

Liquid Silver Books

DAUGHTERS OF ANISTA

CAPTIVE BRIDE

The background of the cover features a romantic illustration of a man and a woman in a close embrace. The man, with dark, curly hair, is seen from the side, looking up at the woman. The woman has long, flowing blonde hair and is looking away from him, her expression one of longing or perhaps a hint of sadness. They are both unclothed. In the background, a large, ornate stone building, possibly a castle or a grand estate, is visible under a warm, sunset-like sky. A small, dark object, possibly a bird or a piece of debris, is seen flying in the air between the couple and the building.

DANIELLE DEVON

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by Danielle Devon

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Dedication

For Kevin, keeper of my heart

Chapter One

"You want me to marry him."

It wasn't so much a question as a statement. Adianna paced the length of her father's drawing room, the train of her lilac gown trailing along behind her. The fire snapped and popped in the hearth, drawing her attention. Her gaze wandered upward to the painting of her beloved mother. How she wished her mother were here. Never more had she needed the comfort of her mother's arms, the wisdom of her mother's words.

Dear Mother, what am I to do?

On the far side of the room, her father sat behind his massive desk. A ring of thinning dark hair created a crown about his head so that his bald scalp shimmered under the firelight. She didn't have to look at him to know that the proposition weighed just as heavily upon him as it did upon her. She could see the despair lingering within his umber eyes. He let out an audible sigh, one so heavy that it seemed to shiver through his thick body. It sounded to her as if he too wished for an alternative.

"You've been promised to him."

As she stared at the painting, there was but one thought that weighed heaviest upon her. "I do not love him, Father."

"I know my dear, but in time you will grow to love him. He is a good, strong man. He will provide you with everything you need."

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"I need no man to provide for me Father. I am perfectly capable of providing for myself."

"Yes, yes, I know my dear. But you are a Princess, born to privilege and with that privilege comes certain obligations."

She nodded. She knew only too well. For generations women had been traded in marriage for riches, possessions and property. It was the way of the people of Alya, and she'd known that this day was destined to come.

"All right, Father."

He rose, crossed the distance between them and cupped her face in his hands. His dark eyes softened and a slow smile bloomed on his lips. "Someday you shall make a very fine Queen."

Adianna closed her eyes, turned her lips into his palm and whispered a kiss. "I suppose we shall see."

* * * *

Adianna stood at the window in her chambers looking down upon the rose gardens below. She could see the path that wound from the house, through a sea of pink roses to the small lake just beyond the garden. The swans would be nesting there, making their home in the water reeds and tending to their newborn cygnets.

Spring had finally broken through the cloak of winter. The air still held the faint chill from morning, but by noon the sun would add a touch of warmth to the land. How she would miss this place. She would miss watching the roses bloom each spring and the cygnets grow from little grey fluffs of feathers to stunning white swans. The House of Devlan and

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the land of Anista was the only home Adianna had ever known.

Tears welled in her eyes but she swallowed against them, refusing to let them fall. No, she would not cry. What good would it do to shed tears? Her tears would not save her from an arranged marriage. Her tears would not save her from a life spent in service to a man she did not love. Her tears would not keep her home.

Her chamber door swung open and slammed against the wall. She didn't turn around, because she knew all too well whom it was.

"Do you think he even considered me? Do you think that rotten old goat even considered me? No, of course he didn't! Everything is always Adianna, Adianna, Adianna."

At the mention of her name, Adianna turned away from the window towards her sister. Isadel's dark hair was pulled back into a thick, rope-like braid. It swept down her back, brushed against her hips. Her hands were propped defiantly on her hips. Heat radiated from her wicked dark gaze. Despite a quick flair of temper, Adianna shook her head. "It's not a privilege Isadel, it's a duty."

"Hah. It is indeed a privilege. One which you obviously do not deserve."

"Nor one I wish, but I have no choice." Adianna crossed the room to the dressing table, sat upon the hand-carved stool and picked up a comb. She ran it through the ends of her golden hair.

Isadel moved in behind her, took the comb from Adianna's hand and brushed it through her sister's hair. Her manner

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quieted; not calm, but calculated. Adianna was very aware of the difference. For there was nothing calm about her sister. She possessed the hottest temper and the fastest tongue in all the world of Alya. "Let me take your place Adianna. Surely the Prince has no preference as to which daughter he marries. A bride is a bride."

"Why would you wish such a thing, Isadel? Why would you want to spend your life with a man you do not love?"

"What has love to do with marriage? It's not his heart I desire; it is his palace. It is his servants, his riches. The Prince of Easton possesses more than any man in Anista could possibly conceive of."

Adianna turned, took the comb from her sister's hand. "You'd marry a man just for his riches?"

Isadel let out a little laugh then turned away. Her silk gown shushed quietly as she made her way to the window. She gazed out to the horizon. "I'd marry any man who would take me away from here."

Adianna rose, crossed to her sister and placed her hands upon Isadel's shoulders. "You have your whole life ahead of you. I'd not see you throw it away by taking my place as a bride in trade."

Isadel shrugged away, slipping out from under her sister's grasp. "You just want to see me kept prisoner here." Isadel turned on her heel and stormed toward the door.

Adianna let out a heavy sigh. Her sister was still so young, she knew very little of the world. Though she dreamed of far-off places and men with riches beyond imagination, Isadel knew not what she'd be giving up in such a trade.

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* * * *

The rain came down in great sheets, as if the heavens had opened to shed every tear it had held since the beginning of time. Huge waves rose up from the Savin Sea, like giant hands slapping against the ship. Great fists of water pounded against the hull until the ship cried out in long creaking moans. Men dashed about the slick deck, desperately working to secure the lines. Their commands bellowed out into the night as they struggled to be heard over the deafening storm. Below decks, Adianna lay still in her bed. She pulled the blanket up to her chin as she wound it through her clenched fists.

She could hear the wind howling outside. Like a banshee, its high-pitched squeals echoed through the night sending a shiver shuddering through her body. She half expected the wild winds to grow claws and rip through the ship.

Damn the sea ... she thought with bitter disgust as she closed her eyes. *Damn the Prince of Easton.* She rocked with the waves, listened to the howling and tried to ignore the churning in her stomach.

And then, as quickly as the storm had come, it dissipated. The sky fell silent. The great waves disappeared, leaving only the slow, gentle lull of the tide. Adianna opened her eyes; let her gaze sweep about the cramped quarters. With the twin moons hidden behind the dark clouds, she was left near blind in the midst of the night.

With a deep sigh that was half discontent, half relief, Adianna pulled the warm quilt off of her body, swung her legs

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over the side rail of the bed and let her bare feet slap against the damp floor. If she never had to set foot on another ship again it would be too soon. She cast a glance at her maid asleep across the room. She could see only the outline of her body but the subtle, steady snore told Adianna that Shala was still sleeping. She reached out, running her hands over the intricate stitching of the woven quilt until her fingers found the soft cloth of her overcoat. She stood and slipped into the fur-lined coat then tiptoed quietly up the narrow staircase to the upper deck.

Once on deck, Adianna gulped in a draft of salted sea air. She didn't like being on deck anymore than she liked being under it, but at least here she didn't feel as if she was smothering in her own toxic breaths. She felt the ship give a violent shiver under her feet. She closed her eyes, but the sickness rose.

She dashed to the side of the ship and threw up what was left of her supper. Slowly she pulled back, swiped her hand over her lips as she looked about. Embarrassment colored her cheeks, but thankfully the crew was too busy with their work to take much notice of her.

She let out another long sigh then made her way across the slick deck to the helm where the Captain stood silently staring. She came up beside him, let her gaze follow his over the dark sea. His amber eyes were silent and steady. Adianna cleared her throat and pulled her coat tighter about her body as the night chill fought its way against her skin. "Captain?"

He kept his gaze locked on the great spans of water before him. He was a big man, tubby around the center, but solid

through the chest and arms. He towered above his crew by nearly a foot and if his size didn't alarm you, the sheer husky power in his voice would disarm you.

"She's not done with us yet," he said softly. "Mark my words, Your Highness; she's not done with us at all."

"Splendid," Adianna muttered beneath her breath. She wasn't sure she could stomach another round with the restless sea. "How much longer until we reach port?"

"We should be at Easton's borders and into the Port of Kalon in a few weeks time, Your Highness." He stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Good, I shall look forward to setting foot on solid ground again."

He held back a chuckle, but allowed a small smile to rise on his lips. No doubt he had seen her disgrace herself over the side of the ship a time or two. "The sea does not agree with everyone."

"I think we can say with certainty that the sea and I have not seen eye to eye on this voyage."

"That we can, Your Highness." This time he let a full smile spread on his lips. It warmed his face and seemed to make him less foreboding, even approachable. "Perhaps horseback better suits Your Highness."

"Indeed."

Adianna turned away and let out a deep sigh as her gaze drifted off over the waters. In the calm after the storm, with the clouds moving away, the sea seemed darker. Silent. Even more deadly than it had seemed only moments before. It wasn't a welcome change. It disturbed her. She turned back

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and managed a smile. "I must try and get some rest. It shall be a long night with all this wretched rocking."

He nodded. "Sleep well, Your Highness."

She bid him good night and headed back across the deck. She drew in a deep breath, as if it might be her last and descended the steps down the narrow hallway. She closed the door behind her and let out a heavy sigh. As a Princess, she had expected better accommodations. The floor was always wet, the bed always cold and the food too heavily salted and stale. But she could not complain; after all, it was the best her father could afford. Wars had seen their small country fall to near poverty. They had little money for finery or grand ships. It was only through their treaties with great countries such as Easton that they kept their people fed. Perhaps that was why she had not fought against her arranged marriage. She could not deny her people the prosperity of Easton's lands for the sake of her own heart.

She slipped out of her coat and laid it across the foot of the bed. Sighing grimly, she lifted the blanket, settled herself beneath its heaviness and rested her head against the coarse pillow. It would be weeks until they reached Easton's lands.

As relieved as she was to be heading toward the shore, she dreaded reaching Easton, and what awaited her there.

Chapter Two

She woke much too early the next morning. She had slept very little over the past few days and knew her poor eyes must be lined with fatigue. Her body ached terribly. She yawned, stretched stiffly and managed to pull herself up. She knew it was hopeless to try for further rest, for when the crew went to work their shouts and laughter could wake the dead.

Adianna paused for a moment and listened. Something was different. There was no sounds of song or laughter; just an eerie silence that caused fingers of fear to tighten across her chest. She looked to her lady's maid who was still sleeping soundly.

"Shala, Shala, wake up."

Shala rolled over and groggily yawned and stretched. "Yes, my lady?"

"Something is wrong, do you hear?"

Shala sat up and cocked her head to listen. "I hear nothing, my lady."

"Precisely." Adianna hurriedly draped her robe about her shoulders as she dashed to the door.

Shala was up and beside her in a matter of moments. "My lady, wait, I shall go for you."

"No, no, I'll go. 'Tis my ship."

Adianna rested a hand on Shala's shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Then she turned and rushed up the steps to the deck, her bare feet nearly slipping out from under her on the slick wooden planks.

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Dozens of crewmen scurried about the ship in a frenzy. Adianna reached out, snatching a crewman by the arm as he passed. "What is going on?"

"A ship of the dead," he whispered before he wrenched loose of her grip and scurried away.

She turned to see a ship as silent as the tombs of her forefathers floating directly before her. It rocked gently in the flowing currents of the sleepy sea, bending to the will of the waves without a hand to set its course. Adianna let out a tiny gasp. She could see bodies, silent and still, carelessly tossed about the ship's deck.

"Pirates."

The Captain placed a heavy hand on Adianna's shoulder, offering some momentary comfort. "Looks like a merchant ship. Blasted pirates probably killed them all, cleaned them out of their cargo."

"You will search it for survivors?"

"Of course, Your Highness. My men are pulling her in as we speak. You'd best head to your quarters."

"I wish to remain here. Perhaps I could offer some assistance."

"No, it's much too dangerous. Please return to your quarters, Your Highness."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he turned his gaze on her and the fury she saw there stopped her cold. He didn't give her time to argue as he stalked away and began barking out orders to his crew.

She cast an aggravated glance at his back then headed back to her cabin. As she stepped into her quarters, a terrible

cacophony of cries echoed on the vast sea. Before she could turn to see what caused the commotion, a body came flying towards her, shoving her down. She fell to the floor, skinning the palms of her hands against the rough wood-planked floors. Her gown was twisted about her thighs so that the length of bare leg shimmered under the dusky light. She turned over abruptly and watched the stranger slam the door shut and brace himself against it.

Shala rushed forward. "My lady, are you alright? What is going on?"

Adianna scrambled to her feet and drew back her fist, prepared to smash it in the intruder's face the moment he turned around. She swore beneath her breath as the ship's boatswain turned toward her.

"Daniel, what are you doing?"

"A ship of the dead indeed. Blasted pirates, fooled us all," he muttered as he strode about the room. "Quickly, help me find something to bar the door."

Adianna stared blankly at Daniel, her mind a whirl of confusion and questions. "What?"

"Pirates," he repeated, his voice wrought with irritation and an unmistakable edge of fear. "Posing as the dead, they've overrun the ship."

"Oh my," she whispered. Above her, the crew let out such heart-wrenching screams that it brought tears to her eyes.

A heavy thud rattled the door, causing them to pause in fear. Another thud, the door shivered against its force. Adianna's horrified gaze met Daniel's. "It won't be long before they break down the door."

Shala hooked her arm through the Adianna's and held tight. "What are we to do, my lady?"

"Stay behind me," Adianna said.

"No, my lady, it is my duty to protect you."

"No, 'tis not. You stay back, Shala. They'll not hurt a princess"

One more blow and the door flew open. Splinters flew through the air and the flimsy lock dangled useless from the sheer force of the attack. Daniel stepped in front of her, his body serving as a shield. She peered over his shoulder as a dark figure appeared in the doorway, looming silently for a long moment before stepping inside.

Adianna drew in a deep breath as her gaze swept across him. The pounding in her chest grew to a fevered pitch. The intruder's dark mane of hair hung just above his shoulders, the tips curling slightly so that they brushed against his cheek. His eyes were dark, too dark in the shadows for her to see their true color.

A black mask rested over his face so that all she could see was the dark light glinting from his eyes and the pale lips that were pressed into a hard line. His eyes met hers, held for one long, breath-stealing moment before he turned away. She heard his rough, heavy voice filter in through the open door.

"Take her to my cabin," he said pointing to Adianna. "Tie the other two up with the rest of the crew."

"Aye, Captain," came a reply.

"They've taken my ship," Adianna whispered, her gaze still locked beyond the open door. She could see little more than

the dark hallway and the long line of shadows from the men just beyond.

Two huge men filed into the room, their bodies so thick and massive that they nearly filled her quarters. Daniel drew a knife from his belt, held it out before him. It looked small and ineffective compared to the swords the men clutched in huge fists.

"Don't come any closer," he warned.

The two men let out deep, heavy laughs that seemed to explode into the room. They took a step forward.

"Put the knife down, son and come along," one said, not unkindly.

Daniel took another step back. His eyes narrowed to dark slits of gold as he glared at them. "I said, don't come any closer."

The bigger of the two men let his hand slip over the hilt of his sword, poised to draw it at a moment's notice. Instinctively Adianna put herself between Daniel and the two men.

"I am Adianna, Princess of Anista and I demand to see your captain."

