



BLACKBIRD

...Kate shoved against him, slipping out from under his arm. “Stop twisting my words against me! And who are you to point fingers? You’re likely planning to have me shot once we arrive in Tortuga!”

Wyndham matched her step for step as she stalked across the deck toward the stairs leading to the hold. He grabbed her elbow and spun her around, drawing her close so that she was pressed against him from chest to knees. Kate felt her world tilt on its axis as the pirate captain stroked the length of her back with one hand and buried the other hand in her loose hair. She stared, riveted by the sight of his mouth lowering to hers.

“You’re indeed a shrew, Kate,” he breathed against her lips. “I’m not going to shoot you. I just want you to play nicely at dinner, play nicely at chess, and swear you won’t try to stick a knife between my ribs if I leave you unbound tonight...”

ALSO BY GRACE DRAVEN

The King Of Hel

BLACKBIRD

BY

GRACE DRAVEN

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

BLACKBIRD
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC
<http://www.amberquill.com>

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be transmitted or reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief excerpts used for the purposes of review.

Copyright © 2005 by Grace Draven
ISBN 1-59279-353-3
Cover Art © 2005 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To E. Vegvary,
who sat me down one day and
made me believe.*

PROLOGUE

The entry into the manor house sported a floor of the finest marble, polished to a mirror-shine by the hard labor of numerous servants. It was one of many features about the home that bespoke wealth, power, and prestige. Within its halls, an army of staff worked to see that it retained its grandeur and made its noble family proud.

Today, the house stood silent. With the exception of the upstairs maids who moved efficiently through the numerous bedchambers cleaning and dusting, and those in the isolated kitchen, no one wandered the corridors save the long time butler, Chambers.

The heels of his shoes clicked on the marble in precise rhythm, his steps measured as he carried a silver plate, piled high with invitations, to the library. The ornately carved doors were closed, but he could hear a voice, low and seemingly frightened, behind the wood.

Chambers frowned in disapproval. He recognized the deepening tones of the earl's youngest child, a by-blow of his by a favored

BLACKBIRD

mistress. The butler sniffed in disdain. It was unseemly that the boy be in this house, even if only for the summer months. But His Grace had been adamant that young Colin would stay with him before returning to Oxford. Lady Montcleve had accepted his edict in bitter silence, only revealing her anger by pretending the child did not exist. It made every summer a trial for all involved, including the earl's legitimate son and heir, Michael.

The voice died away to silence, and Chambers tapped softly on the door. "Your Grace, your correspondences have arrived." He waited a long moment, hearing no return command to enter the room. That alone gave him pause as Lord Montcleve always answered him, even if it was to tell him to return later.

The butler waited, caught in a moment of indecision. It would be the height of impropriety and near insubordination for him to enter the library without permission, but something warned him that all was not right behind those doors. He took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for a defense should he be called to task by the master of the house.

What met his eyes as he entered the library made him gasp, and the plate slipped from his grasp, falling to the carpet amidst a flutter of pristine white cards inviting various members of the house to balls and teas.

The earl sat slumped in his chair, bent forward so that his head rested on his desk. His cravat was stained scarlet with blood, and there was a thin river of red running down the edge of the desk, dripping in a macabre pattern on the Aubusson rug.

Chambers gaped at the scene before him, struck speechless, as his gaze moved to the young man standing next to the earl. The earl's bastard son stared at the butler with stricken blue eyes, his face nearly as white as that of his dead father.

The butler backed away to the door as Colin raised a hand, holding

BLACKBIRD

it out, palm up, to reveal a bloodied knife and smears of red across his fingers. “Chambers, I found him this...”

The servant shook his head, his horror quickly transforming to rage. “Murderer,” he spat. “You killed the earl.”

Colin shook his head, his voice desperate and frightened. “No! I came in. He was already like this. I would never harm him. You must believe me, Chambers. It wasn’t me!”

His pleas fell on deaf ears as the butler jerked the door open and ran into the hall, where he skidded on the slippery floors. His voice rang loud in the vast space of the house’s first floor as he called for help. “The earl! His bastard has killed him. Call for a constable!”

CHAPTER 1

“James, I don’t understand why we have to stand out here in this miserable heat and attend this practice. It amounts to nothing more than watching a group of fumbling idiots march around in some endless, boring parade.”

Kate Abbot suppressed the urge to roll her eyes as she listened to the same complaint for, what was surely, the fiftieth time. She gazed over her sister-in-law’s head at her brother, who returned her look with one of long-suffering patience. James Sutcliffe had fallen in love with and married the beautiful daughter of Barbados’s governor. Abigail was indeed lovely, a dainty woman with a gift for socializing and making herself the most popular woman in the small social circle of the island’s elite. She was an asset to her husband, and Kate supposed she was grateful that Abigail had worked as hard as her husband to make certain he rose to the rank of Commodore. Military experience and a skill for strategy only went so far before the right connections came

BLACKBIRD

into play, and the governor's daughter had many of those.

Still, Kate found her sister-in-law a trial at times. She and James had always been close, looking out for one another and rarely arguing, even as young siblings. It had not taken long for her to realize that Abigail was jealous of those close ties. The gauntlet had been thrown down upon their first meeting when the woman took Kate's hands, smiled sweetly at her and said, "My dearest sister, I'm so pleased to finally meet you." She rose on tiptoe as Kate leaned down to kiss her cheek in greeting. Her laughter was hollow, with a thin edge of spite to it. "My, you're certainly tall, Katherine. And...robust."

It wasn't the first time Kate had heard such remarks concerning her appearance. She was tall, towering over most women and even some men. And because she refused to be cinched into the crushing torture device that was a corset, she appeared larger in her clothes. Her looks and what others might think of them had rarely bothered her, but she recognized the hidden malice in her sister-in-law's tone and responded in kind.

"Thank you, Abigail. I consider it a blessing most times. I've noticed that as some smaller women age, they grow increasingly portly. I'm certain with this height of mine, I will never appear as round as I am tall."

The other woman's lips thinned, her cheeks stained a becoming pink as Kate's words struck home. She said nothing more on it, save to welcome Kate to Barbados. "I hope you'll enjoy your visit with us, Katherine. How long are you staying?"

At that point, James stepped in, sensing a growing hostility between his sister and his wife. "Until we can find a suitable house for her, my dear, and a small staff." He took Abigail's hand, kissing her fingers, and Kate's opinion of her sister-in-law rose as the woman blushed and stared at her husband with loving eyes.

She brushed at her skirts and bent to pick up one of her small bags.

BLACKBIRD

“I thank you both for your gracious hospitality. As James said, I’m eager to find a home of my own, and not remain a tiresome guest.”

After that initial round, she and Abigail had remained on civil terms. While not friends, they often accompanied each other on forays through Bridgetown and to some of the functions hosted by the wives of officers and wealthy sugar plantation owners.

Kate found these social gatherings something of a chore. Dull discussions that fixated on the newest fashions shipped in from far away France, who was marrying who in Port Royal; all punctuated by cups of weak, sugary tea served to give her a headache by the time she and Abigail left for home. She was far more comfortable with walking through the open air markets with her maid, sampling the produce, and mingling with the citizens of Barbados.

And while her brother would admonish her had he known of it, she often slipped out of the house early in the morning and took a well-worn path leading to the beach. There she would hitch her skirts to an improper height and wade through the gentle surf, curl her toes in the sand, and gaze out at the open sea with its shrieking gulls flying overhead and the distant specks of sailing ships navigating the waters. It was during these times that she thought of her husband.

Kate sorely missed Henry, with his endearing way of pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose when he was nervous, or how he kissed her temple each morning before sitting down across from her at breakfast. Twenty-six was far too young to die, but consumption made no distinction in age, and before she knew it, he was gone. She buried him, mourned him, and turned her back on England with nary a glance over her shoulder. In the short time she had been here on Barbados, she had fallen in love with the lush, sunlit Caribbean, and it comforted her to know that her husband, had he lived, would have liked it as well.

She also thought he might have agreed with her assessment of Abigail. Intelligent, spoiled, and quite demanding, James’s wife could

BLACKBIRD

be a handful, but she seemed devoted to her husband. For that reason alone, Kate held her peace when the other woman again took up her incessant complaints regarding their observation of the parade maneuvers before them.

“James, can we please leave? You promised me a trip to the new haberdashery. I’m told the owner, Madame Guiot, has the latest hats in her shop, all direct from Paris.” She pushed her bottom lip out in a pout and stared at her husband from under thick, dark lashes.

Kate hid a smile behind her hand, watching as her brother frowned, struggling with the inner conflict of humoring his wife or fulfilling one of his more mundane duties as Commodore. The duty won out and he took her hand in a supplicating gesture.

“Soon, my love. I did promise you, and we will go. But duty calls first, and I promised Captain Porter I would review and approve the processional march. Remember, the earl of Montcleve will arrive soon, and we want to impress him, yes?”

Abigail promptly forgot her pout and clapped her hands in excitement. “Oh yes! That will surely be the event of the season here. Mother has already turned the house upside down in her preparations for the earl’s visit. And wait until you see the dress I bought. I think you will be most proud to have me on your arm when we are presented.”

James kissed her hand. “I am always proud to have you at my side, my dear, no matter what dress you wear. You will be lovely, as always.” He glanced at his sister. “And you, Kate? Have you chosen something?”

She shrugged. To be honest, it had been the farthest thing from her mind. Were it not so important to her brother and his family, she might have tried to bow out of attending the presentation and any of the socials sure to follow. James and Abigail had never met Michael St. Claire, earl of Montcleve, nor had she. But her husband had been one

BLACKBIRD

of his many solicitors. While always respectful of his clients, Henry had once told Kate there was something about St. Claire that smacked of ill will.

