who tried to kill him. He broke out in a

cold sweat, his heart beating a frantic rhythm.

Oh, God – don't take her away – not yet.

Roger caught up with him as he stumbled into the room.

"She's gone," he said, wandering through the room, too dazed to search for clues.

There were none except for a strange sweet smell that hung in the air.

"Where would she have gone?" Roger asked, but Ethan didn't hear.

The blackness of unconsciousness was all around him. Even though his eyes were open and he could see, he knew Sophia could not.

He shot out of the room, Roger on his heels. He ran out the lobby and into the streets. His lungs burned, his eyes stinging with tears.

Taking a great breath, he cried, "Sophie!"

* * * *

She came to slowly, sounds of people coming from far away. As she continued to regain consciousness she realized that they weren't far away at all. They were close by. She kept her eyes closed for another moment, steeling herself for what she would see when she opened them.

Her eyelids fluttered open and the first thing she saw was filmy gauze floating above her in a gentle breeze. She looked around and found she was lying on a soft pile of plush pillows in colors of blue, purple and pink. Somewhere a musical instrument was being played, the music meant to sooth. She sat up and the room swam.

"Not so fast," a gentle voice said from beside her.

The gauze parted and a woman appeared. She was dressed in Indian garb, her black hair half-hidden under a dupatta. Her understanding brown eyes were almost too much for Sophia.

"Where am I?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"You are in the palace of Prince Ali Monroe," the woman replied, her

English perfectly pronounced.

"How did I get to be here?"

"Here, drink this," the woman offered Sophia a porcelain cup.

Sophia looked at the cup then shook her head.

"No thank you."

"I promise there are no drugs in this," the woman said, seeming to read Sophia's mind. "It will help that dizziness you feel go away. Drink."

Sophia hesitated a moment before accepting the cup, taking a sip of strong tea.

The Indian woman smiled an understanding smile.

"You're different from the others," she said mysteriously.

"What do you mean?"

"The others, they have all been my people. You are the first white woman he has wanted."

"You mean, Prince Ali?" Sophia asked, her head starting to clear. The tea was helping take away the bitter taste in her mouth.

"Yes. You will meet him soon. He has requested you be brought to him as soon as you regain consciousness."

"Is he the person behind all the disappearing women and servants?"

The Indian woman smiled. "You are smart as well as beautiful."

"Is that a yes?"

The Indian woman nodded. "My name is Channa. I am the head of Prince Ali's harem."

"Harem?" Sophia echoed, almost spilling her tea. "You mean that I have been kidnapped into a harem?"

Channa nodded. "The Prince has nine wives. You are number ten."

Sophia bit back a sarcastic retort, thinking that the Prince would be in for a big surprise if he thought she would become another one of his concubines.

"Prince Ali Monroe," Sophia murmured in thought. "How come I've never heard that name before? I've been here a week, and no one's mentioned him."

"He is new here," Channa replied. "He is only just now building his empire."

"What is he like?"

"You will see for yourself. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"To meet your new master. Prince Ali."

Sophia stood, the teacup forgotten. The urge to flee was strong, but she knew she wouldn't get far. She straightened her spine.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

She followed Channa out of the room and down a huge corridor, gaping at the opulence. Everything was trimmed in gold leaf, the doorjambs and moldings shining brilliant in the sunlight streaming from the tall windows. The floor was marble, the walls stark white. Beautiful paintings hung from the walls; vases filled with colorful flowers rested on gold covered stands. Servants hurried by, dressed in colorful clothes. They stopped and bowed as Channa walked by. Sophia surmised that Channa's role in the palace was important.

They came to a doorway that widened into a huge room. The opulence of this room put the hall to shame. Sophia bit back a gasp, her eyes wide as she scanned the cavernous room. Gauze and silk hung in folds from the ceiling, looking like sunset-colored clouds. Pillows in every conceivable color were thrown everywhere. Gold candelabras were stationed throughout, candles burning bright. A breeze drifted by and Sophia

caught the scent of jasmine incense.

"Bring her to me."

The voice came from the center of the room where two women stood. In their hands were large fans made of colorful feathers attached to long poles. They used the fans on the person inside a large solid piece of silk that hung from the ceiling. Channa took Sophia to the opening of the material, coming to stand between the two fan-bearers.

Inside the space a mountain of pillows were placed, a small man dressed in white pajamas reclining on them. He wore a turban with a large blood-red ruby winking from the front. A piece of white cloth covered most of his face. To his left stood a woman holding a tray with a large glass filled with some liquid. He snapped his finger and she offered the tray to him, bowing. He took the glass and moved the cloth aside enough to take a sip, then replaced the glass onto the tray. His eyes were glittering, staring at Sophia as she stood silent.

"So, you are the new one," he murmured, his English accent surprising Sophia. "Tell me, did you enjoy your trip?" He laughed at his joke, the sound high and cackling.

Sophia's senses pricked at the sound. It was very unnerving, and — familiar?

"Have we met?" she asked.

"Have we met? Have we met?"

He laughed again and Sophia shivered in revulsion. She glanced at the other women in the room, wondering how they could stand so calm listening to that cackle.

"That is a good one." He gasped for air, finally calming down into amused chuckles.

He stood and approached Sophia, walking around her as if inspecting a horse for purchase. She stiffened, staring straight ahead, determined not to show any outward fear. When he finished with his inspection he stopped in front of her. His eyes barely lined up with hers.

"How did you come to be wearing that outfit?" he demanded.

Sophia jolted from his loud, high voice. She blanked for a moment, instinct telling her to not tell him the truth.

"I found it in a shop," she stated. "It was pretty and I liked it, so I purchased it."

His beady eyes bored into hers. She couldn't tell what color they were, but they were dark.

"The color is all wrong. You should be clothed in blue. Sky blue, not dark. Channa, see to it that she wears blue from now on."

"Yes, Prince Ali."

Sophia's eyes widened at the exchange.

"And see to it that she is bathed, oiled and prepared for me tonight."

"Yes, Prince Ali."

"What?" Sophia breathed, not sure if she heard right.

Prince Ali's eyes crinkled, the only sign of his smile. "Yes, my sweet. You are going to spend the night with me. All of it. We are going to get to know each other very well."

He laughed again and Sophia recoiled in horror.

"I will not spend the night with you," she stated emphatically.

Prince Ali's laughter stopped abruptly. One of the women gasped, but Sophia couldn't tell who made the sound, her eyes locked with Prince Ali's.

Chapter 16

What did you say?" Prince Ali asked, incredulous.

"I said, I will not spend the night with you," Sophia restated, her eyes narrowed. "I will not be your wife or your concubine, or slave, or anything else for that matter."

"If I were you I would watch what I say, Sophia Pennworthy."

Sophia gasped, shocked that he knew who she was.

"We are not in England now. I am the absolute ruler here. I could sentence you to slow torture, or even death."

"Who are you?" she demanded, searching his face for any signs of recognition.

"You will find out soon enough. For now it is enough to say that I know who you are."

He dismissed her, gazing at Channa. "Make sure she is ready for tonight. That is an order."

"Yes, Prince Ali."

"No!"

"Take her away."

Two large men appeared from nowhere, each grabbing one of Sophia's arms. She struggled as they led her away.

"Stop it, let me go! Listen, you little rooster, if you think—hey, stop that, you're hurting me!"

She was taken back to her room, kicking and fighting the entire way. Once inside they released her. She rubbed her bruised arms as Channa approached.

"You have angered Prince Ali," she said in concern, shaking her head. "You should not have done that."

"I am not sleeping with him," Sophia vowed, breathing heavy.

"But he has chosen you," Channa replied, clearly confused. "It is a great

honor in India to be chosen as the wife of a prince."

"I'm English, not Indian," Sophia reminded Channa. "And he is not Indian either." She stopped a moment. "He knows who I am, so I must know him from somewhere. Only I can't place him. Who the devil is he?"

"It does not matter," Channa insisted. "What matters is that he is ruler here. You must obey him."

"Never."

Channa sighed at the stubborn tilt of her chin. "This stubbornness is not good, Sophia. You will find your life full of pain."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, I am not. I am telling you the facts. This has never happened before. Every woman who comes here is happy to become Prince Ali's wife. They consider themselves blessed. I will tell you this—if Prince Ali orders it, you will be beaten."

Sophia's face went white, but her chin refused to budge. "So be it," she whispered.

Channa tsked, shaking her head. "You do not mean that, Sophia. The pain would be too great. There are other things he could do, like give you to the guards for their pleasure."

Sophia gasped, her chin forgotten. "He wouldn't!"

"He would, if you anger him enough. There are many ways he could break you. You are a smart woman. Think. Would it not be better to win his favor? He would give you anything you asked for."

"My freedom?"

Channa sighed again. "You will have to learn the hard way, I think. Enough talking for now."

She held out her hand.

Sophia stared blankly. "What?"

"Your clothes, Sophia. You will be clothed in blue from now on."

Sophia shook her head. "No," she whispered, backing away.

"Do you want me to bring back the men who brought you here?" Channa threatened. "They will be rough with you, but they will do the job."

Frustration welled within Sophia until she thought she might scream. She knew fighting would do no good. Those brutes they called guards were probably right on the other side of that closed door. Straightening her spine, she undid the fastenings and shrugged out of the garment.

Channa took them from her with a satisfied nod.

"I will prepare your bath," she announced before turning and disappearing through a different doorway that Sophia hadn't noticed before.

She stood alone in the room, completely naked. With a strangled cry she tore a piece of cloth from its moorings on the ceiling and wrapped it around her. It was sheer, but at least she felt less exposed. She fell onto the bed of pillows, shaking her head, wondering how she was going to escape.

Her heart ached for Ethan.

* * * *

Archibald Monroe stood at a secret opening, watching Sophia wrap the cloth around her body. His eyes were riveted as she disrobed, his mouth salivating at the sight of her shapely flesh. He almost laughed with delight, but that would have exposed his secret hiding place, so he remained silent.

He turned away, sliding the secret panel back in place without a sound. He was hard and throbbing. It would be so easy to go to her right now and have his way with her, but he wanted to wait, to do it as he imagined so many times this past week.

He would drug her wine then take his time, having her draped against the silk pillows for his pleasure. He doubted that once would be enough. He would have her many times before tiring of her.

He went back to his chamber, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. Only hours to go before his revenge would be complete.

He'd finally get revenge on the Manchester family. He had waited years, plotting and calculating, waiting for the perfect moment. Now it was finally at hand. He started stealing the tea cargos from Empire Shipping months ago, hiding them in caverns beneath his palace. All was ready for him to take over as the king of tea. The world would have to beg him for tea, paying exorbitant prices for the privilege of drinking the liquid gold. He would be the most powerful man in India, England and maybe even the world. Even the Queen would have to bow to him.

He almost cackled with glee. If all went as planned last night, Ethan Manchester and his cohort, Roger Waverell, were dead. Burned in their very own warehouse. The company would be ripe for takeover and Archibald would have the ships he needed to transport his tea around the world.

He would have revenge on the Manchester family at long last. His father's words, spoken years ago, came to his mind.

Manchester thinks he's so smart. But I showed him! I took two hundred thousand pounds from his company. He'll never find it. He may be able to fire me, but he'll never find the money.

Ethan's father indeed fired Archibald's father, having him imprisoned, too. But the money was never found. Archibald's father told him the whereabouts of the money on his deathbed, his death caused by rotting in debtor's prison for years. Archie vowed to use the money to get his revenge on the Manchesters.

How fitting to use their own money to ruin them.

Archibald invested wisely, siphoning the bulk of the money into a secret account in India. When he accumulated enough he bought a small island off the coast of Bombay. It took three years to build, but the finishing touches had been put on his palace a few months ago. He was in England at the time attending the Pennworthys' masquerade when he heard the news. The next day he bought passage on a ship, leaving England behind for good.

Archibald knew that Ethan was on his way to India, having overheard the conversation between Ethan and Roger at the ball. He ordered men stationed at all the ports in Bombay, waiting for news of their arrival. He was surprised to hear that Ethan brought a woman with him, having been witness to the announcement the Earl made at the masque.

Curious, Archibald spied on the couple. She was a comely woman and clearly the two were close. A little spying by his men produced her name – Sophia Pennworthy. He was surprised by the name, remembering that the toasts had been for the sister, Megan.

Archibald grinned as a servant lit the bowl on a water pipe. He took the long stem and brought it to his lips, inhaling the herbs deeply. Holding his breath for a moment, he released the smoke so that it floated around him.

It was perfect. He possessed Ethan Manchester's tea, soon his ships, and tonight Ethan's fiancée would be made the newest of his many wives.

* * * *

Ethan was a man obsessed. He scoured the streets of Bombay, never taking a break, not eating or sleeping, just barely taking in enough water to keep him going, searching for any sign of Sophia. Roger offered to go to the authorities, but Ethan insisted the police not be brought in, remembering that the only other people besides Ethan, Roger and Tipu to know about the tea shipment were the police. One of them, or maybe more, was an informant. He couldn't trust them.

"It's as if she's disappeared into thin air," Roger said, frustrated when another dead end was reached.

"That's it," Ethan breathed, turning to Roger. "Sophia told me something the first day we were here. She interviewed the bellman and he told her that women have been coming up missing in the last few months. Servants, too."

"No one's been able to find them?"

"No. It's as if they've disappeared into thin air. The families go to the police, but no one is ever found."

"Just like Sophia," Roger said with a nod.

"If we find the person responsible for abducting the women, we'll find Sophia."

"But where do we start?"

"We start with the bellman."

They found the bellman at the hotel and questioned him, but he could give them no further information. Disappointed, they decided to question the families of the missing women. After interviewing the first two it became apparent that they would get no help there. The families said the same thing; that they woke up in the morning to find their daughters gone. There were no signs of struggle and no signs of forced entry. They just disappeared.

They walked back to the hotel, both frustrated.

"We can't give up," Ethan growled, fear welling up inside him.

He tamped it down with an angry reminder that he would not give up until he'd found her.

"We'll have to for now," Roger said, nodding to the horizon where the sun was setting. "It's almost dark. We'll have to wait until morning to try again."

"You go back to the hotel," Ethan said, turning to head down a narrow street. "I have to keep looking."

"But Ethan, you haven't slept in over twenty-four hours," Roger said. "You've got to rest."

"I won't rest until I've found her."

Roger nodded, giving Ethan a pat on the back. "I understand. Good luck."

They parted company. Ethan wandered the streets, his mood dark and dangerous. Fear licked at his belly, which he quickly tapped down. She was safe, he knew. He could just tell, though he didn't bother to ask how he knew. Guilt washed over him, failure to protect Sophia uppermost in

his mind.

I should have known this whole thing was a trap. I should have been able to protect her. It's my fault she's gone. Once again I have failed someone I care about.

He stopped suddenly, eyes wide.

Care about? Never! He shook his head, resuming his search. Of course I care about her safety, I am responsible for her after all. Megan's family would never forgive me if something happened to Sophia. But care about Sophia? I bloody well do not!

He turned a corner, sighing as he gazed down a dark, empty alley. *Where are you, Sophie?*

* * * *

Sophia sat across a low table from Prince Ali. The pillow she reclined on was plush and would have been comfortable if not for the fact that she was on edge, her nerves stretched tight.

The table was set for a meal, with chapatas and condiments such as steamed vegetables, curries and chutney. She noticed the goblet in front of her was full with a rich red wine, while the Prince's glass remained empty.

Alarm bells went off in her head, a voice inside her head saying – *don't drink the wine.*

"What is the matter? Aren't you hungry?"

Archibald ordered the food to be heavily salted and spicy so that Sophia would become thirsty. She would drink the drugged wine and he would spend the night having his way with her. He grinned behind his mask at the thought.

Sophia decided she didn't need to be civil.

"Why aren't you eating?" she countered.

"I will be ... soon. In the meantime, indulge."

Sophia went through the pretense of accepting her fate, putting food on her plate as a servant filled the Prince's glass with wine.

"You know, Sophia, indulgence is the word for the way your life is going to be. As my wife you will not want again. Your every wish will be granted. You want a special food? It will be made for you. A new perfume? Bought. A new outfit? One will be specially made for you."

"But only in blue."

"Yes, in blue."

Sophia bit back a sarcastic retort, knowing her cutting remark would go completely over his head. She noticed the servant who was standing in attendance leave the room for the moment.

"May I have that pillow over there?" she asked, pointing behind him.

"Where?" He turned, and Sophia quickly switched the goblets.

"Over there, the blue one."

She vowed that she would never own another piece of blue again for as long as she lived.

She was dressed in a blue choli, a tightly fitted short blouse, and a salwar, pajama-like trousers drawn tightly at the waist and ankles. On her head rested the traditional dupatta, in light blue cotton. Against her wishes she was bathed by servants, then dried, scented oils rubbed into her skin. The sickening sweet scent hung in the air around her, making her slightly queasy.

"Yes. I will have it sent to your room."

"Thank you," Sophia said with a cold smile. "I guess I am a bit hungry after all."

She took a bite of the chapata. Salt was all she could taste. She reached for her goblet noticing how the Prince's interest perked up when she took the glass in her hand. He watched her as she brought it to her lips, taking a small sip. He relaxed into his pillows, taking his own goblet in his hand. She could almost feel the triumph running through his blood.

"So, how do you know my name?" she asked, pretending to eat but only pushing the food around on her plate.

"As you've already surmised, I'm English, too," Prince Ali said, bringing his glass to his lips after first moving the cloth covering his face.

Sophia bit back a satisfied smile as he took a long pull.

"In fact, I lived in London."

"Really. Would we have run into each other at the opera?"

"No, no, I hate the opera," he said with a dismissive wave. "All that singing gives me headaches." He took another drink from his glass, frowning when he noticed that Sophia's was still almost full.

"Drink up, girl. You must be thirsty by now."

Sophia thought the comment strange but decided to ignore it. "I'm not much of a drinker," she admitted, taking the goblet in her hand.

She placed the rim to her lips, taking a small sip. It must have angered him, for his brows drew together. Outwardly serene, she replaced the glass.

"You know, Prince Ali, I might be able to place you if you remove that material covering your face."

Prince Ali's eyes narrowed. He shook his head as if to clear it and Sophia bit back a smile.

"You'll have to wait awhile yet, I think," he murmured, taking another drink from his goblet.

She could feel his frustration because she hadn't touched her drink again.

"Drink up, girl. We haven't got all night."

Sophia stifled the urge to laugh. Now she knew for sure that her instincts were right. The wine was drugged. Silently she thanked the Universe for the warning. Knowing she was making him impatient, she brought the

goblet to her lips, once again sipping carefully.

"So if not at the opera, where?" she asked.

"Where what?"

"Where would I have met you?"

"Oh yes." He rubbed his eyes.

Sophia looked down at the table.

"We haven't been properly introduced, but I was at your father's masque a few months ago."

"You were?" she asked, trying to keep the alarm from her voice.

She wondered if he remembered that she was the one dressed as the fortuneteller. Maybe she read his palms? She looked at his hands but they were behind him as he leaned back against the pillows.

"Yes, but as I recall, your father announced your sister, Megan, as Ethan Manchester's fiancée. Not you."

"Yes, that's right," she murmured, wondering where his comments were leading.

She took a sip of her wine.

"So how did you end up making the voyage with him?" Prince Ali demanded, his words slightly slurred.

"Oh, it's a long story," she replied, relieved that he didn't remember her.

As she watched, he emptied his glass with one long swallow.

"Bring us another bottle," he commanded the silent servant.

The servant bowed and walked away. He turned, his beady eyes piercing.

"So – how did you come to be Manchester's fiancée?" he repeated.

Sophia took another small sip as she thought of her reply. She decided to play along with his misconception.

"They had a fight. A huge one in fact. It was quite a row, people talked about it for days. My father offered me as a replacement."

She thought the explanation sounded ridiculous, but Prince Ali nodded.

"I see." His eyelids drooped for a moment. He shook himself again.

"You look tired," Sophia commented, feigning concern.

"Nonsense," he insisted. "I'm fine. Just," he paused, yawning. "A bit tired is all."

Sophia bit back a grin. She went back to her plate, pushing the food around.

"So, you never said if we met at my father's party. Did we?"

There was no response. She looked up to find Prince Ali out cold, flat on his back. Her breath caught in her throat. She quickly scanned the room.

"Prince Ali?"

There was no answer. Her heart beating fast, she crawled over to him.

Shaking him, she called again, "Prince Ali? Are you asleep?"

A slight snore was her answer.

She looked around the room again. The servant hadn't returned yet. Careful to not wake him, she picked up a corner of the cloth that covered his face, lifting it away. He wasn't handsome, yet wasn't ugly. Plain would have been a good word for his looks, his nose a bit too long and sloping, his lips too thin, and his chin too small. She studied his face for another moment before letting the material fall back into place.

On a hunch she picked up his hand and turned it over. A strangled gasp escaped her lips as her eyes lit on the lines.

It was him! The man in the loud bird-like costume at the masquerade. She would know that palm anywhere – the lines and mounts seemed to scream at her, revealing his base nature.

"What happened to Prince Ali?"

Sophia jumped and dropped his hand, her eyes flying to the servant, who returned with another bottle of wine.

"He's asleep," Sophia explained. "He must have been very tired."

The servant nodded and turned away, accepting Sophia's answer without question. Sophia stood, rubbing her palms on her pants to wipe his touch away.

"Could you take me back to my room please?"

"This way."

Sophia followed the servant, willing her body to remain calm when every nerve ending screamed to run. When she was finally alone in her room she sat on the edge of her bed, her head in her hands.

The man whose palm was the worst she'd ever read, the man who showed no scruples, no character, no honor, no control – he was the man who held her prisoner.

Relying on her instincts again, she took a few calming breaths, her eyes closed. She pictured Prince Ali in her mind, willing her thoughts to go to Ethan. She pictured everything she knew about the Prince, his costume at the masque, the inside of his palace, his laugh.

This has to work.

Oh please, Ethan. Hear me.