Again the two men let out a hoot of laughter. Her eyes narrowed. She turned, snatched the knife from Daniel's hand and lunged forward. The blade sliced across one of the brute's thick arms so that a small river of blood trickled from the wound. Her swiftness stunned the pirate so that he did not move for a moment. But as she lunged at him again his great fist came down upon her head and darkness engulfed her. The last thing she heard was his muffled curse.

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* * * *

"I gave orders that she not be harmed!"

Rydon paced the length of the room, his gaze shifting quickly from the woman on his bed to his crewman.

"She was giving me trouble, even stabbed me, see?" Hener turned so that Rydon could get a better look at the bandage on his arm.

"Giving you trouble? Look at her, Hener. A tiny thing like that couldn't possibly give anyone trouble."

"My apologies, Captain."

"All right, Hener, leave us."

Hener nodded and leaned forward in a gesture that was not quite a bow. "Aye, Captain."

Rydon turned to stare at the beauty asleep on his bed. He had bound her wrists and ankles to the rails. Her sleeping gown clung to her skin so that he could trace the delicate curves of her body. She was stunning indeed, a princess both in form and in station.

Her hair fell about her in flowing waves of gold. She wore nothing but the gown and a glorious oval topaz pendant encased in silver. Her skin was flushed with the soft glow of youth. He moved closer to her and admired the way her long lashes brushed across her skin.

A wayward strand of flowing hair slipped over her face so that her cheek was hidden beneath its veil. He brushed it back, his fingers trailing slowly against her skin. He felt a rush of warmth filter through his body. She drew in a deep breath and he watched the gentle rise and fall of her breasts.

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Blood pounded through his body like the storm waves had pounded his ship. He felt his cock swell, hardening in response as he devoured her with his gaze. He wanted her, the feeling so quick, so sudden, so powerful. Never before had he desired with such instant intensity. Even the most beautiful of barmaids or the loveliest of ladies had failed to bring such stirring desire to rise inside him. He wanted to take her. To trail kisses along her body, waking her softly as he buried himself inside her.

There came a faint knock at his door, drawing his attention and his lustful thoughts from the beauty upon his bed. He answered it with a grunt. Dobbs, his closest friend and first mate, stuck his head through the door.

"Sorry to disturb you Captain, but you are needed on deck."

"Very well."

He cast one lingering last glance at his sleeping captive then followed Dobbs to the top deck of his ship. Above, the sky was a bright blue and the sun beamed intensely down upon them. The two moons were a faint whisper in the mid-day sky. The moons, or Ladies of Night as they were known to most, guided the way of every ship upon the sea.

Rydon looked upon them with great affection. In childhood he'd gazed upon the Ladies in the midst of the night and dreamt of far off places. He had always known that one day the Ladies would serve as his guides, leading him to great adventures. Great adventures he'd had, but even he was tiring of lonely nights upon the restless sea. Perhaps that's why his body had responded so powerfully, so suddenly to the

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captive within his quarters. He'd been too long without the comforts of a woman.

"Captain, the crew awaits your orders."

Rydon walked through his crew to the ship's helm. They gathered about, their eyes lit with curiosity and anticipation, the air about them charged with excitement.

"My good men, you have served your captain well. Our guest sleeps soundly. You shall all be richly rewarded when we reach our destination."

Cheers and applause thundered from his crew.

* * * *

Adianna woke with a pounding in her head like she had never known. Her eyes were blurry and she struggled just to open them. It took a moment to adjust in the dusky light of late evening with only a hanging oil lamp left to burn low. She tried to move but found herself bound to the bed. She struggled helplessly, twisting and turning until her wrists and ankles began to burn beneath the ropes.

A chill swept through the air, slipping over her body, making her nipples harden in response beneath the thin fabric of her sleeping gown. She didn't know how long he had been standing there when he stepped forward from the shadows filling the doorway, much as he had done when he had burst into her cabin. His chest was bare, glistening from the spray of the sea.

He said nothing as he stepped into the room, closing the door quietly behind him. His eyes were dark blue, like the sea at midnight. She was held captivated by that dark hungry

gaze, but the throbbing in her head kept distracting her. She closed her eyes and winced against the ache.

Adianna tried to move away as he approached, but her bonds rendered her helpless. "Where is my ship? What have you done with the captain and his crew?"

"No harm has come to them; it is only you that I want."

He trailed his hand along the side rails of the bed as he approached her. The faint light from the hanging oil lamp shimmered over his face, making him appear darker, all the more dangerous, all the more ... breathtaking.

"Who are you?"

A solitary tear slipped down her cheek, leaving its watery imprint upon the pillow. She didn't want to cry. She didn't want to give this savage the satisfaction of seeing her tears. But the throb in her head and the fear in her chest betrayed her.

"My name is Rydon. I am the captain of this ship."

His voice was dark and husky, barely more than a whisper, yet it seemed to fill every corner of the room with its echo. He wiped the trace of tears from her cheek with such tenderness it nearly made her heart soften.

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"You'll not be harmed, I give you my word."

"The word of a pirate is of little use to me."

"Perhaps, but I give it to you anyway."

"Let me go."

"I cannot."

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She struggled against her bonds as a rush of fury coursed through her veins. She narrowed her gaze and spoke through clenched teeth. "I demand you let me go."

He reached out and gently stroked the curve of her bare foot. She rose up, her back arching briefly at his touch while her arms and legs remained bound to the rails. As his hand slipped away she continued to struggle with effort against her bonds.

"I said let me go."

He shook his head, his gaze caressing her body as if it were his hands.

She struggled again, twisting and turning helplessly against the restraints to no avail. When she was breathless, her limbs aching, her body covered in a thin film of sweat, she finally quieted. She drew in several deep, calming breaths. She was getting nowhere—she was too tightly bound.

"I am betrothed to the Prince of Easton. Name your price and I shall see that you receive it for my ransom."

He cocked a dark eyebrow and studied her with an intense, concentrated stare. "It is not your money I desire, Princess."

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"I could think of a hundred things I should like to do to you." He moved closer. "But only if you would let me."

"And that I never will," she said.

She wanted to be strong, wanted to fight and kick and scream, but what purpose would it serve? She studied his face. It was handsome, with deep angles and darkly tanned skin; no doubt from long stretches at sea. His mouth was thin

but his lips looked as if they'd be soft. But what captivated her most were those haunted sapphire eyes that seemed to look straight into the darkest depths of her soul.

He reached out and slid his hand under the neck of her gown, cupping a soft, silky mound of breast. His warm palm covered her completely as he softly traced his thumb around her nipple.

"Don't touch me," she said, but the gasp she expelled betrayed her protest. Though his skin was callused from rough work, she found the rugged texture excited her even more. His touch stirred to life something inside her. Her breasts tingled under his fingers as a deep ache settled between her legs.

He brought his lips down, feathering velvet-soft kisses over her face, barely touching, barely tasting.

She couldn't move as his soft kisses fluttered across her lips. Her body, her very breath was held captive by his intoxicating kiss. Then he parted her lips and trailed his tongue sweetly across hers. He nipped her lips ever so softly, leaving her longing for more.

Her heart pounded wildly and all the blood seemed to rush past her ears. The throbbing between her legs grew; the sensitive nub between her thighs seemed to scream out for attention, begging to be caressed. She shifted on the bed, while his tongue danced circles within her mouth.

But he pulled away, allowing her to reclaim her thoughts and the breath that his touch had held captive. These thoughts weren't right. She couldn't fulfill these sinful desires

with a stranger, with a rogue. She must save herself. Give herself only to her prince, as was the way of her people.

Dear Mother, she thought, forgive me for these shameful thoughts!

"I'll ask you not to do that again," she whispered.

He let his hand trail along the length of her arm. "As you wish."

She allowed herself one moment to collect her thoughts, though it was difficult with the memory of his kiss upon her skin. "I demand you let me go."

"It seems to me that you are not in a position to make demands. You are in my possession now."

"I belong to no one."

There was a brief moment of silence. Adianna spoke again. "Just tell me what you want, anything you want and it can be yours."

"What if I desire only you?" There was a faint curl to his lips as he said it but his eyes were guarded and centered on her alone.

His intense stare had the color flushing in her cheeks and, again, she was too aware of her own body. "I am not to be had. I am spoken for."

"You said *anything*."

"You know very well I did not mean *that*."

"Your body betrays your words."

Humiliation washed over her, staining her cheeks bright pink. What torture it was to be so exposed, to have every secret desire transparent upon her skin. She turned her face into her arm.

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"Please, just leave me be."

"As you wish."

She felt his lingering gaze on her body. Finally, after one long, breath-stealing moment he turned and left her alone.

Chapter Three

Rydon stalked the length of the ship. His muscles were tense and his hands fidgety. Why did he desire her so? What was it about her that had him feeling as if he was walking the plank? As if each and every step brought him that much closer to tumbling over the dark edge? He leaned against the railing and looked out over the sleepy sea.

"Captain?" Rydon turned at the voice of his old friend.

"Yes, Dobbs?"

Dobbs leaned against the rail and stared off over the sea. "Everything all right?"

"Fine."

Rydon watched the waves lap at the side of the ship. He knew he'd miss the sea when the time came for him to say his goodbyes. He would miss the smell of the air, the tilt of the ship, even the heart-pounding storms that appeared every few days. He drew in a deep breath, closed his eyes and let the breeze kiss his face.

"It'll do you little good to fret, Captain."

"How did I get talked into this?"

Dobbs placed his large hand on Rydon's shoulder, letting a slow smile curve on his lips. "We both know how."

Rydon turned toward his friend. There was a bond between them, a bond of friendship, and a bond of brotherhood. It had been so for many years. Rydon smiled slowly.

"I suppose we do."

* * * *

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Adianna's limbs were stiff and sore from being pulled taut across the bed. Her eyes felt heavy and swollen, and try as she might she hadn't been able to keep tears from falling. What was to become of her? What did this rogue want from her?

Perhaps he intended to secure a ransom for her safe return. Of course her father would pay a handsome fee, but at what price to their kingdom?

She could not bear to think of it. The entire fate of her country rested on her arranged marriage. Would there still be peace with no bride in trade as promised? No, she could not think of that. Her escorts would not stop searching for her. They could not, for she did not trust this Rydon ... or herself when she was near him.

The door to the cabin creaked open. She tried to rise up to get a better glimpse of Rydon but the bonds held her firm. She had little strength and little pride left.

"Please sir, please loosen the ropes. My limbs can take no more," she pleaded as he crossed the room in silence.

He towered above her as he seemed to consider her plea. He reached a hand out and trailed it along her thigh. Then his fingers went to the knots in the rope and he worked them until they slipped free from her body.

She sat up, her whole body crying out from the stiffness in her joints. She rubbed at her wrists. The skin was tender where the ropes had been, her muscles tight and spasming from being bound. She felt as if she'd lost control of her own body. She kept her gaze down as she spoke, "Thank you."

Captive Bride
by Danielle Devon

"A chamber pot rests in the corner," he said before he turned and left her again.

* * * *

Rydon spent a great deal of his time on deck, more so than usual. He knew the crew had noticed. Rumors and whispers of the captain's retreat from his private quarters spread on the breeze. He knew they also thought it was because their captain and the princess had shared a few harsh words. He knew exactly where they had gotten that idea and quite preferred it to the truth. How would it look to the crew if they had known their captain had been run from his quarters because he did not trust himself to be in the same room with his beautiful captive?

He'd refused her every request to see him. He'd posted guards at her door to ensure she didn't find her way to him. The nights were the worst for him. When he was lying on the cot in Dobbs' quarters, only a single thin wall stood between him and the beauty asleep in his bed. Too many times he'd nearly gone to her. The memory of her sweet kisses still lingered upon his skin.

She'd been so soft, so giving under his touch. Her sweet, whispered moan had penetrated his heart, shot arrows of desire straight to his loins. And her lips ... those soft, pale pink lips had opened for him so eagerly. Had tortured him so completely that he could think of nothing but capturing them once more. Her scent had filled the room, daring him to take her.

He wondered if he had parted those long, silky legs if he would have found her wet and willing.

Though it had pained him to hear her protest, he knew it was for the best. For he couldn't afford to find himself drawn in by her beauty, powerless against his own desire. Oh, how he had wanted her and how it had crippled him to turn away.

Cursed desire, he thought. These thoughts would do him no good. He needed to occupy his mind.

He sat at the long narrow table in the mess studying charts. He marked positions with a stick of charcoal, his fingers smudged with black powder. He struggled to concentrate on the work before him, but his mind seemed to wander and his eyes were strained. He had gone with very little sleep for the last several nights and it was finally taking its toll on him.

He tried to convince himself that it was not because of Adianna.

He looked up from his maps when Kalen, the young cabin boy, entered the room. "What is it, Kalen?"

"May I speak with you, Captain? It's about the princess."

Rydon nodded and gestured to the seat across from him. He waited until the boy took a seat before he continued. "Speak your mind."

"Captain, I hope I am not speaking out of place and I want you to know she did not ask me to come." Kalen fiddled with his fingers. Keeping his gaze cast downward, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"What is it, Kalen?"

"Well sir, I've been serving her Highness for several days now. I think she has grown quite tired of being confined to quarters. She needs fresh air, to be out in the sun and enjoy the day. May I have your permission to accompany her on deck, just for a little while?"

Rydon tilted his head. He'd never heard the lad speak so frankly before. Quite honestly, it had him wondering. "This is not her request?"

"Oh no sir, I don't believe she would ever ask. She is a lady of grace, Captain."

"You've taken quite a fancy to her." Rydon leaned back in his chair, enthralled by the idea.

"Oh yes, Captain, she is a true lady."

"That she is," he replied thoughtfully, "That she is." Rydon nodded and allowed himself one lingering moment to see her face in his memories. "I shall consider it. Go now, tend to your duties."

"Thank you, Captain."

Kalen rose quickly and started toward the door. He paused and turned to face Rydon once more. "Captain, if I may, one more thing."

Rydon nodded.

"I think she is lonely."

There was a long pause. Finally, Rydon waved the boy away. He rubbed at his eyes trying to ease the harsh throb that worked its way up from his temples. She was lonely. Why should he care? It was not his job to entertain her or keep her company. He let out a disgruntled huff and damned himself silently.

Captive Bride
by Danielle Devon

* * * *

The sun had risen and set two times since Adianna had last seen Rydon. Kalen visited her several times a day to bring her food and drink, but he never stayed more than a few moments in her presence. She wondered if that was Rydon's doing.

She wondered why Rydon stayed away. Though she shouldn't have been disappointed, for wasn't that what she wanted? Hadn't she asked him to leave her be? Then why was there a lingering ache to see him?

She was startled from her thoughts by a knock at the door. "Come in, Kalen."

The door opened. Instead of the cabin boy, Rydon stepped inside carrying a pot and two mugs.

"Kalen is busy with his duties."

Adianna watched Rydon with a mix of curiosity and apprehension as he placed the pot and mugs on the table. He went to work silently filling each mug with steaming Genja tea. He held out a cup. She took it and continued to watch him as he settled into a chair and sipped from his own mug. When he caught her staring, he raised an eyebrow.

"Is there something else you need? We have no milk aboard."

"No, no." She shook her head and sipped her warm drink.

Why had he come to her? Why now, after he'd intentionally kept at a distance? Perhaps he had something to discuss with her or perhaps ... he'd finally come to take her virginity. She feared—even as she secretly desired—that he

would thrust himself upon her, stealing her virtue like some devil in the night. She'd heard stories of his kind. When they set their sights upon something or someone, they took it, all of it.

