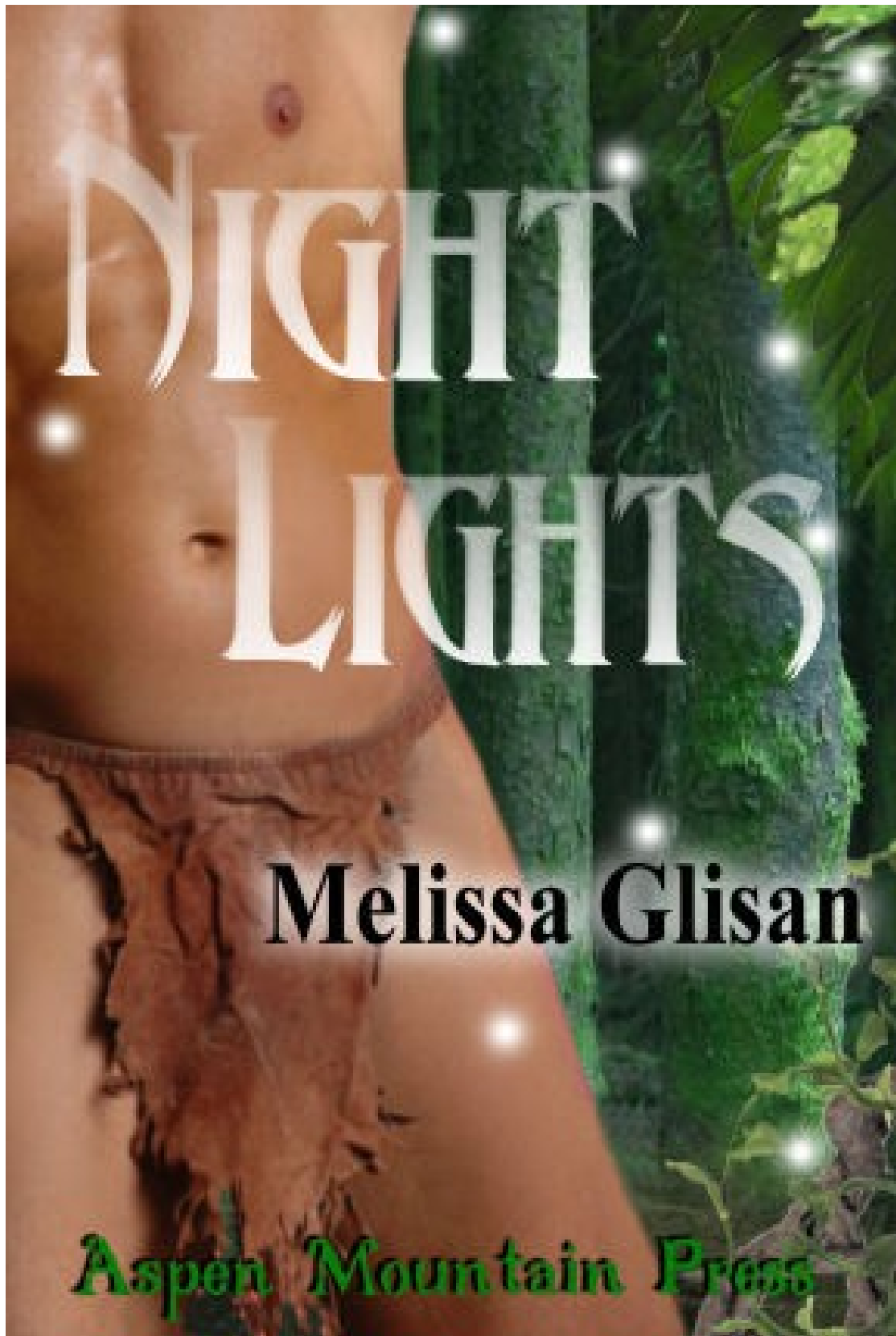


Melissa Glisan



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Melissa Glisan

# Night Lights

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Aspen Mountain Press

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Night Lights  
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**Dedication:**

With thanks to Joanne and Christy for their valued assistance with Malay life.

## Chapter One

*October 15, 1899, Malay*

"Well met fellow traveler," Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker's greeting rang out on the early morning air. Stepping forward, his warm, dry hands gently wrapped around linen-clad feminine ones in greeting.

"Well met indeed, sir," Margaret Thawley dropped a short, informal curtsy, reminding herself again how lucky she was to have the opportunity to adventure and explore the world with such a renowned gentleman of the Royal Society of London. Fear of travel and its risks had plagued her mind, not reservations about the man before her. His stalwart reputation preceded him.

From under the heavily-veiled brim of her straw and horsehair bonnet, Margaret studied the older gentleman. He was a lion of a man, with a thick mane of hair skirting his balding dome joining the beard fringing his austere face. Bushy salt-and-pepper brows perched like caterpillars over sparkling brown eyes. The eyes were young behind their glass windows, but the face was wrinkled and time-worn. Instinctively, Margaret liked his warmth -- he projected an air of "favorite uncle." A novel thought for a woman who had grown up never knowing the same.

It was unusual for the Society to allow a woman on one of their fact-finding expeditions, even more rare to include one who had fallen to ruination. To her father's

credit, he had shuffled his eldest, most troublesome daughter out of the country quickly, expressing hope that word of the scandal would travel slower. So far, Margaret noted, the 'tawdry events' had been left behind with nary a person the wiser.

"I trust travel wasn't too hard on you?" he inquired politely, looking about for the servants and family expected of a middle-class woman of her station. Margaret flushed, her father, Reverend Alistair Thawley, hadn't wanted anyone aware of her 'shame' traveling on the same boat, so she was denied the services and company of even a maid. Instead, she spent the trip locked in her cabin, afraid to venture out except for meals with the captain and infrequent trips around the deck at dusk. It had given her plenty of time to think on what had led to her 'shame.'

"My maid was indisposed and unable to travel, Sir Joseph. In the spirit of Mrs. Isabella Bishop, I have come alone save for my bags, books, and recording tools." She put on her best smile and hoped the false bravado was enough to keep him from probing too deeply. After a tense moment of consideration, he shook his head, relenting.

"Impetuous youth," he chastised gently. "However, the world is a very different place from when I was a lad, I'm afraid," he chatted amiably, telling stories of his boyhood. Tucking her hand under his forearm, he led the way to their cabin on a neighboring, smallish-looking wooden craft.

Viewing the tiny, unlit space, cordoned off with a hanging cloth made of coarsely woven fibers, Margaret nearly fainted as her mind conjured images of sharing sleeping accommodations for an extended period of time with a roomful of men. Obviously, the Reverend Thawley had sent her to the Malay Peninsula with more alacrity than consideration.

*But what had there been to consider,* she asked herself bitterly. Her father needed her out of range of the gossip hounds so as not to fan the flames, and she did have a love of foreign travels. The only problem being that Margaret had never been out of Suffolk. Life, and her father, had thus far limited all of her travels to the pages of the

books she loved so dearly. But Sir Joseph needed an assistant and Reverend Thawley required an isolated place to dispose of his 'embarrassment,' so here she was.

Margaret was conscripted as the recorder for Sir Joseph's newest fact-finding expedition. He was set to comb the forests of Cagayan de Sulu in search of the mystery of the ghoulish, vampire-like creatures reported on by a fellow member of the "unseen university," as the varied societies were now known. According to the reports she studied, no one had ever heard of these bizarre creatures called Berbalangs, until Mr. Ethelbert Forbes Skertchley. A member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Skertchley had written a most fantastical recitation of events surrounding his trip. The Royal Society decided to further investigate the island and the indigenous peoples to see if the man reported true or if he had fallen victim to local folklore.

"Not that I can complain," Sir Joseph's rambling one-sided conversation returned to the subject of Margaret's presence with a chuckle. "I've got a lovely assistant on what will assuredly be a wild goose chase. But..." He turned and gestured to the slim dark haired men carrying her baggage from the hold of the English ship onto the clipper that would carry them on the final leg of their journey. "...it will give my regular men time to recuperate for our return trip to India. Fever you know," he added conspiratorially.

Margaret shivered at the news. The notion of contracting something deadly had fueled nightmares leading to many sleepless hours on the voyage from England. Having her worst fears confirmed as something plausible made her blood run cold.

"Don't worry my dear," Sir Joseph was quick to reassure his new assistant, "once we get some proper food in you and get you into the sun, you shouldn't have a worry. You look a bit pale from the confinement of traveling. I understand the trip was rough. You came at a bad time, as October marks the end of the monsoon season. But my need couldn't have waited another two months for an easier voyage, as I'm due in India."

Margaret nearly choked, the trip *had* been abysmal, but the paleness of her skin was something to be prized, not expunged. She had always been incredibly pale, a shade that the society matrons strove to match with powders and tonics. The weather

had tossed the ship terribly and she did mourn having lost too much weight, but the added pallor was something she considered a nice bonus for her suffering.

Impervious to her cosmetic outrage, Sir Joseph grasped his lapels and orated, "I could never abide the fashion women indulge in, making themselves sickly and pale. For what?" he demanded, sweeping his arm dramatically indicating the vista of sandy banks where dark-skinned children frolicked naked in the surf. "This is how we were intended to be, freely enjoying nature as God intended." He watched the children laughing, splashing one another for a moment. "We were banned already from one garden for putting on airs -- it would be a shame to lose this one as well to vanity and arrogance. I urge you, my dear, to embrace this life and not hide from it."

Stunned by his impassioned speech, Margaret drew to a halt. Sir Joseph sounded so much like her beloved Rupert that she had to fight down the insane urge to confess her sin of attempting to elope to Scotland with a Catholic. Barely, she managed to rein in the impulse. She could see the older man accepting a declaration of love as the reason for her intended flight, but not the truth -- that her true passion had been a wholehearted desire to flee her father. It wasn't that she didn't care for Rupert; she just cared to be free of the Revered Thawley more. Six weeks aboard ship had given her time to see the truth and face it for what it was.

*And that made your 'love' a lie;* she forced herself to face facts. Deep down she was grateful that her plan had been thwarted, Rupert deserved someone who would truly love him. She had abandoned hopes of finding love and was more than willing to settle for freedom. But it didn't matter -- her letters to Rupert had been intercepted and, in an ironic twist of fate, she had been given her freedom. More freedom than marriage would have granted her.

But, she wondered for the hundredth time, was it better to be free in a heathen world full of disease or bound a captive in the tyrannical safety of her father's house? Watching the children laugh and play in the surf just as any English child was wont to do along streams and riverbanks, Margaret discovered herself considering for the first

time that perhaps the trip could be more than a punishment, let alone a death sentence. *If the natives can survive here, so can I*, she concluded, confidence flooding her system.

Feeling emboldened, she swept the veiled hat off of her head and laughed. "It would appear you are right good Sir! God does see me, no matter the trappings, so it is for the best that I look upon His works unfettered." For a moment, the light blinded her, making her deep blue eyes flutter before they adjusted on the beaming face of her employer. Under the brilliant light, there had been a fleeting moment where she could have sworn she spotted a distant pair of burning red eyes focused on them. Fanciful and fearful, she chided herself, smiling widely at the exuberant botanist.