PAGE BREAK

Chapter 17

It was late and Ethan was tired. Admitting defeat for the moment, he made his way back to the hotel. He knew that if he didn't get some rest he

wouldn't be in any shape to search for Sophia again. A few hours rest was all he needed to give him enough energy to go back out looking.

He would not give up until he found her. He would not go back to England until she was once again safely at his side. He did not dwell on his motives, rationalizing that it was his duty, since he was the one responsible for taking her from her family to be with him. It was his fault she was missing. He would find her to make sure she was returned safely to her family.

He did not listen to the voice inside his head that told him there was more to it than that.

Up in the room he crossed to the bed, falling onto it in exhaustion.

"Damn it, Sophie. Where in God's name are you?"

He closed his burning eyes, growling with frustration. An image of Archie Monroe in his rooster costume appeared in his head. His eyes snapped open.

"Why would I think about that little twerp? Bloody hell, I'm too tired for this."

He closed his eyes again and the image returned. He saw Archie laughing then the image turned into a man wearing a white turban with a large red stone.

Breath halted in his throat, his eyes snapped open. He could still hear the grating sound of Archie's cackling laugh.

Then he heard a voice say, "*I was at your father's masque a few months ago.*"

Ethan stilled, his heart beating rapidly. He sat up and looked around the dark room, knowing no one else was there. The voices and images were coming from inside his head, from where—he didn't know. This was no dream. He was wide awake. Something was happening to him. He closed his eyes again and lay back on the bed. He saw a large room, pillows of all colors thrown around. Two women fanned a man with colorful fans.

The man wore that same turban with the large red stone. The image faded, another taking its place. It was Archie in his loud costume at the masque.

Only this time Archie was giggling, saying, "*Any prince would be pleased to have you in his harem.*" His cackling laughter rang in Ethan's ears.

"Sophie?" Ethan whispered into the dark, his senses humming.

He saw another image of a room, smaller than the first, with pillows and material draped about. Everything was blue.

Oh please, Ethan. Hear me.

Ethan's eyes flew open. "Sophie!"

He raced out the door to his room and down the hall, banging on Roger's door until it opened.

"What the devil? Ethan—" Roger said as Ethan pushed past him into the room. "What's gotten into you? That noise could have woken the dead."

"She's in a harem," Ethan breathed, pacing.

"Sophia?"

Ethan nodded.

"Where? How?"

Roger stopped, dazed. He shook his head and stopped Ethan's pacing with a strong arm.

"Ethan, slow down. Start from the beginning."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"It's hard to explain." Ethan brushed past Roger, pacing again. "And it has something to do with Archibald Monroe."

"Archie?" Roger echoed in surprise. "What the devil does he have to do with this?"

"I'm not sure, yet. But he's here, in India. And he has Sophie."

"Where?"

Ethan shook his head, still pacing.

"I don't know where. It's a palace, though. And Sophie's there. We just have to find out where she is."

"Why would Archie be involved?"

"Because he hates my family."

Ethan stopped in the middle of the room.

"Years ago Archie's father was caught embezzling thousands of pounds from Empire Shipping. Albert fired him and had him thrown in prison. The money was never recovered."

"Could that be the money Archie came in to?" Roger asked, taking a seat in one of the plush chairs.

"Probably. Most likely." Ethan started to pace again. "I knew Archie still harbored bitter feelings, but I never thought he'd do anything about it. I dismissed him out of hand. If anyone wants Empire Shipping out of business, it's Archie."

"Do you suspect he's behind the tea disappearing?"

"He would be my prime suspect, yes."

Roger stood. "Now that we have a lead I say we go to the docks, round up the men, and start asking questions."

Ethan nodded in agreement and headed for the door.

* * * *

Archibald groaned, his head throbbing. He turned in his opulent bed, his eyes closed. A strange bitter taste filled his mouth and he swallowed hard. The last thing he remembered was having dinner with Sophia, waiting for the drug to take effect so that he could take advantage of her.

"Bloody servant probably mixed up the glasses," he muttered through dry teeth.

"Sasha!" He moaned after his outburst, holding his head. Immediately a servant appeared, bowing before him.

"Have the girl who served my dinner last night beaten."

"Yes, Prince Ali."

"When they're through with her, have her brought to me."

"Yes, Prince Ali." Sasha bowed before taking her leave.

Archibald fell back onto his pillows with a low moan. Another servant appeared, bowing to one knee while holding out a tray.

"Your tea, Prince Ali."

"It's about time." He snatched the mug from the tray, not noticing when the servant disappeared. Taking a long pull, he sighed. "That's better."

He took another drink, greedily slurping at the liquid until the cup was empty.

"Sasha!"

The servant appeared with a bow.

"Bring me more tea. And have my new wife brought to me immediately."

"I cannot, Prince Ali."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"She is touring the grounds with Channa. I saw them on the west lawn this morning."

Archibald swore, throwing the cup so that it shattered against a wall.

"She is not to step outside the walls of this palace again," he commanded.

"Yes, Prince Ali."

Sasha bowed and exited, thankful to the gods for having the cup miss her head this time. She would warn the others of Prince Ali's sour mood.

* * * *

"My, what a view," Sophia exclaimed, hoping she sounded excited enough for Channa's benefit.

"Yes, it is lovely," Channa nodded in agreement.

Sophia gazed at the vast expanse of water in dismay.

An island! I am on a bloody island.

Hope of escape was crushed as she gazed at the horizon, just barely making out the coastline of India.

"How far out is the island?" Sophia asked, trying her best to sound mildly interested.

"Not far. About a mile," Channa said as they strolled the lush lawn. "We have small boats that we take to the mainland when we need supplies."

"I see."

That must be how I got to be here. Someone must have rowed me out here in a boat.

The thought left her troubled because she couldn't remember any of it. She had been out cold. She turned back to the palace, memorizing every feature.

"How long did it take Prince Ali to build this?"

"I'm not sure. I wasn't here when it was being built."

"You mean you were hired later?"

Channa shook her head. "I was stolen from my family."

At Sophia's horrified gasp, she chuckled. "It wasn't a bad thing. My

family was poor and I was a burden. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would end up living in a palace."

"But to be taken against your will!"

"I was afraid for a time," Channa admitted. "Until I was brought here. When I saw this palace I knew I would serve my new master well."

"Does he treat his people well?" Sophia couldn't help but ask.

"Most of the time," Channa replied. "He can be a hard ruler if someone makes a mistake or crosses him. His word is law. If you obey his every command, he is easy to live with."

The words did not give Sophia any comfort. She knew from studying his hand twice now that he was extremely selfish and emotionally immature. He would demand complete obedience. If not, his cruelty was outlined in his palm, too. He would be merciless.

"How many servants does Prince Ali have?"

"I believe twenty-five."

"You don't know for sure?"

"The numbers grow occasionally," Channa explained. "Especially when he obtains a new wife. Each wife has a personal attendant, so when he obtains a wife, the staff grows."

"Interesting."

They rounded a corner to the back of the palace and stopped, watching as two burly men pulled a weeping woman behind them. Sophia stood horrified.

"Poor Akihr."

"Is that the name of the woman?" Sophia whispered, unable to tear her eyes from the scene. "What are they going to do to her?"

"She must have angered the Prince. She is being taken to a place out back to be beaten."

Sophia gasped in horror. "We have to stop them!"

Channa placed a restraining hand on her arm when Sophia took a step toward where the men disappeared. "We cannot. It is the will of the Prince. He is ruler here."

"But it's wrong." Sophia brushed Channa's hand away. She took another step but had to stop when Channa blocked her way. "Beating someone is not right. We have to do something to stop them."

"We cannot do a thing," Channa warned. "If we try, we will be beaten, too. This is Prince Ali's way. You will come to accept it in time."

"I will never accept brutality."

"Then it would be good for you to try to win over the Prince's affection. You would be able to change his mind. If you are smart, you will make him so enamored of you that he would do anything to please you."

The thought of having Prince Ali touch her made Sophia's skin crawl. She shivered in the warm, tropical air.

A servant came running toward the pair, waving her arm. "The Prince wishes to see his new wife," she called.

Sophia's stomach fell to her knees. She was hoping that she would have been rescued by now, but when she saw the water all around them, those hopes were dashed. She wondered what kind of mood the Prince would be in. Was he angry with her? Did he know she switched the glasses? Was he going to order her beaten, too?

Glancing back at the spot where the men had dragged the woman, her palms started to sweat, her heart pounding in her chest. She took a deep, centering breath and followed Channa and the servant back to the palace with wooden legs.

She was taken to the Prince's quarters and found herself in front of him too soon. She took another deep breath, centering her rioting emotions. She wished fervently that she could see his face. His beady eyes gave nothing away.

"How are you feeling today, wife?"

Sophia's eyes widened at his choice of endearment. "I am not your wife," she stated, her voice soft yet firm.

"So, you are still not accepting of your fate," he murmured.

He stood and approached. Sophia swallowed hard, but looked straight ahead.

"It seems I owe you an apology."

Sophia blinked, her only outward show of emotion. "Apology for what?"

"For last night. I assure you it was not my intention to, er — fall asleep while in your company."

"I see." Her whole body tensed, waiting for him to accuse her of the switch.

"I assure you that it will not happen again. Tonight we will have the meal we were supposed to have. Tonight we will become much better acquainted."

"Prince Ali, I must once again demand my release. I do not wish to be your wife. I do not wish to remain here at all. I insist you take me back to the mainland."

Prince Ali's eyes narrowed above the material.

"That is out of the question. I have brought you here and that means you are mine. I own everything and everybody on this island."

Sophia felt her anger start to rise. "I am not an object to be owned."

"How dare you talk to me like that," Prince Ali growled, and Sophia knew she had gone too far. "What difference does it make who has you — myself or Manchester? You will be a slave either way."

"I was promised to Ethan first," she managed to say past the lump in her throat.

"Promises are made to be broken, Sophia." Prince Ali turned away, his movements sharply agitated. He turned back around suddenly to face her and she bit back a gasp.

"I will be lenient with you this once because you are English and are ignorant of my ways. But I am warning you – wife – that I will tolerate no more outbursts. You will accept your fate. I command it."

He turned to Channa, who was quietly standing by Sophia's side. "Channa, take my disobedient wife back to her room and instruct her in what is expected of her. Make sure she is properly subservient by dinner time."

"Yes, Prince Ali."

Sophia knew that no amount of 'instruction' would make her subservient to anyone – especially Prince Ali. She had been her own woman for too long.

"It doesn't matter how much instruction I receive from Channa – I will not change my mind! I will not become your concubine no matter what do try to do to me!"

"Enough, wife!" Prince Ali screamed his forehead blotched red from his anger.

Channa's hand on her arm was a silent command to go with her. Sophia didn't resist, eager to get back to her own room again. In the spacious hallway Channa scolded her.

"You should know better than to prick the temper of Prince Ali," she said, her tone reproving. "I have warned you of this. You are lucky he did not have you beaten, like Akihr."

"I cannot accept any of this, Channa," Sophia explained, too angry to care what Channa would say in return. "It goes against my very nature. I will not passively stand here and not defend myself. In my country, women are not kidnapped into harems. In my country, marriages are arranged between two consenting families, and the man has one wife, not dozens."

"We are not in your country now," Channa reminded her.

"Believe me, I am very well aware of that fact."

"You must put your stubbornness aside and face the truth. You will not be rescued. When Prince Ali takes someone there are no traces left behind. You must come to accept this."

"Channa, I swear to you – I will never accept this!"

"Then your life will be filled with pain, I'm afraid."

Back in Sophia's room Channa walked over to a large chair. Sophia stopped her.

"Could we wait to do this for a while, Channa? I have a horrible headache." She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingers.

Channa sighed. "Yes, I suppose I could come back in an hour."

"That would be fine," Sophia breathed, relieved. "Thank you so much, Channa. You are very kind. I'm sure if I just lay down for an hour I will feel better."

Channa nodded, parted the gauze covering the exit, and disappeared.

Sophia sighed, reclining on her plush blue pillows. She closed her eyes.

Prickles danced down her spine, as if she were being watched. She rubbed her temples, picturing images in her mind and sending them to Ethan. She didn't know if he was receiving them, but she knew she had to try. It was the only way to be rescued. She was thankful that her thoughts were silent, because whoever watched her wouldn't know what she was up to. She felt the energy of the person, and it was not a kind energy. Her intuition told her it was Prince Ali, waiting. Watching. She knew time was running out.

Hear me, Ethan. Please – see my pictures.

Chapter 18

Ethan stopped suddenly, Roger almost running into him. They were at the docks, having gathered as much of the crew of The Enchanted as they

could find. They apprised the men of Sophia's situation, then broke off into groups to search and question the workers.

Ethan drew his breath in. Sharp images assailed him, almost overwhelming him. He could see a great palace, then water – lots of water.

"Come on Ethan," Roger complained. "We've got five more wharves to check out. Let's shake a leg."

"She's on an island."

"Wha – " Roger stuttered, confused.

He searched Ethan's face and suddenly, he knew.

"You're getting something from her," he accused. "That is how you knew she had been taken to a harem, isn't it."

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Ethan murmured, seeing more pictures in his head.

"Don't hand me that, blast you! I know all about that bloody line the two of you share."

Ethan blinked in surprise. "Did she tell you?"

Roger nodded, angry. "She explained it to me after I asked her to marry me."

"Damn you Roger! I thought I told you – " He stopped suddenly, hearing Sophia's voice.

Hear me, Ethan. See my pictures.

"What is it?" Roger demanded.

"I hear her voice," Ethan whispered, his eyes focused far away. "And I see pictures. A palace on an island. I can just make out the coast. Two men are dragging a crying woman behind them."

"Is it Sophia?"

Ethan shook his head. "There's a man in a white turban. A cloth covers his face. He's saying — 'I own everything and everyone on this island.'"

"He's got to be the man who has her," Roger stated.

"Yes. He keeps changing — one minute he's the turban man, the next it's Archie in his costume at the masque."

"Archie must be masquerading as the turban man. He has Sophia."

"Yes, I think that's what she's trying to show me."

"Send her back a message," Roger directed. "Tell her we're on our way."

Ethan hesitated, at war with himself. It was one thing to receive these strange messages — he could explain them away by way of his imagination. But to send a message? That would be like admitting that he believed in all this hocus-pocus. That would mean he'd have to admit there was a unique connection between them.

He closed his eyes, breathing deep.

In his head, he thought — *hang on, Sophie. I'm on my way.*

Sophia's eyes snapped open with a start. She almost toppled off her pile of pillows, Ethan's words strong in her head.

Her heart bursting with hope, she closed her eyes, thinking — *hurry.*

She wanted to laugh for joy, but knew she could not, with the Prince watching her. Now she knew that Ethan was getting her messages. He would come to her as soon as he could. He had not abandoned her.

On the dock Ethan turned to Roger.

"We need to reassemble the crew. We sail as soon as possible."

An hour later The Enchanted was under way. Ethan poured over maps, looking for small, out of the way islands about a mile from shore. He gazed up to the sky, blue eyes scanning the horizon, sea breezes blowing through his sun-streaked hair, and vowed he would get to Sophia in time.

Channa returned exactly an hour later and Sophia spent the rest of the day listening to her patient instructions.

What she heard made gooseflesh dance down her spine. She was to be completely acquiescent; no show of any emotion other than an urge to please would be tolerated. She was to bow at his feet to show subservience, and should he choose, she would remain with him for as many nights as he wished. She was only to speak when it was requested of her, and her answer would be short and to the point. She was not to give any opinions of her own. When she had her monthly flow, or when she was with child, she was to stay in her room. The Prince would take another of his wives until she was once again available.

Sophia bit her tongue so many times she thought it would turn to mincemeat. She would never submit to this. She would never submit to him. Outwardly she tried to show an emotionless face to Channa, pretending to accept all that she was being taught. It was an acting job worthy of a standing ovation.

"That is enough for now, I think," Channa announced, standing.

"You mean there's more?" Sophia asked despite herself.

"Yes. As the Prince's new favorite you will be in charge of the rest of the wives. When he tires of you or gets you with child another wife will take your place."

Sophia tried not to grimace. *In charge of other wives? With child? Not bloody likely!*

"I see," was all she said.

"For now we need to get you ready to see the Prince."

"You mean, another bath?" Sophia tried to keep the dread from her voice and only barely succeeded. At Channa's nod, she tried to smile, but it felt like her jaw would break. She hated having other women bathing her.

And she especially hated the scent they rubbed into her skin. It was probably Prince Ali's favorite scent, but it made her slightly nauseous.

* * * *

Ethan stood at the helm, his spyglass to his eye. In the distance he could just barely make out a small piece of land jutting out from the water. With his spyglass, Ethan could see much more. A palace, sparkling white with gold trim glittering from the sun. It looked amazingly like the Taj Mahal, but Ethan knew the Taj Mahal was nowhere near here. The grounds were lush, with fountains and marble statues placed strategically around.

Shrubbery was pruned to mythological figures.

As he looked around a movement caught his eye. He swung the glass around as two large men went down into what looked like a secret entrance that led below ground. Intrigued, Ethan studied the coastline carefully. After his fifth pass, he found what he was looking for. It looked like a hidden opening carved into the side of the island, only accessible when the tide was out. The spyglass went back to where the men disappeared. They reappeared again a few minutes later, each carrying a large crate in their straining arms. Ethan's breath caught as he recognized the writing on the sides of the crates. They were from a cargo that had been stolen from Empire Shipping months ago.

He let his breath out in a slow hiss. It all made sense. Archie somehow recruited enough men to steal the tea from Empire Shipping. Whenever a shipment was loaded, his men would come in the cloak of night, carry it away, and hide it in the caverns beneath his island. Ethan was now sure that Archie's aim was to ruin him, both financially as well as personally.

Stealing Sophia was the last straw. Archie meant to get rid of him permanently by burning the warehouse, taking his woman as the final insult. Hot anger surged through his bloodstream when he thought of how close the little rooster had come to succeeding.

Archie had stepped over the line when he stole Sophia. Tea could be replaced, a new warehouse built. But Sophia was one of a kind — irreplaceable.

The fact that Archie put other people's lives in danger when he tried to kill Ethan showed that Archie had no scruples and was a dangerous enemy. He would stop at nothing to achieve his goal.

"Well, what do you see?"

"This is the place," Ethan handed Roger the spyglass, blood surging with triumph.

He knew Sophia was somewhere behind those walls. He could feel it in every fiber of his being.

Roger put the spyglass to his eyes, whistling from what he saw. "It's the bloody Taj Mahal! How'd he manage to do that?"

Ethan shook his head, looking toward the island in the distance. "All he would need is money. It's amazing what can be done with enough blunt."

"I thought you said his father stole a couple thousand pounds," Roger murmured, moving the glass around. "He'd need a bloody fortune for this."

"So it seems. His father stole a couple hundred thousand pounds, Roger. That was a long time ago, I was just a lad. The money was never recovered. His father obviously invested wisely."

"Obviously." Roger lowered the spyglass. "So, what's your plan, old boy?"

"We wait for dark." Ethan's pulse leapt at the thought.

After tonight he'd have his tea back, but more importantly he'd have Sophia.

* * * *

Sophia sat across the table from Prince Ali, a sense of déjà vu creeping over her as she gazed at her surroundings. The scent of patchouli incense hung in the air. Music drifted by from somewhere in the background. A different servant than the one last night stood in silent attendance. Sophia wondered what happened to the other woman, ignorant of the fact that at this very moment the woman was recovering from Prince Ali's punishment.

Sophia eyed her meal in trepidation. Red wine filled both goblets tonight, and food was already placed on both plates. Sophia tried to guess at what was drugged tonight. She listened for her intuition, but it seemed to be as confused as she was, for she heard nothing in response. She swallowed hard, knowing she would not be able to get away with not eating or drinking at all. Prince Ali would expect her to dine – she didn't know how she would be able to refuse him without making him angry.

"You're not eating, my dear."

"I guess I'm not very hungry," Sophia lied with a forced smile.

"Too bad, it's all very good," he assured her, reaching over to pick up a morsel from her plate with his fingers.

He moved the food behind the cloth covering his face, careful not to soil the white cloth. He chewed for a moment then nodded.

"Superb."

Sophia's heart rate accelerated. How she hated that piece of cloth covering his face! What was he trying to hide anyway? She already knew that he was not disfigured — just a bit ugly was all. She sensed the only reason he wore it was for power. He would always have an edge over his opponent. The Simian line she'd seen in his palm came back to her now, and she could see his egocentric nature in full bloom. With it the line brought emotional intensity and jealousy, a complex nature hard to understand by others.

Sophia understood him perfectly. She pushed the food around on her plate as he took a drink from his wineglass.

* * * *

Archibald watched her face. He knew that she was trying to put on a serene expression while feeling less than receptive inside. He knew she still balked at becoming one of his wives. For this reason his tactics changed for tonight. The wine was not spiked. The food was properly prepared, too. He ordered only one morsel filled with a sleeping draught. The little chutney sat innocently on his plate. He would use it only if she refused his advances.

Archie watched her lazily. He did not feel the urge to rush her, having taken his aggression out on the beaten servant girl. After her beating was complete the men brought her to his chamber, where he showed her just who the master of this island was. She denied any wrongdoing, but he was unmoved. His fornicating was rough, but she knew better than to yell or scream. When he was through, he sent her away.

He could take his time and enjoy the pursuit of his next victim, playing

her like a fox played with his meal. He smiled behind his mask.

"Did Channa do a good job instructing you today?" He watched, his eyes like a predator's just before the pounce, as Sophia ate.

"Yes, she did a good job."

"So, you know what's expected of you?" Prince Ali's eyes glittered a silent challenge.

"I know what is expected of me." She looked down at her hands.

Archie heard her soft agreement, noticed her bowed head, and felt victory surge through his veins, settling into his groin. He shifted on his pillows and brought the wineglass to his lips. He was almost disappointed that she stopped fighting for her freedom. He would have liked to show her his dominance. But no matter. He would have her soon. That was all that mattered. Nothing would stand in his way this time.