She had seen the earl once, from across a busy street near the business district where her husband worked. A handsome man dressed in the height of fashion, he had stepped into a carriage and turned to face her, staring over the heads of the milling crowd with a disdainful hauteur. That expression didn't give her pause. It seemed to be a perpetual look worn by members of the nobility. What made her understand Henry's unease was the debauched look to his features—a cruel twist at the sculpted mouth, a lingering malice in the eyes that stared through her and those around her. The image had never left her, and it was with no great enthusiasm that she greeted the news that he would be visiting Bridgetown as a guest of the governor.

“Kate?”

James's question startled her out of her thoughts, and she offered him an apologetic smile. “Forgive me. I wandered away for a moment.” She tugged at the wide brim of her hat, wishing she could just toss it to the side and enjoy the cool breeze drifting off the water.

It was Abigail who spoke this time. “Kate, have you something to wear for the presentation?” The obvious doubt in her voice let Kate know she was becoming familiar with her sister-in-law's somewhat eccentric ways.

“No. I haven't thought much about it, though I'm certain it will be black. Remind me again why he's coming here?”

Abigail gaped at her, but James only smiled and shook his head. “Never one to keep up with the aristocracy, were you, sister mine?” His features quickly took on a more serious cast. “Despite all the revelry this visit will inspire, Montcleve is coming to Barbados to personally witness the execution of his father's murderer.”

Kate blinked at him in surprise. Well, this was new. She knew of

BLACKBIRD

the earl's visit through Abigail, but the other woman never made mention of the why of it, only that he would be here in a few days' time, and what a social coup it was for her father to host him. She'd never said the man was traveling from half a world away to watch another man die. While the thought of losing one's parent to so grisly a fate made her pity him, she could not suppress a shiver, remembering that dissolute face with its cold expression. Somehow, she suspected that whatever righteousness was rendered, Michael St. Claire's enjoyment of the event would go deeper than simply seeing justice done.

She was interrupted from asking anything more by Captain Porter's approach. He saluted his commanding officer and bowed briefly to both women. The men behind him stood at stiff attention, flushed and sweating in their dress uniforms and formal wigs.

"Commodore Sutcliffe, sir, I await your comments on the procession."

Kate's attention began to wander as the men spoke of changes to be made to figure eights and who would best serve as point man in the procession. Abigail was likely as bored by the conversation as she was, but maintained a wide-eyed, insincere look of interest. Always the helpful wife. Kate admired the woman's fortitude. Then again, Abigail could talk for hours of the new Alencon lace imported to the islands, so this was not so far off the mark.

She watched as native islanders, African slaves, and pale, transplanted British mingled in a ceaseless flow of humanity in the streets. The scent of the sea mixed with the smells of frying food and the pungent tang of fish. And interwoven among the strongest odors, she smelled the lightest hint of flowers—heliconia, flower fence and hibiscus.

The dragging clank of metal striking cobblestone interrupted her musings. Kate stepped away from her brother to investigate the sound.

BLACKBIRD

Her eyes widened in shock at the sight. A shambling line of prisoners, bound together by short lengths of chain clasped to their ankles and wrists with iron cuffs, shuffled slowly across one of the paths.

Kate stared at them, moved to pity by their condition. Though labeled as criminals according to British law, she could only feel sympathy for their plight. Filthy, almost beyond recognition, they stumbled slowly down the street under the watchful eye of a prison guard. Their clothes hung on them in rags, and several were painfully thin. She frowned. No one deserved such treatment, no matter the offense, and she promised herself a long talk with her brother the first chance she had a private moment with him.

Kate continued to watch the small, pathetic procession, her eyes narrowing at the sight of the guard tapping a riding quirt against his thigh. She gasped aloud, angered and horrified when one of the prisoners stumbled, falling to his knees and bringing the man closest to him down on top of him. The guard leapt forward, shouting invectives and bringing the quirt down on the second man's back with vicious blows.

The surprised cries and frantic calls of her brother and sister-in-law fell on deaf ears as Kate lifted her skirts and bolted down the street, heedless of the sight she made in her black widow's weeds and grey petticoats pulled up nearly to her knees. Had she not been so enraged at the sight of the guard beating his charge, she might have laughed as the other prisoners in the line stared at her in terror as she raced towards them.

Her long legs closed the distance in moments, and the guard grunted in surprise when a hard force struck him in the side, sending him crashing to the cobblestones. He felt the quirt ripped out of his hand, and his howl of pain was heard for blocks as the crop lashed him in the face and again across the shoulder and upper arm. He crawled on one elbow and his knees, protecting his injured face as he was struck

BLACKBIRD

once more. Blood ran into his left eye from the open cut on his cheek as he squinted at his attacker above the edge of his hand. What he saw made his jaw gape in shock.

A tall, black-garbed crow of a woman loomed over him, her fine features flushed with fury as she stared down at him with loathing. She held his bloodied quirt tightly in her clinched fist, and strands of auburn hair stuck to her cheeks in unkempt spider webs. He whimpered and cowered on the ground as she raised the quirt in a threatening gesture, her eyes daring him to move.

“Kate!”

The guard moaned as he recognized the bellow as belonging to the island’s commodore.

Kate glanced at her brother for a brief second before turning to check on the two prisoners who had taken the worst of the guard’s abuse. They had both risen to their feet with the help of their gang mates, and now watched her with wide, disbelieving eyes.

“Are you all right?” she snapped, trying unsuccessfully to calm her breathing and tone down her voice.

Both nodded and one summoned up the courage to give a short bow and say, “Yes, mum.”

“Woman, what is the meaning of this?”

She had almost forgotten about James and raised an eyebrow at the sight of him, and a bevy of soldiers all standing behind him, glaring at her. She pointed at the downed guard with a shaking finger.

“Did you see that? James, he was beating a bound, defenseless man for nothing more than that the unfortunate wretch lost his balance!”

James yanked the quirt out of her hand and tossed it to the ground, clearly amazed and infuriated by his sister’s actions. “You are out of line, Kate,” he snapped, voice low and seething with anger. “You have embarrassed me and Abigail with your behavior.” He lowered his voice, tilting his head to whisper in her ear. “What is the matter with

BLACKBIRD

you?”

Kate felt the blush of righteous indignation change to one of mortification. She didn't want to shame her brother or his wife, especially when they had been so generous to offer her a home with them until she found one of her own. But the crusader in her could not ignore what was blatantly an abuse of power by one over another more helpless.

“James,” she hissed. “You cannot sanction this!” She waved a hand at the prisoners, close enough that they could hear every word of the interaction taking place. “Look at these men. This isn't what I call a disreputable state. This is torture.”

He rolled his eyes. “Kate, they are prisoners, kept in a jail, not a boarding house. They are incarcerated because they committed a crime, not because they needed a room for the evening.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and turned to glare at the guard who still cowered on the ground at her feet. “That still doesn't make what this oaf did right. And I'm fairly certain this isn't an isolated episode. If he's going to attack him, at least make it fair and take the prisoner off the chains so that he can fight back.”

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach as James's demeanor changed before her eyes. From indignant and embarrassed, he went to cold and resolute, and she fully understood why he had risen in the ranks of the British navy to the place he now occupied.

He took her elbow, yanking her around none too gently to stare at the line of prisoners. There were eight in total, all covered in a layer of dirt and rags and reeking to high heaven of dank sea water and rotting fish. Long, unkempt beards and matted hair obscured most of their features, but she could make out the expressions in their eyes—some curious, two grateful, others avid with a lust that made her shudder. Only one kept his eyes lowered as James pulled her past him to the first man on the line.

BLACKBIRD

"I'm about to treat you to a dose of reality in all of its equanimity and fairness, sister dear," he snapped. They faced the first man, one who gave her a brief tentative smile that exposed blackened teeth.

"Angus MacNeil. Thought himself back in the Lowlands and decided to try a little reiving here on the island. Granted, they weren't cattle, but... Where exactly were you planning to take a herd of goats, Mr. MacNeil?"

The prisoner shrugged and smiled again. "Hadn't thought that far when I tried it, Commodore." He nodded to Kate. "But I might no' ha' gotten caught ha' I a fiery lass like that to help me."

Kate struggled to hide a smile even as James growled low in his throat and continued to pull her down the line. She was introduced to Rabby Dickson, Marcel Daviau, and a man who simply went by the name, Parrot. "Pirates," James drawled in a voice thick with disdain. "Lice on the water. These three were members of the crew of the *Blackbird*."

It was Rabby to whose defense she had come, and all three men gave her quick bows of respect, their chains rattling. Marcel touched a lock of greasy hair at his forehead and addressed her in a surprisingly cultured voice. "Madame," he murmured.

An instinctive shiver rode down her arms as they stopped in front of another bedraggled inmate. This one stared at her in a way that made her feel naked and sullied by the touch of his eyes upon her. She understood and agreed with the loathing in her brother's voice as he made known this particular prisoner's crime.

"Here we have Grinling Anderson, neither thief nor pirate. Simply a murderer and rapist. He raped a fourteen-year-old girl on the island of Anguilla. Unfortunate for him that she happened to be the niece of one of the wealthier landowners there. Before that, he killed three men and a woman for the thrill of watching them bleed."

Kate shuddered. She did not regret coming to Rabby Dickson's

BLACKBIRD

defense, but was quite glad that it had not been this specimen of human offal she had protected. She walked on with her brother, feeling Anderson's empty black eyes boring into her back as she passed.

They came last to the prisoner who had kept his eyes downcast. He was the tallest of the group, one of a few men she would actually have to raise her head and look up to. As ragged and dirty as his companions, he didn't appear at all frail despite the open sores on his wrists and ankles where the shackles had rubbed the skin raw. She could see the taut muscles of his arms and shoulders through the threadbare patches of his clothing, and his hands were large and powerful.

Even with his dark head bent, and the tangled hair and beard shielding his face from her, Kate was intrigued. There was something about him that reminded her of James, especially now, when her brother wore the mantle of angry leader.

There was a brief silence, and she glanced at James to see him watching the prisoner with a measured, thoughtful gaze. "And here," he murmured in a soft, almost respectful voice, "we have the elusive captain of the *Blackbird*, Colin Wyndham. Pirate, thief, ever popular among the strumpets, and recently revealed to be a murderer like Anderson there. Wyndham is accused of patricide."