"Excellently done, Miss Thawley! Now," he leaned close and whispered in her ear, "let us work on getting you out of those uncomfortable wool contraptions and into the sensible dresses the natives favor."

The feeling of freedom swelled, making her feel giddy. "We must leave something new for tomorrow, Sir Joseph." She smiled impishly. The sun, which had been sapping her strength through the oppressive apple green traveling suit, took on new meaning. Suddenly, she felt invigorated. Her eyes no longer saw the faded, peeling paint and crude cabin on an aged clipper, but a vessel expressly crafted to carry her off on new adventures.

A small chair and makeshift desk had been placed on the deck of the boat, near the cabin. Sir Joseph bowed and indicated she should sit. Grinning happily, Margaret settled into the chair and dug in her valise for her quill and papers to begin recording everything she saw. Theirs was the first boat in the marina, the first set of bare wooden branches lancing into the vibrant blue sky after the bright sandy beach. Birds darted overhead, their cries almost drowning out the lyrical sounds of laughter from the deck hands as they readied the boat for departure.

So many scents assaulted her nostrils that Margaret closed her eyes for a moment to focus on chasing each one as her fingers nimbly recorded her impressions on the page. There was the smell of the sea, salt-tang and fish blending with the pungent aroma of oils rubbed into the wood of the deck and bow. *Pitch*, she agreed, as her nose

wrinkled in distaste at the identifiable sooty odor. The wind shifted direction and carried in its invisible arms a sweetness that made her mouth water. Unbidden, images of fruit sprang to mind and Margaret lost several minutes in wonderment as her mind conjured exotic images to go with the scent, conjured tastes exploding across her tongue.

“Mangoes, young Miss, with pineapple and coconut,” the curiously accented male voice at her shoulder made her jump in her chair. Swiveling around, she peered up into the darkest eyes she’d ever seen. It was like staring into a pool of midnight water. Inky black, it was impossible to tell where iris ended and pupil began. They were almond-shaped and tilted cat-like in his warm caramel face. Smiling eyes, she fancied as her heart skipped a beat.

Her mind, still locked in catalog-mode, noted that he was from Malay, but somehow different. His face wasn’t as round as the men scurrying here and there in bare feet and scant trousers; it was longer, more angular with high, strong cheekbones above sensual, almost feminine lips. The wind shifted again, this time teasing the silky tips of long black hair from behind his ears. Through a fog of fascination, she nodded agreement that his hair looked so much better free to ride the wind than clubbed back as her countrymen were known to do.

Blinking rapidly, Margaret floundered for words and composure. She had never been one for conversation. The few times she had been permitted to speak at her father’s dinner parties, she had been viciously chided for her stilted, unoriginal dialogue. All of the beautiful conversations she enjoyed in books couldn’t rescue her from the embarrassment of being ‘tedious.’

“Thank you, Sir,” she felt her cheeks warm from more than the sunshine as he smiled at her words. “Are you making the trip to Cagayan de Sulu with us?” Sunlight kissed his skin a warm golden shade above his pristine white shirt. The crisp material set off his darker skin tone perfectly.

“Cagay-an” he gently corrected, drawing the word into two syllables, softening the ‘g’ to an ‘h’ sound. His voice was husky, making her shiver despite the heat of the afternoon sun.

“You are going?” he asked in his low-pitched voice. Embarrassed over the faux pas of mispronouncing the name of the island, she merely nodded. In reply, his soft lips lifted, revealing even white teeth as he flashed a quick smile. “Then yes, Miss. It would be my honor to escort you to my home. Cagayan is a wild beauty. I would not wish it to frighten you. So, at your side I will remain.”

Blood thundered in Margaret’s ears, he spoke so boldly! Her father would have blistered the ears of any man who would have spoken thusly to her at home. Heat bloomed low in her stomach, sending a different kind of warmth through her veins. Nervously, she cast about. Sir Joseph wasn’t far off, in fact he stood mere feet away speaking in an odd liquid language to the squat, swarthy captain. Perhaps she was being presumptive, maybe such talk wasn’t considered scandalous in Malay?

“I-I thank you for your offer, sir. But as I do not know who you are, I am afraid the offer is quite forward.” She stumbled over the words propriety necessitated while choking back the ones of acceptance her newly discovered freedom dared her to utter. *Take a chance, be bold*, a naughty imp tempted her.

“Ah.” Understanding settled across his attractive features and he moved around to the front of her desk. “Allow me to make introductions? I am Rizal Malihim, my father is a tribal chief, one of the two leaders of the island you are traveling to. He sent me to be educated in Spain when the Spaniards ruled our islands. Then, when our country was sold to the Americans,” He shrugged and spread his arms in a graceful way that made Margaret’s mind trip to ballads of swordfighters. “I journeyed there at his bidding to plead for our freedom.” Suddenly seeming aggravated, he clasped his hands behind his back. “But it would seem that the ‘Land of the Free’ does not wish to understand our desire to be free as well. However, that may change.”

Margaret made sympathetic sounds as she bit her tongue. She had always romanticized the Americans for their part in winning free of England, not because she

thought they were right but because the tales sounded so dashing. If the Americans held such a double-standard, perhaps she had misplaced her compassion.

"Rizal!" Sir Joseph hurried over and eagerly pumped the younger man's hand between his own. "I had worried that you would be unable to accompany us to the island's interior." Margaret openly watched Rizal. He didn't seem as enthusiastic as Sir Joseph.

"I had thought that you had given up on your quest to meet the Berbalangs tribe."

*Tribe?* Eerily the word bounced and echoed in her brain. She was glad to be sitting her thoughts spun so crazily. The scant information the Society had provided her with to study on the arduous trip from England had said nothing of the fantastic creatures being a tribe of people. Instead, it had painted a rather lurid ghost story that, combined with her terror of disease, had made sure she laid awake at night staring timidly into the darkness.

"Until I meet these good people of your land, I cannot write the papers that will lift the stain of cannibalism from their community."

"Cannibalism?" Without thinking, the word simply popped out from between her lips. Horrified, Margaret's hands flew to her mouth as if trying to force the word back inside.

## Chapter Two

Rizal wondered if the frightened young woman before him knew what a treat to the senses she presented. When he first saw her step foot on the British ship's rust-stained gangway, she had looked like an exotic bird preening under the morning sun in her shades of bright green. The tight corset transitioning into the rear bustle, coupled with the puffy mutton sleeves, only added to the illusion.

Not for the first time, he marveled at the strange fashion conventions of the English nobility. Why bury a perfectly beautiful woman under layers of strategically formed frippery? Then again, he had discovered that many of the women from the ranks of the nobles had very little beauty, inside or out. On this new creature, the ugly clothing style took on an exotic, sensual air. It drew his eyes to the mystery of her hips and the lush fullness of her breasts.

Watching the heavyset form of Sir Joseph Hooker hurrying forward to greet the feminine form, his attention sharpened. There was no purpose for the famous botanist turned explorer to bring a woman onboard his expedition. Supposedly, the good doctor was in search of a plant or mushroom to explain away the 'burning eyes' seen at night in the Cagayan jungles and fields. Glowing eyes the villagers attributed to the Berbalangs. Both Rizal and his father, Hari, had tried to explain to the man that there was no plant to match his description. Not to be ignored, the aging Englishman plied father and son with tales of mythic foxfire and how it was eventually proven to be

nothing more than a mushroom. Stories of flying stags and more had Hari and Rizal exchanging amused glances.

As entertaining as the stories from distant lands had been, Sir Joseph steadfastly refused to accept that there wasn't a plant to blame for their stories, either by their eerie night-glow or through hallucinations from ingesting them. His father had grown tired of explaining, "There is only that which exists, my friend. Nothing more or less." However, when Rizal had left for the mainland to meet again with the American diplomats, the two had been swapping tall-tales about witches and ghouls like old women poling laundry in the river.

Thoughts still swimming with the imaginary wash, Rizal was jerked out of his reverie when the figure in green swept off a straw hat hung with layers of lacy veils. Sunlight struck her bare head and gleamed as thick-coiled braids topped her perfection of form with a nimbus of hammered brass. Even at a distance, he could see the way it was twisted and netted along the nape of her neck, forming swirls of flax and honey tones melding together like woven sunshine.

In one way Rizal was thwarted, he couldn't hear her voice. Between them was a cacophony of deck hands and traders moving baggage along the wharf, but his eyes hungrily followed the creamy light pink of her lips as they spoke. He had never seen skin so white in all his travels. He was caught by an urge to stroke her skin, strip the concealing clothes from her contours and discover if she were as smooth as she appeared. Imagining his tanned hands on that naked, milky flesh, his darkness against her whiteness, as their bodies twisted together in passion made his breath hitch and heart hammer. Even more, awareness built and slid across his skin. He felt trapped between lust and hunger, and the inner conflict caused the fine hairs on his neck to rise as quickly as passion stirred in his loins.

He had to have this enchanting creature.

Approaching her had been foolish, but he couldn't stop himself. Her allure was too great. The sweet scent of fruit wafted from the market and swirled around the boat before flowing out towards the islands. He watched as she closed her eyes and followed

the tangy perfume with her nose. Painfully, his pants tightened as a vision of her nakedness sprawling over him, eyes closed as she memorized his body's scent with the same air of innocent fascination nearly brought him to his knees. On instinct, he circled behind her before engaging her in conversation. As the sensual nymph faltered and fell into confusion behind a wall of prim English practicality, he smiled at the opposing natures locked in her slim body. Which would win out?

Forcing himself to focus on the heavysset older man, Rizal tried to steer his body away from reaching out and touching the woman perched scant inches away. Acceptance on the old man's foolish quest was such a minor thing to win, but the true bounty was being able to close the distance on owning the fair-haired beauty. Now that he stood over her, drawing her scent into his lungs, the need to claim her as his was so much stronger. Watching her quiver in fear made him want to sweep her off the chair she was balanced on and ravish her. As a warrior of his people, his duty was to protect, but with this exotic woman, there was little consideration for safety in his mind. Transfixed, Rizal watched the slim column of her throat as she reflexively swallowed. The telltale thrum of her heartbeat throbbing at one side caused another, deeper hunger to rise. One he tamped down with gentle, calming words.

"Be at peace Miss, there is nothing for you to fear. The Berbalangs are a fierce warrior people. Whenever you have such, there are rumors and lies spread through ignorance and fear." He made his voice as soothing as possible.

The more Rizal studied the young woman, the more birdlike she appeared. Her wrists were thin with delicate bones disappearing into the tight cuffs of the ugly jacket. Her long, thin fingers tipped with oval nails grasped her pen intently. All he saw was the simple beauty of womanly talons. Eyes bright, they darted here and there, attracted by bright flashes of light or bursts of sound. *Like watching laughter*, he mused, as his own followed the dancing blue orbs. Her nose was a little larger than what the English desired, but he frankly appreciated the way it made her appear slightly arrogant.