"Bring me my pipe," he ordered the servant standing by.

She bowed and hurried away. His eyes were fixed on Sophia as she went through the pretense of eating. He noticed how she studiously ignored him, intent on her plate. He dismissed it as a case of jitters.

Sophia's head bowed, she didn't see him move but suddenly he was there, his hand appearing in her line of sight, closing over hers. She stiffened, breath catching in her throat. Her first instinct was to pull away, but knew if she did, he would retaliate. She passed the test, staying still. He squeezed her hand and let go.

Silence enveloped the room, the only sound coming from the musician playing in the background. The chords from the sitar were meant to soothe, but Sophia's nerves just grew tighter, like the strings used to pluck the notes from the instrument she heard.

Why doesn't he try anything more? What is he waiting for?

Ethan, please hurry!

The servant returned with a large bulbous piece of glass. She set it next to Prince Ali and filled it partially full of water. She placed a small button of

something brown into the bowl, then lit a match and held it as Prince Ali drew on a long stem attached to the glass. He inhaled deeply then released his breath, smoke billowing out from around the cloth over his face. He handed the pipe to Sophia.

"Here, this is for you."

Sophia's eyes grew large as she stared at the pipe, having never seen anything like it before.

"What is it?"

"My own special blend," he answered, placing the stem of the pipe in her cold hand. "It will relax you. You are nervous."

"I'm not nervous," Sophia denied with a shake of her head.

Prince Ali chuckled. "I can tell you are, my dear. But I understand. You are innocent and have no knowledge of the marriage bed. This will help ease your fears."

She wasn't about to tell him that she had first hand knowledge of what happened between a man and a woman in bed, and she also wasn't about to let slip that Ethan was the one to initiate her in the ways of love. She brought the stem to her lips. Sucking in gently, she felt her lungs burn from the acrid smoke. Coughing, she handed it back to him.

He chuckled. "You'll get the hang of it soon enough."

He brought the end to his lips again and inhaled, expelling the sweet smoke into the air around them. He handed it back to her, but she shook her head in refusal. He leaned back on his pillows and smoked again, watching her.

Sophia's head started to feel fuzzy. She knew from the studying she did that she inhaled some form of opiate. The tingling in her arms and legs felt strange, like they were asleep. She licked her suddenly dry lips. A drink from her wineglass was refreshing, the wine suddenly much tastier than before. She was thankful that her mind still seemed alert. She didn't want to become so inebriated that she couldn't defend herself should the need arise.

"Come, my dear. Sit with me."

It was a command framed as a request. Sophia looked up and bit back a startled gasp, for Prince Ali had taken off his disguise. For the first time since her arrival she could see his entire head. He removed the turban, too, along with the cloth covering his face. His hair was a dark, muddied brown, and flattened to his head. Sophia gulped; knowing the time was at hand.

"Oh, my," she breathed, wringing her hands in a show of coyness that she didn't feel.

"What is the matter?"

Sophia chanced a glance at him then quickly looked away, stalling for time. "It's just that—that, I've never seen your face before."

Prince Ali smiled, confident of his good looks. Sophia gulped her revulsion away.

"Why don't you come closer to get a better look?"

He patted the pillow next to him. She obeyed, moving slowly around the table, feeling like she was going to her execution. She wondered a bit crazily if she would be offered a blindfold and last words.

Prince Ali took her in his arms and laid her on the pillows next to him. He leaned over her and Sophia squeezed her eyes shut tight. A second later his lips were on hers, wet and slimy, moving forcefully against hers.

Her mouth stayed closed and his tongue stabbed against hers, demanding entry. She opened her lips the tiniest bit and he swooped in, choking her. She broke free with a strangled cry, rolling out from under him.

"I can't do this!" she cried, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "I just can't!" She was afraid of what he'd do to her, but all he did was smile.

"That's quite all right, my dear," he said, sitting up to reach for something on the table. "We have all night. We can take our time. Care for some chutney?"

Chapter 19

Ethan, Roger, and most of the crew from The Enchanted were inside the cave. Ethan watched in satisfaction as his crew carried crates of tea back on board, the two men on guard overpowered and trussed up like fat Christmas geese.

Ethan and Roger dressed in Indian style to disguise themselves should anyone see them. They started up the stairs to the lawns above when Ethan stopped, swaying on his feet.

"Are you well, old man?" Roger's face was furrowed in concern.

"Yes. That is, I think so. I suddenly feel dizzy, like I'm drunk." Suddenly that feeling was replaced with one of fear and revulsion. "Oh, God," he moaned, taking the stairs by two, "He's drugging her again. We've got to hurry!"

They burst through the opening and sprinted to the palace in the distance.

* * * *

The aftertaste from the chutney was the first clue that she was drugged. Her eyes flew wide at the realization, her fingers suddenly too numb to hold the food in her hand. It fell to the table.

"Damn you," she hissed, spitting out what was left in her mouth. She reached for her wineglass, his cackling laughter ringing in her ears.

"You are so perceptive, my dear," Archie giggled, enjoying watching her wash out her mouth with the wine, spitting it back into her glass. "And right, of course. I have put a sleeping draught in the chutney. I knew there would be a chance that you'd be too stubborn to submit to me, so I took the necessary steps to insure your complete cooperation. I also sent away the servants so that I could enjoy you for a good, long time without any interruptions."

Sophia held her glass in front of her with both hands, hating the smug expression on his face. The room started to spin.

"You would take me even if I'm not able to respond?" Her words started to slur.

Archie nodded, rubbing his hands together with anticipation. "I don't need your response to enjoy myself, my dear. After I'm through you will be my wife in every sense of the word. There is nothing you can do to stop me."

Sophia growled rage and frustration welling up in her chest until she almost choked from it. With a sudden burst of strength she hurled her wineglass at him, splashing red wine on his face and chest. He gasped, his eyes glittering retribution. Sophia didn't care. She felt the sleeping draught moving through her body. Soon she would be unable to defend herself at all. She had to strike back while she still could.

"You will be very sorry you did this to me," Archie promised with a growl.

He stood, overturning the table with one violent move. Sophia screamed, flinching from the eruption. Her sudden movement made her head spin and the room darkened. She tried to stand but was too dizzy, instead crawling on her hands and knees to get away from him. He grabbed her and spun her around, pinning her to the pillows as he straddled her.

Through a thickening fog she could see his evil face above her. She struggled to remain conscious as she fought him with all her strength, only one thought in her head.

With her last ounce of strength, she cried, "Ethan!"

* * * *

"There are too many rooms," Roger muttered, frustrated they couldn't find Sophia.

"Keep looking." Ethan's fear grew by the second.

"Why don't you send her a message? Ask her which room she's in."

Ethan turned to answer but suddenly the hall spun. He reached out for the wall to steady himself before he fell. His breathing ragged, hot, naked fear ran down his spine.

"She's in grave danger." He blinked his eyes, trying to clear the fog. He could see the room with all the pillows and it kept fading in and out, like she was struggling to remain conscious.

"Concentrate, Ethan! Close your eyes and feel for her. We've no time to lose."

Ethan stopped and took a deep breath, his eyes closed. He opened them suddenly and pierced Roger with their intensity.

"This way."

There were no other people in the halls to stop them, the lights dimmed for the night. Ethan led the way, his pulse pounding in his ears. He could feel Sophia's struggle, and when Archie grabbed her, Ethan felt her pain.

He growled low in his throat, his frustration overwhelming. He sped down the hall as fast as his legs would carry him, Roger following right behind.

They rounded a corner and Ethan knew he was in the right place. He'd seen this hall before in Sophia's pictures. At the end of the hall was a pair of huge golden doors, closed at the moment.

"Ethan!"

They bolted for the door, Ethan throwing himself against it. The doors crashed open and he rolled, gracefully coming back to his feet, his eyes scanning the dim room.

"Who is it? Who is there?" Archie demanded from inside his flimsy room of netting. "I thought I left strict orders that we were not to be disturbed!"

Ethan followed the sound of Archie's voice. Murder shone in his eyes. He rounded the corner and stopped, relieved that he made it in time. Sophia lay unconscious, but fully clothed, Archie hovering over her.

"Who are you?" Archie demanded in an imperious tone. "Tell me your name at once so I can have you whipped by the palace guards."

Ethan removed the cloth covering his face, his movements slow and deliberate. He grinned when Archie's eyes flew open in recognition.

"It's me, Archie. Your worst nightmare."

"Manchester — you're supposed to be dead!"

Ethan chuckled, shaking his head. "Haven't you heard, Monroe? Your little trap failed. I'm alive and well, as you can see." His grin faded, his face rigid as stone. "Now step away from Sophia."

Archie cackled, making hackles rise on the back of Ethan's neck.

"You're funny, Manchester, really you are. I'm ruler of this island and yet you're giving me orders. That's quite amusing."

He chuckled again, then sat up and yelled, "Guards!"

Ethan lunged at Archie but two burly men appeared seemingly from nowhere, flanking their ruler. Ethan stopped in his tracks.

Archie folded his arms over his chest, his feet straddling Sophia's prone form.

"Come on, Manchester. Have a go at me now. What's the matter, afraid of my men?"

"Is that the best you can do, Archie?" Ethan countered.

Archie snarled in response.

"I think we should be able to dispatch these two hulks rather quick, don't you think — Roger?"

Roger stepped from the dark, coming to stand beside his friend. "No doubt about it."

"Waverell!" Archie sneered. "Guards, kill them both."

Archie's goons stepped forward, drawing long sabers from cloth belts tied around their waists. Ethan and Roger readied themselves by discarding their headdresses, not wanting to be hampered by loose clothing. They turned back-to-back, waiting for the precise moment to move.

The first guard advanced on Ethan, swiping his blade in a wide arc. Ethan dodged it easily, kicking out one booted foot to the guard's wrist that sent the saber flying through the air. Without pause Ethan turned and kicked again, hitting his opponent in the mid-section and doubling him over. One more well-placed kick to his chin had the ruffian sprawled out flat on his back, knocked cold.

Ethan didn't bother to turn and see how Roger was doing, walking over to the saber lying on the floor. Roger dispatched his opponent in short order, taking up the extra saber in his sure grip. Both men had been taught martial arts years ago on their many voyages, tutored from a Mandarin sailor who thought it fun to teach the young lads.

Archie blinked, amazed and horrified at how easily his two enemies dispatched his men. A shiver of fear snaked down his spine. He knew it was late and that his other guards were asleep in their quarters. The two men Ethan and Roger easily overpowered were his finest.

"Roger, truss that rooster up while I see about Sophie."

"My pleasure, Ethan."

"Not so fast!" Archie cried, his voice shrill from desperation.

He fell to his knees over Sophia, drawing a thin dagger from his tunic and holding it to her throat. Roger and Ethan froze. Archie cackled.

"Not so sure of yourselves now, are you? I may not have your primate brawn, but my brain is still superior to yours!"

"You touch her, Archie, and you're dead."

Ethan's threat was spoken in a quiet, confident, menacing voice.

"You're in no position to be giving orders, Manchester," Archie countered, relishing his sudden power over his nemesis.

"It's two against one, Archie," Ethan reminded him as Roger took a slow step to the side. "You're outnumbered."

Archie noticed Roger's move and brought the blade closer to Sophia's fluttering pulse. Roger stopped.

"Don't try to trick me, Waverell. I'm too smart for the likes of you."

"Give up, Archie," Roger tried to reason with him. "You know you're not going to win."

"I see it as a stalemate, then. We both lose. And Sophia dies."

Ethan's eyes narrowed at Archie's words. "Why do you want to kill Sophia? She's not your enemy, I am. Let her go and have a go at me instead."

Archie chuckled, shaking his head. "You still don't understand, Manchester. I won't be satisfied until I've destroyed everything you hold dear. Your bloody shipping business, your stellar reputation, your life, and finally, your bride."

"My bride?" Ethan echoed with a blink.

"Don't play dumb with me, Manchester," Archie growled. "I know she's your intended. You wouldn't have brought her with you otherwise."

"Why kill her?"

"I wasn't going to at first. Just knowing you were dead was almost enough. I thought—how fitting it would be for me to fill her belly with my babies." He cackled with glee. "Imagine it! I fill Ethan Manchester's fiancée with my seed. My children come spilling from between her thighs, not yours! The ultimate takeover!" He chuckled again. "I planned to keep her impregnated for years. Would have started tonight, had you not interrupted us."

"Thank God for small miracles," Ethan drawled, hot anger running in his veins.

The thought of anyone else touching Sophia—especially this putrid excuse of a man—made Ethan see red.

"Careful, old man," Roger warned, his face rigid. "Don't let him get to you."

Archie cackled again. "You mean Manchester actually has feelings for

her? How wonderful! Oh, this is priceless!"

A low moan from the woman beneath him startled them all, but Ethan was the first to recover. Bursting with speed he attacked, jumping over Sophia and hitting Archie square in the chest with his foot. The two men went rolling as Roger sprang forward to drag Sophia to safety.

Archie swung out with his fist, burying his blade in Ethan's thigh. Ethan responded with a solid right to Archie's chin, knocking him out cold. As Roger took Sophia in his arms Ethan pulled the dagger from his thigh. Blood poured from the deep wound, turning his white trousers crimson.

"Can you make it?" Roger asked.

Ethan nodded, grimacing from pain as he stood. "Yes. Get Sophia out of here. I'll take care of Archie."

"Are you going to kill him?"

Ethan shook his head. "That would be too good for him. I think trussing him up would be better. Imagine his embarrassment when his servants find him in the morning."

Roger hesitated. "Are you sure?"

Ethan nodded, limping to some cloth hanging from a wall. He tore it down and limped back to Archie.

"I'm sure. Go now. Get her back to the ship. I'll be along soon."

Roger spun on his heel and hurried away, Sophia tucked safely in his arms.

Ethan kicked Archie's prone form with his good leg, rolling him over. He bent down and tied the cloth around his mouth, ripping off the excess. Rolling Archie over again he tied Archie's hands behind him, then moved lower and tied his feet together. When he was finished he stood, breathing hard. The pain in his leg was nothing compared with the hatred uncoiling in his belly. He knew if he were a lesser man he would take one of the sabers lying on the floor and run it through Archie's cold heart. It would be so easy. It would feel so right.

Somewhere in the palace a clock chimed three times, shaking him from his thoughts. With one satisfying kick to Archie's ribs, he turned and limped away.

Roger was barking out orders for cast-off when Ethan limped onto the quarterdeck. Within minutes the ship was under way.

"How is she?" Ethan demanded.

Roger saw his friend's pale and strained face. He frowned, not knowing how to break the news. Sophia's eye was black and blue. It seemed she must have angered Archie before passing out from the drug she was given, and he had hit her right before they arrived. One eye was black and blue, and one side of her mouth was swollen.

"You need to have your wound seen to," Roger replied, no answer at all.

Ethan grabbed Roger's collar and growled, "Damn it man, I'm in no mood. Tell me how she is or so help me I'll tear you apart."

Roger wasn't worried in the least.

With studied calm he pried Ethan's fingers away, remarking, "Better have a seat then, old boy."

Ethan swore savagely. "Where is she?"

"In your cabin."

Ethan turned to leave but Roger stepped in front of him.

"Ethan, I don't think it would be a good idea for you to see her just yet."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because Doc's with her now."

Ethan swore again. 'Doc' was the nickname given to the quartermaster, who showed an aptitude for stitching wounds. He wasn't a doctor, just good with a needle and thread.

"How bad is she?"

Roger noticed the tension in Ethan's face. His brows drew together in a frown.

"Why should you care?" he countered.

"What the bloody hell do you mean by that remark?"

"Absolutely nothing. But I do have to wonder. I mean she is nothing to you, right? Why should you care if she's hurt or not?"

Ethan growled and Roger knew he was just barely controlling the urge to throttle him. Muttering under his breath he pushed past Roger, limping down to his cabin.

Fear, dread, and guilt welled up within him as he made his way below decks. He did not want to see her injuries, feeling solely responsible for them.

If only I'd gotten to her sooner! If only I'd kept a better eye on her – none of this would have happened. If only I'd kept control of myself and not brought her here against her will. It's my fault she's hurt – mine! Because of my blasted weakness. I wouldn't blame her if she never wanted to have anything to do with me again.

He imagined he could hear his father's derisive laughter and his jaw clamped in response.

Once again he vowed to control himself and not touch her.

When he opened the door to his cabin the quartermaster stood from a chair next to the bed. Sophia lay still under the covers – if that swollen face really was Sophia. Ethan went ashen as he drew near.

"She hasn't regained consciousness yet, Captain," Doc said in a worried hush.

"What happened to her?" Ethan managed to rasp past the lump in his throat.

"Looks like someone wanted to teach her a lesson." Doc shook his head.

Hot rage blinded Ethan, so hot it made him lose his breath. He wished

fervently that he'd finished Archie off. One saber through the heart would be too good for the coward! Imagine, taking out his aggression on a defenseless woman. The man had no morals. He wasn't a man, he was an animal.

"Captain?" Doc's voice brought Ethan back to the present.

"Is there anything you can do for her?" Ethan asked, his voice just above a whisper.

"I've done all that I can. There are no broken bones, thank God. It's really not as bad as it looks. It will just take time to heal."

Ethan approached the bed, his limp heavy. Doc's eyes widened when he noticed the large red stain on Ethan's thigh.

"Captain, you've been shot!"

"No Doc," Ethan lowered himself onto the bed next to Sophia. "Not shot. Knifed."

"Does it need stitching?"

Ethan released a long breath before nodding. "Yes, Doc. I think it may need a stitch or two."

"I'll help you to my cabin and we'll fix you right up."

"No, Doc. Go get your things and bring them here. I'll not leave the lady's side."

Doc nodded, turned and hurried out the door.

Ethan turned his troubled eyes on Sophia's face. "Ah, Sophie. It seems I've failed you."

He sighed, running his fingers through his tousled hair. Unable to hold himself back, he leaned over, his fingers light as they caressed her face. Her eyes opened at his touch. They were glazed with pain, but they gazed straight at him, seeming to see into his very soul. She tried to speak, but he placed a finger over her lips.

"No love, don't speak. I will tell you all you need to know. You are safe on board The Enchanted. You've been through quite an ordeal, but it's all over now. Your face is hurt the worst, but luckily no major damage is done." He paused a moment before adding, "He never had you, Sophie. We got to you in time."

She closed her eyes, releasing a ragged sigh. A single tear escaped her eye, falling to the pillow. Ethan looked away, remorse eating at him.

"Forgive me," he whispered to the room.

Sophia squeezed his hand and he looked into her questioning eyes.

"I wasn't able to save you from this. I failed you. I never should have taken you with me on this bloody trip."

The door opened and Doc returned with his supplies, unknowingly putting an end to their conversation. Ethan felt Sophia squeeze his hand as Doc set up his things. He looked at her in question. She moved her hand, drawing him closer. He leaned over, searching her eyes.

"I love you," she whispered through her swollen lips.

"Don't," Ethan growled, closing his eyes and looking away. He broke free from her hold and turned to Doc. "Have at it," he commanded.

Doc knelt on the floor by Ethan's side, using scissors to cut away the trousers from Ethan's leg.

"The cloth has dried on your wound," Doc told him, peeling back as much as he could. "I'll have to soak it off."

"Did you bring a bottle?"

Doc nodded.

"Do it then."

The bottle was whiskey, or whatever hard liquor was on hand. Doc claimed the alcohol helped stave off infection, but it hurt like hell when applied. Ethan's faith in Doc's ability was great. Not once had any injury treated in this manner been infected.

Doc uncorked the brown bottle and splashed it liberally over Ethan's thigh. Ethan sucked his breath in, raising half off the bed. Sophia's hand closed over his; his pain reflected in her eyes. Unable to stand her sympathy, he looked away.

"Not bad, as far as stabbing goes," Doc murmured, probing the wound.
"What'd you get picked with?"

"This." Ethan removed the dagger from the waistband of his trousers and threw it to the floor.

Doc nodded. "I think a few stitches is all you need. Don't move and I'll be done before you know it."

Ethan reached for the bottle and took a long pull before nodding that he was ready. He closed his eyes as Doc worked, trying not to concentrate on the feeling of a cold needle moving through his warm flesh.

Pink roses filled his head, surprising him. He could see them clearly in full bloom, the scent of them strong in his nostrils. He inhaled deep, relaxing as they swayed in a light breeze.

"There. All done."

Ethan blinked his eyes open and looked at Sophia. Her eyes opened and through her swollen lips he could see her smile. He knew then that she was the one responsible for sending him the roses to take his mind off what Doc was doing.

"Stop doing that," he hissed, his brows slashed over his narrowed eyes.
"Stay out of my head."

"There, you should be good as new in a week or two," Doc said as he wrapped a clean bandage around Ethan's thigh.

Ethan stood when Doc was done to try out his leg.

"You should stay off it for at least a day, Captain. We don't want your stitches tearing out."

"I have a ship to run, Doc. I can't be on my backside all day."

"Let Captain Waverell take over, sir. He can handle any problems."

Ethan's frustration grew. He knew Doc was right. Roger was every inch as good a captain as he was. Roger would have no problems taking over The Enchanted. Ethan could convalesce in his cabin for the entire trip if he chose to.

The simple fact was he didn't trust himself to be alone with Sophia. These strange new things happening between them scared him witless. Receiving and sending messages? Feeling each other's pain? Hearing her voice in his head? If he didn't know better he'd think he was stark raving mad. And why wasn't she angry with him? If the situation were reversed he wouldn't have been trying to make his enemy feel better! He would have enjoyed watching the other person's pain.

He couldn't stand Sophia's understanding and sympathy. He needed her as angry with him as he was at himself.

He looked at Doc's stubborn face and knew he had no choice in the matter. He would stay in the cabin with Sophia.

"Leave the bottle," he growled, limping to his chair at his desk.