At that last statement, the prisoner's head snapped up and Kate emitted a soft gasp as blue eyes met hers for a moment before turning to stare at James.

The commodore smiled at the challenge in that hard intense gaze, though the prisoner remained silent. Kate was riveted. Even veiled by the overgrown beard, it was easy to see that Colin Wyndham was a handsome man, with fine features and eyes that made one think of the sky on the hottest summer day. They burned with an inner fire, and she would never again think of blue eyes as cold.

It was a curious thing, but she could feel the tension between the

BLACKBIRD

two men, a competitive edge that thrummed with the sharpness of a knife. One was free, with a small army at his back. The other was chained, armed with nothing more than his bare hands, yet Kate felt the two to be equally matched. She wondered if the guard had ever dared to raise his whip to Wyndham, and thought likely not. The coward was still alive after all.

It seemed as if James had forgotten her, his hand falling away from her elbow as he concentrated on this last prisoner. "What? No words of defense, Wyndham? I've waited a long time to catch such a prize fish." He smiled, though the expression held no humor.

Wyndham stared back. "I am guilty of all those things save one. But this isn't an issue of my guilt or innocence, Sutcliffe. And you are just a convenient pawn in a long-running game between me and my dear brother." His voice was deep, raspy, as if from disuse and a long silence.

Kate frowned, the frown turning to open-mouthed surprise when James answered in a frozen voice. "Game or no, your capture and hanging serve two purposes. I rid the seas of another floating cage of rats, and the earl gets his justice."

She could see the bitter smile half hidden within the depths of the prisoner's beard. So, he was the reason for St. Claire's visit. Henry had never mentioned a brother when he spoke of the Montcleve family. And this was more than the murder of a nobleman. It was patricide, an even darker crime.

Kate stared at Wyndham a long moment, easily seeing the bandit and possibly the thief, but the cold-blooded murderer of one's own father?

As if he felt her eyes on him, Wyndham turned his head and stared at her. Kate stood frozen in place, pinned by that penetrating blue gaze. For a brief, shocking moment, she wished she were not so tall or large-boned or swathed in yards of black that bleached the color from her

BLACKBIRD

skin and gave her auburn hair an orange tint.

“What do you see?” he asked her in that same hoarse voice.

He bewitched her with the intensity of his stare. “A man,” she whispered. “A man burdened.” Her surroundings faded for a moment, and there was only the two of them, alone within a raindrop of time that excluded all else.

His face, obscured by the beard, whitened at her words and the blue eyes narrowed. “Burdened by what? Guilt?” There was a sardonic note of amusement in his words.

Kate shook her head. “No, not guilt. Memories. You don’t sleep at night because of them.” She backed up a step as his gaze hardened, and she could see the fires burning in the summer blue. “I don’t know you,” she qualified.

He gave a brief, mocking “hmpf” before answering. “No, you don’t, Kate.”

The words had hardly left his lips before a snarled, “How dare you!” erupted and James leapt forward, landing a hard punch to Wyndham’s jaw. The blow sent the other man reeling, jerking the line of fellow prisoners with him as he crashed to his knees.

Kate gasped, crying out as her brother drew his sword. “Don’t ever sully my sister’s name by saying it aloud, you filth!” The commodore raised his saber, intent upon delivering a fatal blow to the downed Wyndham. He was thwarted not a moment too soon by his sister leaping between him and his prey.

“Goddamnit, Kate! Get out of the way.”

“No,” she snapped back. “What is the matter with you?” She didn’t understand his unreasonable anger, but there was something between these two men. Something more than warden and prisoner, law and anarchy. She glanced over her shoulder to see the pirate captain rise slowly to his feet, gingerly touching his jaw.

Kate was so intent on trying to talk some sense into her enraged

BLACKBIRD

brother that she didn't heed his warning until too late. One thoughtless step back and she was within reach of the prisoners. Her cry was abruptly cut off as cold metal, slick with the muck of a prison cell suddenly wrapped around her throat, and she was jerked backwards to come up against a hard chest.

A triumphant voice whispered in her ear, deadly with resolve. "Brave, foolish woman. Now you will play savior to me."

CHAPTER 2

“Stupid, stupid Kate.” She chanted the statement softly to herself as the ship raced over the water, playing a lethal game of chase with her pursuer as it made for the haven of Tortuga.

The deck swayed beneath her feet, but Kate held her balance easily, leaning against the railing to watch dolphins ride the bow wave. The late afternoon sun was warm on her shoulders, a fine complement to the cool, damp breeze that blew constantly off the water and sprayed the deck with a fine mist. Were it not for the fact that she was a hostage on a pirate ship bound for an outlaw sanctuary, she might actually be enjoying herself.

On the whole, she was thankful to be alive and unharmed. Any citizen of the isles knew well the reputation of the Brethren—outcasts, criminals, half savage. Their manner of dealing with captives was frighteningly well known, and any unfortunate woman taken aboard one of their ships soon begged for a swift and merciful death.

BLACKBIRD

Such was not her fate. Her time aboard the *Blackbird* had been more frustrating than terrifying. Whether it was because she championed two of the crew members or because she was far more valuable to the captain alive than dead, she couldn't say. It might be a combination of both things, but Kate was relieved that the most trauma she suffered so far was a stiff neck from falling asleep in an uncomfortable position and having to deal with the stubborn, resolute Colin Wyndham.

That frightening moment, when the breath rushed out of her lungs as Wyndham had captured her, still plagued her thoughts. The admonishments she heaped upon herself remained constant, as they did now when she stood at the *Blackbird's* bow and muttered invectives under her breath concerning Wyndham's lineage and character.

Kate had never been a fragile flower, never prone to fainting spells or any of the other supposedly feminine mannerisms currently enjoying popularity. But for an instant, she was certain she would pass out in her captor's chained hands.

Wyndham had wrapped the irons around her throat; not so tight as to strangle her, but taut enough that both she and James knew he was serious in his threats.

"Drop the saber, Sutcliffe, or I'll snap her neck here and now."

James obeyed immediately, opening his hand so that the blade fell to the ground with a clatter. He held up a staying hand to the troops who edged closer, their own swords and pistols now drawn. His gaze never left Wyndham, and there was a calm to his manner that contrasted sharply to his previous actions.

"Release her, Wyndham. She is nothing to you."

Kate felt the pirate's smile against her hair. "True. But it's obvious she is something to you. The question is, how much?"

She could see her brother's eyes narrow in impotent fury. There was nothing he could do save bargain with a man he would like nothing

BLACKBIRD

more than to skewer with his abandoned sword. Kate cringed inwardly at putting herself and her brother in so precarious a position.

The chain tightened ever so slightly around her neck as Wyndham gave the first of his commands. "Tell your men to drop their arms."

She gasped as he jerked on the chain.

"Now," he snapped.

There was a flurry of movement as the commodore nodded slowly, and the troops placed their weapons on the ground.

"Now you, Commodore; retrieve the keys from your jailer and give them to Monsieur Daviau there."

Kate tensed, trying to raise her arms without her captor noticing so she could ram an elbow into his midsection. Her efforts came to naught as he caught on quickly to her game. "Have a care, sweet Kate. Your misplaced courage has cost you your freedom for now. Don't let it cost you your life."

She snarled softly and felt the vibrations of his quiet laughter against her back.

"This isn't funny, you bloody vagabond!"

One of those long-fingered hands slid across her collarbone and up her neck, curling gently under her chin. Kate choked on her remaining words as Wyndham raised her head. She could feel the warm stream of his breath on her shoulder as he leaned closer and watched as her brother's lips thinned to an angry line.

"That's it, my lad," the pirate captain coaxed softly. "Just hand them over so the monsieur can get us all out of these bilboes."

James tossed the key ring to the Frenchman, who caught them deftly with his bound hands. Wyndham was the first the sailor freed after himself, but Kate remained bound to him by the looping chain and the firm grip of his arm around her waist. Soon, the remainder of the prisoners was free, and they all waited for his next orders.

Kate stared at her brother, apology glittering in her remorseful gaze.

BLACKBIRD

James ignored her, never taking his eyes away from his nemesis.

“Now what, Wyndham?”

They all listened as the *Blackbird's* captain gave additional orders and the men of his crew were quick to obey, gathering up the pistols and sabers at the soldiers' feet. Wyndham took one of the firearms from Rabby, being careful to keep a tight hold on Kate.

There was a deafening blast, followed by agonized shrieks. Grinling Anderson rolled on the ground, screaming in pain as he held his shattered foot in bloodied hands. Kate sagged in her captor's arms as Wyndham tossed the spent pistol to the ground and nodded to the commodore.

“You and I are of the same opinion on that one, Sutcliffe. You don't want him free to roam, and I don't want him on my ship. Consider it a favor.”

James's features tightened into a sneer. “For obvious reasons, that fails to raise my opinion of you. You are no better than Anderson there; another murderer attacking a defenseless woman.”

Kate felt Wyndham snort behind her. “Just ask your jailer how defenseless your fragile Kate is, Sutcliffe.”

He edged back along the wall of the building behind him, always keeping his captive as a shield. “I'm borrowing her for a short time, Commodore. Insurance, you might say. A way to make certain you don't put a ball between my shoulder blades with the nearest pistol, or blow holes in my ship with cannon.”

Kate sucked in a terrified breath. “Please,” she begged in a low voice, “don't do this. He will kill you for it.”

Wyndham's voice was somber, devoid of its previous mocking humor. “He intends to kill me anyway, lass. I'm just making certain it won't be today.”

The ragtag group of freed prisoners and their single captive continued to follow the line of buildings, their tracks matched by the

BLACKBIRD

watchful commodore and a handful of soldiers. Kate heard Daviau's cry of triumph as they spotted a wagon hitched to a team of mules.