He fully intended her spirit to fly as free as her nature deserved.

“Now, now, Miss Thawley,” Sir Joseph’s voice was openly disproving, “didn’t you read the dossier provided by the Society?”

Margaret couldn’t find her voice, being put on the spot always made her stammer and forget what was in her head. That Sir Joseph and the incredibly good-looking Rizal were both staring at her expectantly made it all the worse. Nervously, she readjusted her grip on the pen and tapped it on the paper as her mind searched for words.

“*M’una. Mag-awitan muna tayo bago...*” the soft-spoken words drew her eyes to Rizal’s face. Margaret had no idea what he said, but it sounded lyrical. Even more comely was the way his face darkened as Sir Joseph chuckled. “My apologies, young Miss, you remind me of a songbird. It is a saying in my native tongue, Tagalog. I simply said ‘take a minute, sing your song first’ to calm you, yes. Say words out loud to ease your upset.”

*He knows*, her deflated spirits caught an inner wind as understanding took hold. He meant not to be flirtatious but to help her overcome her fear of speaking. Without thinking, she smiled beatifically at the now silent Rizal and turned to Sir Joseph.

“The papers I had been given said nothing about a tribe,” she offered with an apologetic air. “Indeed sir, they spoke not of men but of fantastical creatures with flame eyes and wings that moaned through the air as they attacked living men when there were no dead bodies to gnaw on.”

“What papers are these?” Rizal’s sensual voice barked sharply. “You came to my island, told my *datu* you had heard vague tales from fishermen and became interested in hunting plants.” Anger radiated off his tense shoulders, Margaret was stunned at the sudden rage but empathized completely. His people should have been told the truth of why the Society had come to Malay.

Sir Joseph quickly began speaking in what must be Tagalog, trying to placate the angry islander. His switching languages angered Margaret. Rizal spoke fluent English, assuredly much better than the adventuring botanist spoke the Filipino language, from the way he kept repeating certain words and phrases in different sputtering ways. The

only reason for speaking in the Malay language was to exclude her from the conversation. Given Sir Joseph's warm welcome, she never thought to be shuttered from a conversation for being a woman. A sudden chill ran down her spine. Could there be another reason? Was the older man talking about something she was not supposed to know? But, that didn't make any sense if she truly was supposed to be the recorder of activities for the expedition. What purpose would it serve to keep her in the dark?

Firmly, she plucked up her courage and interrupted the volley of words being lobbed over her head. "What is a *datu*?" The diversion worked. Sir Joseph looked flustered and knocked off kilter, but Rizal had a hooded, predatory look in his midnight eyes that made her think he knew exactly why she interrupted their argument.

"It means 'leader' or 'chief'. The *datu* of my clan is also my father, Hari. On our trip, little scribe, I will try to *properly* explain our ways." He turned and leveled a glance at Sir Joseph that made the older man step back with a flinch. "It seems that a *clear* and *accurate* account of my people is needed to do battle with such terrible lies." Rizal placed such force on the words that Sir Joseph stepped back as if each landed a blow.

Margaret felt sweat break out all over her body from the tension. It didn't help that the day was becoming so much hotter than expected, on par with the hottest day at home. What had the Captain said? That the islands were pleasant, the same average temperature year round. She hadn't counted on such heat; it had been turning cool in England before she had left, so she had foolishly packed her winter wardrobe. None of the famous female explorers she'd read about had gone to the Philippines, and she hadn't a clue on the weather.

From sitting in the sun, sweat soaked through the thrice damned corset and into her blouse. Shifting in the chair had helped, air circulated better under the heavy jacket, but the arguing made everything worse. Fresh moisture dampened even the wool suit, and immediately she began to itch. The misery of feeling set upon by thousands of little ants made her want to moan and scratch. But she didn't dare move, not when Rizal

seemed on the edge of doing violence at the smallest provocation and Sir Joseph seemed more inclined to chucking her over the side.

### Chapter Three

Rizal stepped away from her desk and began pacing the ship. When Sir Joseph had his fill of looking at her in angry disgust, he hastened to the younger man's side and began trying again to engage him in conversation. Without being obvious, she considered the pair, one stalking up and down the deck like an annoyed cat, the other trundling along like a tubby toddler in chase. It should have been amusing but it wasn't, given the uncertain position she had on the boat and their foray into the Philippine Islands. If Sir Joseph should become annoyed enough with her performance...well, it just didn't bear thinking about. At best, she'd be sent home, at worst dumped on the mainland.

Margaret forced a deep relaxing breath, swallowed down her fears and began taking notes on the entire interchange, beginning with the moment the two men shook hands in greeting. She had a grim feeling that the minutest detail would prove important before long. Plus, the writing helped take her mind off of the growing urge to scratch at her irritated skin, abused by the damp, itchy wool suit.

As the sun lifted on the clear azure horizon, she felt as if she were baking in the stylish jacket. *More like boiling like a pea in the cook pot*, she nearly groaned moisture from her body leeching into the fabric and began baking into the air around her. Being in public, she couldn't just remove the hateful jacket. It was unheard of, going half-naked

in full view of so many people. Not that people had ever paid her much mind, she thought, squirming uncomfortably, she had a tendency to fade into the background.

Convention didn't seem to bother Sir Joseph. She watched in covert jealousy as he stripped off his jacket and rolled his sleeves while he directed the placement of assorted boxes. At one point, he even removed his shoes and stockings, slipping on a pair of flimsy looking slippers as he padded about the deck inspecting all of the stores, rations, and equipment needed for the expedition to the center of Cagayan de Sulu.

With the older man busy, her eyes cast about looking for the one person who truly caught and held her interest after so many weeks sequestered. No matter that her eyes hungered for a peek at his dark handsome frame, she couldn't see where Rizal had gotten to. *Perhaps he decided to hell with us all and just left*, she grumped. A drop of water fell on the paper and she stared hopefully at the cloudless sky. No such luck, she retrieved a handkerchief from her valise and dabbed lightly at her nose.

By the time she finished recording the meaning of the word 'datu', Margaret was ready to collapse. Begging a moment's leave of her distracted sponsor, she escaped into the cabin hoping to strip out of her cumbersome clothes. Instead, she walked into a wall of oppressive heat. The room was dark and airless, offering no respite. There wasn't even so much as a porthole to open and catch the air. The only thing the structure did was shield her from the merciless sun. She had sat on the deck for less than an hour, yet her cheeks burned as if she had been staked out all day.

What was the matter with her? As a child, she had run free in farmers' fields, climbed trees and splashed in ponds. Only the one time could she remember feeling so burned by the sun's rays, even then it had taken a full day of playing along the bank of the miller's stream. Her nurse had gently daubed her skin with water and milk, citing an old family remedy. Once her father had come home, that had stopped. He called the burn 'God's own wrath' and her punishment for acting like a hoyden instead of a proper young miss. She recalled the day perfectly, the deep hue of the evening sky making the purple-topped heather look almost black as she stared forlornly out of her bedroom window. It had marked her last day as a child.

## Night Lights

Did she remember the day so clearly because of the pain from the burn or because of the stark beauty of the night? She sighed in the darkness and tried to conjure memories of cold winters to cheer her into accepting the incredible heat. At least in the cabin she could remove the jacket. Sliding out of the tight garment, she felt as if she threw off a weight from her back. The itching didn't stop, but it did ease a little as she stretched her arms up and over her head. The cut of the cloth had almost pinned her upper arms to her sides.

Margaret had long viewed the sleek traveling suits as stylish, but now regarded the wilted cloth as a cannily-crafted alternative to the Iron Maiden. No wonder her father had looked over the design of the popular garment with approval. Not only had it held her uncomfortably in perfect posture, it certainly kept her body covered from ankle and wrist to neck. Unlike other young women, she had the full front to her corset, quashing her aching breasts against the unwieldy whalebone and satin. What she wouldn't give to be able to untie the damned thing. But no, she'd been so eager to impress Sir Joseph that she had bribed the servant of another passenger to help her do up the restrictive undergarment.

Fumbling in the dark, she moved around the room. Her fingers found the hard edge of a small table as she barked her knees against the first row of bunks. Blowing out, she puffed the super-heated air and counted to ten, urging restraint against cursing the dark room. Gingerly, she reached the rough sheet of material separating the front three sleeping cots from one to the rear. Given that she was the lone female aboard the boat, she felt her way to the isolated, thin, lumpy mattress and hoped it was hers, as she dropped to sit on its surface. Signing in resignation, Margaret accepted that this bed would be even more uncomfortable than the one on the last ship. For a moment, she considered digging out a candle to shed some light on her corner of the room, but changed her mind. It was so hot already that the idea of adding heat from even a candle made her want to melt into a puddle on the floor.

Shifting about, she tugged the hem of her blouse out of the waistband of the skirt and found the slim buckles for the bustle. Standing and giving a weary shake, she heard

the thump and rattle as the series of hoops fell to the floor. Sinking back to the mattress, she reached back and found the laces of the corset. Inches away from freedom and... confound it! The young maid had tied the strings into knots. *A series of knots at that*, she mourned as her fingers felt along the lumpy silk. Margaret wanted to slump over and give in to the tears that had been building ever since she was hustled out of England.

Behind her eyelids, she saw her father's furious face and shame added to the frustration as silent tears slid down her cheeks. At twenty-five she knew she was on the shelf — both of her younger sisters were happily married to men her father had chosen. Why couldn't she have a husband? Each time a young man had asked permission to court her, the Reverend Thawley had responded with the same furious refusal.

Charitably, her nurse tried to ease the sting by telling Margaret it was because of how strongly she resembled her long-dead mother, Phoebe. The words had been a balm to her sixteen-year-old heart, but as the years passed, they began to chafe. It was painful enough to know the words were a well-intentioned lie. She became jealous of the mother she dimly remembered. Her mother had known love and laughter. That was one thing she did remember from when she was a child; the beautiful sound of her mother singing and laughing in the small kitchen garden behind the rectory every morning.

"What took you from me mother?" She was glad for the darkness; no one could see her tearstained face. There had been times when she missed her mother terribly. Today was turning into another. All she clearly remembered was one day her mother was there, bright smiles, warm hugs and loving kisses, and the next she was gone. The house had turned so quiet that Margaret would hide under the stairs and practice talking in a tone that wouldn't stir the dust. Even that seemed overloud as the drifting motes settled into the corner to keep her company. Her father had always been stern, scary to a small girl, but he didn't bother much with her or her sisters, leaving them instead to her mother. All of that had changed when Phoebe died. That had been the only thing the trio of small girls had been told, their mother was dead and had gone to be with God.

"God has a mommy, he doesn't need mine," Theodora had cried, pressing her face into Margaret's shoulder. Little Elizabeth was too young to understand the words or their meaning, but her little face had screwed up in fear as she cried on the rug. Margaret had pulled the baby into her arms, but a six-year-old isn't big enough to hold two smaller sisters for long. In the end, they curled up in Theodora's bed, sharing tears and memories. Theodora had been so worried that Elizabeth would never remember their mother, Margaret remembered as her fingers tugged at the knotted cords. In the end, even Theodora had forgotten.