Chapter 20

Sophia's head was turned away. Doc approached her now, placing his hand on her forehead to check for signs of fever. She turned back, her eyes questioning.

Doc smiled. "You're going to be fine," he assured her. "Just one black eye and a split lip. I left some salve for your lip, but the eye is just going to take time to heal."

"Thank you," Sophia murmured.

"Are you in pain?"

Sophia nodded her head.

"I left a bottle of whisky for the Captain. Would you like me to get you some brandy?" She smiled, and Doc patted her hand.

"I'll go right now."

He left, saying that he'd be right back. The room grew quiet. Sophia looked over at Ethan; his broad back turned to her. He looked so imposing, so unreachable. It was a pure rejection.

Tears gathered in her eyes.

Why was he doing this? He went through so much to rescue her – even risking his life and getting stabbed. Why would he go to such extreme measures just to turn his back on her? She knew he was fighting their bond with stubborn strength. She knew she had to somehow break through the barriers he kept putting in the way.

Doc returned, bringing another bottle. He set it on the desk next to Ethan.

"Make sure she gets this," he instructed, handing Ethan a spoon. "She'll need to have it fed to her for now. Once her lips start to heal she'll be able to drink it on her own."

Ethan took the spoon with a short nod. Doc handed Ethan the salve.

"She'll need this applied often, to keep her lips from cracking open."

"I understand."

"Make sure you both get some rest," Doc instructed before disappearing out the door.

Ethan looked at the spoon and jar in his hands. Imagine, Lord Ethan Manchester, womanizer of the first quarter, commander of a fleet of ships, ruthless businessman, owner of the largest shipping business to the queen – a nursemaid. It was so preposterous he almost chuckled.

Almost.

He turned back to the bed. Sophia's eyes were closed, but he knew she wasn't sleeping. He limped over to the bed.

"I know you're awake," he said, perching on the edge of the mattress.

Sophia's eyes opened, her narrow gaze directed at him. He saw that her black eye was starting to swell closed. A pang of guilt stabbed him and he pushed the feeling away.

"Doc told me to give this to you."

He uncorked the bottle, carefully filling the bowl of the spoon. He brought the liquid to her mouth, dribbling it past her lips. He did this a few times, until she shook her head that she was done. Setting down the spoon, he picked up the salve and applied it to her pursed lips.

"Thank you," Sophia whispered in icy politeness when he was through.

"You're extremely welcome," he replied, his own tone sarcastic.

He got up and limped back to the desk to set everything down, then blew out the light. He didn't know it, but Sophia's eyes opened in the darkness, seeking him out in the shadows. His unsteady gait echoed in the silent room, then the bed dipped as he climbed in on the other side.

He lay in the dark, as far away from her as he could without falling out of the bed. He heard a forlorn sigh.

"Oh, bloody hell."

Suddenly he was pulling her into his arms. He kissed her forehead soundly and sighed, setting her safe against his side. She felt warm and right against him. He did not even think about how much he needed to feel her warmth to sleep. She snuggled into him; a contented sigh escaping her lips before sleep overtook her.

She awoke the next morning to Ethan's lips on her brow. His touch was feather light, caressing, soothing. They moved over her face, carefully moving over every inch, exquisite finesse in moving around her wounds.

His lips moved lower to her neck, nuzzling, nipping, still light but intense. She sighed, her arms wrapping around his lean waist, reveling in the feel of him already between her thighs. His lips traveled lower, capturing an erect nipple, kissing and laving, gently arousing and sending shards of pleasure through her body.

Her hands became impatient, caressing his broad chest and lean waist. Moving lower, her hand closed around him and his breath halted. She guided him into her, groaning with wanton need when he filled her completely.

His movements slow, careful and gentle, he took exquisite care not to injure her further. She wrapped her legs around him, her hips moving in gentle rhythm with his.

It was a welcoming, a coming home, a joyous reunion. Their bodies sang in unison, their needs being met fully in the other. They reached their release simultaneously, minds, spirits, and bodies mingling into one.

Ethan rolled to her side, enveloping her in his strong arms.

His breathing labored, he kissed the side of her head before asking, "Did I hurt you?"

Sophia shook her head, her arms around his waist. "No. It was wonderful. Were you hurt?" she asked, lightly touching the bandage on his thigh.

"No," he reassured her. "I'm fine. Feel grand, in fact."

"Me, too."

They chuckled, feeling better than they had in days.

A new closeness developed between them. They stayed locked in Ethan's cabin that first week, alternately making love and sleeping, healing both in spirit and body.

Doc was amazed by their quick recovery. He'd never seen two people heal as fast as Ethan and Sophia. He proclaimed them well enough to leave the cabin after that first week, but the couple preferred to spend most of their time in the cabin anyway, rarely venturing topside. They were given the solitude they needed.

They spoke infrequently; no words needed to convey how they were feeling. On those occasions that found them out of bed they were always near each other, touching legs as they sat side by side, holding hands, sitting with limbs entwined while Sophia read and Ethan went over

manifests. It seemed as if they couldn't get enough of each other, each needing the touch of the other to feel complete.

Sophia accepted the new closeness unconditionally, but there were times when Ethan's conscience bothered him. He knew he would not be able to keep this closeness with Sophia once they reached London, but he also didn't want to ruin what they shared now. He admitted to himself that he'd come to care for Sophia – perhaps too much.

Nothing good could come from this.

He still had to marry Megan.

A Manchester never goes back on his word. His word is his solemn oath, his honor. He is nothing without it. As much as he wished it otherwise, he was still an engaged man. He would do the responsible thing. He would fulfill his obligation.

He said nothing, accepting this time as a great escape from reality.

All too soon they neared the English coastline. Roger informed Ethan the previous day that they would probably make the Thames River within twenty-four hours.

"Have you decided what you're going to tell Sophia's family yet?" Roger asked, grim faced.

"No," Ethan admitted with a negligent shake of his head. "But I'll think of something."

Now he stood on the quarterdeck, wind blowing through his sun-streaked hair. His gaze found Sophia as she sat on a crate on the main deck, giving one of the crew a palm reading. She wore a pretty day dress of pale green, her hair in a bun at the nape of her neck with wisps floating around her face. Her face was totally healed, her beauty once again perfect. She felt his warm regard and looked up, smiling and waving. He nodded before turning away.

He knew he had to tell her tonight, before the ship docked in the morning. He had to tell her he was still going to marry her sister.

It was the hardest decision he'd ever had to make in his life. But he'd

given his word and he couldn't go back on it. If one thing was drummed into his head since birth, it was that a Manchester did not go back on his word. His word was his oath, his promise. He was nothing without it. It was his father's motto, and his father's before that. The Manchester men were men of their word.

He promised Megan he would marry her. He could not undo that promise, no matter what. No matter that Sophia loved him. No matter that he had come to care for her deeply in return. He doubted he could love anyone, but with Sophia he came close.

He planned to ask Sophia to continue as his mistress. He knew it was unconventional to say the least, to have sisters as lovers, but the fact was that he wasn't ready to give Sophia up yet. He wasn't tired of her. He needed more time and didn't have any left.

He knew he'd be damned to hell for his proposal, but it was the only way he could keep Sophia in his life. He was a desperate man willing to go to extreme measures to keep Sophia in his life.

After dinner he sat her down, facing him on the bed.

"We have to talk," he began, his tone serious.

"What about?" she asked with a loving smile.

"Roger tells me we should be docking in the morning. As soon as we dock I'm taking you home."

Sophia froze, her brow wrinkled in confusion.

"Why?"

"It's for the best."

"You mean, until you can come and get me."

Ethan cleared his throat before continuing. "I will get you — eventually. After I've returned from my honeymoon."

Sophia's smile faltered just a bit, but it wasn't because of what Ethan had just said. She'd come to think of this trip as an idyllic honeymoon and

didn't want to see it end. These past months had changed her completely and she found she loved her new life. She had changed inside as well, growing and maturing as a person. She knew she could never go back to her former self, reading about life instead of living it. She looked forward to a new and exciting life, a future with Ethan at her side.

"You're still going to marry Megan?"

Ethan nodded once.

"How? Why? I don't understand."

"I can't go back on my word. I won't." Ethan's tone was implacable.

"But you don't love her — you love me."

Ethan chuckled; it was a bitter sound. "I warned you once, Sophie. I told you I was incapable of love. No, I don't love Megan. But I don't love you, either."

Sophia gasped at his callous words. "Yes you do," she argued, her voice shaking.

"No, I don't. I enjoy being with you, yes. And we are great in bed together, but that's all. There is nothing more to it."

Sophia's hands went to her ears, blocking out the hateful words. "Stop it," she hissed. "You make me sound like a common whore."

"Not a whore, a mistress."

She gasped, eyes faring wide. "Mistress!"

Ethan nodded. "When I return from my honeymoon I'll rent you a pretty little cottage on the outskirts of town. It will be perfect for you."

"You mean, it will be perfect for you!"

"Lower your voice," Ethan commanded.

"Not on your life!" she bellowed, fully enraged. "I can't believe this! After all we've been through, you're still planning to do this to me!"

"Do what? I'm offering you the perfect solution."

"Oh!" Sophia cried, flouncing off the bed.

She paced the room, fighting the urge to throw something at his stubborn head. Deep hurt centered in her chest until it hurt to breathe. He hadn't learned a thing. He still didn't believe they were fated to each other. She was a fool for believing she could make him understand.

"Your stupid pride," she muttered, pacing angrily. "It's still your bloody stupid pride."

She turned, pointing at him. "I will not be your mistress!"

"Yes, you will."

Her hands curled into fists. He looked far too sure of himself, of his power over her. All he had to do was touch her and she melted. She knew it and so did he. She found she hated him for it.

"No I won't," she promised passionately. "You are going to ruin three lives all because you gave your *word*," she spat in disgust. "What about these?"

She held up her palm, showing him her Fated Lover's Line.

"What about them?"

"We are fated to be together," she almost shouted with frustration. "You cannot marry Megan! You were meant for me."

"And you are jealous, my dear." Ethan's face was closed. Sophia fought the urge to slap his handsome face.

"What about India?" she challenged with renewed determination. "What about our telepathy?"

"You mean, when we communicated with each other through our minds?"

"Yes! Doesn't that prove to you that we are connected? That we are meant

for each other?"

"All that proves was that we were thinking along the same line."

"Oh, you boorish man," she growled, at wit's end. "Go ahead and marry Megan then! But don't come to me ever again. I never want to see your conceited, self-righteous face again as long as I live!"

She picked up a glass and hurled it at him, not bothering to watch it shatter on the wall behind his head. Stalking to the door, her hand went to turn the handle but his hand was there, slamming the door shut again.

"Not so fast."

"Get away from me," she warned.

"You're angry now, but you'll come 'round when you've had time to think it through."

"I curse the Universe for ever sending you to me." Pushing him away, she ran out the door.

Sophia burst onto the main deck, her breathing ragged. Great sobs rose up in her chest, robbing her of any chance to hide before they boiled over. Burying her face in her hands, she wept. Great, heaving sobs came forth, so violent she almost fell to the ground. Strong arms encircled her and she leaned into them, her sobs tearing through her so that she shuddered, wracked from the intensity.

Roger held her patiently, his arms around her heaving shoulders, wishing he had a glove so he could slap Ethan's face with it. A duel would be so satisfying, and right now Roger was angry enough with Ethan to gladly put a bullet into him.

After a while Sophia's sobs turned to hiccups, Roger's shirt soaked from her tears.

"Come, sit with me," he commanded with a gentle voice, helping her to a nearby crate.

She sank onto it. "Thank you, Roger," she gulped between hiccups.

"My pleasure. I take it he told you."

Sophia nodded, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

"I'm so sorry, Sophia."

"Me, too. I can't believe he's really going to marry my sister!"

"My offer still stands. I still want you to marry me."

Sophia chuckled, but it was a sad sound. "Thank you, Roger, but my answer is still no. I cannot marry you."

"I understand, Sophia, but think for a moment. What if you're with child?"

She stilled at Roger's gently spoken reminder. "Oh my God."

"I would be a good father to the baby," Roger offered. He couldn't believe he was actually saying those words. Lord Roger Waverell, womanizer of the first quarter, asking the possibly pregnant woman of his best friend to marry him! Promising to be a good daddy to his friend's bastard. Incredible. And yet—he really wanted this. For some unexplainable reason, he wanted very much to be Sophia's husband and father of her child.

"I couldn't ask that of you," she stated.

"You didn't ask, I did," he corrected, a slight smile on his face.

Sophia looked at him through red-rimmed eyes.

"Marry me, Sophia."

"I—I—don't know what to say."

Roger grinned. "Say yes."

"You would marry me, knowing that I love another man? Your best friend?"

"He is no longer a friend," Roger stated emphatically, his smile vanished.

"Any man who could so casually throw aside a gem like you is no friend of mine."

Sophia searched Roger's face before answering.

"I will have to think about this."

"You do that," Roger jumped to his feet. "Come, I'll escort you to my cabin. You look like you could use a drink and some rest."

Roger led Sophia to his cabin, knowing she was probably in a state of shock. He sat her down on the edge of his bed then walked over to his desk. He opened a small door and extracted a bottle and glass. Filling the glass with an amber liquid, he handed it to her.

"Drink up," he ordered and Sophia obeyed, downing the entire glass and grimacing when she was done.

"Good girl."

He took the empty glass from her cold fingers and set it on the desk before returning and folding down the blanket.

"Get in, Sophia."

She did, sliding between the sheets fully clothed. Roger tucked the blanket securely around her.

"There. Try to get some rest now."

He kissed her forehead like a father would to his child before turning out the lamp and exiting.

Sophia sighed, tears threatening again as she stared unseeing in the dark.

So, this is what it feels like to have your whole world fall apart. It hurts like bloody hell. He's still going to marry Megan. He's still going to ruin all of our lives because of his damnable pride! Well he can rot in Hades for all I care. I will never agree to become his mistress. Never.

Chapter 21

Hours later Ethan joined Roger on the quarterdeck. The sun had set long before, a faint pink blush on the horizon the only sign of where it had been. In the distance the vague shadow of land could be seen. They were almost home.

Roger stood at the helm, his strong hands confident as he steered the ship. Wind blew through his dark, shaggy hair, the cool breeze helping to calm his rioting emotions. He purposefully ignored Ethan, instead looking straight ahead.

Ethan looked around casually, but Roger knew he knew him well and knew he was actually searching for Sophia.

"She's not here."

"Who?" Ethan asked with studied nonchalance.

"Sophia."

Ethan gazed out at the horizon. "Where is she?"

Roger growled low, his fist connecting with Ethan's jaw, sending him sprawling onto the deck.

"What the bloody hell was that for?" Ethan leaned up on one elbow and felt his chin.

Roger stood above him, breathing hard. "For taking advantage of a beautiful woman."

"Ah, the knight in shining armor," Ethan mused, nodding.

He jumped back to his feet. Roger braced himself for a fight, but all Ethan did was hold up his hand.

"I'm not going to fight you, Roger. You've done your duty defending her tarnished honor, I assure you."

"Bastard," Roger breathed, his fists at the ready. "What did you think, Manchester? That you could have one more night using her body before

we dock? One more night of self-gratifying sex. Hell, it don't matter that you've already told her you're still marrying her sister! She's too used to your skillful loving to refuse you, is that it? One touch and she's your willing love slave."

"Something like that," Ethan drawled, a sarcastic grin marring his handsome features.

"Well you'll not touch her tonight. And if I have anything to say about it, you'll not touch her ever again."

"Oh really. And just how do you propose to stop me?"

"By marrying her myself. After that you will have no right to her at all."

Ethan's smile was cold. "She's already turned you down, old man. Or is your brain so addled you've forgotten?"

It was Roger's turn to smile. "But I asked again, don't you know? The lady's in my bed as we speak."

"The devil you say!" Ethan's smile vanished, replaced by a sudden realization that his friend was deadly serious.

Roger's grin widened. "Yep. How's it feel to be the rejected one, Manchester? Don't feel too good, does it."

Ethan's fingers curled into fists.

"Come on, Manchester. Have a go at me. I've been waiting for this all night."

Ethan dropped his hands to his sides.

"I'll not fight you, Waverell. I may hate your guts at the moment, but I'll not fight you."

"Too bad, Manchester, cause I'd relish the chance to permanently remove that smirk from your face."

Ethan turned and stalked away, slamming down the steps.

"And don't bother looking for her in the morning," Roger called from above, "Cause I'll be the one taking her home!"

Ethan slammed the door behind him once he entered his cabin. He picked up a glass lying nearby and threw it with all his might. It hit the opposite wall, shattering into a million pieces, joining the broken shards already there from the glass Sophia had thrown earlier.

"So, this is the game you're playing. Well, you've got it. We'll play it your way."

* * * *

Ethan was nowhere to be found the next morning. The Enchanted docked during the night and he left immediately, barely bothering to wait for the gangplank to be lowered.

That suited Roger just fine, but he knew Sophia would be heartbroken all over again. It seemed Ethan couldn't get away from her fast enough.

Roger entered his cabin, moving silently to the woman lying in his bed. He watched her in sleep, her perfect features in repose. She murmured, her brow furrowing. He gently shook her awake.

"Sophia, it's morning and we're home. Time to face the day."

Sophia protested with an incoherent murmur, turning away. Roger shook her again.

"Come on, luv. Time to be up and slay your dragons."

"Why did you have to remind me?"

Roger chuckled, throwing back the covers. "Bravery becomes you, darling. Now show a leg, I'm anxious to announce our engagement to your parents."

"I haven't agreed to it yet," Sophia reminded him, sitting up.

"You will." He handed her a pretty mauve walking dress. "Meet me up on deck. I find I'm an impatient fiancée."

Humming, he turned and left, closing the door behind him. Sophia shook

her head, bemused at his light mood. He was determined to marry a woman who didn't love him and quite possibly was carrying another man's child, and yet he was happy as a lark.

She couldn't help but grin.

He kept up a light banter all the way to her parents' home in the hired carriage.

"What am I going to tell my parents?" she worried out loud when they pulled up to the town house.

"You leave that to me," Roger assured her with a confident smile.

"Roger — "

"Look, we're here!" he exclaimed with forced cheerfulness, bounding from the carriage before Sophia could say another word. "Come, my sweet. I'm anxious to meet the future in-laws."

"Roger, I swear you're incorrigible," Sophia exclaimed, letting him help her from the carriage. "I beg you not to tell my parents about your proposal until I've made up my mind."

"Darling girl, as much as you love to think until your beautiful head spins, I do believe this is a time for action."

They stopped at the front door. He turned to her with a bright smile.

"Ready?"

Without waiting for an answer, he knocked on the door. It opened, the family butler, Rodney, standing in the doorway.

"May I help you?" he asked, his tone cold.

Sophia stepped from behind Roger's broad back and Rodney's eyes flew open with recognition.

"Hello, Rodney," Sophia said, a forced smile on her face.

"Mistress Sophia! We'd lost all hope!" Rodney breathed. "Come in at

once! I'll get the elders."

He hurried away as Sophia and Roger stepped over the threshold, Roger closing the door behind him. Sophia's eyes drank in the familiar décor, relieved that it was just the way she remembered. It was hard to believe that she had been gone for over three months.

"Sophie?"

Sophia gasped, whirling at the sound, her heart pounding as her eyes found Lorna at the foot of the stairs.

"Lorna!"

She ran to her mentor, throwing her arms around her as sobs welled up in her throat. Lorna held her, crooning comforting words as they both wept.

"What on Earth is all the commotion about?" Sophia's father demanded as he stood in the doorway of his study.

When he saw Sophia in Lorna's arms his countenance changed, crumbling for a moment before he could recover himself.

"Sophia? Child, is it really you?"

Sophia left Lorna's loving arms, wiping her eyes.

"Yes, Father. It's me."

With quick steps she moved to him. He closed the gap, his steps rapid as they ate up the space between them. Without pause he enveloped her in his arms, his eyes closed.

"You have no idea how worried we were," he whispered, his voice shaking. "We searched for you for months."

He held her away from him. "What happened, Sophia? You disappeared without a trace."

"Mr. Pennworthy, I do believe we should discuss this matter behind the closed doors of your study," Roger interrupted, noticing that the halls

were filling with curious faces.

"Yes, yes, of course," Edmund agreed, ushering Sophia into the study.
"Come along then. What'd you say your name was?"

"Roger, sir. Roger Waverell."

"Oh yes, I remember now. Partner with my Meg's fiancée, Manchester."

"That's right."

Roger followed Edmund into the study, closing the door behind them. He knew that if he opened the door in the next minute the help would go scattering in all directions. Nothing was a secret for long in these large households.

"Now let's have it," Edmund said, taking his seat behind his desk.

Sophia's breath was taken away as memories flooded her. Ethan in this room with her, taking the palmistry book from her hands. She shook her head to clear it.

"Now what exactly happened?"

"I was abducted, Father," Sophia began.

"Abducted! How? By whom?" Edmund's voice was sharp.

Roger seated Sophia before taking a seat next to her. He squeezed her hand in warning.

"Let me tell your father, darling," he said, his voice warm.

Sophia flashed him a warning look.

"Darling?" Edmund echoed, his eyes widening.

"You see, Mr. Pennworthy, Sophia was abducted from her bedroom by a group of unsavory characters." Roger leaned forward, clearly relishing telling the tale.

"My God," Edmund breathed.

He looked his daughter over in concern.

"Did they hurt you, Sophia?"

She shook her head and opened her mouth to reply, but Roger interrupted her.

"No sir. Sophia wasn't hurt. Just a bit disheveled, I'd say. You see, I rescued her from the ruffians before they could get their meaty little hands on her."

"Do say," Edmund murmured.

"Yes. We had to sail right away or they would have done us all in."

"Where to?" Edmund was clearly enthralled by Roger's story.

"India."

"India!" Edmund slapped the desk with his hands, the sound so loud Sophia jumped.