But perhaps ... he hadn't really wanted her. For if he had, would he have not already taken her?

Dear Mother, what were these thoughts?

His low, husky words broke into her thoughts. "How do you find your Genja?"

"It is fine, thank you." She spoke softly, unsettled as much by her own lustful, shameful thoughts as she was by his powerful, sensual presence.

"Kalen tells me you've grown tired of being confined to quarters."

Still taken back by his graciousness and casual nature, Adianna nodded. "I should think anyone would grow tired of looking upon the same walls day after day."

"Yes, I suppose they would. Perhaps you would enjoy a walk on deck later this afternoon."

"Yes, thank you."

He set down his mug, rose then and went to the small bookshelf beside the bed. He ran his hands over the worn spines. "I haven't much of a collection here, but you might find some of the titles of interest."

She watched over the rim of her mug while he selected a thick book bound in dark green leather. He flipped it open. A small smile curved his lips as he ran his thumb across the page.

"My brother used to read this to me when we were just boys."

Adianna crossed the room and peered over his shoulder. There was an intricate illustration of a ship faring a storm. Standing so close, she could smell the intoxicating mix of man and sea upon his skin. The shameful desire she harbored stirred to life inside her.

She leaned forward slightly, her hair brushing against his arm. She hoped he would turn toward her, draw her into his arms and steal her virtue. It was a shameful thought, but one she couldn't push away.

Since childhood, she'd dreamt of giving herself, upon her wedding night, to the man who'd captured her heart. Yet here she was, aching to spread her legs and offer herself to a stranger. A beautiful rogue with thickly muscled arms and a chest carved more beautifully than the finest marble statue. Pushing away her lustful thoughts, she tried to turn her attention to the book.

"It's beautiful."

He stood silent and still, the book open within his large capable hands. The only sound between them was the quiet whisper of their breath. He closed the book, turned and handed it to her.

"Perhaps you will enjoy it as much as I."

She took it, hugged it close to her breast. "I've read several of your books already." When he cast her a sideways glance she quickly added, "To help pass the time."

He nodded. He went to the table and took one last sip of Genja then headed for the door.

Captive Bride
by Danielle Devon

Rydon paused with his hand upon the handle, when she spoke. "Will you be back?"

He turned back. Heat flamed to life around them, the silent hope of flickering desire seeped into the air. He drew in a careful breath, his gaze resting heavily upon her. He nodded one more time, and then quickly turned to leave.

Alone once again in the room, Adianna clutched the book tighter to her chest. *Dear Mother, how she desired him, how she wished for his return.*

* * * *

Behind the closed door of Dobbs' cabin Rydon paced the length of the small room, taking but a few steps before having to turn about and begin again. His muscles were so tense that they ached with each step he took. Yet he needed to move, or else he might find himself giving in to his desire.

His arms still tingled where she'd brushed up against him, so close that he could smell the soft, feminine scent of her skin. For a moment he'd thought her closeness had been deliberate, as if she were silently urging him to take her. But of course that could only be wishful thinking.

Dobbs watched silently from a chair in the corner while Rydon paced. Dobbs rested his chin on a hand. "You've much on your mind."

Rydon shook his head then slumped down into the chair across from his friend. He rubbed at his eyes. He really should try to get some sleep. He would not be much good to his men if he was flat on his back from exhaustion. But he knew sleep was not an option. Not with his muscles tied in knots, his cock

constantly throbbing, straining against his breeches. He must stop thinking of her for even his attempts to ease his own pain had provided little relief.

Dobbs rose, went to a small cabinet and pulled out a pipe. He stuffed it full and lit it from the embers in the small stove. Smoke circled his head as he puffed.

"You've not slept."

"How can I sleep?"

Rydon drew his hand through his hair in frustration. He wanted to break something. *Anything*. To smash his fist into something and drown the pain of his desire actually crossed his mind. But he dared not, for such displays of temper would have his crew talking. He didn't need any more complications.

"Is it our mission that troubles you so?"

Rydon glanced at his old friend. A flicker of amusement lit Dobbs' eyes. There were no secrets between them. Rydon could all but read Dobbs' face as if he were reading his mind.

"You know very well what troubles me."

"Yes, I do," Dobbs said with a lighthearted smirk. "That I do."

Chapter Four

There was a knock at the door and Adianna found herself hoping it was Rydon. But when Kalen's soft voice echoed through the door, she felt a familiar wash of disappointment.

"Your Highness?"

"Come in Kalen," she said.

"I am to see if you would like to stretch your legs on deck."

She couldn't help a long sigh or the heavy-hearted tone of her voice. "Is the Captain not coming?"

"No, Your Highness. But he said that I should escort you on a brief walk about deck." Kalen cast his gaze down at his feet and shuffled them against the floor as if embarrassed.

Adianna crossed to him. She rested a hand on his shoulder and smiled when he looked up at her. "I should quite enjoy a walk on deck with you, Kalen."

She looked at the cloak he held in his arms. "What have you there?"

"Captain said you should put this over your gown." He handed her the cloak. A smile bloomed on his lips, so wide and innocent that it nearly made her heart break. It lit his eyes, making them sparkle.

Adianna slipped the cloak over her gown then followed the boy past the cautious guards. They made their way down the long hall. The passageway was narrow, barely more than shoulder-length across.

Captive Bride
by Danielle Devon

They ascended the steps and when they stepped out onto the deck Adianna nearly laughed. Despite the cool breeze in the air, the sun's rays reached out like warm fingers and caressed her face. She closed her eyes, tipped her head back and drew in a deep breath of fresh sea air. It was like a dream, the sun warming her skin, the air filling her lungs. In that one moment she nearly forgot where she was.

"This way, Your Highness," Kalen said.

All around her the crew stopped their work to stare. They whispered murmurs Adianna couldn't quite hear. She paid them no mind.

She wondered briefly where Rydon was taking her. She'd never been away from Anista before, though she'd stood upon the banks of her homeland shores and often wondered about the lands beyond. Strange that on her first trip across the great Savin Sea that she should have no clue of their destination.

Even more strange was that she really didn't care.

* * * *

With her long golden hair stirring about her shoulders in the sea breeze, she was breathtaking. Adianna stood where he could trace the contours of her profile with his gaze. Her eyes were closed and she seemed fixed in a deep trance of private thought. Her mouth had softened, her lips parted slightly.

She was covered with the oversized cloak he'd provided. Her sensuous curves were hidden under the yards of fabric

that engulfed her. Yet, Rydon knew what treasures lay beneath the cloak.

Rydon had to remind himself to breathe. He hadn't realized he'd been quite so obviously staring until Dobbs dropped a hand on his shoulder and murmured, "You ever see anything so beautiful?"

Rydon shook his head. Indeed he hadn't. He wanted to go to her but didn't trust himself to even walk beside her. He feared he might find himself drawing her into his arms, bringing her lips to his. Sweeping her off into his cabin was all he could think about these days. There he'd rip that delicate gown from her body, suckle those luscious breasts. Slip himself inside her...

Cursed thoughts.

He could take her beauty no longer, for it sent razor-edged bolts of desire flashing through his body. He turned away, disappeared below deck where he went to work with his maps and charts.

He couldn't get the vision of her from his thoughts.

* * * *

Adianna felt the presence of someone behind her. She turned slowly and met a bright gaze. It was an older man, nearly twice the captain's age. His hair had gone white. His skin was wrinkled and sun-bronzed. His eyes were a pale blue, and there was a softness and a kindness in them she'd rarely seen. He nodded his head in a sort of informal bow.

"Your Highness, enjoying your walk?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I'm Dobbs, the captain's first-mate."

"Princess Adianna, of Anista."

"It is an honor indeed, Your Highness." He gave a slight bow. "May I walk with you?"

"I've promised to walk with Kalen, but perhaps he would not mind the interruption."

"He'll not mind." Dobbs sent Kalen a knowing look and at once the boy scurried off.

They turned to walk the length of the ship. Adianna had been amazed by its size. She hadn't known anyone but royal families that owned ships of such grandeur. More than a hundred men could easily, and quite comfortably, live aboard.

They walked in silence for several long moments, merely enjoying the day stretching before them. Much to her disappointment Dobbs broke the silence.

"Has your journey been pleasant Your Highness?"

"I'm a prisoner, not a passenger."

She didn't look at him as she said it but she could see his nod and the small smile curve on his lips from the corner of her eye.

"Even so, has the crew been kind? Young Kalen been attentive?"

She gave a nod and wondered why he should care if the crew had been kind. She was a prisoner after all, held aboard a ship against her will. But everyone *had* been kind, and Kalen had been attentive.

Alas, it was not Kalen's attention Adianna sought. There was but one on board who'd captured her fancy. And he was nowhere to be found.

"And the Captain?"

Adianna sighed. It was as if Dobbs had been reading her thoughts. She could feel warmth rise in her cheeks. She hoped he wouldn't take notice. "The Captain has behaved just as I would have expected."

"He's taken quite a fancy to you as well."

She whirled around then, her mouth open in shock. How dare Dobbs speak to her in such a fashion!

"You dare make assumptions on my behalf, sir? I've no interest in your captain or his fancies."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

His cool, confident nature infuriated her. There was nothing she detested more than someone telling her how she felt. She knew very well how she felt and it was none of his concern. Even if he'd assumed correctly, she'd not dignify his comments by attesting to her interests. That was her burden to bear.

"I'll thank you to keep your ill-mannered assumptions to yourself, sir. I have no desire to listen to these untruths."

Dobbs nodded, waved a hand that had Kalen scurrying forward at his command. "Take Her Highness back to the cabin."

Kalen nodded.

Dobbs turned back to Adianna. "Thank you for the walk, Your Highness."

She didn't return any thanks to him as he walked away.

Adianna let her gaze wander about. She stood on a small walkway. The sea stretched before her. Two thick ropes tied to the railing caught her eye. She leaned forward, just

enough to catch a glimpse over the side without risking losing her balance or making too much notice of herself. Just a few feet below a rowboat dangled upon the ends of the ropes.

It was a small ship, just big enough to hold a body at either end. The ropes seemed to be attached so that one could easily lower the boat to the water several feet below.

She straightened, her gaze darting from the small ship to the horizon as Kalen approached. The clouds were darker off in the distance, the breeze had picked up so that her hair began to flutter about her. She turned to Kalen.

"Is that a storm, off in the distance?"

Kalen shielded his brow with his hand and looked towards the sea. "Yes, Your Highness, looks to be here night after next."

Adianna let a groan that was loud enough to have Kalen casting a quick glance at her. "Something wrong, Your Highness?"

"No, no. I'm afraid I don't fair well in these sea-born storms."

* * * *

Adianna woke slowly as if being softly stirred from a dream. She blinked away the fog that drifted in her brain. The flicker from the oil lamp circled the cabin like a wreath of dancing light. The scent of jasmine shimmered around her. He was settled on the chair across from her, so engaged in the green leather-bound book that he didn't notice she had stirred.

She rolled onto her side, and watched him silently as his gaze scanned across the page. The light from the lamp flickered over him, casting plays of shadow and light across the hard angles of his face. His linen shirt was unbuttoned to mid-chest so that her gaze could trace every chiseled muscle.

He wore a pair of black breeches and knee-high boots. The sight of him nearly stole her breath. She'd never seen anything more handsome, nor had she desired anyone so strongly.

She let out a heavy sigh that startled him, drawing his gaze. He quickly closed the book, set it upon the small table to his left.

"I hope I didn't disturb you."

"No," she whispered.

Her eyes were still heavy from sleep and her mind was still a bit lost in a sleepy haze, but the flame of desire flickered to life within her. She could feel every inch of her body tingling. Adianna glanced to the small window. Darkness still covered the sea.

"Could you not sleep?"

"I'm afraid I sleep little these days," he said as he rubbed wearily at the tension in the back of his neck.

"I've taken your bed."

She rose, letting the blanket slip away from her body. The neckline of her gown slid down her shoulder, revealing a hint of skin though she didn't notice.

"I wish that were the reason."

Captive Bride
by Danielle Devon

His voice was dark and husky, barely more than a whisper. He gave her a look, one so consumed with desire that she felt every muscle in her body tighten in response.

All of her feelings for him whirled about her, nearly suffocating her with their heat. She ached for him, down to the very core of her body she ached for him. It shamed her to know that she desired him so. She wanted to give herself to him. She'd never yearned for anything so desperately but her thoughts brought shame upon her.

A tear trickled from the corner of her eye, dripping down her cheek.

He let his gaze sweep over her. He wondered if she knew just how lovely she was, or that she seemed to radiate heat with every breath she took. He admired the subtle change of tones in her skin, the long, lean curves of her body, the mass of soft flowing silken hair.

He could not help himself. She was so exquisite; it made him ache just to look upon her. As if he'd lost control of his own will, he rose and settled on the bed next to her. His hand stole out to gently rest upon her thigh.

"Why are you crying?"

"I've shamed my family," she whispered even as the ache of desire rippled through her body.

He moved closer. The pale flicker of light illuminated her skin. The soft round globes of her breasts hidden beneath her gown seemed to call to him. Teasing him as they rose and fell with each breath she took.

"You are magnificent. Even though I know I'm likely to lose my heart, and my soul, I can't help but desire you. I desire

you so much that it hurts. I've not the strength to fight anymore."

As he inched closer, his words echoed deep in her heart and her desire deepened into pure submission.

"Nor I," Adianna whispered breathlessly.

He drew in a deep breath and let his hand find its way under the fabric of her gown. Gently he cupped her silky mound of breast in his palm. He traced his finger around her nipple. It hardened beneath his touch. It amazed him how such a simple response could cause such need within him.

"It is wrong," she said, but the deep sigh she let out betrayed the protest. His hands flowed over her skin like silk. As he teased her nipples, her eyes closed and a nearly inaudible moan escaped her lips.

He heard it—and it drove him mad.

He nudged her gown further down her shoulders, exposing her breasts. He cradled her breast in his hand, brought his lips to hers. He feathered soft kisses over her velvet-soft skin, barely touching, barely tasting even as he yearned for more.

She couldn't move as his soft kisses fluttered across her skin. Each time his lips touched hers a dull-edged throbbing sprang to life within her body. When he took her nipple into his mouth, the warmth and wetness brought a pleasant shiver to her body.

Rydon smiled slowly as he drew back and gazed upon her. He'd give her everything she ever wanted and more. With her breast still caught in his hand he slid down between her legs. As he settled there, his breath trailing over her moistened

skin, he heard her murmur. He turned and kissed her softly on the inner thigh.

"Will you give yourself to me?"

She drew in a deep breath as he continued to touch his lips to her skin. Had she wanted to protest she couldn't, unable to find her voice. It, like her will, had been stolen with his touch.

He kissed her again, his lips slightly parted as his tongue lapped at her skin. She couldn't deny him, wouldn't deny him. She wanted everything he had to give.

"Yes," she whispered.

He nearly melted from the yearning in her words. As if they were slender fingers they wrapped around his heart and tugged. He inhaled the scent of her arousal. The heavy, musty fragrance filled his senses so that he could think only of her.

He settled between her pearly thighs, kissed her softly there and enjoyed the moan that escaped from her throat. His tongue dipped beyond the silky folds of skin to touch her slit beneath. He licked her—one long, demanding stroke that made her body arch in response.

She was aching with need, a deep throbbing pulse that made her lift her buttocks from the bed, and push herself against his hot, eager mouth. As he flicked his tongue over her in quick repetitive strokes, she felt stirring pleasure crash over her in waves.