Slowly, the worry from the day's events lessened as she let the memories wash over her mind. Keeping her mind occupied freed her fingers to work out the complex knots barring frustration from impairing their dexterity. It had always been that way; if Margaret wanted to get something done properly, she had to do another task at the same time. Her tutors had been confounded at how she couldn't learn Latin unless she was in the kitchen baking cookies for her sisters. That math and science were utter gibberish until she began working in the garden pulling weeds. Her peculiarity went from novelty to nuisance as she got older.

"I don't pay teachers to chase after you in the garden, Margaret," her father had thundered as he dismissed them from service. "Most see it a waste of my money, educating a gaggle of girls. In this case, it's doubly wasted if you can't stay on task. If you wish to learn further, there is the church library, avail yourself of that." And that, had indeed, been that. At the time, Theodora was sixteen and had been planning her coming out while fourteen-year-old Elizabeth found every excuse to slip out to the barn and pat the coach horses. Neither missed the tutors and both had married well, Theodora among the gentry and Elizabeth to the son of a famous racehorse breeder. Quietly laughing at the joy both had discovered, Margaret closed her eyes and felt the final dregs of tension ebb from her body.

With a tug, the laces were freed and the corset eased, allowing her to gulp in deep breaths of hot, stale air. Tired from wrestling her clothes and emotions, she left the miserable thing loose as she sank back against the mattress, her head alighting on a

lumpy pillow. She was asleep before she had a chance to remember that she had told no one where she had gone.

\* \* \* \*

Angry, Rizal had stalked off of the clipper and back to the mainland. The ship's captain knew better than to leave the son of the *datu* and the lead *timawa* warrior behind when he sailed with the English for Cagayan. He needed time and distance from the lying man to consider what to do. Instead, he found himself standing inside the line of young palm trees above the breakers, watching the woman.

Miss Thawley. Miss was a title bestowed on unmarried women and Thawley wasn't truly her name, but the surname of her father. What other name lurked under the prim demeanor? There had to be something that when spoken contained all that was of her. The Europeans had such a love of formal names, names heaped upon other names. It had never been the Filipino way to use two or three sets of names, most people never left their island or if they did, it still didn't matter. They were known by who and what they were, not the label of a name.

But that simplicity had changed when his father was a boy. The Spanish had gotten fed up with the islanders' tendency to using a singular name. When they discovered that fathers took on their son's names as honorifics, the tradition had been halted, forcibly. *It was impossible*, they explained, *to get taxes out of everyone equally if there was no way of telling the people apart*. Being a descendant of a Muslim pirate had been in young Hari's favor. The family had an unused surname, Malihim, and resurrected it to stave off being assigned a Christian name by the Spaniards.

*But what name*, he wondered, *did the Thawley parents choose?* Was it a name of the heart or one of stiff convention? He watched as the vibrant figure slowly wilted under the sun. Why didn't she take off that ridiculous garment? The wool was far too heavy for the beautiful day. Her shoulders hunched as she filled pages with lines of script. The

grim determination in her posture reminded him of the look in her eyes as Hooker spoke fast and clumsily, trying to repair the damage her honesty had caused.

She knew that Hooker had an ulterior motive for hiring a pretty young woman to act as recorder for his expedition. But from the worried confusion lining her softly rounded features, Miss Thawley had yet to understand just how much danger the Royal Society was knowingly throwing her in front of. Were they baiting a tiger or merely hoping to distract one? Either way, she was the sacrifice to their academic greed.

With a small stagger, she moved from the desk to speak with Hooker who distractedly waved her off. Hastily, she disappeared into the cabin, and Rizal winced knowing how the heat must have built in the room. The captain was superstitious and feared not the dark, but any spark of light at night. As a result, the cabin had been built without any windows to catch the sea breezes. He planned on joining the crew at night and rigging a hammock below decks where he could at least feel the air.

Children's laughter reached his ears. Startled at the sound, Rizal shook his head and noticed how many minutes he had passed observing the slim English woman. There was much he had to do before returning to the clipper, seeing her unhappiness only added an extra chore.

## Chapter Four

"Swim with me, Maggie-Pie." Fighting to keep her nose above the inky waves, Margaret paddled with all her might towards the voice that held her heart.

"Mama," she sputtered as water surged into her mouth. Straining, she pulled through the choppy current and called again, "Mama wait for me, not so fast." *Stop whining*, she gritted her teeth and forced her tired arms and legs to keep propelling her through the water. In the distance, she could see her mama's head above the dark breakers.

But how? There was no moon in the sky. Margaret stopped pushing forward to tread water. Her clothes were waterlogged, heavy and cold from the late spring chill of the inlet they were swimming and pulled at her body. There on the bank, Margaret spied two torches burning, lighting the way. Arms and legs numb from exhaustion, she pushed herself on, swimming towards the dim outline of her mama's head and the bright lights.

*Bright lights, cold nights, dark frights...* her mind started a singsong chant to push the dark and exhaustion away. Why did mama get her from bed to go swimming? Father would be so mad. Water plugged her nose and she floundered, thinking about how angry he had become when he discovered she'd learned to swim.

## Night Lights

"We're going away, sweet pea," the words had been whispered in her ear as sleep tried to keep her snugly in bed. "We're going to take a boat and ride the sea of winds," The words had sounded like a lullaby.

Margaret was so tired. Mama kept getting farther away. Why couldn't she wait? "Come on now," even mama's voice sounded strained, "almost there, go to the lights, baby, go to the lights."

Her world narrowed to the orange-red burning orbs. Tread water. Paddle and swim. Stop and cough. Tread water. Her body moved of its own volition but her eyes never left the burning torches as they danced before her, always just out of reach.

*Too much*, she sighed and slid beneath the water, felt it surge up her nose but she couldn't blow out anymore. Even then, she had hope. *Come for me mama*, she willed, lifting her hands to the receding glow of fiery eyes. *Come for me*.

Coughing, Margaret awoke in the dark. For a moment, she could have sworn that she saw the burning red torches from her nightmare gleaming against the far wall of the cabin. Shrieking, she rubbed her eyes and tried to gain control of her body. But she couldn't stop the panicked cries.

A commotion at the door startled her and she yelped as Sir Joseph and the captain dashed into the room.

"My dear girl!" Sir Joseph hurried to her side holding her close, the way a father would. His comforting arm gave Margaret the center she needed to get her body to start calming and she began trying to concentrate on breathing normally. Still galloping in her chest, her heart hurt from the thundering pace. Dropping her chin to her chest, she wanted to sob in relief and hide under the cot in shame. The last time that particular nightmare gripped her she had been a child.

When the captain whipped back the thick cloth separating the rear bunk from the rest of the cabin, both she and Sir Joseph nearly fell from the bed. Their reaction made the captain hop backwards and he nearly went over the cot behind him, as crewmembers scattered, muttering in low tense voices.

Outside, she could hear another voice calling to the men. Rizal, she remembered in a rush and groaned aloud.

"Are you all right, Miss Thawley? Did someone harm you? What happened?"

Margaret felt her spirits sink somewhere beneath her shoes at the tremor in the old man's voice.

"Oh no, Sir Joseph, no one harmed me." She paused to scrub at her face with a hand; sweat seemed to coat everything making her feel both slimy and sticky. "I had a nightmare, I'm afraid." God, she felt so incredibly stupid admitting such to this august man. "Given the circumstances, sir, perhaps you could call me Margaret?" From where her ear was pressed against his chest, she heard the rumble of laughter.

"Yes, I do think that we would do better on a first name basis, please call me Joseph." Air rattled out of his lungs making his bulk shudder under the weight of his relief. "I never realized how ugly this little room was." He turned his head looking at the unpainted wood walls, ceiling, and floor before shifting to consider the grey lumpy cots and tables. "Well my dear, I will allow that it has been a big day for you, coming to Malay, sitting too long under the sun, and all that talk of cannibals. It's no wonder you had a bad dream." Joseph Hooker pulled back, patting her hands now clasped worriedly in her lap and levered himself to his feet, using the frame of the cot for balance as the craft listed.

"I see that Rizal has gotten the captain to put out to sea, excellent! I had feared you left the ship for a spot of shopping, and was readying a search party when you cried out. Funny, Rizal knew exactly where you were," he shook his head, "makes no matter." Fidgeting with his watch fob, he studied the bamboo rail running across the ceiling holding the material that divided the cabin into two rooms. "We'll leave this somewhat open as well as the door to give you light to straighten yourself. I hope you would join me at the railing, but if you've had too much excitement already...?"

"Oh no, no sir, I'd be thrilled to join you." Margaret rallied a smile for the older man. "Just allow me a few moments to collect myself and perhaps freshen up."

Nodding, he headed for the doorway and Margaret dropped her head into her hands.

## Night Lights

She desperately wanted to relax but her body wasn't cooperating. Her limbs still shook with fear, the muscles aching as if she had swum for hours.

For the first year after her mother had died, she had nightmares of swimming in black water towards pinpoints of firelight. As a result, fire always calmed her. No matter the fear, no matter the threat, all she needed to do was find a candle and she wasn't afraid. Her history tutor had laughed at her explanation when he caught her staring into the schoolroom lantern as she gave her speech on the Hundred Year War. It had been his opinion that all people sought the light when they were afraid because it pushed back darkness from the soul.

*I don't know about all that, Margaret smiled wanly, looking at the spot between wall and hanging curtain where her mind had conjured the twin torches on awakening from her dream. But I do know that if mama wanted me to go to the light to be safe, that is where I want to be.*

Shaking her head at the fanciful turn her thoughts had taken, she stood and stretched her stiff, sore muscles. Perhaps she ached not from the nightmare but from the hard lumpy mattress. The idea made her grimace. How long *had* she been asleep? The sun was still bright in the jewel-toned sky, but from the cabin, she couldn't see its location on the horizon.

A gentle knock on the wall beside the open door had her heart beating double-time again. Rubbing the material over the silly organ, she moved carefully to the opening, wincing against the glaring light.

"Yes, who is there?"

"It is Rizal, Miss Thawley. I have brought for you a gift, one I hope will make the heat of our days easier to bear." His voice made her insides quiver and not with fear. It was naturally pitched for lovers' stolen moments, and for a split second she wished his words were more intimate. Quickly, she patted at her crumpled outfit and hoped for the best as she approached the opening.

He watched as she tentatively stepped towards the doorway. Her eyes darted looking past him to see if anyone was staring at her disheveled state. They wouldn't

dare, he'd seen to that with a few words to the crew before ordering the captain to heave anchor. The soft look of relief that crossed her pretty features was worth the glares from the men as she relaxed and smiled hesitantly, her blue eyes boldly meeting his.