"Yes. We were on our way to India to find out what was happening to our tea cargos. They disappeared mysteriously from our wharves."

"Mysteriously, you say," Edmund nodded.

"Yes. This trip was too important, we couldn't cancel it so we had to take your daughter along."

"You've been to India?" Edmund turned to Sophia.

"Yes Father," she began, but again Roger interrupted her.

Exasperated, she silently wondered when was the exact time she lost control of the conversation.

"You can tell your father all about your grand adventure later, my dear," he admonished her with a loving smile.

"Roger—" she warned, knowing that he was enjoying playing the

besotted fiancée – perhaps a bit too much.

"What I have to tell him is much more important."

Roger turned to Edmund, suddenly serious.

"During the voyage we fell in love."

"Do say!" Edmund blurted, pleasantly surprised.

"Roger!" Sophia exclaimed at the same time.

"Yes." Roger nodded. "I've asked her to be my bride. I do hope you'll be giving us your blessing, sir."

"Who are you giving a blessing to?" an imperious voice demanded from the doorway.

Sophia turned, taking in the sight of her mother, Beatrice, standing poker-straight. Her mother hadn't changed either, her hair still perfectly done, her somber gray dress impeccable. Beatrice's eyes lighted on Sophia, flared, then narrowed. Sophia knew in that moment that she would not be receiving a warm welcome from her mother.

"Beatrice, come quick dear," Edmund said, standing. "Our Sophia has been returned to us!"

Beatrice marched to the desk, her lips pursed.

"Where have you been, Sophia?" she demanded. "You've had us all worried sick!"

"She was in India, Bea," Edmund started to explain.

"India! She went on a sabbatical and didn't bother to notify us?"

"Is this your mother?" Roger asked Sophia, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"I'm afraid so," Sophia murmured.

Roger stood and took Beatrice's hand, bowing over it formally. "Mrs.

Pennworthy, how wonderful to finally meet the woman who raised my beloved!"

"Beloved?" Beatrice echoed, caught off guard by Roger's handsome features and innocent grin.

"Yes, Bea. This rascal here not only saved our daughter from harm, he's asked for her hand! Isn't that grand?"

"Sophia's hand?" Beatrice asked, clearly unable to fathom why anyone would want her spinster daughter.

"Yes, Mrs. Pennworthy." Roger took his seat once again next to Sophia.

He pinned her with a heated smile.

"I'm completely besotted. Madly in love. Say you'll have me. If not, I may just have to throw myself into the Thames."

Sophia rolled her eyes, but no one noticed. Roger was laying it on so thick she doubted she'd be able to make it to the door through all the manure. And how dare he tell her parents that he asked her to marry him! She expressly requested he keep that bit of information to himself, and here he was – blurting it out to the world like some besotted schoolboy!

"We must have a party, Bea," Edmund announced with a slap of his hands. "Not only to welcome our daughter back, but to announce her engagement!"

"Now Father, don't be hasty," Sophia warned.

"What a smashing idea!" Roger exclaimed much too enthusiastically. "A party! Just imagine, dear, a party in our honor."

Sophia gritted her teeth through her smile.

"Could I have a word in private with you, Roger?"

"Yes, let's leave these two lovebirds alone," Edmund agreed, pushing Beatrice to the door.

"But, I-I haven't been told –" Beatrice stuttered.

"I'll explain everything," Edmund assured her, winking at Roger before closing the door.

Sophia smacked Roger in the arm with her fist once they were alone.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"For telling my parents you want to marry me!" Sophia hissed.

She stood and paced, too angry to stand still. "How could you have done that?"

"As soon as you've settled down a bit, I'll tell you," Roger replied easily.

"No – you'll tell me now," Sophia demanded, stopping to tap her foot on the plush carpet.

"Come, sit on my lap then," Roger suggested with a lascivious wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Roger, be serious!" Sophia cried. "I know you don't mean a word you say."

"All right, all right!" he exclaimed. "Stop that bloody pacing and sit down."

Sophia stomped over to her chair and perched on the edge, her blue eyes glittering at him.

"I have a plan," he started.

"A plan? What kind of plan?"

"To get Ethan so jealous he has no choice but to marry you," Roger stated, a wicked smile spreading across his handsome face.

"Jealous?" Sophia repeated in a whisper, considering. She shook her head. "It will never work. He won't go back on his bloody word, he told me so. There's nothing we can do to change his mind."

"It will work. I know Ethan. He's not like his father. He'll come round, you'll see."

Sophia looked down at her flat belly.

"But how soon?"

Roger patted her hand.

"If we lay it on thick enough, very soon," he promised. "If he doesn't come around you will marry me and I'll be the doting father of your baby. Don't worry, Sophia. Everything will be fine." He grinned. "Trust me."

"Oh Roger," Sophia chuckled. "You're too good for me. Thank you for being such a wonderful friend."

"Friend?" Roger made a sour face. "Perish the thought! But now you must promise to be the doting fiancée in public, understand?"

Sophia nodded.

"Good. We must be seen in public often. We'll be the newest gossip on everyone's lips. No one will be able to remember that Ethan's supposed to marry your sister. We'll steal their limelight, what d'you say?"

"I say it's a smashing plan, luv," she agreed with a giggle.

"That's my girl. Now, what'd you say to a ride in Hyde Park? Time to kick the rumor mill into high gear."

Chapter 22

Ethan sat alone in a booth at White's, nursing a drink. Two empty glasses sat before him, silent testimony to his sour mood.

Roger and Sophia's engagement was the talk of the town. The Ton couldn't get enough of the romantic story – Roger rescuing Sophia from ruffians, their romantic trip to India where they fell in love. It was the stuff of operettas and romantic tomes.

Leave it to Roger to put a good spin on an ugly situation.

At least it saved Ethan from having to explain to Sophia's parents why he had kidnapped Sophia from her bed.

It still confused him, how she spurned his offer of a cottage in the country. True, she'd never be his bride, but at least they would still be together. Anything was better than this empty ache inside his chest. It felt like she ripped his heart out when she left. He felt empty. He'd never realized how much fun Sophia was until she was gone. And in his mind she was the one who left, not the other way around. He still wanted her! He hadn't broken off the relationship – she had when she told him she wasn't going to be his mistress.

He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. This empty ache he felt inside was all her fault. If not for her stubbornness they would still be together.

It galled him to admit it, but he would still take her back if she changed her mind. He would never admit it to another soul, but it was true.

He'd never admit to anyone how much she meant to him.

He took a long pull from the glass, letting the amber liquid burn its way down his throat. He turned to the bottle frequently this past week, more than he could ever remember doing before.

His brows furrowed as he recalled his homecoming. Enduring a gushing welcome from Megan, her happiness at seeing him pleasing until he realized that she was just happy that the wedding was on again. It had taken everything within him to not push her away in revulsion.

Desperate to get her to stop going on and on about wedding plans, he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her. Not only did he feel acute revulsion at the embrace, Megan slapped his face, warning him to keep his hands to himself.

He knew she was young, but now he wondered if she was too young for him. Her frilly outfits and fat, bobbing curls disgusted him. And it seemed the only person she really cared about was herself! She couldn't care less that he found out who was stealing his tea shipments, rolling her eyes when he tried to tell her the story – without Sophia, of course. All she

cared about was the blasted wedding.

He finally gave her a flimsy excuse and left, feeling like he just avoided a horrible wreck. It was a nightmare. It was his future. His bleak future.

He had thought Sophia not worldly enough, not able to mingle in polite company. He thought she would never be able to run his household. It seems he was very, very wrong. He caught glimpses of her at gatherings, escorted by Roger. She was breathtaking, decked out in beautiful new gowns, her hair in a perfect coiffure. She was dazzling, witty, charming. The perfect companion – to Roger. The jealousy coiling in his belly every time he saw the two of them together was intense, eating at him until he could barely breathe.

Roger paid Ethan a visit that first day home. He warned Ethan to stay away from them or he'd tell the whole bloody city the sordid details of what really happened, ruining Ethan's marriage plans. At the time Ethan wholeheartedly agreed, promising to stay as far away from Sophia as possible.

But now – now, he couldn't put it to words. He needed her, no – wanted her, no – what was it he wanted? He wanted to be back on The Enchanted with Sophia in his arms.

Downing the rest of his drink, he called for another. A silent waiter placed the glass in front of him.

His wedding was planned to happen in one week's time. Roger and Sophia's engagement party was tonight, just a small gathering of family at the townhouse. Since Ethan was engaged to Megan, he was invited. He grimaced at the thought of having to spend the entire evening watching Roger put his filthy paws all over Sophia. It was bad enough watching from a distance – he'd been close to calling Roger out a few times already over what he saw. A romantic kiss on the hand, a conspiratorial whisper close to her ear, a casual arm dropped across her smooth shoulders – the jealousy was eating him alive. How would he be able to restrain himself from blackening Waverell's eye at the engagement party?

Damn them to hell! He should be the one with Sophia, not Waverell!

The glass was lifted to his lips again. Maybe if he drank enough, he wouldn't care.

* * * *

"I don't think I can go through with this," Sophia murmured, her gentle brows creased with worry.

"You're just nervous, lamb. You'll be fine," Lorna assured her, smoothing her hair in place.

Sophia and Lorna had caught up with each other in no time flat. Sophia told her mentor everything, leaving nothing out. Lorna at first rejoiced, and then cried for her. She was also happily counting the days until she could hold Sophia's baby in her arms.

Sophia was now certain she was going to have Ethan's child. She never received her flow, and in the past two days she noticed tenderness in her swelling breasts. This morning the thought of eggs for breakfast almost sent her swooning. She figured she had another month, tops, before she started to show. Then the whole world would know.

Roger insisted on setting their wedding date for two weeks after Megan and Ethan's.

"But don't fret," he assured her, "He'll come 'round long before then."

Sophia fervently hoped so.

"Come on, let's have a look at you," Lorna instructed, pulling back Sophia's chair.

She was dressed in a dazzling jewel-colored gown of topaz satin. The décolleté was cut low, showing her growing bosom to its fullest advantage. Topaz and diamond earrings glittered at her ears, a matching necklace around her throat; a large topaz teardrop stone nestled at her cleavage.

"My, you are a sight, lamb," Lorna breathed, pride shining in her eyes. "You are a beautiful woman."

"Oh, Lorna."

"Ethan won't know if he's coming or going."

Sophia gave Lorna a quick hug before heading to the door.

"I hope you're right," she called with a wave.

Spying Roger at the bottom of the stairs, she smiled at his handsome face, thankfulness blossoming in her heart at this man's kindness. He could have been a boor — like Ethan — and abandoned her. But not Roger. He went out of his way, putting his own life on hold to help her in her time of need. When he could have been gallivanting around town with any woman of his choosing at his side, he was helping her bring Ethan to heel. She knew she would never be able to repay her great debt to him.

Roger met her at the bottom of the stairs, his brown eyes gleaming with admiration as he watched her descend. He wore a suit of dark blue, his white shirt setting off his deep tan. Around his neck was a rakish cravat of matching blue.

Roger watched Sophia as she descended gracefully, half in love with her himself. He fervently hoped that Ethan would thank him someday for what he was about to do. Hell, by the end of all of this, Ethan would be indebted to him for life. She was perfect — beautiful, charming, poised, polished — a perfect partner. He half hoped Ethan would remain too bullheaded to change his mind. Then he would be able to keep her all for himself.

"Ah, love. You are a perfect jewel," he declared, bringing her into his arms for a quick embrace.

In her ear, he whispered, "Manchester won't know what hit him."

"We will see, won't we," Sophia whispered back before they broke apart.

She smiled, her voice carrying throughout the room when she exclaimed, "My, future husband, how dashing you look tonight. A sight for sore eyes."

Sophia's father smiled indulgently at the pair.

"Ah, young love. So wonderful," he murmured.

"Where is Ethan?" Megan whined as her mother fussed over her hair. "I want my fiancée here! It's not fair that Sophie gets to have her date here

when my Ethan is so late!"

"Now dear, tonight is for Sophia and Roger," Beatrice explained, tucking a fat curl in place. "You've had your engagement party already, remember?"

"But it's not fair!" Megan cried, stomping her foot in a childish pique. "She's taking all the attention meant for me. All people can talk about is them — how *romantic* they are! It makes me sick."

"Now now, dear, don't dwell on that," Beatrice threw Sophia a nasty glare. "It can't be helped that Sophia found someone to marry her so close to you finding the catch of the season. Who knows if she would have another chance? You know yourself how firmly on the shelf she was. She has to take advantage of this opportunity before it slips away." She patted Megan's hand. "Just think about how grand your wedding day will be compared to hers. A large cathedral filled to the rafters with flowers, hundreds of people attending. Much nicer than Sophia's little ceremony in the rectory."

"You're right, of course," Megan agreed with a hateful glare thrown at Sophia.

Roger's face darkened during the mother and daughter exchange and he stepped forward to put them both in their places. Sophia's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Don't," she said with a shake of her head. "It's not worth it."

"But the way they talk about you!" Roger declared. "How can you let them say those horrible things?"

"They're still angry with me. I've tried to explain myself before, but they don't want to listen. It seems they've developed a strange closeness since I've been gone. Let them go on with their vile tongues, I'll be gone from here soon and then it won't matter."

"If you're sure," Roger countered, still wanting to put those two shrews in their places.

"Yes." Sophia smiled. "Come, let's have dinner."

They went into the parlor, where drinks and hors d'oeuvres were tastefully arranged. Roger poured champagne in two chargers, handing one to Sophia.

"To my beautiful bride-to-be," he announced, raising his glass. "Sophia, you have made me a very happy man. To many years of wedded bliss."

"Ah yes, wedded bloody bliss."

All eyes turned at the sound of the voice. Ethan leaned in the doorway, his hands in his trouser pockets, shirt disheveled, and hair uncombed. He hadn't bothered to get his hair cut after the trip to India and it hung almost to his shoulders.

"Ethan! Where have you been?" Megan demanded, hands on hips as she flounced over to him. "You're late!"

"So it seems," he murmured, but his eyes were fixed on Sophia.

She swallowed hard, her chin tilting up as she looked away.

She'd seen him since returning, of course, but it was always from a safe distance. This was different. Her body leapt in response, crying out for him. Silently berating her traitorous heart, she took a sip from her glass. Her nerves suddenly felt strung tight as a violin.

Ethan brushed past Megan; his steps unsteady as he made his way to the bottles and glasses set on a nearby table.

"Let's get this party going," he declared, his voice booming through the silent room. "Come on, this is supposed to be a happy occasion! The old maid marrying my ex-best friend!"

Sophia gasped at his cruelty, along with everyone else in the room.

"You're drunk!" Megan cried in outrage.

"How observant you are," Ethan muttered, his words slurring slightly.

He filled a glass with brandy, sloshing some of the amber liquid over the rim.

"And here I thought the only person you cared about was yourself."

Megan gasped. "Mother – make him stop!"

"Stop what?" Ethan asked with false innocence. "Stop you acting like a vapid, selfish, spoiled brat? Never. You're too far gone."

He turned to Roger and Sophia, lifting his glass as Megan burst into tears and ran from the room, Beatrice following close behind.

"To Roger and Sophie. May they have many babies, and may my ol' ex-friend Rog always wonder if the first is his."

"Manchester," Roger growled.

Sophia turned ashen at Ethan's horrible words. She clutched the goblet in her hand so tight she thought the stem would snap, anger welling up in her chest so that it was hard to breathe.

"See here, young man – I think you should be going," Edmund commanded, his voice like steel.

"Why's that?" Ethan asked, taking a swig from his glass.

He smacked his lips in appreciation. "Fine brandy. Th' best. Always knew you had good taste, Dad. So why'd you let a piece of scum like Waverell put his filthy paws on your daughter?"

"That's it!" Roger cried, advancing.

Edmund restrained him as Ethan smirked.

"Let me handle this, son," he ordered. "This is my home, after all."

He turned and gave Ethan a disapproving glare. "I suggest you go home and sleep it off before you say anything else that will hurt a member of my family."

"And if I don't?"

Roger advanced again, Edmund just barely holding him back.

"Then Waverell and I will personally see you out. Is that understood?"

Ethan gazed between the two irate men as if gauging his chances. It was as if the three men forgot that Sophia was even in the room, standing poker straight, her eyes narrowed, face white. Finally, he put his glass down. "It seems I have no choice, do I?"

His eyes went to where Sophia stood. "Ta-ta, my love! See you at my wedding."

He turned to leave, then stopped, thinking. He turned back, his blue eyes pinning hers.

"My offer still stands, you know. Think about it."

"Bastard," she breathed, her voice shaking.

Ethan blew her a kiss before sauntering out the door.

Roger went to Sophia, enveloping her in his strong arms. Edmund watched the couple, his brow furrowed with concern.

"What was that all about?" he asked the pair.

"We had a falling out on our return, sir," Roger explained, deliberately vague. "He's just jealous of my good fortune."

"Yes. Well," Edmund harrumphed. "I'd better see about dinner."

He turned and hurried out the door.

"Are you all right, Sophia?" Roger asked when they were finally alone.

"No. Yes. Oh, I don't know!" Sophia broke free from Roger's embrace and paced the room. "He was horrible, Roger. Simply horrible."

"I know." Roger sounded too happy. Sophia stopped and looked at him in question.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Sophia, use that lovely brain of yours. He came here tonight completely

foxed! He can't stand the thought of us marrying. He still loves you."

Sophia's eyes went wide at the realization. "But he's still not changing his mind, Roger," she argued. "He still wants me only as a mistress, you heard him."

"If your sister has any sense at all she'll call off the wedding," Roger explained. "After all the nasty things he said to her, she'd be a fool not to."

"Do you think that he was rude on purpose?" she asked, hope shining in her eyes.

"Could very well be."

"Then he was trying to break it off with her," Sophia breathed. "He didn't want to be the one to do it, so he was intentionally horrible so she would."

"Precisely."

"Oh Roger!" Sophia threw herself into his arms. "This is wonderful! Everything's going to work out just fine!"

Roger closed his eyes, savoring the feel of her in his arms as if for the last time.

"Everything's going to be just fine," he murmured.

Chapter 23

Everything wasn't fine.

Megan refused to break her engagement to Ethan, even though Beatrice and Edmund tried to talk her out of it with angry shouting matches that rang throughout the household. Megan insisted it was too close to the wedding to break it off, naively insisting that once they were married she would put a stop to his drinking. She was sure she would be able to bring him to heel and no amount of talking, cajoling or shouting was going to change her mind. Ethan was the catch of the year. She wasn't about to let him slip through her fingers, no matter what.

The days leading up to the wedding went by in a blur, the household constantly up in arms.

Ethan spent his days in a drunken haze. He couldn't believe his ploy failed. Megan was still determined to marry him. They hadn't even spoken to each other since the night of Sophia and Roger's engagement party. Weak with relief, he thought her silence was a sign of her refusal to marry him, but then a day later a message arrived at his townhouse. It was a tersely written note with instructions to be sober and at the church by ten on the day of the wedding. He ripped the paper to shreds.

He felt like a man on the brink of insanity. His every waking thought was of Sophia, and when he slept she haunted his dreams like a specter. He turned to the bottle to block the pain. Yes, he could still feel her pain. He knew she was as miserable as he was. He refused to acknowledge it.

Acknowledging it would mean that he'd have to admit to the bond between them, and if he did that, he'd have to admit to himself that Sophia had been right all along. He would have to admit that he'd been wrong, and his father had beat into him long ago that a Manchester never admitted he was wrong. It was a sign of weakness, and Manchester men were never weak. Never.

The morning of the wedding came, a thick gray mist hanging in the air. The gray day suited his mood — bleak. Shooting pains started the minute he opened his eyes, radiating from his chest outward to his arms and legs. Having been in good health for such a long time, now the pain puzzled him. He chalked it up to all the excess he'd been imbibing in since his return to London, ignorant of the fact that the Universe was sending him the pain as a warning not to go through with his marriage vows.

He dressed and made it to the church through sheer willpower alone. In the rectory of the church, his black attire matching the blackness of his heart, he waited for his best man to arrive. It wasn't Roger, that was for sure. Roger was a traitor, deserting him and pledging his allegiance to the enemy — Sophia. All those years of friendship — gone. In a drunken haze he asked someone at White's to step in. Trouble was, he couldn't remember just whom he asked. No matter. All he needed was a warm body.

A pain shot through his chest and he winced. The door opened, but Ethan was in too much pain to see who it was.

"Ah, here's the impatient groom now," Roger's drawl reached Ethan's ears.

"What are you doing here, Waverell?" Ethan sneered.

"I came to wish you all the best, of course," Roger gloated with a grin.

He sauntered over to the chair Ethan was in, standing in front of him. Ethan had to look up to see into his eyes.

"I'm glad you're going through with it, old man. For a minute there I thought that drunken scene at my engagement party was a ruse to get Megan to cry off."

He looked Ethan over closely, his grin gone.

"You weren't trying to shirk your duties, were you? Albert would have had a word to say about that, I do believe. Were you hoping that Megan would have nothing to do with you if she knew you were an ass and not the great catch you pretend to be?"

"Go to hell."

"Splendid, because it didn't work, did it? The stupid girl has the mistaken idea that she's going to change you after the wedding. Isn't that a hoot? I'd love to watch that, indeed I would. More's the pity. You see I'll be very busy with my new bride. Sophia and I are going to be very happy."

Ethan tried to stand but the shooting pains kept him seated, breathing in pain and anger.

"She wants nothing more to do with you, you know," Roger continued, strolling around the small room.

He shook his head, tsking. "You sure did make a mess of things, old man. Luckily I was there to pick up the pieces. Sophia's fully recovered from your abandonment."

He turned from the opposite side of the room, his smile cold. "I'll take good care of Sophia. And the baby."

Roger turned to leave, but got no further than the door. Ethan was behind him, slamming it closed.

"Baby?" Ethan echoed, his voice hollow.

The thought of Sophia having his baby made little bursts of excitement shoot through his pain-filled body. Could it be true? Was Sophia really carrying his child?