His mouth was warm and frantic with hunger as she lifted her hips in a wordless invitation. She felt passion rising, a hot, liquid ascent into blissful madness.

She drew closer to the peak, her body trembling with need, her cries rising up to fill the cabin, drowning out the sound of the sea. She felt a surge of desire rush through her body, as he flicked his tongue across her clit in quick, heart-pounding motions.

Adianna buried her hands in the dark tendrils of his hair, pulling him closer so that his tongue dipped that much deeper.

"Rydon," she called out breathlessly.

Then she shuddered against him and tumbled over the peak into a fast, dizzying descent. His mouth was warm and wet; his tongue dancing wildly over her clit until she convulsed from the sheer pleasure his eager mouth brought her.

He brought her to the edge time and time again. She shuddered against him. Her body was alive, nerves tingling at every end so that she was aware of every inch of her sweat-slickened skin.

She was so incredibly warm, so sinfully wet. He could have tasted her forever. But when her moans turned to cries he lost himself completely.

"Please take me now. Take me now."

Adianna reached down for him, dug her nails into his back. She wanted ... needed him then. She would not wait. She wanted more, she wanted everything he had to offer her.

Rydon obeyed, fighting free from his tight breeches. His cock was swollen and hard. Aching with raw desire, he buried himself deep within her, inch by maddening inch. As the soft,

moist folds of flesh enveloped him, he knew she was made to love him.

She felt her barrier give as he entered her. She let out a whimper that was a mix of pain and pleasure. She'd never known anything like it.

He filled her so completely; she could feel every inch of his cock pressing against the liquid hot depths of her pussy. Her arms stole about him, her fingers burying deep in his hair as he plunged inside her. She drew his lips to hers, tender lips that hungrily tasted and savored.

She thought not of escape, but only of pleasure. His kisses were as tender on her lips as they had been on her skin. Yet desire, that raw-animal like lust, drove her, had her aching for him. She touched his tongue with hers, and then rocked her hips to invite him deeper.

He filled her so completely. He thrust inside her, faster and faster, carrying them both to the edge of madness with their desire.

As their frenzy grew and desire mounted, they cried out to the night and he withdrew, emptying his seed onto the bed linens. She drew him to her breast as he collapsed against her, breathless from his release. She lovingly kissed his forehead. His skin was warm, so tenderly warm that it begged to be kissed.

He lifted his head to gaze down upon her. He kissed her deeply, with more passion than she'd ever known before. His dark eyes met hers and held. She expected to feel fear for the man who'd taken her prisoner, humiliation for what he'd done or shame that she'd enjoyed it.

Captive Bride
by Danielle Devon

But she felt only peace, a soft, warm, complete contentment.

Chapter Five

Adianna woke early, just as the subtle orange hues of sunrise were beginning to kiss the sea. The faint glow of early morning glittered through the small window, dipping into the shadows to spread their warmth. Despite the gentle lull of the waves beneath the ship's hull, Adianna had slept like a dream. She stretched her aching muscles and thought of her lover beside her.

Lover...

That word had once upon a time been foreign to her. Something she'd only dreamt about on warm summer nights in Anista, lying alone in her bed, secretly stoking her clit while the visions of lovemaking played in her mind.

Even the afterglow of lovemaking couldn't drown the floods of shame that now washed over her. For how could she feel content when in the cold light of morning she knew she had disgraced herself and betrayed her father and country?

Adianna sat up, not bothering to cover herself as the blanket slid away from her naked form. She looked about the room, but it, like the bed beside her was empty.

"Rydon?"

She rose and drew her gown over her head. This wasn't how she had expected to greet the morning after her first night of lovemaking. She had expected to wake, slowly and dreamily with his arms wrapped about her.

She had imagined him smiling down upon her, his eyes still heavy from sleep, his body still weak from lovemaking. He

would kiss her softly and wish her a good morn. They would greet the day together, perhaps making love again under the pale glow of morning.

Reality was grim compared to the dreams of innocent youth. Her lover had gone, leaving her alone with only a sickness in her stomach and a deep settling ache in her heart.

What would her father say if he knew what she'd done? Would he cast her aside for the shameful harlot she was? And what of her new husband? What would be said when it became known that she was no longer pure and innocent?

Adianna's stomach clenched as a dreadful thought occurred to her. What if the Prince of Easton revoked the trade? A prince of such great lands would have no desire for a soiled bride and it was only their marriage arrangement that ensured peace in her land.

Would the prince declare war upon her small country for her misdeeds? The thought of it brought a wave of nausea rolling through her stomach. It wrenched her stomach until she was forced to dash to the chamber pot and disgrace herself.

She looked up from the pot, stared blankly at the wall. How could she have traded her country's peace and her father's wishes for one night of passion? How was she to go on, knowing that it would be her misdeed that would cause the fall of their lands, of her home ... of her father.

She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her gown, unsure about what she should do now. She was positive she'd destroyed any hope she had for a prosperous union with the Prince of Easton.

Captive Bride
by Danielle Devon

Once he found that she had betrayed him, he'd have no desire for her. She strode across the small cabin, her bare feet padding again the wooden floors. She had to see Rydon.

She wasn't sure what she would say to him or what good it would do, but she had to talk to someone. She couldn't carry this burden on her own and she couldn't help but feel he was partially responsible. She only hoped that together there would be something they could do.

Though she had no idea what.

Adianna threw open the door and collided with a burly guard. She stumbled backward, surprised to see him standing there.

"Pardon me, I didn't see you."

She started to step around him but he held up a hand. "Sorry Your Highness. You cannot leave. Captain's orders."

Adianna stared up at the guard in disbelief. Surely it must be a mistake. Rydon wouldn't keep her captive in her quarters. Not after the night they had shared together.

Would he?

She shook her head and took a step forward. "There must be a mistake. Now, please move aside. I must speak with the Captain."

The guard took a step forward. His massive body filled the doorway leaving her no chance of escape.

"I am sorry, Your Highness, but I cannot let you leave your quarters."

Adianna stepped back. She didn't understand.

What was going on? Why had Rydon confined her to her quarters? Was it possible that in the early light of morning he

regretted what he had done? But then why should a pirate feel regret?

It was her that had shamed her country and betrayed her family. What did a pirate know of betrayal? What did a pirate know of shame? And for that matter, what did a pirate know of love?

She felt tears well up, yet she refused to let them fall.

The guard shifted uncomfortably, as if he wished to comfort her but didn't know how.

"I will be sure to let the Captain know you asked for him."

Adianna only nodded as she closed the door.

It was clear to her now. He'd used her. He felt nothing for her. If he had, he would not have left her alone to bear the grief for what she'd done.

No, she meant nothing to him.

For why should he care about the price she would pay for her indiscretions? He'd gotten what he wanted and now she would be left to suffer. She was almost glad he was taking her away, for what did she have to offer now? She could no longer offer her virtue nor her hand in marriage.

She was as worthless as Rydon's sweet words.

She closed her eyes. Adianna sank to the floor as every muscle in her body seemed to come to life in one burning ache.

The dull, aching throb in her heart was the worst pain of all to bear.

* * * *

Rydon paced the length of Dobbs' small cabin. He dragged his hand through his dark hair. He could still smell her upon him. It was driving him near mad.

To have the smell of her upon his skin, the taste of her upon his lips.

He must have been mad. It was the months he'd already spent at sea, that's what, he tried to convince himself. Yes, time at sea could be hard for a man.

And she had just been too tempting. Carnal lust, that's all it was. Just lust. Nothing more.

He repeated that to himself over and over as he paced the room, but even he didn't believe it. There was more. Too much more. More than he cared to admit. More than he cared to feel. How could he have let this happen?

How could he have let himself care for her so deeply, so quickly?

He'd taken her ... in every sense of the word and he'd broken a promise. But then why should he care? It was his honor and the honor of his men that he'd betrayed.

He should have never given in. It was far too complicated and now that he'd made a mess of things, he could think of nothing further to do than to keep his distance and remind himself of his mission. He had to keep his objective clear. But there was just one problem.

When he took this mission, he'd not counted on falling for his captive.

"There'll be nothing left of the floor by the time this voyage is over."

Dobbs strode into the room and closed the door quietly behind him. He settled in his armchair and pulled out his pipe. He watched Rydon pace the room.

"What troubles you so?"

Rydon stopped short, ran his hand through his hair once more and finally settled on the edge of Dobbs' bunk. Rydon rubbed at his tired eyes. He brought his gaze up to Dobbs' face. His friend waited patiently as Rydon rose again, unable to sit still.

"I've made a mess of things," he said.

"Come now," Dobbs said with a shake of his head. "It cannot be as bad as all that."

"Worse," Rydon said. He sat back on the edge of the bunk.

"Need I bother to ask if this is in regards to a certain pale-haired lady aboard this ship?"

"Last night," Rydon began slowly. "We ... I took her."

All was silent for several long moments until Dobbs broke out into laughter. He reached across and slapped Rydon on the knee.

"This is the horrid act you've committed?"

Rydon rose to pace the room again. His frustration was more than he could bear. How could he possibly make Dobbs understand? How could he make him see that he'd crossed a line that he'd never meant to cross?

"She's the Princess of Anista."

"And you are a prince."

"I'm not the prince she is to marry." Rydon shook his head and dropped back down to the bed. "She thinks I am nothing more than a common pirate."

"Tell her the truth," Dobbs stated simply.

"I am afraid that will not help matters much. What's done is done."

Dobbs studied his old friend for a moment. "Tell me the real problem, Rydon."

Rydon let out a deep sigh. "I think I'm in love with her."

"And?"

"I fear I cannot let her go."

Dobbs shook his head and let out a long sigh. "You will. Because you must."

* * * *

Blasted, savage pirate, Adianna thought as she prowled restlessly around the cabin. As if taking her virtue and destroying her life and quite possibly the life of her people wasn't enough, Rydon had confined her to quarters.

Even after she'd forsaken herself, shamed her family with her misdeeds, he had the nerve to treat her like nothing more than a common prisoner. But then what should she have expected from a dirty, rotten pirate? He would not give a care about the sickness that churned inside her each time she thought about how she had betrayed those she loved.

Adianna spent a few moments working herself into a fury. Just as she turned to start across the cabin for the hundredth time the door creaked open. Rydon entered and before he could even manage to close the door she was upon him, her finger digging deep into his chest.

"How dare you treat me like a common barmaid! What right do you have to keep me locked in this cabin like a prisoner?"

He didn't bother to move as he stared down at her. "I have every right to keep you locked away if it keeps you safe."

She didn't care for his light tone, or the faint hint of amusement that filtered into his voice. She was furious, furious at herself for throwing her life and her future away for one night with a lowly pirate.

Furious at him for taking everything from her and not caring about the burden she would bear until the end of time. She was going to make sure he felt every inch of her wrath.

"You have no such right. You do not own me, *Captain*. I may be bound by duty and country but I am bound by *no man*."

He leaned forward and captured her mouth with his. She let him linger there, while her senses whirled around her in a blinding haze. All the passion from the night before sprang to life inside her, melting away the edges of anger. Yet she wasn't ready to yield and his attempts to soothe her angered her all the more. She pulled back and slapped him across the face.

He drew in a deep breath, as if he was trying to bury the embers of fury that were rising within him. "I pity the prince who takes you as his bride."

She drew back, her mouth falling open at the boldness of his remark. With fury raging like a wildfire in her body she turned away from him and stomped across the cabin. She

folded her arms across her chest and kept her back to him as she spoke.

"Since you have made it abundantly clear to me that I am nothing more than a prisoner to you, I should thank you to treat me as such and keep your hands and your lips to yourself."

He took a step forward but stopped short. Though she couldn't see him, she could nearly feel his muscles tightening, hear his blood pumping. And when he spoke she could very clearly hear the heat in his words.

"You wish to be treated as a prisoner? Then your wish is my command, *Highness*." He turned and left the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

Adianna let out a huff. He was angry. Good. So was she. Down right furious.

How dare he treat her with such disrespect after they'd spent the night together? After she'd given herself to him so completely. She had been right about him all along. He was nothing more than a common pirate.

She flopped down on the bed, buried her face in her hands and let the tears of anger, the tears of frustration and the tears of shame fall freely. She'd ruined her life and for what? A dog of man who showed her the promise of love then jerked it out from underneath her without a care.

* * * *

Rydon stormed into the mess. He crossed the room to Kalen. The young boy glanced up from his food, a frightened look upon his face

"She is to have nothing but bread and water. Nothing else. Do you understand me, boy?"

Kalen nodded but didn't utter a word.

Rydon whirled about and stormed back out onto deck, muttering beneath his breath.

"A prisoner, indeed."

* * * *

A storm was beginning to whip the winds. Adianna could hear them whistling beyond the walls of her quarters, sending the waves to smash against the hull. The sun was beginning its descent; soon night would fall. The ship was already rocking and it sent her stomach to rolling.

She pushed past the sickness, past the fear and concentrated on planning her escape. Of course she knew with the storm approaching it would make it all the more difficult but she didn't care.

She couldn't chance a rescue vessel coming for her. Adianna was sure that the Prince of Easton would refuse her as a soiled bride and thus the treaty between Easton and Anista would be at risk. Without a bride to offer in trade, what hope would her small country have?

But if she were lost at sea...

Easton could not hold Anista or her father responsible. The treaty could continue and another trade could be made. Her father was a smart man, a good, caring man and she had faith that he would do what was right for their people. As a princess and daughter of Anista, it was her duty to sacrifice

herself for her people. She would disappear among the waves; cease to be the Princess of Anista.

Adianna had briefly entertained the thought of sailing away with Rydon, but of course that had been nothing more than a childish fairy tale. If it hadn't been obvious enough after he'd posted the guard at her door, it was even clearer now that he saw her as nothing more than a prize. A warm body with which he could bury himself in and pass those cold, lonely nights.

A reward, she was sure, for what other reason could there be to capture a princess? But she refused to let what happened between them cloud her judgment. She'd already sacrificed her life for him; she'd not sacrifice her heart as well.

She managed to fashion a sack using one of Rydon's linen shirts. It had still carried the scent of him when she had tied it together with torn shreds from the hem. Now it smelled of the bread Kalen had brought her.

When Kalen returned with her supper, she ate half the bread and packed the remainder away. When she was finished she hid the sack under the bed and waited for night to fall.

She lay awake for quite some time, listening to the sounds of the storm. The ship rocked back and forth so violently that if her mind wasn't so preoccupied and her body already sick from dread she might have disgraced herself.

She took a moment to draw in several deep breaths, close her eyes and prepare herself for what lay ahead. Then she opened her eyes and quietly collected her sack. Adianna went

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to the door, inched it open and peered out. Just as she had hoped, the guard leaned against the wall, sleeping.

With her stomach tightening in knots and the blood pounding through her veins, she crept out the door, pulling it softly. She inched past the guard, slowly, quietly without even the sound of her own breath to disturb him.

She made her way up the stairs and stepped out onto the deck. The wind was howling so that the sound of it made her nearly deaf. Waves crashed against the hull, the sounds like tribal drums echoing out into the night. And just ahead of her she could make out the crew at the helm. They had their backs to her, too busy with their work to take notice of her under the cloak of darkness.

She quickly made her way to the starboard sidewalk and to the small ship awaiting her. She slipped her hands over the rail and peered over the side into her escape vessel. On the other side of the ship a huge wave struck the hull so that plumes of salt water sprayed about and the ship shivered violently against the attack. The rocking ship beneath her feet brought her supper to the back of her throat. Though she didn't have the time to waste, she was forced to vomit over the side of the ship.