On Cagayan, most of the population retained the Muslim faith and ways, so it was rare for a woman to meet a man's eye. He liked being able to read her thoughts and emotions through the clear windows of her soul. Blue eyes were such a rarity in the islands that he couldn't help but stare. The color was dark and rich, the color of the Sulu Sea just before the sun dipped below the horizon. He noticed the way the lighter striations radiating from the center brightened as she studied him in turn. Such an innocent, he smiled at her, letting the heat she pulled through his blood show as he handed her the paper-wrapped dress he'd purchased from a shop off the main thoroughfare.

Nervously, her eyes dropped to the thick brown paper and Rizal wanted to lift her chin. He missed their connection already. When he felt an arc of knowing snap into place through her eyes, he remembered an old conversation. One of the Arab traders that frequented the islands before the Americans came had shared coffee, sweet figs, and tales of women with spirit equal to that of man.

"You will know when you meet a worthy one," he had sipped at his drink, "you will feel the fire of battle racing through your veins. Then, and only then, have you truly found the wife you are meant to bring into your tent." Since before the Spanish, the Arabs had traveled to their lands, taken brides, left sons and engaged in commerce, and the people of the land loved them for their culture and compassion. But now, with the advent of the Americans, the traders were labeled 'pirates' and they stayed away.

When he looked upon the milk-skinned English girl, he felt a frisson race through his blood, bringing him to the edge of violent emotion. He wanted no other to look upon her; she was his and his alone.

Slowly her fingers picked the knot out of the hemp twine tying the parcel together and instead he saw them opening the front of his trousers. Closing his eyes

against the vision, he heard the rattle of the paper as it fell to the ground and her indrawn gasp.

"If it does not please you, when we get to Tana Mapun I can buy you another," he said, opening his eyes. By the look on her face she was enchanted, not offended, and Rizal smiled again. The barong style dress had been exquisitely woven in both the *sinuksok* and *pili* embroidery style so that flowers and vines edged the bottom and flowed upward along pillars of latticed columns and back down to the center of the dress. The most striking feature, however, were the small green birds perched among blue and peach flowers.

Her fingers shook as she smoothed the soft silk of the *pina jusi* dress. Instead of looking happy, she looked crestfallen, rubbing her fingers against her travel-stained skirt. "I'm afraid of dirtying something so fine, I can't accept this," her mouth spoke the words but her hands continued to hold the dress close to her heart.

Ah! She needed to wash up. Perhaps then she could accept his gift. Rizal stepped back and waved, catching the eye of a crewman called Matali. Eyes downcast, Matali moved past Margaret into the cabin, silently placing a washbasin, pitcher, and small towels on the bedside table. Turning, he made a low bow before retreating still staring at his sandaled feet.

"There now," Rizal smiled down into her rosy cheeks, "you can wash away your travels and wear the dress."

"But," she sputtered turning a becoming shade of red, "I might ruin the beautiful material and stitching." He couldn't help himself; reaching forward he lightly touched her chin with his fingers, directing her eyes to his.

"It is meant to be worn, little one. These are the clothes of my people. The dress will not melt away if you wear it. Like you, it is stronger than it seems." Under his fingertips, he felt her heart race as if answering the call of his own. From behind him, Hooker harrumphed, clearing his throat noisily. Her reaction was immediate; her skin lost its pink glow and paled whiter than ever as she stepped back inside the room mumbling a garbled thank you.

“Hooker,” he drawled the name out slowly, savoring the vowels on his tongue, “I believe you are going to tell me another story.” Palming the beefy shoulder of the stolid older man, he easily turned his bulk and pointed him towards the bow of the small craft. “Only instead of mushrooms, you will entertain me with the story of Miss Thawley and why it is she is here.”

Shaken, the older man missed a step and stumbled. “You have to understand,” he dug in his coat pocket, “it wasn’t my idea to bring the child on this trip, it was her father’s.”

Rizal turned and leaned against the wooden railing. He hoped to give the illusion of being at ease as he watched for the emergence of the young woman from the cabin.

“Her name? Other than Miss Thawley, she must have a name?” he asked, giving Hooker a moment to mop his brow and organize his thoughts.

“What? Oh, Margaret, her name is Margaret, the poor child. I knew her mother; she is the image of poor Phoebe.” Hooker grasped the railing in his beefy hands, his face florid with strain. “You must understand that I don’t believe in vampires any more than I believe in the tales of Berbalangs as they were recited to the members of my Society. However, men believe as they will and many were eager to delve into the possibility of finding such creatures.

“One such man is the Reverend Thawley. He spent years chasing the tales of vampires across Europe and Russia before returning home with an illness of the legs that made further travel impossible. In London on business, he discovered Phoebe Sayers at a debutante ball and negotiated for her hand in marriage. The gossips hashed over the match for months, given Thawley’s unusual predilection for chasing spectral horrors and Phoebe’s youthful innocence, but she seemed honored at his offer and they were wed.

“For a while they remained in London, to give her time to adjust to being a new bride, however, his eyes were ever on his home in Suffolk and the books he intended to write on the nosferatu. But the morning they were to leave, Phoebe disappeared. The

gendarmes were called and after the first night, private men were hired to help the search. A week later she was found on All Saints Day in Highgate Cemetery, wondering among the labyrinth of Egyptian sepulchers singing nursery rhymes and looking for the 'kind man with the burning eyes.'

"Thawley was never the same again; you see the cemetery was rumored haunted by a vampire with burning eyes. When nine months later Phoebe delivered Margaret, he had to be restrained from drowning the girl in the baptismal font. He could never accept his daughter as truly his, or that she was as normal as you and me, for that matter."

Rizal had held his breath through the recitation almost afraid to speak. If only the old man knew. "What of the mother, what did she have to say?"

"Phoebe?" the sad look on Hooker's face spoke volumes, "she was never right after the time she spent in the cemetery. All she did was pick flowers and sing whatever song captured her fancy. Thawley tried doctors and priests, he even had two more daughters with Phoebe, but nothing seemed to wake her mind from wherever it went. Then one day she simply vanished."

"What do you mean 'vanished'?" Margaret chose that moment to step into the doorway of the cabin. Her hair was down in a single braid that hung over her shoulder, lying along the trail of flowers meeting her waist.

"I mean that the woman disappeared as if she had never stepped foot in the house. Gone without a trace. Since then, Thawley shepherded this daughter as if she were a thing to fear. He wouldn't allow her to leave the grounds, make friends or to even find a husband." Hooker turned and saw Margaret standing in the doorway, looking flustered in her new dress. The sight of her in the creamy *pina* silk only made Rizal hunger to touch her more.

"Why was she not allowed to wed?" He tried to keep the words even, uncaring, but failed.

Hooker slanted him a sharp knowing glance, "Because he feared her to be the get of the vampire. So he sent her here to lure one of her own "kind" into the open. That or to be killed."

With a disgusted sound, Rizal pushed away from the railing and walked to meet the blushing beauty who couldn't seem to make up her mind if she should disappear back in the cabin or join them at the bow.

## Chapter Five

Margaret couldn't help but blush as Rizal walked towards her. The frank admiration and hunger in his eyes made her more than tongue-tied. Her blood danced in her veins but she didn't know what to do in this situation. He seemed to understand and simply proffered his arm in a gentlemanly fashion.

He shushed away her newest attempt at thanks for the dress and guided her to Sir Joseph at the bow of the vessel under the cover of a muslin canopy. They spent the late afternoon watching the shoreline slip away as their boat eased between other crafts. For a moment, Margaret longed for her small desk so she could take notes on the experience. But after awhile she relaxed, knowing full well that this day would be etched in her mind forever.

As the day wore on, Rizal told her the history of his homeland. Cagayan wasn't the original name, that the people still called it Tana Mapun. The confusion led to an amusing tale of how the Spanish, who spoke no Pullem, and the natives, who spoke no Tagalog or Spanish, renamed everything so very wrong. Margaret found herself fascinated at every turn. The land didn't sound like the backwards heathen place the scant travelogues she had unearthed painted. There was a rich history, a proud culture loyal to the Muslim Sulu Sultanate, and as for heathen, while the Christian church didn't agree with the Muslim people they most assuredly had an equally ancient and legitimate faith.

"Things never do turn out to be what they seem, do they Rizal?" she asked, staring into the darkening horizon. The sun was setting behind them, but she preferred to look where they were going, not where they had been.

"What do you mean, Miss Thawley?" He had insisted she use his first name, but steadfastly refused to address her by hers.

"I mean to say that I was led to believe that this would be a perilous journey to a place rife with disease and villainous people, not a trip through what is looking to be more and more like the Garden of Eden." As the sun dipped towards the horizon, the air began to cool considerably. Amazingly enough, the thin material of the dress seemed to hold the heat of her skin keeping her warm, where not an hour before it was airy enough that she stayed cool.

"Ah," he breathed against the shell of her ear, moving closer, almost crowding her against the rail. "Just as your presence on this trip is not what it seems, yes?"

Margaret felt her racing heart stutter to a wrenching halt and fall to her shoes. Could the two men really know the truth of her ruination?

"What do you mean?" Her voice was stiff as she tried to ease into discovering what Rizal did or didn't know.

"How does a beautiful," his lips grazed the top of her ear, "young," she felt the tips of his fingers drag along the side of her ribs to her waist, "woman, such as yourself end up the scribe for an academic expedition." Leaning so close that she could feel the heat of his body burn along her back, he whispered, "You are not a scholar."

"No," she admitted, feeling slightly miserable inside even as her body responded to his warmth. Never had she felt so alive. But the thought of admitting the truth of why she was on the trip to the darkly handsome male at her back made her feel sick. Would he understand or be disgusted at her fickle heart? She found that she desperately wanted to keep his attentions, not push him away.

"You are not Hooker's daughter." His hand settled heavily at the juncture of her waist and pulled her up against his hip. Shivering, she felt the length of his body, from knee to chest, press along her side. "And you are not wed to any member of his team."

Rizal wasn't much taller than she, but the rock-solid feel of his body made her feel small, soft, and protected. When his head dipped slightly, allowing him to drop a light kiss to the side of her neck, she couldn't repress her body's instinctive reaction.

"In fact," his hip shifted, digging into her softness, "you seem to be the only other member on this survey, when Hooker normally travels with a team of no less than a dozen." Shivering with need, her head tilted, arching into his mouth. Her world narrowed to the sensual hum of his voice, the fleeting pressure of his fingers, and the need to feel more. A low chuckle stirring the hair at the nape of her neck was his only response.

"Why then, Miss Thawley, are you really here? Or don't you even know?" The sky purpled, as if a switch had been thrown, night began falling as fast as she seemed to be doing at his feet.

"I...I can't say," she admitted miserably. "You would be disgusted at what I have done and I couldn't bear it."

Dark laughter floated on the night wind as he backed away, leaving her feeling cool and bereft. "I do not believe that you could have done anything so bad. But think on this if you will, this trip of Hooker's has been planned for many months, your place in it included."

The fast pace of her heart shifted from arousal to fright. What did Rizal mean? It had only been a matter of weeks since her haphazard plan to run away and elope had been discovered. Her father's rage had been real, his banishment to the expedition no less so. In fact, he had called it a stroke of 'divine providence' that his old friend had immediate need of help. How then could Sir Joseph have known of her participation for months?