"Didn't I mention that before?" Roger asked, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "I thought I had. No matter. I'll be a good father to your bastard, Manchester, you may depend upon it."

He paused, as if considering. "If it's a boy I think I'll name him after me. Roger Junior – it's got a certain ring to it, don't you think?"

Chuckling, Roger brushed by Ethan and strolled out the door. Ethan doubled over as a new pain shot through him, worse than any he'd experienced before. Gasping, he staggered over to a nearby chair, falling into it.

A baby ... the thought kept echoing through his head like the ringing of a bell. Could it be? And if it were true, which Roger seemed pretty damned sure of it himself, then why hadn't Sophia come to him for help? Could she hate him that much? So much that she would hide such incredibly good news?

His best man arrived just as the minister told them it was time for the ceremony to begin. Sweating profusely, his face strained and white, Ethan made it to his feet. He ignored the curious glances his best man and the preacher gave him, willing one foot in front of the other until he stood at the front of the sanctuary.

His glazed eyes scanned the vast expanse of the cathedral, not really seeing. His sense of smell rioted at the overwhelming pungency of thousands of flowers. Somewhere an organ played, too loud. At the back of the church Megan stood next to her father, dressed in a blinding white dress with so many ruffles he could barely make out her face. Her eyes glittered at him, promising him a future of misery. In her hands she carried an obscenely huge bouquet of pink roses.

Pink roses ... it brought back the memory of sitting in his cabin aboard The Enchanted, his mind filled with pink roses as Doc worked on his leg.

Sophia had sent him the pink roses even though she lay next to him on the bed; herself wracked with pain from Archie's hands. She pushed that pain aside to give him comfort.

Pain shot through him so intense it doubled him over. He grasped his chest, gasping, sending the crowd murmuring. It was then that he heard it. Soft weeping. Over the loud organ music, above the noise of the crowd, he could hear Sophia cry. It was a gut-wrenching sound, coming from deep inside of him. She sounded as if she'd never stop, as though her soul were shattering.

And he knew he couldn't go through with it.

Through a fog of pain his eyes met Megan's narrowed ones. "I'm sorry," he said, turning and striding from the church. Megan's screams echoed behind him as he ran out the side door and vaulted onto his horse, kicking it into a gallop.

* * * *

"Sophia, you must stop this weeping," Lorna entreated her charge, her face a mask of worry.

Sophia sat on the window seat in her room, her red-rimmed eyes looking out at the gray landscape, but not really seeing anything. She was inconsolable, her tears starting when she opened her eyes at the beginning of the day and not stopping since. Lorna tried to get her to stop, even reminding her of the baby. Nothing worked. Sophia wept uncontrollably.

"You'll become ill," Lorna tried again. "Think of the baby. You don't want to lose the baby, do you?"

"I can't help it," Sophia gasped, wiping her eyes with a fresh hanky that Lorna handed her.

"Would you like me to give you a sleeping draught?"

"No! No more sleeping potions, please," Sophia insisted with a shake of her head.

"But you must stop, lamb. This isn't healthy."

"Oh, Lorna," Sophia cried, her shoulders shaking. "I feel as if my life is over."

"Don't say that!" Lorna said with a startled gasp.

She remembered what the old wise woman said all those years ago about the Fated Lover's Line. The old woman told her that she didn't know what would happen if the two souls weren't joined. Lorna feared for Sophia's life.

Suddenly the door to her room slammed open, startling the two women. Ethan stood in the threshold, his breathing labored as if he'd run all the way from the church. His deep blue eyes glittered as they centered on Sophia.

Her eyes drank him in. His clothes were rumpled, his hair wind-tossed. He looked half crazy standing in the doorway, his body seeming to fill the frame. Time seemed to suspend as they looked at each other, so lost in their own world neither one noticed when Lorna slipped away.

"What are you doing here?" Sophia finally asked, breaking the spell.

"I had to come."

Her heart pounded in her chest as he closed the door behind him. His eyes never left hers, his face unfathomable.

"You're supposed to be at the church. You're supposed to marry Meg."

He shook his head, advancing with slow, measured steps. "I can't."

Sophia's eyes widened at his words. Her spine straight, she stood her ground as Ethan advanced.

"Why can't you?"

"Ah, Sophie," he breathed, shaking his head. He was only a breath away. "Don't you know?"

He reached out to touch her and she backed away, her arms out for protection.

"Don't," she demanded, suddenly angry. "Don't touch me. I won't be your play toy, to be used and discarded."

Ethan raked his fingers through his shaggy hair. She could sense the frustration flowing through him. She vowed to not give in.

"I know you've been hurt Sophie, but if you will just let me explain –"

"No!" Sophia closed her eyes.

She couldn't bear to have to go through all of this again – the wanting, the loving, and the leaving.

"If you've come to ask me to be your mistress again you've wasted your time. Go back to Megan. Go back to the church before it's too late."

She gasped as Ethan's warm hands closed over her shoulders. His touch sent shooting currents through her body. She moaned, leaning into him. God, how she missed feeling his fingers on her skin.

"It's already too late," he murmured, his breath on her face. "I'm already under your spell."

His lips met hers and she moaned, lost in the tingling sensations that burst through her body when he touched her. She clung to him, answering his kiss with all the pent-up passion in her. When his lips finally left hers they were both gasping.

"You and I are going to be married at Gretna Green today," he commanded.

Sophia's eyes flew wide in surprise, her heart hammering even faster than before.

"Today?" she breathed.

He was going to marry her, and not Megan?

Ethan nodded and she threw her arms around him.

"Oh Ethan! Yes, let's go to Gretna Green right now!"

His rich chuckles floated around her and she wondered if she was dreaming.

Neither heard the door open.

"Oh, Sophie, it was horrible! He left me standing at the back of the church, all the guests staring – Ethan?"

Megan stood in the doorway still wearing her wedding dress. Dawning realization crossed her face as she stared at the couple embracing before her.

"Now Megan, don't go off until I've explained," Ethan warned, but Megan's eyes narrowed.

"How could you?" she breathed. "Both of you! This is too much!"

She flounced to the door, calling, "Mother! Father! Come quick – I found Ethan!"

"Megan, please listen," Sophia tried as Megan stomped back into the room.

"There is no explanation for this," she hissed, her arms crossed over her ruffled bosom. "You have made me a laughingstock. You are going to pay. Both of you."

Beatrice and Edmund hurried into the room and Megan pointed dramatically.

"Look! Here he is, in Sophie's bedroom!"

"What is the meaning of this, young man?" Edmund demanded.

"I still plan on becoming a member of the family, sir," Ethan explained, his voice calm as he placed his arm around Sophia. "I'm going to marry Sophie and not Megan."

Megan cried out at the news, running to her mother's open arms.

Edmund looked from Sophia to Ethan, confusion written plainly on his face.

Sophia crossed to her father.

"I know this doesn't make much sense, Father, but I love Ethan, not Roger."

"Does Roger know about this?" Edmund asked.

"He does. He's always known that I'm in love with Ethan. He understands."

"Ethan's *mine* ," Megan cried, her fist pounding her chest. "Mine! You can't have him!"

"I'm not a possession to be had, Megan," Ethan stated, coming to stand next to Sophia.

He took her hand and Megan stamped her foot.

"You asked me to marry you, not Sophie! You asked me first!"

"I made a mistake."

Beatrice crossed the room until she stood in front of Ethan. "Just what do you plan to do to rectify this situation?" she demanded.

Ethan gazed at her a moment before answering. "I suggest we speak bluntly, madam. State what's on your mind."

Beatrice smiled, but it never reached her eyes. "Very well. Take my daughter back to the church and marry her immediately."

"I plan to marry Sophie today."

Beatrice shook her head. "Not Sophia — Megan."

Ethan's eyes widened as Sophia inhaled sharply.

"You're mad," he breathed.

"No, just practical. We told everyone at the church that you were ill and that was why you left. We will tell the parson that you've recovered. You will marry Megan and there will be no threat of scandal."

"You would wed Megan to me knowing full well that I don't love her?
That I've bedded Sophia?"

Megan gasped, but Beatrice just nodded. "We must avoid a scandal."

"Even if it costs you the love of your daughter?" Ethan countered,
incredulous.

Beatrice's hateful glare turned to Sophia.

"Sophia's been nothing but a burden since the day she was born. After Megan is wed to you she will be sent to a nunnery in Spain. That will take care of any lingering rumors."

"I knew we never liked each other, Mother," Sophia murmured into the shocked silence. "But I had no idea you hated me so."

Beatrice's smile shattered her face. "I don't hate you, girl. I just never loved you."

"That's enough, Beatrice," Edmund growled.

Beatrice whirled on him. "Don't start with me, Edmund. I've kept quiet long enough! It's time the truth was told."

"I've warned you what will happen if you say another word."

"I dare you," Beatrice breathed.

She turned, pointing dramatically at Sophia. "You are no daughter of mine!"

"Beatrice!"

"You are the product of an affair your father had with one of the maids. She was comely, with curly blond hair and blue eyes. Luckily she died giving birth to you."

Edmund spun Beatrice around as Sophia looked on in shock.

"I said that's enough. You will pack your bags and remove yourself from my home. I never want to see your hateful face again."

"You wouldn't dare throw me out," Beatrice challenged. "Think of the scandal it would create."

"To hell with the bloody scandal!" Edmund cried, his face blotched red from fury. "My Lucy was more woman than you could ever hope to be. I curse the day I met you. Now pack your things and be gone by sunset."

"People will talk, Edmund," Beatrice informed him with relish.

"Let them. I don't care a whit about it. The only reason I went along with your silly threats all these years was to have Sophia grow up as my daughter. She is the one blessing in my life."

"You love your bastard daughter more than you love me!" Beatrice accused.

"Course I do. Always have." Edmund pointed to the door. "Out with you. Take whatever you want. I don't care. Go to the continent, or to hell if it suits you. Just get out."

Beatrice pivoted on her heel, crossing to the door. "You will regret this, Edmund," she promised. "Come, Megan."

"But Mother – what about Ethan?" Megan demanded, pointing at the silent pair standing together in the middle of the room.

"I will find you a richer man," Beatrice promised, holding the door open.

Megan flounced to her mother, her curls bobbing with every step. At the doorway, she turned.

"I never liked you, Ethan," she stated with a smug smile.

Beatrice followed her out the door.

"Why do I feel I've just escaped the hangman's noose?" Ethan murmured into the silence.

Edmund cleared his throat. "I suppose you have a lot of questions, my dear."

Sophia nodded, her brain buzzing from the realization that her mother wasn't really her mother after all. This explained so much. Lorna raising her from an infant, her father's doting while her mother watched in disdain. Sophia had stopped trying to please her years ago, realizing that no matter what she did, it would never be enough. The physical differences had always perplexed her, too. She was never quite sure where her blue eyes and blond hair had come from, surmising a mysterious relative from the distant past to be responsible.

Ethan brought her back to the present by kissing her hand.

"I think it would be best if I leave you and your father to talk. I'll return at three. Be ready for me."

He walked to Edmund and the two men shook hands.

"Take good care of my Sophie," Edmund ordered, his voice gruff.

"You may depend upon it." With sure strides, he walked through the open door.

Sophia and Edmund were left to stare at each other in the quiet room.

"Why have you kept this from me all these years?" Sophia finally asked, breaking the silence.

There were so many questions in her head it made her dizzy.

"I knew I looked different, but I could never understand why moth—I mean, Beatrice never liked me."

Edmund went to sit on the edge of Sophia's bed. Sophia took a seat next to him.

"I think I should start at the beginning," he said. "Beatrice and I were a good match, or so I thought. We weren't in love with each other, but our families both wanted us to marry, so we did. I liked her enough to think that I could be happy with her, that we could have a good life together."

He sighed. "But that wasn't the case. She wanted to stay in London, loved the party life, the intrigue, the gossip. Me, all I wanted to do was return to my estate in the country. We quickly grew apart. One night we had a terrible fight. She insisted on staying in London, so I went back to the estate. She sent me a letter demanding that I sell the estate and move to London to be with her. I refused. She was gone for over a year."

He was silent for a moment, his head bowed at the memory. Sophia took his hand.

"It wasn't your fault."

Edmund shook his head. "It's never only one person's fault when a marriage goes bad, Sophia. I could have insisted she come home where she belonged, I could have gone to London and demand she return with me, but I didn't. I had already met your mother by then."

"Tell me about her."

Edmund's smile was wistful. "You look like her, you know. She was new to the household staff. I took one look at her and fell head over heels in love."

Edmund brushed his knuckles over Sophia's smooth cheek. "Believe me, Sophia. I never would have dallied otherwise. You were conceived in love. When Lucy told me she was expecting I was ecstatic. She told me I was a fool, but I was too happy to care."

"Beatrice made a surprise visit when Lucy was seven months along. It didn't take her long to figure out who the father was and she was livid, threatening to have Lucy fired. I resorted to blackmail."

"Blackmail?"

"Yes. Word reached me earlier that Beatrice was making the rounds of gentlemen's bedrooms in London. I gave her an ultimatum – Lucy stays or I divorce her publicly."

Sophia gasped, knowing that a public divorce was a scandal of the first quarter. No wonder Beatrice was always so worried about scandals. The threat of one hung over her head for many years.

"I was impulsive and headstrong. I believed I could change the world."

"I'm glad you didn't let Beatrice send my mother away," Sophia said. "I'm glad you stood up to her. Now I know where I get my courage from."

Edmund flushed. "I don't know about that. I'm just a foolish old man who's made a bloody botch of his life."

"There is still one thing that puzzles me," Sophia murmured.

"What would that be, lamb?"

"How did Meg come along?"

Edmund flushed, looking down at his hands.

"I mean, if you and Beatrice were not getting along – "

"It was a mistake." He looked at Sophia, his eyes intense. "Don't get me wrong, I love Megan, too. But her making, it was wrong. Beatrice and I were both drunk that night. She'd hosted the first ball of the Season. It was the one time of the year when she was here, at the estate, for any length of time. She always threw the staff into chaos, her demands nonstop. They couldn't wait for the party to be over, then she would go back to London and peace would be restored in the house once again."

Edmund looked away, remembering. Sophia placed her hand in his, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"It's all right, Papa. You don't have to explain the rest. It's best to leave the past in the past. What's important right now is that all of those ugly skeletons are out of the closet."

She smiled tenderly. "I think you are a very brave man and I'm proud to be your daughter."

Edmund's arms went around her and the two embraced. When they were done he stood, wiping his eyes. "Enough rehashing the past," he said, clearing his throat. "You need to get ready for your young man's return."

"Yes, I do, don't I." Sophia's breath halted in her throat when she thought

of Ethan's return. They would go to Gretna Green and be married at last. Excitement washed through her, and she silently thanked God for answering her prayers.

"Do you love him, Sophia?"

Her eyes met his questioning ones.

"Yes, I do," she assured him. "But I'm not sure about him, Father. I know he loves me, he's just too stubborn to admit it."

"Someday you can explain all of this to me," Edmund muttered with a shake of his head.

Sophia grinned, standing to give her father a peck on the cheek.

"I will, Father. I will explain it all soon, I promise."

In her head she thought, *I'll explain about the baby, too.*

Shaking his head and muttering something about young love, Edmund walked out the door.

Sophia was left in the room, alone. Hope and apprehension warred within her until she thought her chest would burst.

Chapter 24

Ethan returned to his townhouse. The moment he walked through the door his butler announced he had a visitor. He marched to the parlor with impatient steps, a frown on his handsome face.

"Who the devil wants to see me now?" he muttered, knowing there could be more than a few people who would want to see for themselves if he was in fact ill or if he'd run out on his wedding.

He promised himself that if it were a curiosity seeker he'd throw the person out, and he wouldn't be gentle about it, either.

He rounded the corner, moving straight into the room with long, angry

strides, then stopped in his tracks.

"What are you doing here, Waverell?" he demanded, his eyes narrowing on his ex-best friend who was looking very comfortable, reclining in an overstuffed chair by the fireplace, a glass of fine brandy in his hand.

"I came to congratulate you, of course." Roger lifted his glass to Ethan in a toast. "And to receive my thank you."

"The only thanks you'll be receiving from me is when I thank you to get the bloody hell out of my house."

"Is that any way to talk to the man who single-handedly saved your sorry hide?" Roger demanded, sitting up straight.

"What the devil are you talking about?"

Roger grinned, relaxing back into the cushions. "I did such a first rate job you still don't get it, do you?"

He chuckled to himself as he sipped his drink.

"Hell and fire, Roger – spill it!" Ethan demanded, his patience at an end.

"You should see yourself, old man," Roger announced with a smile. "So done up over the girl you don't know whether you're coming or going."

"Roger – " Ethan growled, pushing up his sleeves as he advanced.

"All right, all right! I give!" Roger declared, throwing up his hand.

Ethan stopped in the middle of the room, his face a mask of fury.

"I was never serious about marrying Sophia, you ass. I did it just to make you jealous."

Ethan's face froze, his breath halted in his throat.

"Mind repeating that, Waverell?" He felt as if he'd just been kicked in the gut. Imagine, a Manchester being played the fool by a mere slip of a woman. He could almost hear Albert's derisive laugh. The thought made his blood pound in his temples.

Roger's eyes narrowed, suddenly serious. "You were behaving abominably, Ethan. Someone had to show you the error of your ways. If it weren't for me, you would have made the biggest mistake of your life today."

Ethan stared at Roger's smug face, a thousand questions running through his mind.

Roger was never serious. Did Sophia know Roger never intended to go through with the wedding? Or was she in on the plan from the beginning? Is she really carrying his baby, or was that just another lie to bring him to heel? Oh, yes. Albert was probably spinning in his grave right at this very moment.

"It was all a ruse?" he demanded.

Roger placed his drink on a nearby mahogany table and stood, approaching his friend so that they stood eye to eye.

"No, it wasn't a ruse, Manchester. I would have married Sophia if you hadn't come to your senses. I give you fair warning now – if you ever do anything to make her unhappy, so help me God, you will have me to answer to."

"Is she carrying my child or not?" Ethan blurted before he could think.

Roger chuckled and Ethan curbed the urge to throw a solid right to his chin.

"Hasn't she told you yet? Maybe she's waiting for the right moment. Have no fear, Manchester. Sophia is carrying your child."

The fight went out of Ethan in one large rush, the thought of becoming a father registering for the very first time.

Roger looked at him with pity. "I think you need a drink, old man. I'll pour."

* * * *

Sophia waited in the entrance hall at three, perched on a packed valise. She wore a traveling dress of dark blue wool, a long matching cape tied

around her slender throat. Her brow furrowed with worry, she wondered when Ethan would show. Beatrice and Megan were already gone, to where Sophia couldn't even begin to guess. It still hurt that Megan chose to desert her. After all, Sophia was more a mother to her than Beatrice was, at least until the last few months.

She closed her eyes and breathed deep, letting the anger and hurt flow through her and back out into the Universe again to be turned into energy. Lorna already said her good-byes, the two hugging and crying together as they packed her bag. Sophia assured her mentor that as soon as she was settled in to her new home she would send for her, so the farewell was temporary.

Why did it feel so permanent?

A loud knock at the door startled her so that she jumped to her feet, hurrying to the door. She stopped, centering her frazzled nerves before pulling it open.

Ethan stood on the other side, impeccable in a dark royal blue coat and black pants. His hair looked freshly washed, tied neatly at the back of his head. Sophia's heartbeat accelerated as they stared at each other, his face closed and inscrutable.

"Ready?" he asked.

Sophia nodded, turning to get her bag. He was right behind her though and easily lifted it from her cold fingers. She watched his broad back as he carried it out the door.

The carriage was polished black with Ethan's family crest emblazoned on the side. Without a word he helped her into the rich appointments, throwing her bag up to be stowed away by the driver. Climbing in after her, he pounded on the roof and they were off.

Scenery passed in a blur, Sophia's nerves stretching tighter with every passing mile. Ethan sat on the opposite side of the rolling carriage, his features so dark and foreboding that she decided not to talk to him, let alone ask why he was in such a dark mood. She caught him staring at her stomach and placed her hand over it. His gaze went to the window, his eyes even darker than before.

He couldn't know about the babe, could he?

The thought made her gulp. Her fingers worried at the strap of her reticule, thoughts flying through her mind.

Should I tell him now, or wait until later?

She couldn't stomach the thought of him marrying her for the sake of the child. She wanted him to admit that he did indeed love her. If she told him now, she would never be certain of his love.

She was ignorant of the fact that Ethan already knew, and that he was waiting for her to tell him. With every passing mile he grew more impatient, imagining that she was making him even more the fool.

The trip to Gretna Green was made in silence.

It was almost dark when the carriage stopped in front of the parson's house, the sun having set an hour before. Ethan jumped to the ground, stalking to the modest cottage, pounding on the door with an impatient fist. An elderly man with receding gray hair and a napkin tucked in his shirt collar opened the door.

"We need to get married," Ethan commanded.

"I'm in the middle of my supper, young man," the parson said, gesturing to the napkin that rested over his protruding belly.

"My apologies, but this is an urgent matter," Ethan countered, his tone implacable.

"Ethan, let the poor man finish his supper," Sophia called from the open carriage door, mortified at his lack of courtesy.

He turned, impaling her with his glittering blue eyes.

"Please forgive my fiancée," Ethan said into the silence. "This is an urgent matter."

The parson gazed at Ethan a moment before capitulating, yanking the napkin from his collar.

"I can see that you are an impatient lad," he said, disapproval heavy in his voice. "So let's get this done."

The parson disappeared into his home as Ethan approached the carriage.

"Come Sophie," he commanded, his arms outstretched.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Ethan," Sophia hissed in outrage. "Apologize to that poor man at once."

"You are not yet my wife, so I suggest you measure your words with care," Ethan threatened, his voice smooth yet menacing.

Sophia gasped as his large hands went around her waist, lifting her from the carriage with ease. He set her on the ground so hard her teeth rattled.