The shouts of crewmen suddenly seemed to grow louder behind her so that she scrambled up and lifted her leg over the railing. Another great wave hit and her fingers slipped along the slick rail so that she lost her balance and tumbled into the small boat.

Quickly she rose and went to work lowering the boat to the sea. It took far longer than it should have as the waves

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swelled and the winds rocked her, making her lose her balance several times, the rope slipping out of her hand. Each time she pulled herself up and went back to work.

The small boat hit the water with a splash. She was sure the sound was unnoticeable with all the waves rising around her. Another huge wave hit the towering ship above her, sending it shuddering and nearly crashing into her.

The undercurrent picked up the small boat and pulled it away from the ship. Under the cloak of darkness and sheeting rain Adianna's small boat rode the waves. She desperately tried to keep her balance.

She'd been tossed about so much that she could no longer see Rydon's ship in the distance. She'd grown weak with exhaustion as she fought to keep the boat afloat in the storm.

Her body was drenched from icy rain and the cold winds tore at her gown so that it began to come apart at the seams. A series of waves pelted the small vessel, nearly turning it over each time.

The boat turned toward the waves, caught the curve of a swell rising swiftly before her in the moonlight. And before she could even let out a scream it slammed against her, throwing her back so that she slammed her head against the side.

Adianna slipped silently into the cold blackness.

* * * *

Two times the sun had risen and set since she'd made her escape. She had a nasty bump on the head from when the wave hit her. But she had survived the storm. She ate the

food she'd managed smuggle off ship, but that was gone now. She hadn't seen a single ship since she'd escaped.

She was both relieved and disappointed.

While she was on the small boat, she changed her position by paddling when she thought it was needed. On the third day she caught a glimpse of land in the distance. She let out a hysterical laugh and paddled madly until her arms ached and burned and she became short of breath.

It seemed to take an eternity for the current to pull her toward the land and wash her up onto the shore. Adianna pulled herself over the edge of boat and tumbled onto the sand.

She lay for a moment with the sun beating down on her face. Tears streaked down her cheeks as she let out a long, delirious laugh. She was exhausted and when she struggled to stand she found her knees were weak and the muscles in her legs had gone soft.

She stumbled several steps before managing to find her balance. Her gown was torn, the skirt so tattered that it hung just to her thighs. One sleeve had torn, leaving only one small sliver of fabric to hold it in place at her left shoulder. She didn't care as she stumbled forward across the sands and drew in the sweet breath of freedom.

Great sand dunes stretched all around her, creating a wall of washed gold against the blue skies. This was not Willow's Cove. Though she'd never seen it with her own eyes, she'd been told what it would look like. Towering trees, lush grasses just beyond the beaches. A village in the distance.

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But there was only sand here. Miles and miles of sand, stretching as far as she could see. Where was she? The dunes perhaps? She told herself it didn't matter. She was free. She trudged through the heavy sands, her bare feet leaving a trail of prints behind her as she wandered off toward the unknown.

* * * *

With renewed energy his crew had managed to get the ship to Willow's Cove on the third day. They'd determined that with the high winds Adianna might have made it ashore.

Rydon was sick with worry. His head had a constant ache and his stomach was tied in knots. As each day passed on to the next without so much as a glimpse of her small boat, the sickness had grown. He refused sleep, ate only when he feared the lack would put him on his back and remained at the helm until they pulled into port.

Rydon didn't bother to assist his crew in preparing the ship to dock as he normally did. And if Dobbs hadn't stopped him, he would have jumped from the ship before they'd even dropped anchor.

"You aren't thinking of going alone, are you?"

"Tell the men they may break until I return. It will do them good to stretch their legs on dry land."

Dobbs lowered his brow in a scowl. "What about you, Captain?"

"I'll be back as soon as I find her."

Rydon slapped Dobbs quickly on the back then hurried down the bridge to the pier. Despite the ache that went straight to his bones, he ran down the dirt path to Endler.

His first stop was the local inn where news passed quickly from flapping tongues. He burst in, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the darkened room.

Everyone turned at once to cast a glance over the stranger. Rydon didn't waste time questioning any of the patrons. Instead he headed straight to the source.

The innkeeper stood behind a long wooden bar. He was a heavysset man, with huge round eyes and sand colored clothes. He automatically moved to snatch up a mug, and pour Rydon a drink before he even reached the counter.

"You look like you could use a stiff drink."

Rydon didn't even glance at the mug. "I'm looking for a woman. Long pale hair and blue eyes. She might have washed up on shore."

The innkeeper thought for a moment as if he was searching an aging mind for such a woman. He shook his head. "Can't say I've seen anyone like that. 'Course the dunes beyond have quite a long shore."

Rydon was well aware of just how long the shoreline was, and he didn't want to think of it. "She may still be out a sea. If she comes in here you keep a hold of her no matter what she says." He reached deep into his pocket then dropped two gold coins on the bar.

The innkeeper picked them up, turned them over in his hand. A small smile curved on his lips. Rydon doubted very much that the innkeeper had ever laid eyes on two finer pieces of gold.

The innkeeper nodded. "We'll hold her."

"Good. Now I need a horse."

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Still examining his coins the innkeeper motioned to a man sitting at a table by the fire. "Yakins can help you there."

* * * *

Adianna didn't know how long she had walked. All she knew was that the sun was starting to sink beyond the horizon. Her stomach had gone from growling to aching and her mouth was so dry she could hardly swallow.

Her legs ached and burned so that it was a struggle just to put one foot in front of the other. She stumbled forward and fell into the sand.

She rolled on to her back. She couldn't move her legs to stand. The sky was darkening above her. The moons were growing brighter. Her eyes felt heavy, the lids falling closed time and time again. When she could fight it no more she fell into a dreamless sleep.

When Adianna woke her sight was blurred so that she could see no more than disfigured shapes. But she could feel the warmth of a fire on her skin and the softness of a blanket beneath her. There was high-pitched chatter. She couldn't pinpoint the sound, as it seemed to be all about her. She lifted her hands and rubbed her eyes until they began to clear.

She found herself in small hut constructed of wood and wide leaves. A cup of water and a small plate of berries sat next to her. She eagerly dove into the food, her stomach churning and growling with the sickness of her hunger.

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As she ate she glanced about. There was little in the room, just the blanket on which she sat, a small pit for the fire and some crude looking pottery piled beside the pit.

The floors were covered in a type of wood planks, like the kind you might find on the side of a ship. They were poorly put together so that sand could be seen between each board.

Adianna rose, nearly smacking her head against the low ceiling. She was forced to drop to her knees and crawl out the small opening.

She emerged into a crowd of little bodies and a roar of high-pitched chattering. They swarmed around her so quickly and tightly that she couldn't move in any direction. Her breath caught in her throat but she held back a scream as the little creatures reached out for her. Their stubby little fingers ran over her clothes, her skin and tugged at her hair. She let out a yelp that had them all quickly scurrying away into the sand.

Startled by their quick retreat, Adianna stumbled back herself, smacking into the little hut behind her. Slowly, the creatures re-emerged, cautiously this time as they eyed her. The biggest of the creatures, still only two feet in height moved toward her.

Its eyes were very dark and appeared a bit too big for its head. It had a long snout with a flat, black nose that twitched as it sniffed at the air. Its body was plump and its limbs short with little fingers and toes. It eased closer on all fours as it approached.

Its body was covered in a fine pale coat of hair that from a distance would probably blend with the sand. It made a low

whimpering noise, as it grew closer. Its head dropped down as if it was afraid she might strike out.

The others watched intently, still hiding behind their huts or poking out from the sand.

"Unbas," she whispered to herself.

She'd seen drawings of the creatures in books, heard tales of their hidden life. It was rare that an Unbas came out of hiding, rarer still for them to approach a stranger. Slowly she held out a hand, palm up to the creature.

"It's alright little one, I won't hurt you."

At her soft words he moved forward and cautiously sniffed at her hand. Slowly she turned her palm toward it and touched it just behind its little pointed ear. Its eyes closed slightly at that, its mouth curving slightly.

"Oh, do you like that? Yes, you like that."

Adianna rubbed behind its ear as she cooed. Then the brazen little creature jumped into her arms and snuggled against her chest. She laughed at that, a sound that had the rest of the Unbas scurrying back. She turned back to them.

"It's alright, come on out. Don't be afraid."

Slowly the Unbas crept from their hiding places and neared her. She looked down at the one in her lap. It was still nuzzling against the tattered fabric of her gown.

"I wonder if you have a name."

"Ika," it squeaked in a high voice.

"Ika? Is that your name?"

It rose then, standing tall before her on its back legs, its little chest puffed out. It touched a hand to its chest. "Ika."

"Ika," she repeated.

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While the others watched and chattered in a strange language Ika took her hand and placed it on its chest. It was warm and soft beneath her fingers. "Ika," it said again and then brought her hand up and placed it between her breasts and watched her.

"Adianna." She took Ika's hand and touched both of them repeating the names.

"Adia," it said, then jumped up and turned a circle in front of her as if thrilled by its progress.

She laughed at that and then repeated her name. They went though it several times before the little creature got it right. It seemed very thrilled with itself and jumped and turned circles each time it spoke to her.

"That's amazing," she said as the little creatures began to chant her name.

"Not so amazing."

She jumped at the sound of a thick male voice coming from behind her. The man strode up beside her, his thick sable hair stirring in the evening breeze. His matching eyes settled intently upon her, watching her as she rose.

"Who are you?"

"I am Damous."

He turned to the little Unbas that gathered about him. They wrapped their little hands about his boots and stared up at him with deep affection. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, yellowish melon. The sight of it excited the Unbas—they began to jump and chatter. The stranger handed it to Ika and spoke softly.

"Uka ba lay sho esa utu."

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Ika chattered something back, and then took the melon and scurried away to study it by the fire. The rest of the Unbas crowded around as if waiting for their piece. Adianna turned her gaze from the creatures to the stranger.

"What did you say to them?"

"I merely thanked them."

Her eyes narrowed upon him. He was indeed handsome, but there was something dark and frightening behind his eyes. "For what?"

"For bringing you to me."

"Pardon?"

His gaze locked on the jewel clasped within her necklace.

"The Ladies of the Night," he muttered and reached out as if to take it.

Adianna slapped his hand away and only then did he bring his gaze back to her eyes.

"Do not touch me," she warned.

His haunting gaze was full of darkness. Fear swirled deep in the pit of her stomach. He snatched her by the arm, his iron-like fingers digging into her skin. She screamed and struggled against him with the last spurt of energy she had stored.

No longer preoccupied with the fruit, Ika ran up beside her, jumping up and down on his hind legs and chattering wildly. The stranger kicked at him, sending him to tumble backwards and the rest of the Unbas scurried to hide once more.

Adianna turned and sank her teeth into Damous' arm. He let out a bellowing cry, his grip easing enough for her to

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wrench loose. She turned and ran, her legs pumping so hard that she could no longer feel them. She heard him bellow out behind her but didn't pause to look.

Moments later a body flew at her from behind, tackling her to the ground. Then another fell on her, so that they had her arms and legs pinned to the ground. Her face was buried in the sand so that she couldn't breathe. She struggled in vain.

"Get her up."

The two brutes yanked her up and turned her toward the dark stranger. His eyes were glazed with deep-seated fury. He brought his arm up and slammed the back of his hand into her cheek. Her head snapped to the side, heat and pain flaming to life in her face. Tears welled instantly in her eyes but she didn't allow them to fall. With fire burning in her eyes she brought her head up, met his dark gaze and spit upon his shirt.

He struck her again, this time with such force that she tumbled out of the brutes' hands. She fell to the sand, spit a mouthful of blood and struggled to stand. She made it to all fours before she felt the kick against her stomach and collapsed like the dead onto the sand.

Chapter Six

Hooves pounded fast and furious across the shoreline sending sprays of seawater up behind them. The stallion's sides heaved with the effort of the gallop, but Rydon kicked him on, urging more speed, covering more ground. The stallion stretched his legs further in response, his high-pitched whinny telling his rider he was up for the challenge.

Dusk settled over the land, casting amber hues over the dunes. Rydon had found Adianna's boat upon the shore, half a day's ride from the docks. He'd also picked up her footprints heading in the opposite direction from town.

If she'd only gone the other way...

He followed her footprints for several strides then yanked back on the reins when the prints suddenly disappeared.

"Whoa." He dismounted and picked up a handful of grains, letting them slip through his fingers like precious gems. The footprints had vanished, yet there remained a strange marking in the sand. An indented spiral, like a whirlpool, nearly three feet across marred the surface of the silent sands.

From this spiral, a wide groove in the sand led off over the dunes. There was but one thing he knew that would make a marking of that nature ... a body being dragged through the sand.

He cursed himself silently. It was all his fault. If he'd just done what was asked of him. If he'd just kept his distance and not fallen for his captive, he wouldn't be here now.

Adianna would be safely aboard his ship and not being dragged over the dunes. He only hoped he could find her before it was too late.

If anything was to happen to her, he could not bear to go on in this life.

Rydon mounted his stallion, following the trail in the sand. For several long minutes he rode along beside the groove in the sand, until once again the trail disappeared. He dismounted and scanned the area.

"Blast!" he mumbled. There was nothing but sand. Sand everywhere, as far as the eye could see. The trail had simply stopped at his feet as if she had just vanished. What in the world was going on? Where had she gone? What had happened to the trail?

How could it just vanish?

Rydon slumped down onto the sand, rested his head upon his knees and took a moment to rest. Perhaps he'd imagined it. Perhaps he'd become so sleep deprived that he was following ghosts in the sand. His horse pawed at the ground, then snorted as the stallion took a moment to catch his own breath after the heart-pounding ride across the sand. Rydon felt fur brush his arm though he didn't bother to look up.

"Not now Mercus."

But then he felt fingers crawling on him. It had him jumping up and drawing his sword from its sheath. His breath caught in his throat as he scanned the silent sands around him. There was nothing. Then he caught a flash out of corner of his eye. He whipped around.

"Who's there?"

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Silence greeted him, but he held his stance for several moments. He watched the sand shift, closing in on itself as something moved beneath the surface. His horse bellowed out a whinny and reared up against the strange motion in the sand. Rydon watched the sand closely. He drew his sword up further. The movement stopped.

Without warning something burst from beneath the sand. Rydon swung out blindly. His blade whirled through the air but made no contact. Its momentum sent Rydon stumbling back as a little creature let out a high screech and ducked back under the sand.

"Blast," he cursed. "What was that?"

He watched a little head peek out from beneath the sand, big dark eyes blinking rapidly. Slowly it emerged and Rydon let out a sigh of relief. "Unbas"

The Unbas inched forward, sniffing at the air as he neared Rydon. Rydon sat down onto the sand while the Unbas sniffed at his clothes. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath.

He was running out of options. Here he was chasing a hopeless string of trails in the sand, fighting off harmless three-foot sand creatures and there was still no sign of Adianna. She was gone, perhaps without a hope of returning and he was to blame.

Guilt washed over him like the tides against the shoreline. It swept over him in steady, lapping waves until he feared he might drown in his own sorrows.

He drew in a deep breath and tried to push away the ache in his heart. It would do the princess no good for him to lie in

the sand and damn himself for letting her get away. He had to find her. He could not give up on her. He would find her.

He *had* to find her.

"Adianna."