Clutching her elbows, Margaret stood watching the dark current flowing towards the boat. All the night needed was a pair of burning torches in the distance and she could be locked in her nightmare. The thought was not reassuring, but it did serve to focus her thoughts and memories on things other than the feelings Rizal raised in her flesh.

Rupert had been at the house at her father's insistence, helping the older man finish the latest of his books. They were horrible things, her father's books. As a child, she had been so proud of her father, nothing was so important in the world as his books. As a budding young woman, she had asked numerous times to read one of his works, only to be told she was too young.

After her sister Theodora wed, she had been shopping for a present for the newlywed couple when she happened across a used copy of what the shopkeeper assured her was her father's greatest work to date, a thick volume on witches and werewolves. Reading the book had made her sick to her stomach. So much anger and hate poured off of the pages, but she couldn't deny his scholarly attention to details. It hurt more that she never knew that her father spoke so many languages, had traveled to so many places as was reflected in the pages she turned. He truly believed that such evil creatures existed and that man was still locked in battle with them to save his immortal soul.

*Here we stand, at the cusp of a new century and our brightest minds are still locked in the superstitions of the past,* she thought as the stars sparkled to life in the deepening sky. Oh, she knew she was in the minority when it came to ghosts, vampires, and ghouls. She didn't believe in the horrid stories, but considered it possible that there was a kernel of truth at the center of each. Still, reading the tales had raised gooseflesh. Rubbing her arms at the memory, she turned and made for the center of the craft where everyone was grouping together for a late meal.

Fear had nothing to do with belief. Margaret closed her eyes against the prickle of tears. She was beginning to fear for her life, and to suspect that her father's obsession with bogeymen had more to do with her being in the Philippines than any thwarted love affair. Even Rupert's attention seemed contrived in retrospect. Perhaps her maid had been correct in thinking that Rupert had intentions on something other than marriage. Perhaps he had designs on the trip she had been banished to.

Looking at the men arranged in a loose circle around an open stone grate built on the deck, she wondered who she could trust. The captain and his men didn't know her,

from what she could tell, they didn't even speak her language, so they couldn't really be counted on. Sir Joseph hadn't said anything about her arrival, but if he knew she was coming aboard the expedition, he surely knew the reason, given his close relationship with her father. Or did he? Could he know differently?

Is that why Rizal sought her out, to make her question everything? As for Rizal, she was completely lost. She might be inexperienced with men and their needs, but not even in the romances she snuck into the house did the hero put himself at risk for the heroine until after a lengthy courtship. Could she trust him, or was he using her uncertainty to compromise her?

Primly, she sank onto a cushion one of the deck hands indicated and accepted the bowl of rice and cooked fish with a distracted smile of thanks. Watching the others dig in lustily, she began to eat. Halfway to her lips, a forkful of the savory meal paused as she stared in shock. Sir Joseph had taken a small green lime from his pocket and used a knife almost long enough to be a machete to cut the fruit, sprinkling a few drops on the dish. The way he studied the food afterwards made ice run in torrents down her spine.

In the folder provided to her by the Society was a section she would never forget. Skertchley spoke at length about the powers of lime juice to repel the native Philippine vampires, the Berbalangs. One especially stomach-knotting section detailed how the demons would disguise human flesh as fish, and that the application of the juice from a lime would reveal the lie.

Sir Joseph believed in the Berbalangs. He more than believed, he accepted their existence and used the local lore the Society had written so condescendingly about to keep himself safe.

Even more telling, he never offered the protection of his knowledge to her. She was no better than bait. Margaret had a very bad feeling about her anticipated role on this adventure.

## Chapter Six

Morning came with the soft, even pattering of rain. The sound inside the tin-roofed cabin was deafening. Margaret couldn't believe that the sound of the storm never awoke her from her confused welter of dreams. Awake, the constant hammering was enough to drive her insane inside the hot muggy space.

Her dreams worried her. In the beginning, she had been as yesterday, standing on the boat watching black water flow towards her. Then suddenly she had been a child again, swimming against the current chasing her long dead mother towards twin pinpoints of fire. Instead of the inevitable drowning, she was lifted from the rushing water by strong arms, arms belonging to a man whose features were lost in the darkness but for his eyes, two glowing flame red orbs, staring down into her own with an intensity that should have frightened her. But even in her dreams, she felt no fear there was...love. That was the emotion, Margaret decided, tenderness.

Hungrily, her dream-self had closed her eyes and the tone and temperature changed, turned languorous as the wet clothes vanished and were replaced with hot male skin rubbing against her own. That part hadn't been too hard to figure out. After listening to all the naughty stories from her two younger sisters about the sexual acts they shared with their husbands, her body was more than happy to begin indulging in the same. And judging by the reaction she had to Rizal Malihim, her female parts were clamoring for the real thing over the imagined.

But why Rizal? Of all the good-looking, youthful men of her own country that had asked for a chance to win her hand, not a one made her body burn in the night at the memory of his voice as did Rizal. Yes, he was good-looking in a very sensual way with his cat-tilted midnight eyes, soft lips, and dusky golden skin. His body was strong and graceful. He moved with an economy of motion that projected both stealth and power. Perhaps she was more attracted to him for being different, exotic, and completely alien to her world.

Her world, what a lark! Years of rigidly enforced propriety, parentally inflicted isolation and spinsterhood for what? To be stuffed onto a ship bound for Malay by a retired occult researcher, to meet up with a botanist turned vampire hunter and face God only knows what in the jungles of an American-owned, Muslim-ruled archipelago in the Sulu Sea?

Last night, sitting near the cooking fire, Margaret had quietly resolved to stop praying for safe travels and a fast boat home, choosing instead to focus on surviving whatever was waiting for her at the end of this journey. This morning she renewed that vow with a small addition, she intended to never return to her father's house. Looking at Rizal's relaxed profile as he watched the rain strike the deck and splash into the air, she remembered his passion for finding freedom, true freedom for his island and people. Perhaps he would understand what she had done...

Grumbling, Sir Joseph levered himself from his cot and grabbed a leathery looking smock from a peg on the wall. "We should be approaching Cagayan, I best speak with the captain," he muttered tenting the coverall over his bald head as he dashed out into the weather.

"He really shouldn't run," Rizal noted lazily, watching the older man slip and slide across the wet planking. "He's got the wrong shoes for it." There was more than a small dose of mischievous humor in his voice and Margaret found herself stifling laughter.

"I thought about what you said last night." She started and winced at the sudden tension in the air. When was she going to learn how to hold a proper conversation?

"You are right. There truly is no need for me to be on this trip with Sir Joseph. I can't speak any language but English, I've no great grasp on math or science and my knowledge about history and foreign places is limited to books I've read."

Taking a deep breath, she looked up and found his dark eyes watching her intently. "I know what I am supposed to have done to have been sent here, can you tell me differently?"

"To know that, *babae*, I would have to know what you were to have done."

Margaret fell to sudden embarrassed silence. How to admit her foolish shame? She felt heat burn along her cheeks.

"Come now, it cannot be as bad as that."

She could feel his amusement in the small room. Pulling the cloth curtain open farther, she tried to meet his eyes but couldn't. "I had an...affair." The words sounded lame coming out of her mouth.

His reaction was unexpected. Soft laughter echoed in the cabin. Chancing a glance upwards, Margaret went from wanting to sink through the floor in embarrassment to having a sudden urge to hit him over the head. "I don't see how that was funny!"

The laughter in his eyes extinguished. With incredible speed he rolled off his cot, cleared the top of Sir Joseph's, and landed roughly on top of her, pushing her back against the lumpy pillow. Errantly, he pulled the curtain closed, painting the alcove in shadows. The thunderous sound of rain faded into nothingness as he captured her hands from pushing against his chest, placing them above her head.

"So, *sinta*, you have had an affair with a man?"

Margaret held very still as he pushed himself between her thighs. Foolishly, she had tossed an old chemise and thin skirt over her shift, wanting to avoid the heat or abusing her new dress with repeated wear. She felt too well the thickness of his erection as it rubbed against her cleft. His weight pushed her breasts against his chest. Open-mouthed in shock, she watched as his eyes drifted closed in appreciation of her body.

Margaret choked, she should be screaming for help, her heart should have been galloping with fear, but no, she felt the way her body heated, softened in anticipation of his rough caress. The tempo of her heart wasn't speeding in panic but thrumming deep and low, vibrant with want. She wanted this. "Yes," she croaked.

"Then you have laid like this with a man?" He nipped the skin at the side of her jaw, and she quivered.

"No," she admitted.

A knowing smile flitted across his face. "Of course, then he has touched you like this?" Slowly he slid the backs of his fingers from the column of her neck over the swell of her breast and lower, across the edge of her hip to the top of her thigh.

Her breath hitched as his fingers plucked at the thin fabric, hiking it above her knee. Panting beneath him, eyes wide in fear misted with want, she felt the heat of his fingers as his hand slid between them towards the delta of her thighs. Whimpering, she bit her lower lip. Locked in uncertainty, her body felt alert yet slumberous, it ached for the feel of his hands, but did she dare lay there and allow him to touch her body so intimately?

A single slim digit brushed again and again at the slick skin of her slit, and reflexively she parted her legs further. When his finger swirled around the aching nub of her clit, she gasped and arched allowing his finger to slide deep inside.

"Ah, there, I can feel the truth, *mahalin*, it is wrapped around my finger. You've lain with no man."

"N-no, I ha-haven't," she managed to stammer as his finger turned and caressed a spot inside that she never dreamed existed. Heat flared as bright as a lightning strike through her body, and her bones burned with want. When he removed his hand, she cried out, wanting, no needing more. But he only smiled, a sad twisting of his lips as he tasted the fingers that had plumbed her depths before dropping his lips to hers to hush her cries.

"Perhaps then, he touched you here?" Smoothing the material of her skirt down, his hand moved to cup her breast. The way his fingers closed around the swollen globe

made her head swim. The nipple tightened under the thin fabric and stood, an erect point rubbing against the soft cotton fabric. Delicately, he rolled the turgid flesh between finger and thumb, causing an aching wave of desire to undulate from the point of contact through her stomach to her core.

"Oh God, no." She turned and buried her face against his shoulder.

"Did you want him to touch you like that?"

Blindly she shook her head no.

"What of me, shall I stop?"

"No, don't stop, please," she begged in a high thin voice.

"But I must," he teased. "However, I need to know how this man touched you in this 'affair.' Did he kiss you?"

Drugged by the feelings coursing through her body, Margaret blinked up at him owlshly.

"If I may?" he asked, and she nodded hesitantly, unsure of what to expect.

His mouth covered hers, tongue licking at the seam of her lips and she was lost to the feeling, caught between her heart turning over and the moisture gathering at her cleft where the weight of his body pressed his hard male flesh against her softness. Her lips opened and he plundered her mouth, sliding against her tongue, conjuring images of his body moving against hers in the dark. Slowly, he pulled back; feathering kisses along her throat and jaw. Over the roaring of blood in her ears, she heard him ask, breath brushing hyperaware skin, "Did he kiss you like that?"