The driver saw them a second too late. He froze in his seat as the Frenchman pointed his pistol at him in warning. "*Bonjour, mon ami.*" He said in a pleasant voice. "You will join us for a ride this morning, no?"

He looked to his captain from the corner of his eye, and Wyndham nodded his approval. Kate resisted his dragging her to the back of the wagon, but it was to no avail. He was far stronger than she was and pulled her along with him as if she was no bigger than the petite Abigail.

James's snarled threat had sounded loud in her ears. "Harm a hair on her head, Wyndham, and I'll make certain that when you are recaptured, you will beg for the gallow's rope."

Wyndham hoisted himself into the back of the cart, dragging Kate with him. Her skirts snagged on the rough edges of the splintered floor, trapping her until Rabby gave her an apologetic smile and tore the hem free so his leader could yank her farther into the cart.

Soon they were on their way, riding at breakneck speed through Bridgetown, toward the teeming docks. Kate thought her teeth would rattle free from her head, and her stomach lurched in a threatening manner at each hole they struck as the hapless driver lashed the mules into a hard gallop.

She lay on her side, Wyndham curled around her, silent and tense. He had said nothing more once they had made their bid to escape for the sanctuary of the open sea, and she wondered when he planned to take the second pistol given to him and use it on her. Maybe once they reached the quays and the boats waiting for them. Kate mused that James never realized an escape plan had long been in the making for the *Blackbird's* captain and his three crew members. It was a stroke of luck for them that she had fallen so neatly into their plans.

BLACKBIRD

Despite the near suicidal journey to the quays, they had no mishaps, and Kate soon found herself on a dinghy heading out to sea toward a graceful brigantine anchored in a nearby cove. It was a sleek ship, her sails furled against her two masts as she rocked gently on the water. She glared at Wyndham who stared at the ship with the eyes of a lover.

“You could have just left me on the beach. We outdistanced them in Bridgetown. You have plenty of time to make it to your ship.”

The pirate didn’t bother to look at her, and his voice was mild, a little distracted. “True, but the journey doesn’t stop there, sweet Kate, nor does the danger. I need to sail the *Blackbird* out of here without one of Sutcliffe’s frigates trying to blast holes in her. We have ten cannon. The English frigates have at least twenty-seven. We can outrun them, but not outgun them. You are my assurance that the good commodore won’t attempt to sink the *Blackbird* before I can even take her out of harbor.”

She crossed her arms over her breasts and lowered her head in defeat. A dirty hand with blackened fingernails rested briefly on her shoulder and she turned to stare at the pirate called Parrot. He gave her a gap-toothed smile, one meant to be reassuring and sympathetic. Kate wondered why he was given such a strange name as she had yet to hear him utter a single word.

The crew aboard the *Blackbird* cheered at the first sight of the dinghy, and there were many helping hands to hoist the small boat and bring the emancipated crew members on board. There were curious stares when Wyndham brought Kate up with him, and a few uneasy mutterings of “what’s the strumpet doing here? ’Tis bad luck to bring a woman on a ship.”

Kate opened her mouth to lash out that there was a great deal of difference between a widow and a harlot, but the captain forestalled her with a warning look. “This one is good luck for a change, lads. She’s our ticket out of Bridgetown without engaging one of the commodore’s

BLACKBIRD

frigates in battle.”

He turned to the Scotsman, Angus MacNeil. “You’ve a gift for healing, MacNeil. I saw that in the jail. I lost my barber to malaria a few months back. You’re welcome to take his place as long as you shoulder your load. We split the booty evenly, and if I catch you *reiving* from any of the other men, I’ll put the lash to you. What do you say?”

The Scotsman offered a clumsy but enthusiastic salute. “Oh, aye, Cap’n Wyndham. Count me in. I’m honored.”

Wyndham nodded and wrapped his hand around Kate’s wrist as she tried to edge toward the railing. He gazed at her with those hot blue eyes, a mocking smile peeking out from the depths of his shaggy beard. “You might want to reconsider that swim, Kate. We’re anchored in a favorite feeding ground for sharks. You would make a fine meal for one, I’d think.”

Kate shuddered. Prisoner on a pirate ship or helpless shark bait? Neither option appealed to her; both frightened her. Still, the idea of being eaten seemed infinitely worse than anything else she could imagine, and so far Wyndham and his crew hadn’t harmed her, with the exception of suffering that hideous cart ride, which they had all shared.

She tried to jerk free of his grip, but it only tightened and his eyes narrowed threateningly. “Mr. Daviau, have one of the crew show MacNeil where we keep supplies. He can start earning his keep now by treating these shackle wounds. Then send one of the crew down with hot water.”

He tugged on Kate’s arm, pulling her with him as he made his way to the hatch leading into the bowels of the ship. She resisted for a moment, but soon gave up as he increased the pressure of his grip and her wrist went numb.

It took her a moment to adjust to the darkness of the hold, and she nearly pitched down the stairs, not nearly as sure-footed as her captor.

BLACKBIRD

She blinked several times as Wyndham unlatched a narrow door and shoved her through its opening. Where there had been thick shadow, renewed sunlight spilled into a small chamber from high, round window.

It was a Spartan room containing a bed, a large chest, a desk and table with two chairs. It was spotlessly clean, and she was surprised at how neat and tidy such quarters were on a pirate ship.

The loud click of the latch behind her made her spin around and face her captor. Wyndham stared at her with a measuring gaze, revealing nothing of his future intentions. She was at his mercy, alone with him here in this small, quiet place. The thought made her stomach knot with dread.

Her eyebrows rose when he spoke again, his raspy voice suddenly weary. "I have no intention of swiving you, lass, if that's what you're thinking. You serve a purpose, and bed partner isn't it."

He brushed past her, and Kate blushed with mortification and a sense of insult. Why his words made her indignant, she refused to speculate. She should be relieved. Shouldn't she?

She sucked in a shocked breath as he started to strip the tattered remains of his clothes from his body. "What are you doing?"

Wyndham didn't bother to look up as he loosened his trousers and let them slide down his legs. Kate gasped and whirled around so that she faced the paneled wall in front of the desk, but not before the image of long, muscled thighs and small taut buttocks was burned into her mind's eye.

"Can you not wait until I'm not sharing this cabin with you?" Her ears felt hot with embarrassment, and she frowned at his answer.

"No. I am covered in a month's worth of grime. If your delicate sensibilities are so offended by the sight of me, you're welcome to walk on deck where, I assure you, some of my fellow inmates are doing the same as I am."

BLACKBIRD

Kate growled under her breath. “You have no shame, Captain Wyndham.”

“And you have a false sense of it, Kate Whoever You Are. Your weeds mark you as a widow, but you bleat like an untried maiden.”

She waited to see if the paneled wall would catch fire, her glare was so hot. “I am still a lady,” she snapped.

The mockery in his voice made her fingers curl into claws. “Oh, aye, most prim and proper, especially running down the street with your skirts hitched up around your knees so you can attack a guard. Fortunate for the man that he chose to carry the quirt instead of his favorite instrument, the cudgel. I’m not at all certain he would have otherwise survived his first meeting with you.”

“Ooooh,” she seethed, spinning on her heel to face him, hot with indignation. “You insulting, abhorrent...” She cut her statement abruptly short and covered her eyes with her hands, whirling back to face the wall. “You’re completely naked!”

True amusement echoed in his laughter. “Well, yes, except for the dirt. Control that temper, lass, before you get another eyeful.”

Kate thought she would combust with mortification at any moment. Her cheeks were on fire, and her scalp tingled from the hard blush she knew stained her skin. A short knock on the door offered a brief respite from the tension in the cabin, and she listened as Wyndham padded past her to answer the door.

She recognized Rabby Dickson’s voice. “Water and supplies for a shave, Captain. Will the lady be needing anything?”

“Not yet. Tell Marcel I will relieve him at the helm in a half hour.”

The door closed again, and she heard her captor set down his items on the table before opening the lid of his chest. Kate stiffened as he walked up behind her.

“Hold out your hands, Kate, and close your eyes if you want to protect your modesty. I am still as Adam before the Fall.”

BLACKBIRD

She immediately closed her eyes, but hesitated with answering the second command. "What are you going to do?"

He didn't wait for her acquiescence, only grabbed her hands and lashed them together at the wrists with a slender leather strap. She was bound so quickly, there was never a moment to try and fight him.

"What are you doing?" she protested, still keeping her eyes tightly closed.

His voice faded a little as he walked away from her. "Insuring my survival. I'm about to bathe and shave. You're wicked fast on the attack, lass. I don't want to have to fight for my life while you try to cut my throat with my own razor."

Her eyes popped open again, and she resisted the urge to turn around and confront him with his unfounded accusation. "I was only trying to defend one of your crew, if you recall," she spat. "I had no intention of killing anyone. And you are a hypocrite. Shooting an unarmed man in the foot. You've likely maimed him for life."

There wasn't a hint of apology in Wyndham's rebuttal. "I should have gut-shot him. Anderson is the worst slime. If Sutcliffe is as smart as I think he is, he'll hang the man before the week is out."

Part of her wanted to continue arguing with him just for the sake of it, but Kate was honest with herself. There had been a primitive satisfaction in seeing Anderson howling in pain there on the street. He had caused enough misery in other lives, and she didn't blame Wyndham one bit for not wanting him on his ship or anywhere near him.

She kept silent after that, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as she kept her back to her captor and listened to the fascinating sounds of water sluicing over skin and hair, the rhythmic stropping of a razor, the scraping sounds as he shaved. It was achingly familiar and intimate. Kate thought of Henry, but found it hard to compare him to the tall, battered looking sea captain. There was virility to the man that was

BLACKBIRD

impossible to ignore, despite his shabby appearance. She thought of James's description of him. A favorite among strumpets, was he?

The squeak of the chest lid, followed by a rustle of clothing let her know he had finished his ablutions and was dressing. Finally. Her feet hurt from standing so long, but she was damned if she would ask him if she could sit down for a moment.

"You can turn around now, Kate. I'm decent.