"Come my dear," he said, linking his arm with hers. "Let's not keep the poor old parson waiting."

His arm was steel around her waist as he steered her into the small cottage. She bit her lip to keep silent, just barely curbing the urge to argue. Her mind barely registered the worn carpet and faded curtains that hung from sooty windows, the smell of some kind of peasant stew hanging in the air. Ethan brought her to stand before the parson, his wife by his side in the sparsely furnished living room.

"Have at it, preacher."

Sophia's head swiveled to Ethan at his rude pronouncement, her mouth open to protest. The parson opened his bible and before she could say a word she was being instructed to repeat after him to love, honor, and obey. Ethan's firmly spoken words were clipped, and then suddenly she was in his strong embrace, his lips on hers in a hot, quick kiss that left her breathless. As soon as the embrace was over Ethan paid the parson, adding his bold signature onto a piece of paper.

"Sophie."

Startled, she looked at him. He held a pen for her to use. She signed her name where he pointed, her hand suddenly shaking. Without a word he took her elbow, marching her resisting body out the door. She muttered a quick apology to the disapproving parson's wife as she was ushered out

the door. Ethan lifted her back into the carriage and climbed in after her, pounding on the roof. The carriage was off with a jolt.

"What the devil was that all about?" she demanded once she caught her breath.

"We were just married, my dear," Ethan answered, lighting a small lamp by the door.

The light cast eerie shadows on the interior of the carriage, making his face take on a sinister glow.

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"What I wanted —" Sophia stopped, alarm bells going off in her head. "I thought we both wanted this."

Ethan shook his head, his cynical smirk warning Sophia of his mood.

"You tried to get me to believe that I wanted this. But it won't work."

"I don't understand you."

"Ah, but I understand you perfectly, my dear. So why don't you make your big announcement?"

"What are you talking about, Ethan?"

"Don't play coy with me. Your ex-fiancée paid me a visit today." Ethan ignored Sophia's gasp. "He was pretty proud of himself. It seems your little scheme worked, didn't it? I fell right in with your plans."

"It wasn't my plan, it was Roger's," Sophia insisted, her voice soft, a lump in her throat.

"So you do admit there was a plan," Ethan pounced, his eyes glittering in the lamplight.

"Roger suggested it after you left The Enchanted. He thought that if he made you jealous you would realize your mistake."

"And you went right along with it."

Sophia had the grace to blush at his accusation. "You make it sound evil, like it was some kind of sinister plan."

"Wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't." Sophia paused, looking out the window into the inky night before looking back at Ethan's mocking face. "Roger asked me to marry him."

"And you accepted."

She was surprised at the venom in his voice.

"I told him I would think about it," she corrected, becoming angrier herself. "You left me. I had nowhere to go, no one to turn to."

"Why didn't you go back home to your parents?"

"I did!"

"Yes, and Roger was with you."

Sophia sputtered, indignant. "Yes, Roger was with me! I noticed you couldn't get away from me fast enough."

"That was only after you refused my proposal."

"Ha! That was no proposal. That was an insult. No decent woman would have accepted that proposal. How dare you offer that to me!"

"Any other woman would have been thrilled to be my mistress."

"Not me."

"Why not you?"

"Because I had more than myself to consider!" she shouted, totally enraged.

Ethan pounced at her, grabbing her by the shoulders. She cried out as his face loomed just inches before hers.

"Say it," he demanded, shaking her. "Say it, damn you!"

"Stop it, Ethan!"

"Tell me why you had more than yourself to consider!"

Sophia went still, her eyes wide as the blood drained from her face.

"You know," she whispered.

"Say the words," Ethan demanded.

"I'm pregnant," she admitted, and he immediately released her, sitting back on the other side of the rocking carriage.

"Finally, madam, we get to the truth," he said with a triumphant smile.

"When did Roger tell you?"

"At the church this morning."

Sophia's heart plummeted, her worst fears realized. Ethan married her because of the baby, not because of his love for her. He still did not believe in the Fated Lover's Line. He still did not believe they were fated for each other.

"You knew about the baby when you came to me."

"Yes."

"If Roger hadn't told you about the baby you would have married Megan."

Ethan didn't respond.

Sophia took his silence as a confirmation. Her heart felt as if it had shattered into a million pieces, the shards digging at her ribs. She gazed unseeing out the window. She tried to curse Roger, to blame him, but could not. She knew he felt he'd done the right thing.

"You must hate me," she whispered, not caring whether he heard.

"I married you."

Sophia looked at him, searching his expression. She did not see hatred in his eyes. It gave her hope.

"Why don't you hate me? You have every right to, you know. If everything you say is true, if every bit of what you've accused me of is factual, then you should be spitting on me. I'm such a conniving, evil woman that I've manipulated you into marrying me to protect my baby." She paused. "How do you know it's yours?"

"That's quite enough."

His face was thunderous, but she boldly continued. She had nothing left to lose.

"How do you know I didn't cuckold you on the ship? After all, I was the only woman on board. One of the crew could have had me – you never would have known."

"I said that's enough!"

"Or Roger. He could have had me. God knows he wanted me! What if this child in my belly is his, Ethan?"

She cried out as he grabbed her by the arm, yanking her across the interior of the carriage so that she fell onto his lap. His mouth descended on hers, his claim on her bold and all encompassing. But even in the onslaught she found herself answering his lips with hers, clinging to his warmth. They broke apart, both breathless.

"The child is mine," Ethan stated and chills ran up her spine at the possession in those words. "Never claim it otherwise again."

His lips descended on hers again and she was mindless.

The popping sound of gunfire broke them apart. Everything seemed to happen at once. The driver cried out, the carriage lurching as he fell to the ground. Ethan flung Sophia away from him with a curse, reaching under his seat for his weapons.

"Hang on, Sophie. We're in for a wild ride," he instructed as he checked his pistols.

"What's happening?" she asked, hanging on for dear life as the carriage picked up speed.

"My guess is we're being robbed," he muttered, blowing out the light.

The interior plunged into darkness.

"They shot our driver and the horses are spooked. Brace yourself for a crash."

As soon as the words were spoken the carriage lurched, becoming airborne for a moment before crashing to the ground. It rolled before finally coming to a stop in a nearby field.

Dizzy, Sophia was thankful when the carriage finally stopped. Fighting through layers of petticoats and gown material she managed to right herself. She found she was sitting on the roof.

"Are you all right?" Ethan was next to her, a bit disheveled but still as handsome as ever.

"Yes," she said. "Are you?"

His nod was his only answer.

"Whatever they ask for, give it to them. A few pounds and jewels aren't worth getting killed over."

"I quite agree," she murmured, her heartbeat accelerating as the sounds of horse's hooves grew near.

The door flew open and Sophia gasped as the muzzle of a huge rifle was pointed between her eyes.

"Give the guns over or yer lady 'ere loses 'er life," was the terse command.

"No, Ethan," Sophia exclaimed as he handed his pistols through the door. "Don't!"

"The sooner we get this over with the better," he muttered, obviously irritated that he had to give his weapons up.

"Out of the carriage."

Ethan climbed out first, turning and helping Sophia. The night was black but the sky was clear with a full moon. She could see the thieves clearly in the moonlight. There were three of them, with one lone rider a shadow in the distance. For some unexplainable reason she didn't fear the three nearby as much as the one in the distance. His energy filled her with dread.

"Empty yer pockets."

The three thieves waited as Ethan and Sophia tossed all their possessions to the ground.

"There," Ethan said, tossing his gold watch onto the pile. "That's all of it. Take it with our blessings."

The three men chuckled and prickles of fear shivered across Sophia's neck.

"Not just yet," one of the thieves said.

"Take the girl," the lone man in the distance commanded.

"No!"

Sophia breathed as Ethan shoved her behind him. She plastered herself to his broad back, her heart fluttering wildly.

"That's where I draw the line," Ethan said, his voice threatening. "You'll not be taking the woman."

The lone rider kicked his horse into motion, riding close as the two others leveled Ethan's pistols at him.

"That's where you're wrong, Manchester," the rider said.

Sophia gasped in horror, for the voice belonged to Prince Ali.

Chapter 25

Ethan cursed. For the first time in his life he felt pure naked fear snake down his spine. He did not care for the feeling one whit.

"Archibald Monroe," he growled.

"That's right, Manchester," Archie sneered.

"I should have finished you off in India."

"Yes, you should have. But you didn't." Archie chuckled, the high grating sound drifting through the trees. "Thanks to your misplaced sense of honor I am alive and well." He paused, his smile gone. "You didn't really think you would get away with it, did you? You humiliated me in front of my people, trussing me up like some Christmas package, looking the fool! I think that deserves an answer."

"Your beef is with me, not Sophie," Ethan stated, standing tall and proud, his mind feverishly working on possible escapes. "Leave her out of this."

Archie shook his head with an amused chuckle.

"Wrong again, Manchester. Sophia is smack dab in the middle of this. You see, you stole my wife."

"I am not your wife!" Sophia shouted, coming out from behind the safety of Ethan's broad back. Silent until now, Ethan tried to push her back behind him again.

"Sophie be quiet," he commanded.

"I will not be quiet," she hissed, slapping his hands away. "I will not let the two of you talk about me like I'm not here!"

"What's the matter, Manchester? Having trouble handling my wife?"

"Look here you little weasel, I am not your wife!" Sophia yelled, pointing her finger at Archie. "You kidnapped me in India—I did not agree to

anything of the sort! And for your information Ethan and I were just married over the border, so you can just take your henchmen here and ride away. You're too late."

"Sophie!" Ethan hissed, pushing her roughly behind him again. "Shut up before you do any more damage than you already have!"

Archie was laughing so hard he failed to hear Ethan's terse instructions.

"Ah, this is rich," he giggled with glee. "Manchester, leg-shackled."

"That's right Monroe," Ethan stated. "Sophie and I are married. Take your men and be on your way."

"You are in no position to be giving orders, Manchester," Archie reminded him nastily.

He turned to his silent companions. "Get the girl."

"No!" Sophia cried as Ethan prepared for a fight.

Outnumbered, he still managed to inflict a large measure of damage before finally being subdued with a vicious right to the jaw. As two men held him to the ground, another grabbed Sophia.

"Let go of me!" she cried, arms and legs flailing as the ruffian carried her to his horse. "Stop this at once!"

"Let him up," Archie instructed the men who held Ethan to the ground.

Ethan sprang to his feet, then stopped when Archie leveled a revolver at his chest.

"You will not get away with this," Ethan growled, the tin taste of rage choking him.

His eyes darted for a split second to where Archie's men were tying Sophia to a horse. She struggled against them, planting her foot square in the stomach of one of the men so that he ended up on his backside in the dirt. A rush of pride washed over him, then was quickly replaced with overwhelming frustration and fear. He knew he had to save Sophia, knew he was failing.

"Oh, but I will get away with this, Manchester," Archie sneered. "You see, I am not quite as honorable as you. I will make sure I leave nothing behind."

The pistol in his hand barked. Sophia screamed as the report of the gun echoed through the forest, Ethan flying backwards, landing on the cold, hard ground, unmoving.

"Tie her up."

"No," Sophia breathed, her wide eyes riveted on Ethan's still form.

Wild, she struggled with the man tying her hands together, needing to get to Ethan's side, but she was no match for the thieves. That didn't seem to matter, though, for suddenly she felt as if she had the strength of many, swinging her fists and feet at anything that moved, until finally the mob subdued her, muttering as they tied her hands and legs together, throwing her over the side of a horse. She was gagged, her cries unheard.

They traveled for hours, silent in the dark of night and keeping to the shadows. Sophia lost track of time and had no idea which direction they went. Grief threatened to overwhelm her and she fought the tide of tears. She could not get the image of Ethan flying backward through the air and landing on the ground out of her head. It played over and over again before her eyes. Emptiness filled her soul. She couldn't scream. It was like she had no feelings left inside. She wondered if she was as dead as Ethan.

Her mind recoiled at the thought. He can't be dead! But even as she thought the words, her mind's eye could see the bright red stain blossom on his pristine white shirt as he flew through the air.

No, he can't be dead. If he were dead I'd know it, wouldn't I? I would feel it, and I don't. I don't feel anything but blackness. Ethan, if you are still with me, let me know.

Oh, please Ethan – hear me!

* * * *

Ethan's eyes fluttered open. He groaned from the searing pain in his shoulder. He didn't have to move to know he'd been shot, remembering the bullet slamming into him with enough force to knock him from his

feet to the forest floor.

Gritting his teeth against the pain he made it to his feet, stumbling as the world tilted wildly. He staggered to the overturned carriage, gasping for breath from the exertion. Hot pain shot through his chest every time he moved, blackness at the edges of his vision. Silence was all around him, not even a wind to rattle the leaves of the trees on this night. Frustration ran through him as he thought of being stranded here for hours, not knowing when another late night traveler would come by. Every minute took Sophia farther away from him. He had to think of something.

A faint noise caught his attention and he stilled, listening. It came again, the faint clink of a harness. Searching through the darkness he spied the vague outline of a horse next to the road. He recognized it as one of the horses from his carriage. He approached the frightened animal slowly, fighting to remain conscious as he whispered soothing words to the beast. The horse tossed his head at the scent of blood, but Ethan was able to grab onto its harness before the animal bolted. Gasping from pain that shot through him as he climbed onto the horse's back, he turned the beast toward London, praying he would catch up to Archie in time.

* * * *

Noise in the entry hall interrupted Roger from his dessert; a lovely redhead named Ginger.

"My lord, what has happened to you?" he heard his butler, James, cry from the other room.

Roger paused, his lips halfway to his date's inner wrist as his ears picked up the response.

"Just get Roger – now."

"Roger honey, I think someone's here," Ginger whispered, removing her arm from Roger's hands.

Before he could reply the door slammed open, Ethan staggering inside. Ginger screamed at the frightening sight as Roger jumped to his feet.

"Good God, Ethan! What happened?"

"Archie," Ethan gasped, falling into a chair.

Roger's movements were quick, with one nod of his head James was showing Ginger out the door. Roger strode to Ethan's side, kneeling before him to look at the wound.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Archie waylaid us on our way back from Gretna Green," Ethan managed to get out between gasps of breath.

"My God — he has Sophia, doesn't he," Roger demanded. At Ethan's short nod, he swore. "Damn it Ethan! You were supposed to take care of her!"

Ethan's chuckle turned into a groan of pain. "I was outnumbered, old man. I did the best I could."

Roger sighed, raking his hand through his thick hair. "I know, Ethan. Let me get the doctor."

He moved to stand but Ethan's hand on his arm stopped him.

"No time for doctors," he rasped. "It's got to come out now. I've already wasted enough time getting here. He could have her aboard a ship by now."

"But I'm not a doctor!"

"You must do this."

Roger's eyes met Ethan's intense stare for a moment. He stood and shouted for James. The butler appeared instantly, as if he'd been outside the door waiting.

"James, we need towels, tweezers, bandages, alcohol, and anything else you think might come in handy. Hurry."

James turned and strode out the door, no questions asked.

Roger went to a small table that held an assortment of bottles filled with liquor and glasses. He poured some dark amber liquid into a glass and handed it to Ethan.

"Drink this," he instructed.

Ethan took the glass and downed it in one long gulp. James returned. In his arms were towels, bandages, bowls and bottles. With swift efficiency he set everything up on a table nearby.

Roger picked up the long tweezers, spinning it around his fingers.

"I've never done this before, Ethan," he offered, a bit shaky.

"You'll do fine."

"If you'll excuse me, sirs," James efficient voice cut in. "But I may be of some assistance."

"Have you done this before James?" Roger asked, incredulous.

The butler nodded.

"Then have at it."

Roger gladly handed over the tweezers and stepped aside. James knelt before Ethan's strained, white face.

"This may hurt a bit, my lord," he told Ethan.

"Just do it," Ethan muttered.

James nodded. With a pair of sharp scissors he cut away the material of Ethan's shirt, his movements sure and swift. Next, he poured the contents of a bottle over the wound. Ethan's breath came out in a strangled hiss, his face twisted in pain, but he remained still.

"I'll have to probe for the bullet first," James explained before placing his finger in the hole.

Ethan groaned, throwing back his head, his teeth clamped together as beads of sweat broke out on his brow.

"It's deep, but I think I can get it."

He splashed more alcohol on the wound before toweling it off. He picked

up the tweezers.

Ethan closed his eyes, but despite his best efforts not to, a strangled cry escaped his parched lips as James dug for the bullet. Blood poured from the ragged hole. Roger picked up a towel and held it under the wound to absorb the sticky fluid.

"Ah," James murmured as he pulled out the slug.

With a light flick, he tossed the mangled piece of metal into a bowl then picked up a needle and thread.

Ethan's breathing was ragged, his head spinning, his shirt soaked with blood and sweat. Suddenly pink roses filled his head, the scent strong in his flared nostrils.

"Sophie," he sighed, closing his eyes and slumping back into the chair.

Breathing deep, the pain ebbed as he gave himself over to the beauty of pink roses.

Roger and James exchanged a silent look, watching as Ethan's face changed, pain replaced with serenity. James finished sewing up the wound and wrapped a bandage around Ethan's chest and shoulder before pronouncing the procedure finished.

"You should rest, my Lord," James admonished, placing the instruments back on the table. "You've lost a considerable amount of blood."

"James is right," Roger said as he helped Ethan to his feet. "Let me go find her, Ethan. You stay here."

Ethan was shaking his head before Roger finished. "Not a chance, Roger." He struggled to get his bloody coat back on. "This is personal. I'm going to finish this if it's the last thing I do."

Roger sighed. "Must you be so dramatic?" He took Ethan's coat from his shoulders. "At least let me get you a clean shirt. James?"

"On my way, Lord," James said, striding from the room.

"Where do you think he took her?" Roger asked.

"My first guess would be the docks." Ethan poured himself a drink with his good hand. "If I were Archie I'd run as fast as I could to my ship and get the hell out of the country. If he's caught here he'll be hanged. On his ship, as well as on his island, he's the ruler." He paused, draining his glass. "Knowing that, where would you go?"

James returned with a clean shirt, cutting off Roger's reply. He helped Ethan into the shirt, then pulled a hastily fashioned sling from his coat pocket and helped Ethan into that, too.

"God speed, sirs," he said as the two headed for the door. "Bring your wife home safe and sound, Lord Manchester."

Ethan stumbled at the word, *wife* .

"Good God, Roger," he said in shock. "I'm a married man."

Roger chuckled, moving to slap him on the back and stopping just in time.

"Congratulations, old man," he said instead with a grin. "It's about time you realized it."

* * * *

Sophia sat on one of the many docks of London, bone weary. She wasn't restrained anymore but there were so many of Archie's men gathered around her she knew escape was impossible.

The trip seemed to take forever. She knew it was the dead of night from all the unsavory characters out and about. These people probably never saw the light of day, preferring to keep to the shadows. She was the recipient of many lewd stares and remarks. If not for the crowd of burly thugs around her, she knew she would not have made it through the night. In a strange twist of fate, Archie's men were saving her life.

She was relieved the pain had finally ebbed. Ethan's pain entering her consciousness told her that he was indeed still alive. Hurt, but still breathing. She'd sent him pink roses, hoping it would sooth him. It must have done some good, for now all she felt was an ache around her shoulder.

She prayed he would get here soon. She sent him pictures of the dock and the surrounding buildings, frustration welling up within her as she realized that they could be anywhere—the docks seemed to go on with no end in sight. Unless she could give Ethan some unusual landmark to go by, it might take him hours to find her.

They would have cast off immediately but Archie decided at the last minute to do some business and get supplies, supremely confident that Ethan was dead and no longer a threat.

She'll never forget his callous, cold words.

Manchester's probably wolf food by now, so what's the rush? I'm feeling lucky. I think I'll do some business before we leave.

If it weren't for the fact that Sophia knew for certain that Ethan was alive she would have been inconsolable. As it was, she just stared at Archie's smug expression, her eyes glittering her hatred, wishing she could send him to Hades.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud commotion getting steadily closer. As she squinted into the darkness a wagon appeared, loaded with wooden barrels. Archie jumped from the wagon seat and strolled over to Sophia as his guards rushed to unload.

"Ah, these lackeys in England," he said with a chuckle as he approached.

Sophia turned her back on him.

"They don't know enough to load their cargo onto their vessels while it's still light. We lifted this load of fine English brandy right from beneath the noses of the Queen's men! Imagine them thinking that because the casks have the royal seal on them that no one will steal them. Knaves, that's what they are."

Sophia whirled back to face him. "You stole the Queen's liquor? Are you daft? You'll have the Royal Navy after you!"

"Worried about me, wife?" Archie taunted.

"Don't be absurd! I couldn't be happier. When the Royal Navy is through with you, you'll be dead! I hope you rot in Hades for all the grief you've

caused me. And I repeat this again – I am not your wife!"

"We will settle this once and for all when we are well out to sea, my dear," Archie promised, retribution glittering in his beady eyes. "For now I need to oversee the loading of my brandy."

He turned and yelled, "Guards! Take my wife on board. See that she is locked in my cabin."

Chapter 26

"I will not –" Sophia started to protest, but Archie's command silenced her.

"Immediately!"

Before she could protest further, she was grabbed by two men, each taking an arm and pulling her behind them. She kicked and screamed, knowing that no one would even turn around to check on her welfare. They easily overpowered her and soon she was on the ship, dragged below deck and thrown into a small, dark room, the door slamming behind her, the key turning in the lock.

"Bloody hell!"

Her mind railed – *not again!*

But it was oh, so different this time. This time it was Archibald Monroe who had her. It was his ship, his cabin.

Vivid memories assailed her in the blackness. Ethan sauntering around naked, the fierce storm that brought them together as lovers, the voyage home, when they'd been as close as two people could be.

She put her hand to her belly. The proof of their joining rested in her womb. She had to protect that life at all costs. She shuddered to think of what Archie would do to her once he discovered her condition.