Unable to speak, she shook her head 'no.'

"Then *sinta*, you have not had an affair, but you will." With that promise he teased her lips open and tasted her mouth again as she arched against his muscled frame, oblivious to where they were, "But not today and not on this boat."

Gently, he traced the contours of her face with a fingertip as if memorizing every plane. His eyes were a dark enigma as he withdrew emotionally, then physically, to his cot. Her body felt splashed with cold at his leaving, but it was well-timed. Sir Joseph slipped and tripped along the deck, blustering back into the room.

## Night Lights

“We’ve arrived!” he announced shaking water droplets around the room like a hound. “Did I miss anything?”

## Chapter Seven

The rain stopped not with the slowness of a good English storm but with a jarring suddenness that made Margaret rub her eyes in surprise. Hesitantly, she poked her head out of the cabin and looked around. The sky was still filled with clouds but the rain had ended, leaving wet puddles all over the deck.

Her body was still edgy with the unspent energy Rizal's touch had stirred and the rain had suited her mood. With its loss, she felt like she'd lost a friend.

"Does the rain often just end like that?"

"Yes Miss, in rainy time," the captain answered smiling through the gaps in his teeth. He, like the rest of the crew, seemed a nice man, always courteous and friendly, and she felt a momentary pang at not being able to properly thank them for the uneventful trip. After the rocky portage from England, the smooth sailing of the small boat, even under the pounding rain, had been a relief.

Being this close to land made her feet unaccountably twitchy. With the exception of walking forty feet along the pier, it had been just over six weeks since she had set foot on the earth. For the first time in her life, Margaret fully understood the term "cabin fever." The closer they came to land, the worse it got until she stood bouncing on the balls of her feet, trying to see more of the shoreline as the gangplanks were settled.

Finally, the passageway was in place, the officials had gone over the ship's manifest and the port tenders were moving the baggage.

"You are in such a hurry," the amused voice behind her made her jump and blush. Slanting Rizal a sideways look, she saw his wide smile and watched as he waved to a group of men on the shore. The pier was more of a very narrow dock. With all of the workers bustling to and fro, Margaret was shifting impatiently from foot to foot looking for an opening when she yelped as strong hands grasped her waist and urged her forward.

"Come." He turned and called back to the captain something that made all the men laugh.

"What did you just say?" she asked, more curious than annoyed at being the butt of a joke.

"That I had better take you ashore before you decide to swim for it," he teased. "Would you like a tour of the town? Or would you rather wait on Hooker?"

"I'd love to see the town," she gushed, "but why do you call Sir Joseph, just Hooker?"

"Two subjects at one time, your mind is always busy isn't it, *sinta*?"

Somehow, the porters managed to step safely out of the way as they moved along the pier. The wood felt funny underfoot and Margaret would surely have pitched into the water numerous times if it weren't for the capable hands at her hips. In her excitement to step on firm earth, she hadn't even noticed how intimate the contact was. The men on shore did and dark looks were aimed at her, causing her to falter.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be touching me, Rizal. Your friends seem upset by it." The hurt sound in her voice was unexpected and she bit her tongue to prevent any more gaffes in conversation.

"Those are my father's men, his guards. I do not care if they are happy or not. They have nothing to do with me."

She brightened at the firm, commanding tone to his voice. He was the leader's son; perhaps he had the way of it that their opinion didn't really matter.

Upon reaching the ground, Margaret bristled a bit when Rizal didn't remove his hands. "I think I can manage from here," she said primly. Instantly his hands were

lifted and she took a step then a second but everything seemed wrong and she stumbled. The ground seemed determined to slide out from under her feet. Immediately, his arms banded around her middle.

"If I may? Please try standing still while your body adjusts to being on land again. After so long at sea the body forgets what land is like. The sea, she always moves. The ground, not so often."

More annoyed with her own stupidity, Margaret stood still and took in the sights of the town, or as much of it as she could see from the port.

The lanes were wide and muddy-looking but there were people hastening from place to place in odd-looking wooden sandals that kept their feet clear of the mud. The buildings were in neat, orderly rows following a clear layout. Most of the stores and dwellings looked to be made of stucco with thatched roofs, not much different from rural English villages. The main difference was the people and their clothes. Most of the women were dresses very similar to the native one she wore. A few had outfits that were more ornate with wide bows at the waist. There were even a few wearing what looked to be veils and shawls straight out of the Arabian Nights tales she had discovered hidden in her father's library.

Not paying attention, she heard Rizal engage the waiting men in conversation as they approached. The liquid language flowed past her ears until the words became hard and flew like arrows.

"Rizal," she clutched at his hands still framing her hips. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, *sinta*, we will take a small walk to get you proper shoes for walking in Tana Mapun. Then we will do as these men request and go to see my father."

The shopping trip ended up being much more fun than Margaret expected. Rizal ignored the protestations and demands of the honor guard and escorted her to a shop down the street from the waterfront warehouses. The woman inside made Margaret feel like a giantess, she was so small.

"Are all women here so small?" Frank curiosity was something she never learned to conquer.

## Night Lights

"No, not all are as small as *imp'o*, the grandmother, here." Dark eyes danced in amusement as she sat and pulled on the odd-looking stockings that went with the wooden shoes. "Without the coverings your feet would blister from the wood and rope," he translated the explanation for the old woman as she teetered about the store. "Her daughter weaves, and she asks if you would need more dresses?"

Margaret felt guilty about allowing Rizal to buy her so many things. "I shouldn't allow you to do so much for me, Rizal, it is unseemly even for your people," she said, spirits sagging.

He gripped her chin and met her gaze. "An hour ago I could have gladly taken your virginity. To my people that would have been the same as marriage vows. Consider it a courtship gift."

Margaret was too stunned by his words for her body to do anything but blush. Courtship? Was he really serious or just acting chivalrous after the encounter they shared on the boat?

"Do you really see yourself as so ugly and unworthy, little English songbird? You stir me as no other woman ever has. Yes, I want to pay court to you." He stepped closer and nuzzled her ear, making her blush. "I also intend to take your virginity and make you mine forever. You belong with me."

As much as she wanted to argue that her place was in England, Margaret couldn't. Never in her life had she felt more alive than when Rizal was touching her. If her suspicions about the hunt for the Berbalangs were true, returning home wouldn't be an option anyway.

An hour later, Margaret was in possession of a small cache of new dresses, socks, and her interesting sandals. It felt like walking on little step stools and for the first few minutes, she staggered a bit but Rizal was always there, laughing, encouraging, and preventing her from falling.

The men waited patiently and escorted them wordlessly the rest of the way to the house of the *datu*. "We are not the most important of the three tribes on the island,

we are second, but my father, he likes to act as though we are the best," he explained walking into the whitewashed entry of his father's home.

It was a large, airy dwelling with tall windows covered with louvered shutters. A wide central stair off of the foyer led to the second floor. Voices from the rear of the house indicated where the *datu* was waiting.

Silently the honor guard escorted them to the back of the house where Sir Joseph was laughing and chatting amiably with an older, heavier version of Rizal. There were other differences; his skin was swarthier and his nose flattened as if from a brawl, but the dark sparkling eyes and easy-going smile made it simple to spot the resemblance. Unlike the guards, he bounded to his feet and happily embraced his son, speaking in a language slightly different than what Margaret had grown accustomed to hearing on the boat. She wasn't sure how she knew the language was different, but she did. One look at Sir Joseph confirmed her intuition. He was frowning, lost as the pair held a "private" conversation.

When Margaret made to excuse herself and take a seat next to Sir Joseph, Rizal paused and introduced her to his father. Hari smiled and took her hand, bowing over it, kissing the back, and she curtsied in reply to the courtly gesture. The next volley of words made the older man look a bit puzzled then concerned, and he gave her an appraising look before laughing out loud and clapping his son on the shoulder.

"Where are my manners? Come and sit. This is a beautiful day and needs to be celebrated." He moved to the portico where chairs were set up around a low table. "For the guests, yes?"

Gratefully, Margaret sank into the cushioned seat. The new shoes might have kept her feet clean and cool over the soupy mud in the streets but they took some getting used to.

"Well, now that Miss Thawley has arrived, I guess we should be getting underway." Sir Joseph stretched and stood, holding his hat in his hands.

"No," Hari said simply, turning to his menservants and issuing orders in the other dialect.

"I'm afraid I have to insist this time old friend." Sir Joseph smiled graciously, moving towards the doorway that she and Rizal had just passed through.

"I say no. There is no rush, it is time for the meal and we will eat." Hari gave Sir Joseph a hard look. "The trip to the Berbalangs' tribe takes a day and maybe a half. I am giving to you a guide, why so hurried?"

Instead of answering, Sir Joseph twisted the brim of his hat in his hands as if considering how to proceed. "There is one place I wished to stop and record photos and other details before leaving for the tribe. It will take only an evening for myself and Miss Thawley to do this. We would be back in the morning to meet our guide."

"Where is this place?" The wide-open face of the *datu* went studiously blank, as the aging Englishman stonewalled the question. "There is no place on my island that you can go without my say-so."

Sir Joseph nervously cleared his throat and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, sponging his brow. "Technically it is not your island; it is under the authority of the Americans who've given me all the authority I need to do what I feel is best."

There was a long, tension-filled pause as the two men stared impassively at the other. "Ah," Hari didn't explode as Margaret feared he would, rather he wiggled into his chair, making himself more comfortable. "The Americans, they are here to aid you?"

"Well, no." Sir Joseph looked a bit lost for words.

"No, they are not. They do not even have soldiers here. Until a few months ago, the Americans were not aware my island was part of the Philippines." Looking like the cat that ate the canary, Hari clasped his fingers together and laid them on his chest. "I am thinking maybe you made this known to them, yes? You and your quest for the Berbalangs."

Sir Joseph remained silent, twisting his hat and staring at the floor.

It was another clear indicator to Margaret that this "spur of the moment expedition" that her father sent her on, wasn't. How many people had been lied to, and why? She marveled that a simple folktale could be so important to such a distinguished man of science. That it was made her feel very ill at ease.

"Makes no never mind," Hari waved his hand dismissively. "You have no say-so, the Americans are not here to have say-so and this girl, she is Rizal's *noby*, so she is for me to say where she goes, not you."

"*Noby*?" Sir Joseph looked slightly sick. "Without a *pamaeaye*? To an English?"

Margaret had no idea what the words meant but they thwarted whatever plans the man had for her.

Hari shrugged. "Rizal has many brothers, his mama is gone, it is for me to say. And I say if he is happy, then he can marry the English girl."

*Marry?* Spots danced in front of her eyes as the room started to spin. She wanted to curse her stupidity on the boat. This was all going way too fast. It was one thing to be attracted to a man, it was quite another to arrange a marriage to him, without her family's consent, in the space of a day's acquaintance.

"Her father would never stand for it," Sir Joseph brightened. "This, I can promise you. You and your son are Muslim, she is a Christian girl. Your own faith prohibits it."