Her tone was scathing as she turned slowly to face him. "The irony of that statement is profound. How can a pirate be dec..." Her words died to silence as she got a first good look at a clean Colin Wyndham.

A favorite of harlots, indeed. A favorite of any woman age eighteen to eighty-eight. The captain of the *Blackbird* was breathtaking. Long dark hair, scrubbed clean and tied back from his face, gleamed with red highlights in the sunbeams streaming in through the round window. He had cut the beard close, shaving it into shape so that it ran the length of his jaw and curved around his mouth, accentuating the elegant bones of his features. Fine lines radiated out from his blue eyes, souvenirs of time squinting in the bright tropical light.

He had donned a simple white shirt and coarsely woven trousers, the light color of the shirt contrasting sharply against the sun-burnished skin of his chest with its dusting of dark hair. Kate stared at him, amazed at the transformation from rank-smelling sea rat to a creature of undeniable earthy beauty. Her dislike of him increased ten-fold.

"Handsome example of masculinity, aren't I, lass?

She recognized the teasing in his question, as well as the gloating satisfaction at her admiration. Kate narrowed her eyes and stared at him with loathing. "Beloved of whores, my brother said. I am no whore. Nor do I admire murderers." She lowered her head, barely catching his faint smile disappear instantly, only to be replaced by a grim, watchful expression. "I want off this ship, Captain Wyndham."

"Don't tempt me, Kate. I've a mind to accommodate your wish here

BLACKBIRD

and now. How good of a swimmer are you?"

Shivers raced down her arms at his answer.

Fortunately, he had not given into the enticement of dumping her overboard. They both recognized she was too important to dispatch before they reached the relative safety of Tortuga. Kate never considered she would make it out of this foray alive, so she traded cutting barbs with the *Blackbird's* captain on a constant basis, even as she lost nearly every argument in which they engaged.

Even now, as she stood on deck, watching the graceful glide of the dolphins as they swam before the ship, she planned her next round of insults for him. It had never been her nature to be so overtly aggressive, but Kate was frightened. Frightened not only of her future, which would likely be quite short, but for her burgeoning feelings for Wyndham. Even in the midst of their battles, there was an undercurrent of fire flowing between them. She was no maiden, bleating or otherwise, and she recognized the heat of want racing in her blood, as well as the answering desire that burned in his blue gaze.

She still wanted off the damned ship, not only to return to her brother, but also to avoid falling into the arms of a man who not only kidnapped and threatened to kill her, but was accused of killing his own father.

"I'm no harlot," she said aloud to herself, and was startled when a deep voice answered directly behind her.

"'Tis a shame in a way. It would take less effort for me to seduce you."

Wyndham walked lightly, even in his boots, and she hadn't heard him approach.

"Stop sneaking up on me, Captain," she admonished, refusing to turn around and face him. His presence loomed close behind her and stray locks of his dark hair blew over her shoulder.

"I wasn't sneaking, Kate."

BLACKBIRD

“Mrs. Abbot,” she corrected him, having told him her full name the previous day. His long suffering sigh drifted warm across her nape, and she shivered in reaction.

“You’re a stubborn shrew at times, Kate.” He refused to call her by anything other than her given name.

“And you’re a vain, preening rooster, Captain Wyndham,” she rejoined.

“Colin. My name is Colin.”

“Captain.” She refused to call him by anything other than his maritime title.

A spiraling warmth curled around her spine as he leaned into her, entrapping her within the circle of his arms as his hands came to rest on the railing next to hers. Kate stared at those long sun-browned fingers, imagining them stroking her back in a smooth caress. She shook her head to clear it of forbidden thoughts and felt more than heard Wyndham’s question.

“And what denial are you making now, Kate? Trying to convince yourself that I’m as corrupt as the accusations say I am?”

Kate refused to take the bait, straightening abruptly and bumping the top of her head on his chin. “Go away.” She turned to face him, hiding a smile at the sight of him holding his chin and eyeing her with an injured expression.

“Od’s blood, woman. You’ve a hard head, in more ways than one.” He stared at her suspiciously. “I’d almost think you did that on purpose.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Had that been purposeful, Captain, I would have hit you hard enough to loosen a few teeth.”

Wyndham smiled faintly and shook his head in bemusement. “I never know quite what to expect of you, Kate Abbot.”

“And you never will if I can help it, Captain,” she told him in a prim voice. “Now, please leave me alone.”

BLACKBIRD

She glowered at him when he told her just as dryly, “No. I have finished my watch. Mr. Mapes is serving dinner soon and I want you to join me.”

“Captain,” she began.

“Colin,” he interrupted.

She tried again. “Captain, I always eat with you, whether I want to or not.”

Alarm bells went off in her head as his handsome features turned shrewd. “True. But it’s rarely a polite gathering, is it? More a drawing of swords instead of cutlery. I would make a bargain with you.”

Kate stared at him in suspicion. “Something tells me I should walk away now.”

He smiled in challenge. “Coward.”

She glared at him. “What is your bargain?” The look of triumph in his eyes did nothing to lessen her unease.

“Retract your claws and lower your sword long enough to share a meal and have polite conversation.” He raised a hand to forestall her response. “And a game of chess afterwards.”

Kate eyed him distrustfully. “Fair enough. And in return?” Again that triumphant smile that made her want to run for safety.

“I will not tie your hands tonight.”

She froze. Had he told her he would give her a sack of gold, it would not have been half as tempting. Being bound each night was one of the sore points with her since the beginning of her captivity. That, and having to sleep next to him in the narrow bed. He was as good as his word that he would make no attempt to force her, but there were times when she had awakened from a fretful sleep to find him curled around her, the unmistakable bulge of his erection pressed against her buttocks.

Kate stared hard into the intense blue eyes, looking for a hidden guile. There was none, only a calm stillness as he awaited her answer.

BLACKBIRD

“Why would you free me? The last time I asked you to merely lengthen the strap you refused.”

Wyndham rolled his eyes. “Of course I did. Do I look foolish enough to give you the means to garrote me in my sleep?”

She gasped, outraged. “I would never do that!”

He arched an eyebrow in obvious doubt.

“I wouldn’t,” she insisted. “Besides, you are far stronger than I am.”

“Oh ho! So the issue isn’t the morality of strangling me while I slumber, but whether or not you have the physical prowess to do it successfully.”

Kate shoved against him, slipping out from under his arm. “Stop twisting my words against me! And who are you to point fingers? You’re likely planning to have me shot once we arrive in Tortuga!”

Wyndham matched her step for step as she stalked across the deck toward the stairs leading to the hold. He grabbed her elbow and spun her around, drawing her close so that she was pressed against him from chest to knees. Kate felt her world tilt on its axis as the pirate captain stroked the length of her back with one hand and buried the other hand in her loose hair. She stared, riveted by the sight of his mouth lowering to hers.

“You’re indeed a shrew, Kate,” he breathed against her lips. “I’m not going to shoot you. I just want you to play nicely at dinner, play nicely at chess, and swear you won’t try to stick a knife between my ribs if I leave you unbound tonight.”

His words floated dreamlike in her head as he whispered them into her mouth. The caressing hand on her back slid over the roundness of her bottom and up again to curve around her ribs and over the swell of her breast. Kate arched into him, heedless of any who might watch the tableau unfolding on the deck of the *Blackbird*. Her soft moan fluttered against his mouth, deepening as he forced her lips open with his, sliding his tongue in to give chase to hers.

BLACKBIRD

His kiss drove all coherent thought from her head, and she returned the caress with fervor, sucking on his tongue as he thrust deep, stroking the inside of her mouth with a fiery heat. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears and she massaged his shoulders with frantic hands.

It was he who grasped the first thread of sanity, pulling away from her with a hard, indrawn breath. The blue eyes burned hot, scorching her as he stared at her with a lustful gaze. It took a moment for Kate to find a more even keel, and when she did, her skin warmed with embarrassment. She tried to squirm out of his grasp, but he held her more tightly, refusing to let her go.

“No false modesty, lass. You enjoyed that as much as I did.”

She did, but she wasn’t going to admit it aloud. He was arrogant enough as it was. “Release me, Captain Wyndham.” She ordered in her most frigid tones. “I believe we have a bargain to discuss.”

He scowled, but let her go. She stepped out of reach, straightening her skirts in a vain attempt to bring her emotions under control. A pulse thrummed deep within her, its rhythm hard and sensual, centering on the damp place between her thighs. She cleared her throat twice before speaking.

“I accept your offer. And I never had any intention of trying to murder you.” His sniff of disbelief was loud, and she glared at him. “You have my word, Captain.”

“The word of a woman?”

“Better than the word of a pirate, you pompous...”

Wyndham cut her words off by placing a hand over her mouth. “I take your point, lass.” He slowly removed his hand, silently warning her to hold off on any tirade. “A bargain we have then.” He held out his arm in a gentlemanly gesture. “Shall we?”

CHAPTER 3

Kate held to her word, and for once the meal between her and Colin Wyndham passed smoothly, with easy conversation and much good humor. It had started out shakily at first, with Angus MacNeil bringing their supper to them. Both the captain and Kate gasped when the Scotsman set her plate in front of her with a flourish.

It was piled high with food, enough to feed two men of Wyndham's size and stature. Kate's eyes widened at the fact that the captain's share of the meal was at least half the size of her portion. Both turned to stare at MacNeil in amazement.

He shrugged. "What? It isn't enough?"

Colin cleared his throat gently. "Are you certain you don't have the plates confused, Angus? Did you mean to give that one to me?" He gestured to Kate's heaping plate with his fork.

MacNeil shook his head adamantly. "Nay, that's hers. She's a strappin' lass. Needs to eat well to stay healthy."

BLACKBIRD

Kate's glare promised a slow death as Wyndham broke into a fit of coughing. Sensing that he suddenly tread on very thin ice, the Scotsman reached out a tentative hand and took her plate.

"Be back in a moment with this, Mrs. Abbot. You don't mind sharin'?"