Rydon's eyes flew open at the sound of her name. He sat up quickly and again the Unbas scurried back, though it didn't dive beneath the sand this time. He eyed it cautiously, curiously. Had he really heard what he thought he had heard? Or was he simply imagining things?

"What did you say?"

The Unbas eased forward, walking on all fours, its huge eyes watching Rydon cautiously. "Adianna," it said again in a soft, high voice.

"Have you seen Adianna? Do you know where she is?"

"Adianna," it said again, this time louder. It jumped up and turned circles in front of him.

Rydon moved to his knees, down on all fours so that he was face to face with the skittish sand creature. "Yes, Adianna, very good. Do you know where she is?"

"Adianna. Adianna go." The little Unbas jumped up and down, his little mouth curving slightly, his chest puffing out with obvious pride.

"Where did Adianna go?"

"Ouch."

Rydon struggled to make some sense out of the Unbas' broken speech. Its little voice was so high that he had to strain to listen. As exhaustion threatened to take over, frustration mounted though he tried to keep his temper in check.

If he gave in to the urge to pick the Unbas up by the neck and shake him until he could make sense of his words he'd never find Adianna. And this little creature was the only hope they had.

"Is Adianna hurt? Do you know where she is?"

The Unbas cocked its head as if considering, then it jumped up again and spun around once more. He pressed his tiny palm to his chest.

"Ika," he said then pointed a stubby finger at Rydon.

"Take."

"Take? You'll take me to her?"

Hope, like the welcome spring rain after a long winter showered down upon him. His heart pounded feverishly in his chest at the thought of finally setting eyes on Adianna once again.

Ika jumped and turned circles while he chanted. "Take, take, take."

Rydon scurried up, slipped his sword back into his sheath.

"Yes, good, take me to her."

Though Mercus was nearly as exhausted as he, Rydon slipped the reins back over the stallion's head and threw a leg up over the saddle. He mounted, then reached out for Ika.

Ika eyed him cautiously, cocked his head, then slowly slipped his warm, furry hand into Rydon's. Rydon pulled him up, settled the little creature before him.

Ika pointed a stubby, furry finger to the north. "Take."

Rydon gave Mercus a sharp kick at the sides and the horse leapt forward in response. Ika let out a high-pitched squeal; then he began chanting again.

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"Take, take, take."

* * * *

They'd bound her hands behind her back, covered her head with a sack so that she could barely breathe.

For what seemed like an eternity she rode blindly in front of one of the men. She'd stopped struggling. She hadn't the strength or the desire to fight anymore. She suspected she had nodded off a few times, but she couldn't be sure for how long.

There was still a dull throb in her cheek where Damous had struck her and the ache in her back only seemed too worsen as they rode on. Beneath the sack she let the tears fall, though she sobbed silently.

None of the men spoke. She had no idea who was behind her. Thick, hairy arms were wrapped about her, keeping her balance upon the horse. She could at least be grateful that his hands did not explore her body.

Adianna was jolted from a doze when the horse came to a halt. The man mounted behind her slid from the saddle, and then those same hairy arms grasped her waist and pulled her from the horse's back.

The sack was yanked off her head and she gasped in a breath of fresh air.

"Come along," Damous grunted.

Even if she had wanted to protest she couldn't have. Her body seemed heavy and lifeless to her. Her legs felt so limp and weak they could barely support her weight.

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When he cut the ropes from her wrists, her arms fell helplessly to her sides despite the dull throbbing ache. Damous took her by the arm, his fingers digging harshly into her skin. She staggered along beside him, nearly tripping over her own feet.

Adianna stumbled along as he pulled her down a dirt path overgrown with weeds. They headed towards the ruins of a castle. Broken stone lay scattered about. Vegetation grew thick among the rubble. Wordlessly, she followed Damous inside. The walls were covered in thick ivy and the flicker of a fire sent menacing shadows to play about the ruins. Above, the night sky was the ceiling.

Beyond the castle entrance, lay an oversized room bathed in the glow of firelight. Adianna cast a glance about. At one time this palace would have been magnificent, now it lay battered in the shadows of the forest, cold and forgotten. It stank of rotten meat and the sweat of a hundred men.

Men were scattered about the room, they all turned to stare as she entered. No doubt this was the source of the stink that permeated through the air to make her eyes water.

In the center of a room sat a large, burly man with deeply tanned skin and dark eyes. He held a leg of lamb in his hand, ripped a piece of meat from the bone with his teeth. He spit a piece of gristle out onto the ground. A pack of dogs growled and barked as they fought for the scrap. He brought his gaze up to meet hers.

"I'm pleased you could join us."

"I had no choice." Adianna spat through clenched teeth.

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The man before her was more disgusting than the pigs that wallowed in the mud near the riverbanks. A mocking grin played over his lips. Remnants of lamb covered his mouth and pieces of bread stuck in his teeth. He was far more disheveled and ugly than the scruffy wild dogs at his feet.

"What is your name, my lovely?"

She shook her head. She'd not tell him anything. She didn't have much strength or hope left, but she was determined to hang on to the last shred of her pride.

The slob of a man at the table tore another bit of meat from the bone and chewed with his mouth open so that she could see the bits of flesh rolling around on his tongue. He said nothing as he watched her from across his platter of food.

Damous held her tight at his side. "She wears the royal necklace."

The wretched pig of a man rose from the makeshift table and approached her. She could smell the scent of death and decay upon him, as if he'd bathed in a pool of rotting flesh. The stench brought tears to her eyes, yet she couldn't turn away for Damous' grasp upon her arm.

"Well, well, look at that," the man said. He reached up and wrapped his grimy fingers about her necklace. In one quick pull he yanked it from her neck. "Seems as if we've caught ourselves a princess."

A round of hoots and catcalls rose up from the crowd of gawking men about them. Some licked their lips as they caressed her form with lustful stares while others dared to take a step forward, sniffing at the air like dogs.

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Adianna pretended to pay them no notice though she was much too aware of their presence. Instead she turned her gaze to the man before her. "I demand to know who you are."

He grinned at that, a wide toothy grin that spread over his face and made him look all the more devilish. He gave a slight bow. "I am Feden, King of the Pirates. And you, my dear princess, shall become my queen."

She took as much of a step forward as Damous allowed. "I shall not be your queen."

Feden flashed a devilish smile, then turned away and strode to a wooden rack that sat against the wall. He toyed with the chains that were bolted into place.

"You shall be my queen and anything else that I wish. If I wish you to service me then you shall service me without question. If I wish you to service each and every one of men then you shall graciously obey."

Another round of shouts and cheers rose from the crowd. Slowly Feden turned toward her. His smile had vanished and his eyes narrowed dangerously upon her.

"If you deny me anything I shall not think twice of killing you."

Adianna swallowed hard, pushing down the lump that was rising in her throat. Perhaps she had been destined to a life of servitude, but it would not be with this slovenly excuse for a man or his band of perverted thieves. She'd given herself to a man once before and it had caused her nothing but heartache. She dared not give in again. She would fight him

and anyone else who dared to claim her with the last bit of breath she held in her body.

She would die before being taken captive again, before being treated as nothing more than an object of pleasure. She would die before being owned. She might have once been a princess and she might have once been bound to a duty she despised, but she would remain her own person. And no one, not Rydon, nor the Prince of Easton, nor the proclaimed King of Thieves would take that from her. Her eyes narrowed upon his, challenging him.

"Then kill me."

Feden closed the distance between them in a few swift strides. He tightened his fingers around her face and pulled her chin up until her eyes met his. His callused fingers bruised her skin with a crushing grip. "Don't tempt me."

Flames of rage rose through Adianna's body until they consumed her eyes. She cared not if he killed her. She would no longer be anyone's captive. Anyone's toy. She drew in a breath and spit upon him.

"You disgust me. You are nothing but an animal!"

Feden's head fell back as he laughed. "We are all animals."

He gestured toward the men surrounding them. He rubbed at the scruff of beard upon his chin as he considered her defiance. "You intrigue me. I shall give you till dawn to come to your senses. If by then you continue to refuse me I shall condemn you to a life far worse than death.

"Now get her out of my sight!" he bellowed.

Damous dragged Adianna through a long narrow corridor that led to the dungeons below. He shoved her into a small dark room and slammed the door behind him.

Adianna whirled around and beat her fists against the door as she heard the lock click. "Let me out! Let me out, you bastard! I shall have you hanged for this!"

She pounded her fists into the door one last time, then turned away to rub at her sore hands. It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness of the room, as the only light was the glow of firelight that seeped in from under the door.

She slumped down to the ground, more exhausted than she'd ever been in her life. Every muscle in her body cried out in one long screaming ache. Her head throbbed mercilessly and it wasn't until she was surrounded by silence that she realized just how badly she'd been beaten.

She wanted to fight but she feared she was losing both the strength and the will to live. She spoke the truth when she'd told Feden to kill her.

Death would be a welcomed peace from the hell she'd found herself in. If her father's ships had not found her by now, was there any hope of rescue? She feared not. For they'd be looking upon the sea, not within the battered ruins of a castle hidden deep in the heart of the forest.

And what of Rydon, would he come looking for her? She doubted it very much. For what good was she to him now? Bruised and lifeless without any real will left to live. If she died here, all would be forgiven and forgotten. Another treaty would be drafted between Anista and Easton. She'd never

have to admit that she'd betrayed her family and her country by giving herself to a lowly pirate.

She'd never have to see the shame wash through her father's eyes nor hear the disappointment in his voice. Perhaps this was why she found herself here. Perhaps she was meant to die, alone in the cold confines of this shadowed keep. For what good was she to anyone now?

Adianna buried her face in the crook of her arm and wept.

* * * *

Rydon and Ika rode long after the sun had set. Finally when the horse grew weak with fatigue they were forced to stop for the night. Rydon slid from Mercus and helped Ika down. The little creature yawned and let out a soft sigh.

Ika had chanted "take, take, take" most of the journey, driving Rydon near crazy. He was relieved when the little one had eventually worn himself out so that they could ride in peace.

Rydon glanced about. There was nothing but dunes before them and dunes behind them. It was as if they'd ridden into a great canyon of sand.

"We'll camp here for the night."

Ika jumped up excitedly and sniffed at the air. He began chattering away in his native tongue. Rydon didn't pay him much attention. It seemed as if the little creature was always chattering about something. Despite his aching body, Rydon went to work searching the sands for anything he might use to build a fire.

Ika continued to chatter and jump around, leaving tiny footprints in the sand. When Rydon didn't take notice, Ika scrambled over and tugged on his hand.

"Not now Ika," Rydon said, "We have to find something to make a fire. You know fire. Warm."

"Ika take." The little creature yanked on Rydon's hand urging him forward.

"All right, all right, I'm coming."

He let out a heavy sigh. He hadn't the energy to deny the relentless little creature any longer. Ika led him to the rise of the nearest sand dune. When they reached the top, Rydon was surprised to see a mass of towering trees in front of them.

Just on the other side of the dunes, the sands gave way to dirt and dirt to sparse stalks of yellowish grasses. The thin yellowish grasses merged into the thicker greens of a lush forest floor.

It was as if Rydon had stepped through an invisible door and into another world. There was only one place in all of Anista where the landscape shifted so quickly.

The Ishna Forest. What had once been home to towering castles and powerful families now housed the underbelly of Anista. There was but one band of thieves with the audacity to take a princess captive, and that was old Feden's band.

There was no doubt in Rydon's mind that the old dog was behind Adianna's disappearance. No doubt he intended to trade her for a ransom.

Rydon ran down the other side of the dune, with Ika following at his heels. He raced down the worn path that led

to Feden's refuge. Rydon scanned the ruins. He could make out the shapes of many men.

He dropped his sword. He knew Feden and he knew Feden's men. He'd need only a bag of gold to contend with the thief. He turned back to Ika. "Stay here."

The creature seemed happy to oblige.

Despite his exhaustion, Rydon made his way towards the castle. Just as he knew he would be—Rydon was apprehended before he'd even reached what had once been the castle gates.

A ragged, burly guard met Rydon with the business end of a blade. "What business have you?"

Rydon held up his hands to show he was unarmed. "I'm looking for a woman."

"Aren't we all," the guard chuckled and a round of laughter bellowed out from the other men set to guard the crumbling castle.

"I have it on good authority the woman I seek is here."

Rydon had no intention of fighting. He only wished to get inside, pay Adianna's ransom and get out with both their lives. Had he not been so exhausted from his search and near mad with hunger, he might have enjoyed challenging Feden's men yet again. But a battle was the furthest thing from his mind. All he wanted was Adianna.

The guard stepped forward, the tip of his blade inching closer to Rydon's chest. "And what if she is?"

"I should like her returned. I can pay, of course. Handsomely." He fished a canvas sack of gold from his pocket. He jiggled it so that the coins clanked together.

The guard considered for a minute then gave a jerk of his head. "All right, come inside, but keep your hands where I can see 'em."

Rydon stepped ahead of the guard and picked his way carefully through the rubble. The guard kept the tip of his sword nudged against Rydon's back, reminding him that he was but a step behind. They entered a large open room awash in firelight. A dozen men meandered about and a pack of wild-eyed dogs paced the floor. Several racks and torture devices lined the walls. At the center of the room sat an old wooden table and the leader of the band of rogues.

Feden rose, rounded the table and closed the distance between them. A grim smile curved his crude lips. "Ah, Rydon, how wonderful to see you."

The guard nudged Rydon forward as if to remind him was still walking at the tip of a sword.

"A pleasure as always."

Rydon huffed out a short laugh. He remembered the last time he'd been here. He'd left Feden with a cut across his arm, three men with broken bones and the valuable sword Feden's men had stolen. Of course, the treasure Feden had stolen this time was far more valuable than that of a sword.

Rydon intended to do whatever it took to get Adianna back, pay whatever amount the worthless thug required. No price was too high for the Princess of Anista.

Feden closed the distance between them and gave a deep, exaggerated bow. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I'm looking for a woman."

Feden scratched at his chin as if considering. "Can't say as I've seen one."

"I know she is here, Feden. I want her."

"She'd worth a great deal to me, Rydon. A beautiful woman like that could do wonders for my décor." He gestured to the walls about him.

The thoughts of Adianna put on display and being forced to endure who knew what kind of abuse was more than Rydon could stand. The urgency to get his hands on her, to take her away from this awful place was unbearable.

"She's worth far more to me, Feden, more than you could possibly imagine. Name your price and you shall have it."

"Name my price? Any price? What's the catch? You'll pay me for the girl, I'll hand her over and you'll turn your waiting army upon me?"

Feden eyed Rydon. There was no reason for either of them to trust, yet Rydon had no ill intentions.

"I assure you, I'm alone. I want nothing more from you, Feden, than the woman. Name your price and you shall have it. I promise you that."

* * * *

Adianna woke to the sounds of swearing. She opened her eyes, though darkness still seemed to engulf her. Her body was so weak and sore she couldn't move. Her mouth was so dry she couldn't find words to call out.

She lay huddled against the wall in the corner of the dark cell. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't get her mind to clear. Everything was blurry, like she was lost in a haze of

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darkness. There were sounds—she could hear them but she couldn't make out from where they came.

The door creaked open and the glow from a lantern seeped into the room. She closed her eyes against the burning light. She felt arms slip around her and lift her from the floor. She was too tired to fight, too tired to open her eyes. The man's skin was rough and smelled of the sea, a familiar scent. She tried to speak but it came out as little more than a mumble.