She fumbled about in the dark until locating matches. Lighting one she found a lamp and lit it, bringing the room into view.

She bit back a cry of dismay. The room was barely fit for habitation. Small and dirty, the furnishings were sparse, with only shelves and a rickety narrow wooden bed in a corner. Whereas Ethan's cabin was neat and serviceable, Archie's was barren and soiled. She wondered at the filth, knowing from living at his palace that Archie's penchant was for cleanliness and neatness.

Maybe she'd been put in the wrong room. Maybe she was in another part of the ship entirely, forgotten.

And maybe pigs had wings.

A key grating in the lock had her bracing to face the person on the other side. She knew who it was, could feel his evil presence from the other side of the heavy wooden door.

"Ah, I see you've made yourself at home," Archie murmured, his voice dripping sarcasm as he stepped through the door, locking it behind him and pocketing the key.

"It's a hovel."

"Yes, I quite agree with you," he said, nodding with an unrepentant grin.

"There was no time to wait for better accommodations. This ship was ready to set sail and I was in a bit of a hurry, so—" he shrugged.

"Why were you in such a bloody rush?"

"Why, to rescue you from Manchester, of course."

"You have mistaken me for a fool," Sophia sneered, her arms crossed in front of her. "I don't believe that for a moment."

"I can see that."

Archie's mad grin never wavered. Sophia fought the urge to slap it from him.

"Didn't Manchester ever tell you about me?"

"Why would my husband concern himself with a little man who thinks

he's a prince from India?" Sophia scoffed.

Archie's grin faded. "Take care, wife," he growled, anger fast replacing his good humor. "You know how capable I am of punishing you if you step too far across the line."

Sophia remained mute, but her eyes still glittered her animosity.

"I told you once that I was from London. My father worked for Manchester's father. My father slaved for that bastard Albert for years, working his hands raw to please him." His breath was ragged from his impassioned words.

"Manchester never gave my father his due. Never! Not once did Albert ever say thank you, or give my father a bonus for a good day's work. Finally my father took matters into his own hands. He recovered what was his due."

"His due?"

"Money."

Sophia's eyes flared for a moment, her only sign of understanding.

"He took money that was owed to him, that was rightfully his. Manchester deserved to have his precious money taken from him! If once he would have acknowledged my father's worth none of this would have happened. As it was, when Manchester found out, he had my father thrown into debtor's prison. There was no way my father could repay the debt, so he remained in prison."

"All he had to do was give the money back," Sophia challenged, "And he would have been freed."

"Haven't you heard a word I've said? That money was rightfully his," Archie cried, spittle spewing from his lips. "He would not give it back. He remained in prison until the day he died."

"So your father died in prison," Sophia sniffed. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Have patience, wife," Archie growled, plainly irritated that his

impassioned speech failed to move her. "He told me where the money was. I invested it in secret accounts in other countries. Soon I was wealthy beyond my wildest dreams."

"Money is not the answer to life's problems."

"I am well aware of that! My father was dead by the time I made my fortune. He never knew of my success. I vowed on his grave to get my revenge."

"So, go after Ethan's father, Albert. He's the man you have to settle with, not Ethan. He had nothing to do with this."

"Ethan's father is dead, as you well know," Archie growled. "Don't be obtuse, my dear."

"You started your palace long before Albert died," Sophia reminded him.

"I did. My plan was to ruin the entire Manchester family and that's exactly what I've done. With Ethan out of the way the company is yours. I will have his ships at my disposal, making me the largest exporter of tea in the world! Countries will have to bow down to me to get their precious leaves."

He giggled maniacally, rubbing his hands together in glee. Sophia swallowed hard. A shiver of naked fear snaked down her spine.

A sudden shout from above wiped the smile from Archie's face. Hope welled in Sophia's chest as Archie swore, digging the key from his pocket.

"What the devil is wrong now?" he muttered, unlocking the door and throwing it open. "What is it?" he shouted.

"Carriage comin' fast, sir," a voice called. "Bearin' the Empire Shipping crest!"

"Bloody everlasting hell! How could Waverell have known?" Archie blurted, angry and puzzled.

Sophia bit back a knowing grin, blood surging in her veins. She started when he whirled on her suddenly, pointing his thin finger at her.

"You!"

"What?"

Archie didn't answer. He ran to the bed, dragging a small box from beneath it. Rummaging around he found a length of rope. Tugging on it, an evil smile lit his face.

"Yes, this will do," he murmured.

Sophia stiffened as he rose and approached her.

"Show me your hands," he commanded, a snarl on his lips.

"That isn't necessary," Sophia blurted with a vigorous shake of her head, backing up.

"I don't give a bloody damn what you think," he advanced closer.

"Really, you don't have to do this," Sophia backed away until her back came up against the wall. "Just keep me locked in here. Roger will never know I'm on board."

Her plea fell on deaf ears. Archie grabbed her wrists and pulled them together, wrapping the thick rope around them as she struggled.

"Perfect," he breathed when he was satisfied.

He grabbed her by her bound wrists and pulled her behind him as he walked out of the cabin.

"Why are you doing this?" Sophia asked between gasps of breath, pulling away from him with all her strength.

"Why for leverage, of course." His steps did not falter as he made his way above deck.

"I'm a hostage."

"How perceptive you are, my dear," Archie countered as they came out on deck.

He dragged Sophia across the deck, stopping at the railing just in time to see Roger step from the carriage.

Sophia opened her mouth, a glad cry on her lips, but Roger's quick shake of his head clamped her jaw closed.

"Roger Waverell," Archie called. "To what do I owe the honor of your presence?"

"You know damn well why I've come, Monroe," Roger's deep voice boomed across the open space, echoing into the distance. "I've come for the girl."

"You must be daft to think you can take her from me," Archie countered. "Who do you think you are? You are only one man against my entire crew."

"But I am not alone," Roger countered cryptically.

He stepped to the side and the door to the carriage opened again. Sophia's hungry eyes searched, her breath caught in her throat for a split second before a booted leg appeared. Another followed, and then her eyes drank in the sight of Ethan's blond head as he stepped from the vehicle.

Her soft cry of relief was drowned out by Archie's high shriek of recognition.

"Manchester! It's you!"

"That's right, Monroe," Ethan's rich voice was like a caress to Sophia's ears.

"I thought I'd killed you!" Archie shouted, his knuckles white as he gripped the railing.

"Sloppy work, Monroe," Ethan taunted. "You should have stayed and finished the job instead of running off like the coward you are."

"I am not a coward!" Archie shrieked, his voice shrill. Sophia winced from the grating sound.

"You can have your ill-gotten gains, Monroe," Ethan's commanding voice boomed. "All I want is Sophia."

Archie threw back his head, his high laugh echoing in the thin night air.

"So it seems I am in possession of the most valuable cargo," he drawled, caressing Sophia's arm.

She jerked away from his slimy touch.

"Too bad, Manchester. You still seem to think your brawn is superior to my brain. This time it will cost you dearly. You see my ship is already loaded and ready to depart. There is nothing you or your friend there can do to stop me."

"That's where you're wrong, Monroe. If you bother to look behind you, you'll see that one of my ships has you blocked in."

Archie swore viciously, his head whipping around, his eyes widening as they lit on the sight of The Enchanted one hundred feet away. Her cannons were trained on the deck of his ship. He swallowed heavily at the sight of the barrels gaping at him, waiting for him to make the wrong move.

"Give me the girl, Monroe," Ethan's voice rang out into the suddenly still air.

Archie's gaze broke from the ship to Sophia's profile. She gazed at the ship in the distance with loving eyes, her lips curled into a wistful smile. She missed the pure evil that crossed Archie's face.

"All he wants is the girl," he murmured.

Sophia gasped at the menace in his words, her eyes meeting his. One look told her everything she needed to know. With a strangled cry she jumped back from the hand that snaked out to capture her. She was too late, a split second too slow. His grip tightened on the material of her gown, slowly bringing her resisting body closer as his fingers worked on the cloth like the talons of a vulture on a choice kill. She fought with primal strength but was no match for his sudden might. In his dementia he had the strength of ten men.

"Take your hands from her!" Ethan's voice boomed from the dock as Archie took Sophia, kicking and screaming, in his arms.

"No, stop. Put me down this instant!" Sophia demanded, knowing his intention as if she read his mind.

She struggled in his arms, fighting him, all the while knowing it was no use.

"You want her Manchester?" Archie shouted, his steps awkward as he carried his struggling prize to the railing. "Then swim for her!"

Sophia screamed as Archie threw her over the side of the ship.

The last thing she heard before hitting the water was Ethan's scream of terror.

Chapter 27

Silence. The silence was deafening. Bubbles raced by her ears, the only sound to be heard as she sank into the icy, murky depths of the Thames.

She didn't know which way was up.

Her lungs burned. The urge to take a breath was almost overpowering. She tried to swim but her bound hands and the heaviness of her wool traveling dress tangling around her legs made it impossible, pulling her down.

Thoughts tumbled through her mind, pictures, too. They ran in front of her eyes so fast – images of her as a child, flashes of happy times with her father and sister, Ethan's face as he leaned closer to kiss her in the fountain.

A different kind of pain filled her burning chest when she thought of the sweet little life nestled within her. She knew her life was over. She grieved for the lost life of her child.

I'm sorry little one, her mind cried as the burning in her lungs grew. *I'm so sorry. Forgive me.*

Blackness filled her eyes. She struggled until the very end, when the

blackness won, engulfing her.

* * * *

"Sophia!" Ethan saw his entire life flash before his horrified eyes as he watched Sophia tumble into the water.

In that split second he knew she had been right all along. It didn't matter – what anyone thought about their relationship. It didn't matter, what his father had beat into him all those years ago. Pride be damned! This Manchester was not going to make the same mistakes his forefathers made. This Manchester was breaking free from the bonds that held him for so many years.

He loved her. The thought of spending one more moment without her was inconceivable, let alone, the rest of eternity.

His heart in his throat, he ripped at his coat and sling, tearing them from his body.

"No, Ethan!"

Roger's voice was impassioned but Ethan didn't listen, shrugging off Roger's restraining hand before diving into the cold water.

He cleaved through the water with powerful strokes, his only thought to find her before it was too late. The searing pain in his shoulder was nothing compared to the pain in his chest at the thought of losing her. Frustration and fear clawed at him as he searched, knowing with every passing second that it would soon be too late.

He was forced to the surface, his lungs burning as he took in great gulps of air. He hesitated only long enough to find Roger, who was standing on the dock, his face a mask of agony.

"Open fire!" Ethan commanded before diving again.

Terror gripped him, threatening to choke him as he searched. Suddenly he remembered their special link, their bond.

Sophia, his mind shouted, where are you? Help me find you !

Silence was his answer. Naked panic threatened to overwhelm him.

God, oh God please let me find her in time! Let me tell her that she's been right all along, that I can't live without her.

He felt something solid bump into him, then start to slide away. He reached out and grabbed it, hope welling within him when he felt human clothing. Swiftly, his strokes long and powerful, he made his way to the surface, dragging her with him. With super human strength he pushed the body to the surface, gasping for air when his head broke through the plane of water.

The chaos of cannon fire greeted him, but he ignored it, his eyes staring at Sophia's blue face.

"Don't leave me," he commanded, swimming for the dock while holding her limp and rolling head above water.

Roger was there to help Ethan get Sophia out of the water onto the dock. His grim features mirrored Ethan's as he laid her on the wood, beginning mouth to mouth as Ethan pulled himself out of the water. Ethan took over as soon as he reached her.

Cannon fire boomed from the deck of The Enchanted, sending thousands of sparks flying through the air, looking like fireworks in the night sky. Men shouted and screamed, the explosions ringing in their ears.

The two men working over the still form on the dock heard nothing. Their single purpose was to breathe life back into Sophia's cold, wet body.

"Don't give up, Sophie," Ethan begged between gasps of breath, laboring to fill her lungs.

Roger untied the rope from her wrists, rubbing the chafed and bloody skin. He took Ethan's coat along with his own and laid them over her for warmth.

Time seemed to stand still. Seconds felt like hours.

Ethan gave up talking out loud to her, instead commanding her to waken telepathically.

Don't leave me, Sophie. Don't give up! Think of the baby. I thought you had

more determination than this! Fight, damn you – fight! After all we've been through – I won't let you give up now!

* * * *

Shouting. Someone's shouting at me. Make him stop, please. It's ringing in my ears.

She tried to put her hands over her ears but no matter how hard she tried, her arms refused to move.

I feel so weak, so tired. Please, Ethan, stop shouting at me. I'm trying to sleep.

Ethan sat back on his haunches, his eyes wide. *Trying to sleep? My God, Sophie – you're trying to die!*

He renewed his efforts, breathing into her mouth again and again, all the while shouting in his mind – *Wake up, Sophie! You can't sleep now!*

She started to cough and he could have cried for joy. He turned her onto her side, whacking her on the back as she expelled the water from her lungs.

"Thank God," Roger breathed, slumping with relief onto the dock.

"I'm awake, Ethan," Sophia croaked from her raw throat. "You can stop your bloody shouting now."

Roger looked from one to the other in confusion. "Shouting?"

Chuckles erupted from Ethan's lips; building until he threw his head back, laughing like he'd never laughed before, tears of joy running down his face as the burning wreckage of Archibald Monroe's ship reflected on his chiseled features.

Chapter 28

"You two look like hell."

Roger greeted Ethan and Sophia with his cryptic observation as he

sauntered into the bedroom, where the two were convalescing.

They lay next to each other on the bed in Ethan's townhouse; their backs propped up with mountains of pillows.

It was just a day after Archie tried to kill them both. Reports from the deck of The Enchanted assured them that Archibald Monroe was no longer a threat. There were no survivors.

The doctor had seen them both. Ethan's shoulder was re-stitched and a new sling was made for him. After a thorough examination Sophia was pronounced well, the baby, too. The doctor recommended bed rest for the pair.

"And good day to you, Roger," Sophia replied, her voice hoarse.

The doctor informed her it would take a day or two before her normal voice returned.

"What do you want, Waverell?" Ethan grumbled.

"Is that the thanks I get for saving your sorry hide?" Roger demanded, incredulous.

His overreaction made Sophia chuckle, then wince.

Ethan's brows furrowed. "You'll get no thanks from me," he declared. "It's your fault I ended up like this in the first place."

"My fault!" Roger exclaimed, his humor gone. "Just what the bloody hell do you mean by that?"

"You and your blasted plan, that's what. If you hadn't gone sticking your nose where it didn't belong, scheming to get me to marry Sophie, none of this would have happened."

Silence filled the room. Roger glanced at Sophia, swearing under his breath at her red face. His narrowed eyes went back to Ethan.

"Now you've gone and done it, ass. And this time you managed it all on your own."

Ethan glanced at Sophia. Her face in profile, her chin tilted in that stubborn way he had come to know so well. She refused to look him in the eye, instead taking a close interest in the pattern of the wallpaper. He sighed, rolling his eyes heavenward. He didn't intend to be cruel, he knew he still would have married her, but his thoughtless comment injured her feelings.

He'd be damned if he'd apologize in front of Roger, though. He closed his eyes, sending her pink roses. He heard her gasp of surprise before opening his eyes to find her smiling.

"Bloody hell, you're doing it again," Roger drawled, his voice laced with heavy sarcasm.

"Doing what?" Sophia asked.

"Talking to each other in your heads."

Sophia had the grace to blush as Ethan grinned unrepentantly.

"Bloody rude, if you ask me."

"Nobody asked you, old man," Ethan replied, his tone dry.

"I suppose I'll have to get used to it," Roger said with a sigh. "Since you two are married now."

"Just why have you graced us with your presence, Waverell?" Ethan demanded.

Roger didn't answer right away, instead loosening the cravat around his neck. He walked to the bed, making himself comfortable on the edge. When he finished settling in, his eyes went to Sophia.

"I came to talk to Sophia," he said, his lips curled into a soft smile, a smile that would have made any other woman sigh. "How are you doing, my dear?"

Ethan growled but Roger ignored him.

"I'm fine," Sophia assured him. "The doctor checked me over and pronounced me well. The baby's fine, too."

"Thank God for that," Roger breathed with relief.

"Are you quite through?" Ethan demanded.

"Not quite," Roger responded, not even bothering to look Ethan's way.

"Sophia, you've been through quite a bit these past few days. Are you sure we did the right thing?"

"What the bloody hell do you mean by that?"

Sophia's lips curled into a smile in answer to Roger's question. She knew what he meant. He wanted to know if she regretted marrying Ethan. She could have married him then perhaps none of this would have happened. Problem was, she knew that Ethan was the only man for her. There would never be another.

She glanced at Ethan's furious profile. Strong and lean, his brows furrowed over his blue eyes, he was the last man she would have envisioned ending up with.

The Fates decreed it differently.

"Yes, Roger. We did the right thing."

"Right then."

Roger jumped to his feet and sauntered to the door. Opening it, he turned in the doorway.

"You know where I am if you ever change your mind."

Sophia smiled. "Thank you, Roger. You are a good friend."

With a wink he was gone.

"Madam, I demand to know what that was all about."

Sophia's eyes met Ethan's narrowed ones. She bit her lip, unsure of where to start.

So much was unsettled between them. The last time they'd been alone

together was after their disastrous wedding, when they fought in the carriage. He knew she was pregnant with his child.

She knew the only reason he married her was because of the baby. That was why he fished her out of the water, too, not because of any great love for her, but because she carried his heir.

"Roger is a good friend," she murmured in response to his question. "He was just checking on my welfare."

"Do you have any reason to believe you are in peril?"

Only my heart, she admitted in silence.

"Ethan, leave this be. Roger came over for a friendly visit, nothing more. You have no reason to be upset with him." She purposely omitted the word *jealous* knowing that Ethan would have to care for her in order to feel jealousy.

The room fell silent. It felt so strange, sitting in bed with him like this. A clock on the wall ticked seconds by like a tsking mother. It seemed to grow louder and louder, until Sophia felt like she would jump out of her skin.

With a strangled cry she threw off her covers, intent on putting some space between them. A strong hand on her arm stopped her.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ethan demanded.

"I have to get out of here," Sophia cried. "I can't take another moment of this!"

"Another moment of what?"

"This!" She gestured, her arm sweeping over the bed. "Of us, laying here, silent as strangers!"

Ethan's chuckles filled the room as she turned her back on him.

"For someone who has a sore throat you sure like to talk," he commented. "Is it too quiet for you? Go ahead then, tell me about the weather. Or maybe we should talk politics?"

"Don't patronize me," she warned.

"I'm not in the least. You want to talk? Talk then."

She whirled to face him, her blue eyes glittering. "Fine. Let's get this over with then."

"Now you're speaking in riddles."

"I will try to make myself perfectly clear, sir. I know the only reason you married me is because I carry your child."

Ethan's eyes flared. "Is that what you think?"

"Of course. What else am I to think? You said as much in the carriage, right before Archibald Monroe appeared." She looked away. "It's not what I was hoping for, of course."

She straightened her shoulders, her eyes meeting his again. "But that is the reality of the situation."

"Oh it is, is it," he drawled with a wicked grin.

Sophia swallowed hard. When he looked at her like that her blood sang in her ears.

"Yes, it is," she emphasized. "So I will not make this any harder on us than it already is. I'll move into another room until the doctor gives me permission to get out of bed. After that I will move to one of your country estates. You can remain here at the townhouse. I will send word when the babe is born, in case you want to have a look at him – or her."

"You seem to have all the answers," Ethan commented, his knowing grin infuriating her.

"I do believe it is best for everyone involved," she insisted, her chin tilted.

"I see." Ethan's eyes bored into her with such intensity that she couldn't stand it. She looked away.

"Let's see where we are on all that, shall we? First off, my mother is currently staying at the only country estate I'd allow you to go to. I don't think she'd take too kindly to being ousted from a home she's familiar with. Second, you're too much of a troublemaker to be left alone."

Sophia gasped in outrage. "I am not!"

"You are too. From the first moment I laid eyes on you, you've turned my world upside down."

Sophia hung her head, at last admitting defeat. The next moment she was in his embrace, his good arm around her waist. Heart hammering wildly in her chest, her wide eyes locked onto his loving ones.

"You have been nothing but trouble since the day I met you," he repeated, his voice low and husky. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

His head lowered to hers and she closed her eyes, receiving his kiss. It was hot and searing, leaving her breathless and dizzy.

When she could speak again, she asked, "Then you don't mind being with me?"

Ethan chuckled, shaking his head. "Do I have to spell it out for you?" He gazed into her eyes and sighed. "I guess I do. I'm not very good at this sort of thing, so let me try it another way."

Sophia watched his face, waiting as he closed his eyes. Suddenly his voice was in her head.

You were right all along, you maddening girl. I love you, Sophie. I can't imagine life without you by my side.

She gasped as thousands of pink roses filled her head. Ethan opened his eyes and Sophia could read the uncertainty in their sapphire depths.

Ethan sighed. "You still don't understand, do you?"

He took her hand and with great care placed his palm over hers, uniting their Fated Lover's Lines. A jolt of electricity shot through them both, making them gasp. Sophia's eyes were wide.

"I do believe in the Fated Lover's Line," Ethan murmured, feeling a bit dizzy himself as he held her hand in his, their palms joined together. "I believe we are meant to be together. I love you, Sophia. Now and forever."

"Oh, Ethan! I love you, too," she whispered before throwing her arms around him and kissing him with all the love and passion within her.

When their lips finally parted she found herself on her back on the large bed, Ethan nestled between her thighs.

"I don't know," she murmured as Ethan rained hot kisses down her throat. "We shouldn't—the doctor—"

"Said we should stay in bed for a week," Ethan finished for her, his hot breath making her shiver. "What better way to pass the time?"

With a delightful, husky laugh she pulled him closer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Hope lives in Southern Wisconsin with her husband of fifteen years, two great kids, and a menagerie of animals. She loves working with kids, reading, writing, cooking, and throwing pots on a potter's wheel.

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