She almost took pity on him. Almost but not quite. "No, Mr. MacNeil, I don't mind sharing at all. You can make it up to me tomorrow by serving me an entire tuna," she snapped.

Angus raced out the cabin, believing he had escaped a certain and painful death. Inside the room, Wyndham struggled to maintain a somber demeanor, and Kate dared him with her eyes to laugh.

"Remember, you promised me you wouldn't attempt to kill me."

Her own smile was evil with intent. "I promised I wouldn't attempt to kill you in your sleep. You are not asleep."

The glitter of admiration shone in his eyes. "Touché, lass. Touché."

"That would be 'strapping lass' to you, Captain Wyndham," she huffed, indignant.

There was a long moment of silence as Kate tried to retain her indignation, but she kept remembering MacNeil's look of terror when he realized his faux pas and Wyndham's choked humor. Her lips began to twitch, and soon both she and Colin were laughing and wiping at tears as they struggled to catch their breath.

"Poor Angus," she gasped on a giggle. "I'll be lucky if he comes back with a slice of toast for me."

Colin grinned. "You are welcome to share mine."

She grinned back. "And if I eat all of it and leave you none?"

He shrugged, his smile intensifying, becoming suggestive. "Then I will exact payment. Another kiss I think. While you sit on my lap."

Kate blushed and was saved from coming up with a suitable retort by another knock. This time it was another of the crew, and he held a plate with a normal portion of food on it.

BLACKBIRD

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly, but there remained that invisible river of desire flowing between them. She lost miserably at chess, distracted beyond reason by the way Wyndham lazed in his chair as he watched her study the board, or how his long fingers curled around a chess piece and moved it to counter hers.

The candles burned low, and after a while their conversation turned serious. Kate stared at her captor's handsome features, admiring the way the soft yellow light caressed his high cheekbones and the long, dark hair. "Why did you turn to piracy?"

He froze in the act of capturing her queen and looked up at her with a guarded expression. "A fair question. I took to the seas when I was eighteen, having escaped the slow death that is prison or the Hanging Tree at Tyburn. Don't believe it is always the guilty that swing on the gallows, Kate. Now, I am a wanted man, an enemy of the Crown. My safest haven is with the Brethren."

Kate ran her tongue across suddenly dry lips, dreading the next question but unable to stop herself from asking it. "Did you kill your father?"

His gaze deepened, turning cool and closed. "No." And his answer was succinct and absolute.

The brittle silence stretched out between them. She wanted to believe him, needed to believe, for she was drawn to him as a moth to flame, and her morals wrestled with the idea of wanting or caring for a man who might well be a cold-blooded killer.

"Now I will ask you a question, Kate Abbot."

Kate lifted her gaze from her hands, watching him with a curious expectancy. What could he possibly want to know about her? She was singularly uninteresting; with this current escapade the most exciting thing to ever happen to her in her entire staid existence.

"Did you love your husband?"

That was easy, and she answered without hesitation. "Oh, yes, very

BLACKBIRD

much so. Henry was a wonderful man. Kind, intelligent, caring. A good companion. I will still mourn him, even when I no longer wear the black.”

That blue gaze deepened to azure as Wyndham continued to watch her, a half smile curving his lips. “And passion, Kate? Was he a passionate man?”

Kate blinked at him in confusion. Henry had loved her, as deeply as she loved him. They thrived in each other’s company, took walks through the nearby park, read together in the library. Their intimacy in the marriage bed was...regular. Henry was a considerate lover, and if it sometimes seemed a little dull, leaving her wide-awake in the silent dark with an unnamed yearning, well such was the way of a routine life. It didn’t spell disaster for their marriage. She had been happy with him, as happy as she hoped he had been with her.

“Kate?”

His repeat of the question brought her out of her musings, and Kate frowned in warning. “That is neither here nor there, Captain Wyndham, and most certainly none of your business.”

He continued to watch her, running one finger along his jaw. She remembered the feel of his beard against her cheek, the soft bristles brushing her skin as he kissed her nearly senseless. “Widowed you may be, Kate, but I think still innocent of the finer points to lovemaking.”

Her face flamed at the path the conversation was taking. “You are being vulgar and intrusive.”

He snorted in disbelief. “Stop it, Kate. You’re too straightforward a person to hide behind that false façade of maidenly outrage. Were I truly being vulgar, I’d tell you that if that husband of yours had any clue as to how to awaken you to the fire running in your blood, he would have mounted you every free moment available to him; pulled those long legs over his shoulder and fucked you until you screamed his name to the heavens.” His voice had deepened with his diatribe, and

BLACKBIRD

Kate felt the sizzling heat of lust and desire race up her thighs. “That, my strappin’ lass, is vulgarity. Shall I go on?”

She rose abruptly, tipping her chair over so that it fell to the floor with a loud clatter. “I think you’ve said enough. I need some air.” She made to race for the door, but he was faster, blocking her exit and looming over her with the light of battle and a naked hunger glittering in his eyes.

“No walks on deck, Kate. No running away.” His gaze slid lower, resting on her full breasts as she breathed in short, angry pants. “I’ll keep to my word, though it will likely kill me to do so, but you’ll sleep with me as you’ve done so far, tantrum not withstanding.”

She crossed her arms over chest, giving him a mutinous look. “I am not sleepy, Captain.”

It was the wrong thing to say as he smiled, a lazy, sensual expression that carried the sharp edge of warning to it. “As you wish. We can occupy our time with other things. But you will undress and get in bed. It’s late.”

She held her ground, refusing to move, even as he stepped close enough to her to tread on her toes. “Remove your gown and petticoats, Kate. If you don’t, I’ll cut them off your body and use your weeds as the ship’s next Jolly Roger.”

Kate bared her teeth at him, but finally acceded to his orders, muttering death threats under her breath as she removed her shoes and stockings, and turned her back to him so he could unbutton and unlace her.

Always before, Wyndham remained detached and efficient in assisting her, though she mused to herself that he was inordinately deft at removing a woman’s clothing. No doubt he practiced quite a bit in brothels. This time, however, his hands lingered, slipping the tiny buttons from their holes in a leisurely pace, allowing his fingers to drift along the exposed skin of her nape and shoulders.

BLACKBIRD

Kate's hands clenched the fabric of her sagging skirts, and her eyes threatened to close at the light, sensual touch. She mulled over his shocking remarks regarding her husband's prowess, or lack thereof, and an image formed in her mind—of her pale legs draped over Wyndham's wide shoulders, smooth bronze skin sliding beneath her hands as he mounted her in the narrow bed. Shivers rippled through her frame, and she emitted a soft, involuntary moan.

The sound worked as flame to gunpowder, for her captor spun her around and jerked her hard against him. Kate's eyes widened at the sight of Wyndham's face, flushed with wine, warmth, and an unmistakable yearning. His hands splayed across her back, stroking their way across her shoulder blades and over her hips.

"I heard that, sweet Kate," he murmured, and his voice was thick with desire. "You want me." He held her hips, pushing his pelvis against hers in a slow rhythm so she could feel the swollen heat of his manhood. Blood rushed to her head. She spread her legs wider to better accommodate the thrust of his thighs, and he gripped her bottom with hard fingers, claspings her tighter still.

His breathing was as harsh as hers as they continued their erotic dance, and Wyndham bent his head to nuzzle her neck and the soft place just below her ear. "I need you, Kate. I want to bury my head between those beautiful breasts and my cock between those soft thighs."

She groaned low in her throat as he bit her gently on the sensitive cord running along the top of her shoulder.

"Give in to me, lass. Let me make you cry to Heaven."

Kate tried to capture the whirl of her thoughts, bring them into order so that she could find the strength to deny Wyndham and push him away from her. But it was all for naught. Whatever doubts she had of him, whatever lingering resentment at being taken hostage, all were burned to ash by the fire that consumed her. She breathed in his scent—

BLACKBIRD

ocean salt and sun-warmed male. His light shirt wrinkled beneath her sensitive palms, and she could feel the flexing of hard muscle, the tiny points of his nipples as he embraced her.

He was beautiful to look upon, an intelligent and interesting man with whom to converse. Those moments when she wasn't tempted to cuff him on the side of the head for his lack of propriety, he reminded her of Henry, for he often made her laugh in the same way. And he kissed her with a scorching heat that nearly drove her to madness. What else, beyond the fire of that kiss, was he capable of ? The prim widow admonished her for even considering bedding this man. The lonely woman with the heat of passion flowing through her veins urged her to accept him, take him as he would take her.

It was the second voice that won out. Kate buried her hands in his soft hair and tilted her head to invite his kiss. His blue eyes nearly glowed as he bent to capture her lips. The kiss was hard, demanding an equal response from her as his tongue filled her mouth, stroking the inner walls of her cheeks, seeking to penetrate her deeper still.

She was as aggressive as he, her teeth scraping across his as she entangled his tongue with her own, sucking him into her. Her hands were frantic, roaming his hard body, sliding across his shoulders and down his back to grip his buttocks. She fumbled with his trousers, growling into his mouth as the cord holding them to his waist resisted her nimble fingers. He helped her by jerking hard on the knot and the waistband loosened enough for her to slip her hand inside.

Colin shuddered, and Kate sighed as her fingers glided along his rigid shaft, the pad of her thumb riding lightly over the wet tip, smearing the trickle of seed along his length. He groaned into her mouth as she cupped his sac gently, stroking the ultra-sensitive skin that filled her hand with a careful caress.

He reached down, wrapping hard fingers around her slender wrist and pulled her away from him. Kate moaned in protest and he broke the

BLACKBIRD

hard kiss, breathing in deep, gasping breaths. She matched him, her skin warm with excitement and arousal.

“Why?” she asked in plaintive tones, clutching his arms.

“Because,” he breathed, voice heavy with promise as his fingers drifted across her waist to tug her dress and petticoats down over her hips, “I have no intention of coming until I’m buried deep inside you, Kate.”

Her lids fell at his words, a slick warmth pooling at her center, eager for what he vowed to give her.