"Shhhh, quiet now," he said softly, his voice like something from a dream.

They were moving, she could feel the cool breeze against her skin, rustling her hair. She dangled helplessly in the man's arms, her body too weak and worn to resist. She tried to open her eyes and caught a faint glimpse of a man, though her mind was too clouded to make sense of it.

And then she closed her eyes and let the darkness take her away.

* * * *

Adianna woke slowly, this time within the embrace of muscled arms. They were firm as they held her, a comfort she allowed herself for a moment as her mind had yet to clear. His skin was warm against hers, his lips moist as they traced her brow.

"I thought I'd lost you."

The familiar voice brought a flutter to her stomach.
"Rydon?"

"I'm here, everything will be all right. I'm here."

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Adianna tried to blink away the fog that clouded her mind. Where was she? What had happened? Her eyes began to adjust to the dark and she began to make out the outline of Rydon's cabin. Thank the Ladies of the Night he'd come for her.

"Rydon?" she whispered his name again.

"Shhh ... sleep now. All will be better by morning."

Though she didn't want to, though she wanted to linger in his arms for one more moment, sleep took its hold of her. She drifted into a dreamless pit of blackness.

Chapter Seven

When Adianna woke the next morning he was gone and the whole ordeal seemed like nothing more than a bad dream. But the ache in her body, and the torn remnants of her gown told her that it had been all too real.

She couldn't see out the window as the drapes had been drawn, but the ship was still and silent. She managed to sit as the door creaked open and Dobbs entered the room, iron shackles dangling from his large hands.

Dobbs quietly shut the door behind him before making his way toward her. He cleared his throat and glanced down at the irons warily as if he didn't like what he was about to do. When he brought his gaze back up to meet hers, his eyes were soft, almost sympathetic.

"It is time to go, Your Highness."

Adianna lifted her chin and gave him a slight, regal nod. "Have I been reduced to a common prisoner?"

"My apologies, your Highness, but I can't have you slipping away from me." Dobbs let out a soft sigh as he latched the irons about her wrist. "Too tight?"

She shook her head. She thought of Rydon. Wondered where he was. Wondered why he didn't come for her. Above them, she heard his booming voice bark orders to his crew.

Dobbs took the chain that bound the shackle about each of her wrists. She followed a step behind as he led her to the door. When they came onto the deck, the brightness of the sun struck her so that she was forced to squint her eyes. She

drew in a deep breath. It filled her lungs and nearly made them burn with the purity of the air. It felt good to breathe in so deeply.

As her eyes adjusted to the brightness of day, she glanced about to see the crew silently staring. They gathered about, a great crowd of men glistening with sweat from a hard day's work, their skin darkly tanned. Most wore tattered linen shirts and pants and looked as if they hadn't seen land in far too many days. She searched for Rydon, but did not find him. She shifted her gaze forward.

It was then she caught the sweet sight of land. Waves spilled onto golden sands that stretched out before her, giving way to lush greens. Towering trees rose up from the beach to sway softly in the lingering sea breeze. In the distance, a wall of grey-green mountains touched the sky. The sounds of wildlife and water surrounded her, filling her ears like a great welcome.

On the shore two men waited. Despite the warmth of the day, they were clothed from head to toe in thick wool clothing and heavy armor. Their heads were bowed so that Adianna couldn't make out their features. They wore the crest of Easton. Adianna's eyes grew wide as her gaze settled on the crest. Had Rydon really brought her to Easton's lands? How long had she been sleeping?

All was silent as they stepped onto the shore. The armed guard to her right looked up, but his gaze did not meet hers. He looked directly at Dobbs and nodded. The guard turned then and without a word headed off into the trees. Dobbs

followed, yanking on the chains so that Adianna was forced to follow.

The sand gave way to lush grasses and the trees grew tall and full about them. Chirping birds could be heard from the treetops. Their songs echoed out into the silence about them, filling the air with their chipper chorus. Adianna stumbled along behind, following in Dobbs' footsteps to avoid rocks or overgrowth along the faint dirt path.

They came to a clearing where a large castle loomed before them. Adianna let out tiny gasp as her gaze wandered up the stone wall to the top of the watchtowers. Men were posted about, their eagle-like eyes carefully watching as they approached.

The small party reached the towering castle's door. The first of the guards stopped and pressed his hands against the door. The door opened and firelight spilled out at their feet. The guards marched in.

Dobbs started to follow, but Adianna stood with her feet firmly planted. He was forced to turn back towards her.

"This way, Your Highness."

Adianna shook her head.

"Come now, they are waiting."

"I'm not taking another step until someone tells me what is going on. Where is Rydon?"

Dobbs let out a heavy sigh as he took a step towards her. "Forgive me, your Highness, but you leave me no choice."

Before she had time to protest, he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Adianna let out a sharp scream that

was more surprise than fear. She kicked and squirmed, but he held her tight about the waist.

"Let go of me, you brute! I'll have you hanged for this!"

Dobbs said nothing as she fought him. He carried her beyond the doorway, down a series of twisting hallways brightly lit with candles. She continued to squirm and kick until they reached a great, open room.

He plopped her down upon her feet and she immediately drew her arms up and swung out blindly. She heard his muffled curse and watched as his head snap back. When he turned his gaze back upon her, she could see the trickle of blood oozing from his lips. No doubt she'd hit him with the irons.

He cast her a heated glance before he turned his attention to the man awaiting them. "She is all yours, Your Highness."

"Oh Adianna, thank goodness you are safe."

Her gaze was drawn to the familiar voice. A voice that had soothed her during childhood, a voice that brought her such advice and wisdom. The voice of her father.

Even as she turned toward him, tears began to well in her eyes. She stumbled forward, fell into his embrace and buried her head within the soft folds of his linen shirt and velvet overcoat.

"Oh, Father."

He stroked the length of her hair while she sobbed into his shoulder. He pulled her back, held her at arm's length.

"You've had a hard journey."

She searched his face. "Father, what are you doing here?"

"Shhh ... it's alright now. You need to rest." The guard unlocked her shackles and she leaned into her father. He wrapped his arms about her and led her down another long hallway. He opened a door, escorted her inside.

"Rest now, darling, all will be explained very soon."

Her father kissed her brow and left. Adianna glanced about. The room was well lit from the oversized windows lining the walls. An elaborate four-poster bed stood to one side. A fireplace stood on the other side of the room; a small fire flickered and popped inside it. Two towering bookshelves and a pair of matching armchairs were arranged on either side. There was a thick fur-skin rug that covered much of the floor.

Adianna went to the bed and settled upon it. There were so many questions that raced through her mind, but everything seemed to return to him. Where was Rydon? Would she ever see him again?

She supposed not, for what would her father do if he were to find him? Surely he would be hung for kidnapping a royal daughter of Anista. For his sake Adianna hoped Rydon had gone, but the thought of it left her heart with a deep, sick ache.

* * * *

Rydon sat alone at the old wooden table that spanned the length of the room. His thoughts wandered to Adianna. Would she ever be able to forgive him for what he had done?

He let out a heavy sigh and with it a great heartache grew. He doubted it. Even if he told her the truth now, what

purpose would it serve? She'd know he wasn't a pirate, but then she'd accuse him of being a liar.

He wasn't sure which was worse. Of course he'd never lied to her. He'd never said that he was a pirate. She'd made that assumption herself. He'd just never bothered to correct her.

He'd thought it best for her. Who was he trying to fool? He'd thought it best for himself that she'd continued to think it. After all, no princess would ever think of giving herself to a pirate and despite his desire for her, all would be safe.

But she *had* given himself to him. And nothing had been safe. He'd betrayed his brother and lost his heart to a woman he could never have.

"We had a deal, brother."

Marsus' harsh, demanding words interrupted Rydon's thoughts. Though there were several years between them, Marsus and Rydon could have passed for twins. They shared the same dark hair, the same dark eyes. The only difference between them was a distinguishing crook to Marsus' nose.

Rydon turned towards his older brother, the crown Prince of Easton. "I could not go through with it."

Marsus settled down at the table. He leaned in close to Rydon, whispering as if confiding a secret. "Was there a problem?"

Yes, Rydon thought. There was a problem. A huge problem.

One he had not counted on when he'd agreed to do his brother's bidding. But he didn't think he could admit it, not to anyone, especially not to his brother. "I just could not do it."

Marsus let out a long exaggerated sigh. "It was a good plan, a simple plan. How could you have fouled it so?"

Rydon lifted his gaze from his brother to the servant who handed him a plate of warm food. He thanked her with a nod then let his gaze linger upon the food. He hadn't much of an appetite these days, but his growling stomach protested otherwise. He tore off a small piece of bread and popped it into his mouth.

"It was not a good plan, Marsus, it was a foolish plan. To think you could hide her away so as not to marry her."

"I did not count on Father insisting I marry Anista's other daughter."

And Rydon had not counted on falling in love with his brother's bride.

But there was nothing more he could do. Adianna was betrothed to his brother; it had been so since their birth. There was nothing he could do to change it.

The thought of her, being presented to his brother, giving herself to him on their wedding night was more than he could stomach. He pushed back from the table, sent the chair tumbling backwards and staggered across the room.

Marsus took him by the arm, and whispered in his ear. "Careful Rydon, what if any should find out what we've done?"

Rydon jerked free of his brother's grip. He turned his dark gaze upon him, lowered his brow in a scowl. "If anyone? She knows, Marsus. And if she doesn't know who I am by now she will soon enough. It won't be long before the whole country

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knows. We'll not be able to hide what we've done. She'll never forgive us."

Marsus searched his brother's face, his forehead wrinkling as his eyes narrowed upon Rydon. "You've fallen for her. Haven't you?"

Rydon shook his head. He could not deny it, so he would say nothing of it.

"I'm leaving Marsus. My ship sails shortly. I wish you and your new bride all the world's happiness."

And with that he turned to leave.

Chapter Eight

The bed beneath her was as unfamiliar to her as the land to which she was to now call home. Those months at sea, her nights with Rydon seemed like little more than a dream.

When she woke that next morning, Adianna was once again a bride in trade. A captive bride, bound by duty. She should have been furious with Rydon for he had held her captive just as her bridegroom was bound to do upon their union. But she could not be angry with him, for he had given her something that she would forever cherish.

Love. If only for a moment she had felt love. The kind of love she'd read about in her storybooks. Love like she'd dreamed of since childhood.

True, he'd been a pirate and not the golden-haired prince she'd dreamed of as a little girl. It had been a raw, feverish love that had come and gone as quick as a heartbeat. But it had been real. A love that she would carry with her for a lifetime, as it would be the only love Adianna would ever know.

As the sun rose full and bright in the mid-morning sky, Adianna wandered to the window. She looked out over the lands that would soon be hers. A crowd of royals and villagers alike flooded the square. Donned in their most festive attire, they would soon celebrate the marriage of their beloved prince and his new bride. They would dance and drink and speak of a fruitful union.

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But there would be no song, nor drink nor dance for Adianna. A marriage and a treaty should surely be celebrated, but Adianna could do no more than mourn the loss of her own heart. The Prince of Easton might have her hand, he might have her body—but he could never her love.

For it belonged to another.

A solitary tear trickled down her cheek. It was all she had left for she'd shed a river of tears that last lonely night. She'd sent her maids away once they'd dressed her in her silken wedding gown. The bliaut was made of a delicately spun ivory silk trimmed in twisted golden threads. The attached sleeves fell long and full with an overlay of iridescent fabric and were banded with gold braids and pearl trim.

She had requested a moment alone, but there came a faint knock at the door. Adianna let out a sigh and turned away from the window.

"Come in."

The door creaked opened and her father walked in. He wore a long flowing robe of purple velvet and gold braided trim over his magnificent attire. On the breast of the robe, the crest of their family was embroidered in golden threads.

Pride lit her father's pale eyes as he stared at his eldest daughter. "Ah, my dear. You are a sight to behold. I do not believe I've seen such a beautiful bride since your beloved mother."

He crossed the room, took her hands in his and laid a soft kiss upon each one. When she looked at him another tear rolled down her pink cheek.

"Adianna? Why are you crying, my dear?"

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She turned away, pulled a linen handkerchief from the sleeve of her wedding gown and dabbed at her eyes. "I can not go through with this, Father."

She heard his heavy sigh and it only added to the crushing weight in her heart. He didn't move, even as she kept her back to him. "The chapel is set, the Prince is ready and the kingdom awaits its new queen."

"I do not love him, Father."

"Adianna, please. You know we haven't a choice and in time you will grow to love him."

Adianna shook her head. How could she make her father understand? How could she tell him that she could not give her heart to the Prince of Easton? That she'd already bestowed it upon a lowly pirate instead? She couldn't utter the words. Didn't dare confess her heart's desire, for it would do her little good.

"A son's punishment and a daughter's duty."

"You mustn't look upon this day with such sorrow in your heart, my dear."

She turned back towards her father. She looked into his eyes and within them she saw the reflection of her own pain. "I'm sorry, Father, but your words bring me little comfort."

King Landos sought the solace of a nearby chair. He let his gaze fall to the floor and away from his daughter. "You love him."

Adianna shook her head, "No, Father, which is precisely the point."

"Not Prince Marsus, Prince Rydon. You've fallen in love with him."

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The layers of satin and silk of her wedding gown shushed quietly as Adianna took a step forward. "What did you say?"

"You love him, is it not true?"

Adianna swallowed against the lump in her throat. Had her ear deceived her or had she heard her father correctly?
"Prince Rydon?"

"Yes, Prince Rydon. Have you fallen for him?"

Adianna stood speechless and heart-stricken as her father's words crashed over her. Like the wild waves of a sea-born storm in the heart of the Savin Sea, his name drowned in her ears.

Prince? He was a Prince? No, this couldn't be.

Adianna could feel tears welling up again, a lump rising in her throat once more. *How could this be?*

She crossed to her father, knelt before him and looked up into his eyes. "A prince? Father, Rydon is a prince? Can you be sure of this?"

"He is the second son born to King Arsan. Did he not tell you?"

Adianna shook her head. No, he hadn't told her. He hadn't uttered one word of his true identity. He had lied to her, let her think he was nothing more than a sea-dog, a pirate with a handful of stolen gold and the dream of freedom upon open waters.

"This cannot be Father, it cannot. You must be speaking of someone else."

King Landos shook his head. "No, my dear. The man who captured you, who held you prisoner aboard his ship was

Prince Rydon. Son of King Arsan, brother to Marsus, the crown Prince of Easton."

"Why? If he is a prince then why would he have done this? Why would he not tell me?"

"I have no answers for you, my darling. We can only be thankful that he and Prince Marsus came to their senses."

"Prince Marsus? What has he to do with it?"

"It was his bidding."

Adianna sank down to the floor, yards of fabric fanning out about her. Her golden hair was twisted up so that long ringlets fell over her face. She closed her eyes, as the room seemed to be spinning about her. A sickness had risen in her stomach, such as it had aboard ship. This time it was not the sea that made her stomach churn, but the waves of guilt and confusion that threatened to drown her.

She felt her father put his hand on her shoulder, but it brought her little comfort. She doubted very much that anything could bring her comfort. Her love, the last lingering memory she had to bring her consolation during the service of her marriage ... was gone.

"Tell me my darling, do you love him?"

Adianna looked up into her father's eyes as the tears streamed down her cheeks. "Does it matter now Father? I am nothing but a pawn in these royal intrigues. My happiness and my heart holds no value in this world of riches and power."

"Adianna, please," her father begged.