His hand slipped under her shift and began a slow climb along her left leg, gliding across her thigh. Kate adjusted her stance to give him freer access and he rubbed the softness in small, enticing circles.

“Soon,” he whispered in low guttural tones, “soon my mouth will be here, tasting you.

He moved higher, and she groaned aloud as he encountered the soft curls of her pubic mound.

“Oh God,” she whimpered, rubbing against his palm as her hips began a slow, rhythmic thrust in reaction to his touch.

He slid a long finger along the curve of her womanhood, searching for the entrance to her body. He found it easily enough. She was wet slick heat, primed to take him inside her. She moaned and heaved against him as he pushed one and then two fingers into her shuddering body, feeling her muscles squeeze around him

Wyndham began a slow back and forth rhythm and Kate’s eyes rolled back as she clutched his arms for support. He watched her face go slack with the pleasure he inflicted on her, her soft moans turning to mewling whimpers. His own breathing was harsh and deep, warm against her neck.

He abruptly pulled his hand away from her and curled his fingers into the bodice of her shift. With one swift jerk, the thin fabric gave, ripping down the front and falling to the floor where it pooled at Kate’s

BLACKBIRD

feet.

She refused to shield herself before him. Small, petite women like Abigail were fashionably beautiful. Kate was not. Nearly as tall as her would-be lover, she was large breasted with round hips and thighs. There was nothing dainty about her, and there never would be. She only hoped that Colin Wyndham would still find her beautiful now that she stood before him, naked as Eve.

Whatever doubts she harbored evaporated under the heat of his gaze, and she arched into him as he cupped her full breasts in both hands, his callused palms abrading her sensitive nipples and nearly making her knees buckle with the force of sensation spreading across her body.

“Venus rose from the sea,” he murmured in a spell-bound voice, “and found her way to my ship.”

His smile was seductive, wolfish, and Kate smiled back, rosy with the pleasure of his words. He propelled her toward the bed, lifting her slightly to toss her onto the mattress. She scooted back on her haunches and watched as he shucked his boots and followed her, stripping off his clothing as he stalked her. He was animal grace and sun-kissed skin, and she watched him with an avid longing.

“Or a siren I think. One in whose embrace I will happily drown.” He pushed her onto her back, roughly spreading her thighs with hard hands. “I have dreamed of this, my beauty.”

He lifted her hips, elevating her pelvis, and his blue eyes narrowed with anticipation as he lowered his head and proceeded to demonstrate to his captive the fine art of sexual teasing.

He ravished her with his mouth and tongue, greedily stroking and sucking the sensitive pearl that pulsed against his lips. Kate moaned, curling her fingers into the bed linens, pleading for him to stop, begging for him to continue.

Wyndham showed her no mercy, increasing the pressure of his

BLACKBIRD

mouth when she squirmed away from him, pulling away when she thrust her hips toward him. She cursed and blessed him between intermittent gasps, nearly incoherent from the sensations rocketing through her. A sensation began in her toes, rising up through her legs in a hot, tingling wave that continued onward, coursing through her veins and muscles, centering on the place where her lover's tongue worked magic, spreading across her breasts and belly. She arched her back, bracing her heels against the mattress and burying her hands in the pirate's soft dark hair as the wave slammed into her, sucking her down in a whirlpool that left her moaning and crying out his name in a gasping cadence.

Kate had little time to catch her breath before he rose above her, his sculpted features drawn tight with lust, the blue eyes fierce and predatory. Thin rivulets of sweat slid down his chest, dampening the dusting of dark hair. She tilted her chin to meet his kiss, tasting herself as he plundered her mouth with his tongue. She sighed into his mouth, the sighs turning to groans, echoed by him as he raised her legs over his shoulders and slid into her in one deep thrust, then farther until Kate thought she could feel him in her belly.

His slick chest rubbed against her sensitive breasts as he pumped her, the repeated slide of the thick cock within her making her legs tense as she used them for leverage and met each thrust with one of her own. She was utterly enveloped by long, silky hair, hard muscle, and raging male. Wyndham was around her and within her, hell-bent on consuming her, and Kate welcomed it all.

He broke the kiss, gasping her name on an indrawn breath. "God, Kate. I need all of you."

She smiled her acquiescence, tightening her inner muscles so that she squeezed his shaft. Wyndham reacted with a guttural moan, straightening his arms on either side of her head and increasing the pace and strength of his thrusts. Soon he was pushing them both back

BLACKBIRD

on the mattress and Kate braced her arms behind her so as not to crack her skull on the bulkhead.

The rhythmic rubbing of his pelvis against hers set off another spark, one that soon blossomed to an inferno as Wyndham suckled one breast and then the other.

“Come with me, Kate,” he murmured against a damp, pink nipple. His hand moved between them, parting the curls where they were joined, and began a rapid stroking of her clitoris.

Kate drummed her heels on his back, gasping and crying out as Colin brought her to climax again. He soon followed her, pumping into her with three hard strokes before arching his back and groaning her name. A heavy heat coursed through her, a swift pulsing that continued even after her legs slid from his shoulders and he lowered himself onto her, pressing her into the bed with his weight.

Her breathing slowed to a more normal pace, and she ran her hands through her lover’s damp hair. They were both wet with sweat, and she could feel the slick warmth of his seed trickling out of her. Wyndham stroked a leisurely hand down her side, nibbling at her lower lip and nuzzling her throat.

“You will be the death of me, Kate Abbot.” And there was amusement and affection in his voice.

She smiled. “All part of my diabolical plan, Captain, though I think I almost didn’t survive our encounter.”

His tongue flicked out to touch the corner of her mouth. “Colin,” he said in his most coaxing voice.

She turned her head to kiss him gently, surrendering to his command. “Colin.” Her brows rose as his gaze turned from sated to intense.

“We will reach Tortuga tomorrow, lass. Until then, there’s no going back. I’ll want you again, Kate. And I’ll have you. Tell me you’re willing.”

BLACKBIRD

“Aye,” she whispered, a burgeoning need again awakening within her. “I’m very willing, pirate lord.”

She smiled at the expression of relief in his eyes and wondered if he truly would have forced her had she said no. Some instinct within her didn’t think so, but she thought it would have been a royal battle between them.

The remainder of the night passed in short fits of dozing, brief moments of respite before they engaged in heated lovemaking again. Kate was particularly fond of mounting Colin, teasing him mercilessly as she sank slowly down on him, ignoring his muttered threats of vengeance if she didn’t hurry and take him inside her. And he exacted his revenge by pulling her from an exhausted sleep, rolling her to her belly and raising her to her hands and knees where he took her with a hard, driving rhythm.

Bright morning light poured through the porthole when she awakened from a deep slumber. She was alone in the destroyed bed, wrapped in one of the rumpled sheets and clutching Colin’s pillow to her chest. No doubt he was already above deck, and Kate was glad to see a wash bowl filled with tepid water and two clean towels waiting for her.

She was sore, sticky, and ripe with the musk of sex and Colin Wyndham. The sponge bath felt heavenly, and she made note to thank him for picking her discarded clothing up from the floor and placing them neatly on one of the chairs.

Her thoughts touched on many things as she slowly dressed. Colin had told her that two naval frigates followed behind the *Blackbird*, keeping just out of visual range. James was taking no chances, and Kate wondered if he was commanding one of the ships that trailed them. Despite their armament, they wouldn’t chance the western harbor of Tortuga, but would sail to the south side, where Colin had promised to leave her once her usefulness as hostage was ended.

BLACKBIRD

He had been lazily massaging a soft breast when he revealed his plans to her, and Kate tugged hard enough on his hair to elicit an “Ouch!”

“Fine thing to do to a woman, you bloody sea rat,” she snapped. “Leading me to believe you planned to put a pistol ball in me or dump me overboard for shark bait.”

Colin smiled in the face of her glower, giving her a dubious look. “Kate, you have been a recalcitrant prisoner, even with the assumed threat of death hanging over your head. There would have been no way of controlling you short of throwing you into the cargo hold, bound and gagged, if I told you otherwise.”

She frowned even harder, annoyed with his logic and puzzled by something. “How did my brother know what you would do? I never heard you say anything of the sort to him.”

“James Sutcliffe is a wily, experienced seaman, Kate. I admire him, even if we are on opposite sides of the law, and he’s just waiting for the chance to stretch my neck. And that’s a bit of interesting information. I wondered how you were tied to him. Now I know.”

Kate cursed her wayward mouth. She had been so careful not to reveal her relationship to James, feeling it offered more ammunition to her captor. Although now, with his legs tangled with hers and his tongue leaving a damp path along the curve of her breast, such revelations seemed of little importance.

He had asked her more questions; things about her life and past, and in return, he told her of his mother, an actress who had been the old earl’s long-time mistress. His voice was warm, filled with nostalgia as he told Kate of his memories of the bright, laughing Evelyn Wyndham. His tones were cool when he spoke of his father and icy when he talked of his brother Michael.

“You believe Michael killed your father, don’t you?”

Colin’s voice was bitter. “I know he did. I just don’t know the why

BLACKBIRD

of it. But I was made to take the blame, and I'm certain Michael had a hand in that as well."

Kate remembered the frustration lacing his musings and also her one glimpse a year earlier of Michael's cold, dissolute features. She tended to agree with Colin's assumption, though she knew little of one man, and nothing of the other.

She fastened as many of the buttons as she could reach on her back. Either she wait here until Colin came down and asked him to finish it for her, or leave her hair down and shield her back while she went on deck in search of him to play lady's maid. As she slipped on her shoes, a thought occurred to her, a brief memory of something that seemed of little importance when she read it, but that had a profound significance now.

Kate gasped, yanking on her other shoe and running out of the cabin and up the stairs to the deck. Some of the crew greeted her with knowing smiles, and she waved at them in a distracted manner, intent on finding Colin.

He stood at the *Blackbird's* helm, his hands light on her wheel as he steered through the turquoise waters toward Tortuga. In the far distance, she could see a dark line on the horizon. Land.

Colin smiled as she came to stand beside him. "Good morning, Kate. I was about to send food to break your fast. You looked as if you needed the rest this morning."

Kate gripped his arm. "Can you let Mr. Daviau take over for a moment? I have something very important to tell you!"

He lost his smile instantly, stiffening at the almost frantic note in her voice. He called to Marcel to take the wheel, promising he would soon return. Kate easily kept pace with his long strides as they walked back to the cabin.

The door barely closed before he crossed his arms over his chest and eyed her with concern. "What is it, Kate? You don't strike me as

BLACKBIRD

prone to drama, so this is serious.”

She was pleased that he didn’t disregard her anxious questions as hysterical behavior. “Colin, remember when I told you that Henry was one of the Montclevé estate’s many solicitors?”

He nodded, his frown deepening. “Aye. What of it?”

She started to pace in front of him. “I used to help Henry with his paperwork. He trusted me more than an assistant, called me far more organized and tidy.” She ignored his smile. “I think it was three years ago, close to Christmas, when I was filing some of Henry’s papers that I came across a set of documents. It was an original deed and two copies, giving ownership to three mines in south Devon.”

Kate placed a hand on Colin’s arm. “They were deeded to one Evelyn Patrice Wyndham and any of her issue.” She watched as his face whitened, bled of all color so that he was paler than any powdered and painted aristocrat in Charles’s court.

“That murdering bastard!” And his voice was thick with rage. “I know of which mines you speak. It was only a few months before his death that earl received news that two of the mines were discovered rich in silver ore. The Montclevé estate has grown fat off their revenues.”

“Your mother was dead by then.”

She winced as his mouth twisted into a harsh, humorless smile. “Aye, but I wasn’t, and my death would have seemed suspicious. But if I were made a murderer and hanged, all properties would revert back to the earl’s sole heir.”

“Michael.”

“Yes.” He curled his hands into fists and his countenance turned shrewd. “Do you still have those documents, Kate?”

She nodded, the stirrings of uneasiness fluttering wildly in her belly. “I had everything put into storage when I left England, with instructions that my own solicitor sort through and hand over any and

BLACKBIRD

all appropriate papers to the Montcleve solicitors. I'm certain Mr. Newbourne has not yet found the opportunity to do so. He is a busy man."

"Let us hope that continues to be the case." He turned and opened the door, leaving Kate to wonder at his cryptic words. She found out soon enough when he spun back around and shut the door again.

"Kate, your brother will have to wait a bit longer for his sister's return."

Her eyes widened as she absorbed the meaning of his words. "No! You must send me back! I don't belong here!"

There was true regret in Colin's summer blue gaze, but also a hardened resolve. "I am sorry, Kate, but I must have those documents, and I need you to get them. We'll resupply our stores on Tortuga, make repairs and set sail for England. And you are going with me."

Anger and grief warred within her. "Bastard," she muttered in a low voice and swung her hand so that her open palm cracked against Colin's cheek.

His head snapped back, and he staggered a moment, but did nothing to retaliate, only watched her with those impenetrable eyes. The skin beneath his beard flamed red where she had struck him, and she was tempted to hit him again, she was so enraged. "I wish James had hung you in Bridgetown, you betraying whoremonger." Tears welled in her eyes at the knowledge that her freedom was again out of reach.

She went rigid when Colin settled his hands on her shoulders and pulled her up against him. "Do you, Kate? Were there any other way, I would send you back, though even without the need for those documents, I'd be tempted to keep you."

His words were warm, regretful, and Kate held on to her rage with rebellious tenacity. She wouldn't weaken in the face of his words, even when they turned her blood warm. She refused to hear the small voice inside of her that whispered of how tempted she was to agree willingly,

BLACKBIRD

if only to spend a few months time in his company. Her reputation among island society was already in shambles. But if she returned now, it would be as rescued captive, and only conjecture whispered behind closed doors would haunt her footsteps. This new twist on plans was something else. She was less concerned for herself as she was for James' reputation.

"I cannot go with you. Please don't do this, Colin."

His fingers caressed her arms. "I have no choice, Kate. I must take your freedom for a short time in the hope of regaining mine. I want your support in this, your willingness. But I will take you kicking and clawing if necessary."

Kate kept her gaze trained on his chest, staring at the woven threads of his shirt, the smooth brown skin revealed by a gap in the front lacings. "My brother," she whispered. "I will shame him, make him a laughingstock if I agree to this."

His soft laughter drifted over the top of her head, stirring strands of her hair. "No one save the two of us and the crew need know that you were willing, Kate. I can take care of that for you. Your brother's reputation will be safe." He tilted her head up with a finger under her chin. "I cannot say the same for yours. Forgive me, fair Kate. Will you help me? Help me reclaim my right as a free citizen and innocent man?"

She stared long into his eyes, considering, weighing her options, of which there were few. But one clear thing stood out amongst all her musings. This was indeed a man wrongly accused, one who had lived under the sword and by it for many years. And despite the fact that he sailed a ship under the black color of the Brethren, he was a good man, and she was coming to care for him. Deeply.

"Will you at least spare enough coin to buy me another dress when we reach Tortuga? This won't last another long trip across the water."

Colin's features lightened and were soon wreathed in smiles as he

BLACKBIRD

embraced her. “Aye, sweet lass, I’ll buy you a dozen dresses if you wish, of any color, though I don’t know how many respectable dress shops can be found on Tortuga. Most cater to the strumpets.”

She harrumphed, leaning into his arms and wrapping her arms around his wide back. “I’m a fair seamstress. I will make it respectable if need be, or as respectable as a recently fallen widow can make it.” Her own smile was a little uncertain, and Colin ran a gentle finger across her cheek.

“Never compare yourself to them, Kate, no matter your circumstances. You are a lady in all the ways that count, and a damn fine woman.” He chuckled her lightly under the chin, and her smile became less melancholy.

She turned, presenting her back to him. “Well then, Captain Wyndham, you’ll need to play lady’s maid again. I can never reach these blasted buttons.”

He pulled her hair over her shoulder, and she shivered as her nape was exposed. He touched his mouth to the soft skin there. The rustle of cloth and the sudden loosening of the dress at her ribs and waist warned her that he was unbuttoning instead of buttoning.

“What are you doing, Captain?” And her voice nearly purred with the question.

He nuzzled her neck, sliding his hands into the gaping sides of the dress and going higher to cup her chemise covered breasts. “Celebrating your renewed captivity, Kate Abbot.”

She moaned softly as he rolled her nipples between thumbs and forefingers.

“Come to bed, my strapping lass. I’ve a hunger for you that won’t be appeased with just one night.”

Kate laughed and soon the cabin was filled with heated sounds of lovemaking amidst the steady creaking of the *Blackbird* as she sailed closer to the sanctuary of pirates.

BLACKBIRD

Above deck, Marcel Daviau kept a steady hand on the wheel and smiled. “You’re mine for a little longer, *ma cherie. Monsieur Capitaine* has his other woman to please for now.”

EPILOGUE

The beach was deserted save for a tall, thin stick of driftwood, driven deep into the sand. James Sutcliffe waded ashore, his heart in his throat at the sight of a tattered strip of black dress tied to the wood. Pinned to the fabric was a piece of paper and the commodore prayed that it wasn't a note gleefully informing him of his sister's death.

She should have been here, her and not that ratted piece of material. He unpinned the note, trying not to hesitate as two of his troops watched behind him. The script was long and angular, penned in India ink that somehow didn't bleed or spot when it was used.

Commodore Sutcliffe,

It has come to my attention that Katherine Abbot is a far more valuable hostage than I first realized. As you may

BLACKBIRD

surmise, she is still alive, and she is well, despite numerous threats of torture and death that she has leveled on my person. You may also note that she doesn't await you here. I find that she must remain in my possession a little longer before I return her to you. Rest assured, she will be looked after and returned to you no worse for the experience. I doubt I will be able to say the same.

*Regards,
C. Wyndham*

The crew aboard the frigate *Brigantia* swore to each other later that evening that they never realized the stiff, formal Commodore knew so many colorful words for a man's genitals or his hereditary.

On the other side of Tortuga, another man turned from staring out the window of the safest inn in town and watched the sleeping woman curled up in his bed. "England soon, my lovely lass," he whispered in the moonlit room, his voice vibrating with his resolve. "You are the means to my redemption, Kate. And one day, I will be more than your captor."

GRACE DRAVEN

Grace Draven is a Louisiana native, living in Texas, and is a financial analyst by trade. She is the member of a large on-line network of writers, as well as a member of a site that archives fiction works. In the spare moments between working a full-time job and caring for three small children she writes romantic fiction. Grace has lived in Spain, honeymooned in Scotland, hiked through the Teton Mountains, ridden in competition rodeo and is the great, great-granddaughter of a Nicaraguan president. She is an avid fan of medieval history, Renaissance faires, Russian culture and the culinary arts.

* * *

***Don't miss The King Of Hel, by Grace Draven,
Available June 2005 from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

Castil il Veras, a dowerless scribe born of lesser boyars, attends the wedding of her best friend to the notorious cursed king of Helenrisia. It is at the prenuptial celebrations that she becomes bewitched by the mysterious magus king, even as she recognizes that he is forbidden to her.

Doranis of Helenrisia travels south to Caskadan, bound by duty to secure trade agreements by marrying a woman who loathes the sight of him. Marked by the ancient magic of the Waste, he is surprised to

discover one who finds him fascinating instead of repellent. But Castil is beyond his reach, cut off from him by birth, circumstance and distance.

But Fate would have it otherwise, and a beseeching letter from a dying queen will bring them together again in a land rife with an ageless power...

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS
IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SUSPENSE/THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

PARANORMAL

ROMANCE

MYSTERY

EROTICA

HORROR

WESTERN

FANTASY

MAINSTREAM

HISTORICAL

YOUNG ADULT

NON-FICTION

BUY DIRECT AND SAVE
<http://www.amberquill.com>