Rydon had stolen her heart, stolen her life and stolen her hope. She had nothing more to live for and nothing more to give. She would fulfill her duty. She would marry the crown

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Prince of Easton; watch her father sign the treaty that would ensure peace and prosperity for their lands. Then by the light of the twin moons, she would put a dagger between her breasts.

"Rest your fears, Father, for a promise has been made and a promise shall be kept."

* * * *

Rydon stepped aboard his ship. His heart was so heavy he wondered why it didn't sink them. In a few hours time she would be gone. Wed to his brother as promised. The thought of it brought such sickness roiling inside him that he could barely drag himself across the deck to his cabin.

He staggered into the room, fell on the bed and buried his head beneath his arms. The room still smelled of her—nothing was more scented than the bed upon which she'd slept. Upon which they'd made love. And though it pained him to lie there, breathing in the faint scent of her, he couldn't bear to move.

There was a knock at the door. "Captain?"

He didn't bother to look up. Rydon answered with nothing more than a grunt.

Dobbs entered the cabin. "We are set to sail."

Rydon drew in a deep breath, for the thought of sailing on without her drove daggers of pain into his heart. He wanted nothing more than to take her captive once more. To hide her on his ship and leave this world behind as they rode the tide to the open sea.

Flights of fancy, nothing more than a foolish lover's dream. For surely she would have found out about him by now and he could harbor no hope of forgiveness. He rose then, tried to push away the lovesick thoughts. He gave Dobbs a quick nod.

"Good. Tell the men we sail shortly."

Dobbs placed his hands behind his back and took a solid stance before his captain. "With all due respect, Your Highness, I will not."

Rydon cocked an eyebrow in question. "Pardon?"

"I will not let this ship sail."

"And why not?"

"Because I cannot let you walk away from love."

Rydon let out a snort of laughter, yet it was far from amusing. He went to his drawing table, sifted through his maps to busy his fidgety hands.

"Do not be ridiculous Dobbs. I am not walking away from love."

"No, Your Highness, sailing away would be more accurate and I'll not let you do it."

Rydon set a map upon the table, rolled it open and pretended to be interested in the contents. He didn't dare look at his friend for fear that Dobbs would see the hurt and the betrayal within his eyes. "With all due respect, old friend, you have no say. I am the prince and this ship's captain."

"And a stubborn one at that."

Dobbs crossed the room, took Rydon by the arm and yanked him around until their eyes met. "You love her, just as she loves you. If you go now you will regret it."

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They stood silent for a moment while Dobbs' words hung between them. Finally Rydon pulled away and slouched down into an armchair, his maps scattered about the table beside him. "She could not love me, Dobbs. In her eyes I was but a lowly pirate and now a deceitful prince."

"You don't give her much credit, Captain. Despite what has happened she will remain true to her heart, as should you. Do not let titles and promises blind you from the truth."

"The truth, Dobbs, is that the Princess of Anista shall marry the crown Prince of Easton as a show of good faith to seal the treaty of our countries. So it is written by word of the King."

"As a show of good faith, should it matter that the prince she marries be crowned?" Dobbs cocked a heavy brow, a hint of a smile played at his lips as he gave a low, deep bow.

"Your Highness."

Chapter Nine

Adianna waited at the chapel doors while her attendants arranged her wedding gown. She had resolved to see the beginning of peace and prosperity to Anista and the end to her world of misery. As her father stepped up beside her and hooked her arm through his to escort her into the village chapel, her tears fell like rain.

A harpist strummed softly next to overflowing urns of ruby red roses. Sunlight streamed through the colored glass of the chapel windows, sending a rainbow of light to play at her feet. The cold stone of the chapel held the chill in the air despite the warmth of the day beyond its marbled walls.

Each step towards the altar bathed in hues of ruby and gold, was a step toward death. In a few short hours, all would be done. Adianna kept her gaze cast downward even as the nobility murmured well wishes about her. They flanked either side of the chapel, their regal gowns and fine silks and satins awash in brilliant colors. They wished her every happiness and a lifetime of love even as Adianna let her hopeless tears splash to the cold floor.

As they reached the altar, three men waited for her. The King of Easton, the holy priest and her bridegroom. All but he faced her. Adianna turned toward her father.

He kissed her on the cheek then whispered into her ear, "I wish you every happiness, my darling daughter."

She returned his kiss, lingered in the scent of him, as it was the last time she'd be held within his arms. She only

hoped that in the morning's light, he would forgive her for what she planned to do.

"Always remember I love you, Father."

She closed her eyes for a moment as her father stepped aside, leaving her in the hands of her bridegroom. When she opened her eyes she expelled the breath she had been holding and traced her gaze up the royal navy robes. Her eyes locked upon his, her lips parted as she whispered his name, "Rydon?"

Rydon reached out a hand from thick velvet robes adorned with the crest of his family. When she didn't move nor utter a sound, he took her hand in his.

"I should beg for your forgiveness, Your Highness, for the anguish I have caused you. But I fear that no apology can undo the harm I've done. So instead I shall stand here and proclaim in front of God and my kingdom that your happiness and your heart mean the world to me.

"Should you wish, you may leave me now and return to your country, treaty in hand, with my word as the Prince of Easton that no harm shall ever come to your people. You are free, Adianna, free to follow your heart's desire, just as I am. I can only hope that your path lies along the same as mine. That you will forgive me my transgressions, and take my hand not of duty but of desire."

She stood silent for several long moments. She could feel the gaze of the chapel patrons pressing against her, burning into her back as they awaited her answer. Her breath was stolen by the softness of his words. Yet she could not utter a sound. More tears slipped down her cheek and he reached

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out to brush them away. She felt her heart break into a thousand pieces, so small they could be blown away by the simple breath of a whisper.

She wanted to go to him, to lose herself in his velvet embrace. To let him sweep her away once again. Her vision was blurred from the tears that fell so freely to splash in salty pools upon her gown.

"You had me believe you were someone you are not."

When he said nothing, Adianna turned and fled from the chapel. She broke out into the afternoon sun, pushed her way passed the crowd of villagers who'd gathered to celebrate this blessed day. Had she been home she would have fled to the pond beyond their manor—instead she ran through the village square towards the forest, taking the trail that she'd followed the morning before.

Adianna reached the beach. A flock of seabirds squawked and flew away as she burst onto the sands. Her heavy gown tangled about her legs so that she tripped and fell. She sobbed through ragged breaths as she pulled herself up.

Her mind was a whirl of chaotic thought and her heart throbbed with a vicious ache. All she could think of was to run away. To leave the hurt behind her, to end all of the pain. She ripped the satin bliaut from her body, leaving her covered in only an undergown of panné velvet. She cared not as she discarded her heavy veil onto the sands. The damned gown was but a heavy shroud, slowing her flight from a world that would forever bind her.

She heard Rydon calling to her then, his voice strained yet demanding. But Adianna ran on, her silk-soled shoes sinking

into the sand. She ran until her breath came in shallow spurts and her heart pounded so furiously against her chest she feared it might explode.

His body crashed into hers so that they fell together onto the sand. He settled heavily on top of her, trapping her beneath him under the prison of his weight.

"Get off me!" she screamed.

Rydon rose and flipped her around so that their faces were but inches apart. He held down her arms and pinned her to the sand. "I'm not letting you run away."

"You lie again! You said I could go, now let me go!" She struggled to no avail under his massive form.

"Please Adianna, you can't leave me. You can't run away like this. Not until you've heard what I have to say."

"I heard what you said, that wonderfully poetic plea for my forgiveness. Was that your brother's bidding as well?"

"Blast it, Adianna! You are the most stubborn woman I've ever met. Why can you not listen?"

"Because I don't believe a word you say. Now let me up!" She bit down into his arm, her teeth breaking the skin and drawing blood.

He let out a howl. "Adianna! I love you."

If there was one thing Rydon could say to quiet her, it was that. "What did you say?"

"I said I love you."

She was still and silent even as his weight pressed against her. "And you think I should forgive you now, because you've said you love me?"

"Does my love mean nothing to you?"

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"Mere words cannot undo the damage, Rydon." She pushed against him and this time he let her up. She rose, brushed the sand from her undergown with as much dignity as she could muster as she started back down the shoreline yet again.

Rydon rose to his knees. "Adianna, wait. Did you love me when you thought I was a rogue?"

Adianna stopped short and turned slowly towards him. His question astounded her. "What has that do with anything?"

"Just tell me, did you love me when you thought I was a rogue?"

She drew in a shaky breath and ran her tongue across her dry lips. She would have preferred any question to that question. She could have lied, of course, but then she'd be no better than he. She couldn't deny her own feelings any more than she could deny her kingdom's bidding.

"Yes," she said.

"I am still the same man, Adianna, the one you fell in love with aboard that ship. Should it matter now that I am a prince?"

She traced the long lines of his body. His heavy, royal robes sprawled out about him. His hair was combed back slickly so that it shimmered under the light of the sun. On the surface he looked nothing like the rogue that had captured her all those months ago aboard her father's ship.

And then she looked into his eyes—dark onyx orbs that sparkled with a hint of danger, a flicker of fire ... a stirring of desire

She walked towards him. Her long golden hair had fallen free of its clips, her pale ivory undergown stirred softly about her. She studied him under the bright rays of sunlight. Despite the clothes that graced his back his eyes were still the same. They still looked at her in such a way that stirred to life a desire she hadn't known existed until him. The memory of his kiss still lived on her skin.

She'd given herself to him, willingly, with all that she was even though she'd thought him a rogue. Perhaps she too had been lying, not about her station, but about who she was. She'd always known she could never marry a man she didn't love, yet she had been willing to trade herself, to deny her own heart's desire to please her father and save her kingdom.

Perhaps they weren't so different after all.

She knelt before him, touched her hand to his cheek. "I think you are more suited to a rogue than a prince."

He rose then and slipped the heavy royal robe from his body. He swept her up into his arms and without a word carried her into the shelter of the forest beyond. He laid her down on a soft bed of grass.

Rydon leaned over her. His dark hair was tousled. He wore a white silk shirt loosely draped about his body. His eyes were lit with glorious hunger, a mix of light and dark, desire and love.

Adianna drew in a deep breath. Her head felt light, as if she was moments from unconsciousness. She could feel not even the slightest ache, just the warmth of his body covering hers.

Soaring trees towered about them, dark and silent. The faintest reflection of sunlight shimmered from their leaves like the early morning dew. The edges of the world were faded so that she couldn't tell where the land ended and the shadows began.

Rydon's fingers rose to the strap of her undergown and slowly pulled it down. She lifted her hips, allowing him to slide it free from her body. He tossed the gown aside so that she lay naked beneath him. He took a moment to admire the soft curves of her body.

The way her hair fell carelessly about her in golden waves of curls. The way her supple breasts rose and fell with each breath she drew in. She was glorious, a true beauty to behold and every inch a princess.

She felt the fingers of shame tighten about her but she pushed them away. She cared not who saw her, naked, captured beneath his heavy form. Goosebumps rose on her skin, down the length of her arms, not from any chill any in the air, but from the prick of desire flowing over her skin.

"Will you give yourself to me?" he whispered.

With trembling hands, she unbuttoned his shirt, so that she could see his hard, powerful chest beneath the silken folds. She dipped her hands beneath the fabric, ran her fingers over the hard angles of his chest as he pushed the shirt away. Desire flamed to life inside her, sending a familiar ache to linger between her thighs.

She would give herself to him, in body, in love and in life. She had never wanted anything more.

"Yes," she whispered.

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He bent to kiss her, a whisper of a kiss that barely touched her skin. "I'm afraid this time I desire more than your body." A playful light drifted in his eyes.

"What it is you desire?"

"Your heart."

"You have it," she proclaimed.

Her body trembled so that she could control it no longer. He kissed her, like the rogue he was. He slipped his fingers in the soft folds of flesh between her legs. She let her head fall back and drew in a soft breath as he touched a finger to her clit, inviting a deeper touch as a moan escaped her lips.

The sound was nearly as sweet to him as her whispered endearments. He worked his fingers in slow, gentle circles, delighting in her maddening ascent to ecstasy. As her breathing grew deeper, her heartbeat quickened and her moans grew louder, he worked her clit faster. Faster and faster, bringing her so close to the edge of orgasm that her body began to shake with aching need.

He pulled back abruptly, just sort of her release. A devilish grin played on his mouth he watched her squirm against the grasses of the forest floor. Under the soft glow of sunlight streaking in through the trees he could see her thighs glisten from her own juices. Hunger stirred deep within her vivid cobalt eyes. ITIT It made him want her all the more. He could feel his cock, struggling against the confines of his breeches, begging for release.

"Touch me," he said urging her to her knees.

She obeyed, undoing the buttons on his pants and helped his cock spring free of its prison. Immediately she took the

throbbing member into her mouth, so deeply that it touched the back of her throat.

Rydon let out a moan as Adianna drew back, letting her lips slide along the shaft until she reached the rim of the head. She flicked her tongue across the velvet-soft ridge. She gently scraped her teeth along his ridge before taking him deep into her mouth again.

"Adianna," he whispered, his voice husky and low.

He stroked a hand down the length of her hair. Let it skim the softness of her skin. When he knew he was too near release, he pulled from her mouth. She stayed where she was, kneeling before him as his cock jutted out like the spar of a ship.

He yanked off his breeches and boots while her gaze roamed across his naked form, her eyes devouring his erection. He urged her onto her back again. He nudged her legs part, touched his hand to the moist lips between her thighs. He stroked her and she moaned with aching need.

He massaged her clit in slow, sensual circles until she cried out in a whimper of pleasure. When her clit was swollen, her wet lips radiating such heat it nearly burned his skin, he buried his cock within her.

She gasped with pleasure as he filled her. There was no pain this time, only a mind-numbing ripple of pleasure. He moved in and out of her, her hips rising up to meet his every thrust.

He pounded himself inside of her, the need, and the passion growing with each plunge. Delirious from pleasure,

Adianna dug her fingernails into Rydon's back, digging them deep into his skin as he drove himself wildly within her.

Adianna threw her head back as her orgasm simmered to life within her. Rydon edged her closer, taking them both to the heights of ecstasy. They came together crying out in wild abandon. Their bodies were covered in a fine film of sweat, their breaths heavy, and their hearts racing. She'd never known such pleasure, such contentment as she had in his arms.

When he'd emptied the last of himself within her, Rydon rolled onto his side and traced the line of her jaw with his fingertip. Adianna smiled as the last embers of desire lingered within her.

"I hope you don't think this means I've forgiven you."

His lips lifted in a slight smile. "Of course not. I expect to spend a great many nights begging your forgiveness for my misdeeds."

Her mind had settled for but a few moments when worry managed to wiggle its way up through her contentment.

"What of your brother?"

Rydon trailed a lazy finger along her thigh. "I don't think he is interested in begging your forgiveness."

"Rydon, please, what will we do? I've been promised."

He trailed his thumb over her plump lips. They were still swollen and glossed from his kisses. "You've promised to marry the Prince of Easton. And marry him you shall."

Her eyes fell closed as he leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. In all of her childhood daydreams she could have never imagined a more perfect kiss. His lips were soft and

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gentle as they settled upon hers. She could taste his love within the sweetness of his kiss.

She had dreamt of a prince and a prince she had found.

The End

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About the Author:

Danielle Devon lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, two children and two dogs. She writes a variety of erotic stories, poetry and the occasional email. You can visit her website at www.danielledevon.com to learn more about this rising author of erotica.

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