Hari shrugged. "Rizal's mother was Spanish and Catholic, my mother's mother was Chinese and Shinto. It matters not in Cagayan, so long as there is love."

Stunned beyond words, Margaret shook her head lightly hoping the funny buzzing sound in her ears would fade. How could Rizal be serious? But looking into his face, he met her gaze and held it. He meant every word he had spoken in the shoe shop.

## Chapter Eight

He knew that Margaret was aiming to corner him, to tell him there was no way he could be sure about such a big decision as marriage. Walking through his father's garden, Rizal bent and appreciated the delicate scent of the roses the old man was so proud of. Could he make her understand that his decision was as immediate and sure as a master gardener looking through an arboretum, seeing the one bloom that would make his life complete and going after the cultivation of that plant?

It was simple. Never before had he looked at a woman and felt his attention captured to the point where he forgot about time and surroundings. Yes, the argument could be made for pure lust, but he enjoyed listening to her ramble on three subjects at once, as she did over meals. He understood her change of topic and mind without having to pause to think on it.

She cared about people, no matter that they didn't give a damn about her. It bothered him that she was so softhearted, but at the same time he found it endearing. Over dinner, she had shared stories of her mother and sisters, almost nothing about her father. But she took to his father, laughing at his bad jokes and old tales.

Margaret brightened a room with a smile. For too many years he had been on the move, studying abroad, leading jungle fighters to repel the Spaniards, sailing the shoals around the islets surrounding the Tana when it was pirate season and sailing off to America to lobby for independence. The discovery that the quiet, unassuming botanist

might have been to blame for his people's sudden American tang made him want to gut the old fool. They would have discovered the oversight sometime, but there was always the chance to use that gap to prove they should stand with the Sulu Sultanate.

The most interesting thing about the beautiful young woman, however, was something that she seemed utterly unaware of. Her heritage.

Margaret begged Sir Joseph for a few moments to say goodbye to Rizal. He hadn't looked thrilled with the notion, but scowled and waved her toward the formal gardens. It didn't matter that he wanted to leave immediately; they were bade to wait on their guide, Kanani. She really didn't think that the famed botanist was going to get away with running about the island without a watchdog.

In the arched entrance to the garden, she paused to watch Rizal. He was utterly relaxed, at ease in a way that she hadn't yet seen. On the boat or around others he was constantly on guard. It was if he had something to hide and feared it would slip out the moment he rested.

He lifted a soft pink rose bloom and bent to draw the scent in, and she felt her heart turn over in her chest. The flowing clothes of his land suited his looks. It wasn't that Rizal wouldn't look elegant in English fashions, but the embroidered white shirts and simple black pants fit him in a way that no other style could possibly match. With his breadth of shoulder and strength of arms, the billowing shirt gave him room to move and accentuated his physique. The bleached color of the cloth let the dark golden shade of his skin stand out and the midnight brown of his eyes turn black.

Watching Rizal, as she was now, was as addicting as lemon ices. Margaret only hoped it wasn't as fleeting a love. Did she just use the word love? *Funny that, the way the mind trips itself*, she mused. Certainly he made her blood heat. She had spent not a few minutes thinking back over every man who had taken an interest in her. Not a one made her think of getting naked and ignoring the pain and indignity of sex. Rizal not only made her think of it, she couldn't care less where they were or how it was

accomplished, she wanted him so badly. She flushed, the heat running from her cheeks to the tops of her breasts.

Could it be that she was merely attracted to him? Yes, she enjoyed listening to him talk about his homeland. Such passion and attention to detail. He was obviously intelligent, being fluent in a number of languages. When she had pressed for which he could speak he had shrugged and blushed, something she rarely if ever saw a man do. It was more than modesty, but a sense of doing what had to be done — what needed to be done for his land and his people.

How could he possibly love her or simply know her well enough to want to spend a lifetime at her side? Because for her that was what marriage meant, a lifetime commitment.

Margaret shook her head at the fanciful turn of thoughts. *I have to get through this expedition first*, she reminded herself. Her father, the Reverend Thawley, she would never understand. There were days when she thought the man loved her dearly and others where she felt hated. Then there was the one afternoon that she caught him looking at her and could have sworn he regarded her in fear. But why? And why arrange to send her on this quest with his longtime friend? If he hated or feared her, why put her in a position to cause harm to someone he held in high esteem?

Rizal knew the answer. What upset her was that instead of sharing the information with her, he treated her like fragile stained glass, as if he had to make up for what was done and she had no clue what that may have been! It wasn't that she didn't love the dresses and shoes and everything else. It was incredibly thoughtful of him to have considered her physical comfort, but inside she was going crazy trying to understand what was happening and how much danger she was in.

"Why are you looking so worried?" The words startled her and she managed to trip over a small rock ledge. Firm hands caught her, keeping her from falling and pulling her to the questionable safety of Rizal's arms. She questioned her safety in his arms, not because she doubted him but because she knew that with him, she didn't think — she wanted and took.

"I'm worried because in a few minutes I am to leave with Sir Joseph to go to some unnamed location for an unspecified task that will naturally require us to remain in a field all night." *And because I think you are insane for believing that you love me*, her mind finished the thought she was too cowardly to utter.

"And?" The twitch of his lips indicated he knew very well what the missing 'and' was.

"And I can't see how you could truly love and wish to marry me. Happy?" She pulled away, stalked to a stone bench, and sat with a huff.

"No, *mahalin*, I am not happy, not so long as you are so upset." He crouched beside her perch. "Would you believe it if I told you I have been known to go days, even weeks without speaking to another person? I have no desire to talk to others, but you, I want to sit on the beach and unload my entire heart to you. There is something about your smile, the way you stop and consider things, that caught my eye long enough for all that you are to snare the rest of my heart." He gently laid a finger against her lips when she made to speak.

"Trust me, *sinta*, to know my heart well enough to know what I want and need. Trust me to be honest enough to admit to that need and see it for what it truly is. Love. I would also ask that you trust me through tonight to keep you safe. I have an idea as to what Hooker wishes to accomplish, but am unsure. Know this, I will not allow you to be harmed. I am a warrior of my people, let me keep you safe."

Margaret tried to be cynical and not let his words move her, but they did. *Foolish heart*, she sighed and rested her hands on his shoulders. All afternoon she wanted nothing more than to be able to touch him, reassure herself that he was real and wouldn't disappear when she closed her eyes. *Too good to be true*, she shook her head clearing her thoughts.

"If you see me scared, could you perhaps signal me so I know that you are around?"

Silently he captured her gaze and she felt her fear subside as he shared his strength with her.

“Without a doubt. What would calm you?”

Biting her lower lip, she licked the suddenly dry skin. “This is going to sound silly, but small burning lights, like candles have always made me feel safe. For some reason,” she quashed the memory of her nightmares, “they remind me of my mother and I feel stronger.”

“Then you shall have your wish.”

“Thank you.” Margaret felt suddenly at ease and less self-conscious. She hadn’t noticed how close she’d pulled Rizal.

His eyes danced a moment before his lips found hers. All thoughts flew from her mind like startled birds as he teased her mouth to open to him. The velvety probe of his tongue met hers and swirled before pulling it into his mouth where he lightly sucked the appendage, causing her hands to clutch his shoulders, digging her fingers into the firm flesh with want. He growled low in his throat and grasped the back of the bench on either side of her hips, and pushed into her softness, craving the feel of her body beneath his.

“Rizal, my son, it is time for the girl to go.” His father sounded entirely too entertained as he interrupted their kiss. Pulling back slowly, Rizal dropped a kiss on her full lower lip. “Trust in me.”

With those words, Margaret allowed her eyes to flutter open. She didn’t want to watch him leave. They had only spent a handful of hours together and yet it felt as though they had shared weeks. She missed him already.

Shivering despite the heat of the day and the thick humidity, Margaret hugged her arms to her waist and dropped her eyes to pass the grinning Hari in search of Sir Joseph and their guide.

## Chapter Nine

Kanani was a standoffish sort of person. He made three things very clear: that he was Muslim and was devout in his prayers, that he did not like the English, and that he would perform his duty as guide only because his *datu* ordered it be done.

"Rather a likeable chap once you get past the arrogance," Sir Joseph quipped as they set off in a small pony-drawn cart. Margaret grabbed her mouth to keep from laughing. Somehow, she felt certain that Kanani would discover a dislike for the laughter of women and sniff about that was well.

"Where are we going, Sir Joseph?" She couldn't help but be interested as the cart bounced over the rutted road. The lane headed out of town towards a scant collection of farms before ascending the foothills of lush mountains tipped in fog that spread out before their cart.

"We are going to a cemetery of sorts where the Berbalangs have been known to feed."

Her stomach almost rebelled at the image that rose to the surface of her mind; a twisted humanoid form with iridescent eyes and sharp pointed teeth ripping sections of half-rotted flesh from a naked cadaver.

Hoping to get her mind on something not so gruesome, she studied the passing scenery. The trees popping up here and there along the road were of an unknown species featuring long, thin saw-toothed fronds or huge, leafy green paddles. Margaret

longed to ask what each plant was, but Sir Joseph was busy taking his own notes. Instead, she settled for describing as best she could the landscape and the flora in her own words. But the thought of gnawed on dead bodies kept resurfacing.

Couldn't she have been banished to a convent instead of this? Drat and double drat her father's bizarre aversion to Catholics. At least in a convent she wouldn't have the nasty image of half-eaten people lurking in her brain. And in a convent she would never have met Rizal. She wriggled as the wagon abused a part of her anatomy that warmed uncomfortably.

"Why are we going to a cemetery where it is reputed that someone or something ate the dead?" she asked, seeking to divert her thoughts.

Sir Joseph sat straighter and grasped his lapels, a sign Margaret was beginning to associate with him settling into "lecture mode." As they jostled and bumped along the road, she learned that with the advent of the Berbalangs, people stopped burying their dead in cemeteries, choosing instead to place them beneath their homes to ensure the safety of the bodies.

"I suppose that makes sense. If you want to desecrate the grave, you'd have to go through the living as well as the solid floor, and it would make it unnecessarily hard. But didn't the people consider that they were placing their lives in jeopardy?"

Sir Joseph nodded happily. "You've got the right of it, dear. That is what is reputed to have happened. But only after there were no other dead for them to feast on." He went on in his sonorous voice discussing the means of repelling the ghoulish creatures. Lime juice at the doorways barred the creature's entrance, spread on meals revealed their trickery, and smearing the juice on blades ensured the weapon would cause damage. Then there were the all powerful coconut pearls.

"I wonder what is supposed to make a lime so powerful." Margaret mused aloud. Sir Joseph just harrumphed something about idle superstition and jotted a quick note in the book on his lap. "I've never heard of a coconut pearl. Have you ever seen one, Sir Joseph?"

Finally, the older man found a subject truly near and dear to his heart. When Kanani pulled the wagon to a halt to unroll his prayer rug, the lecturing Englishman didn't so much as pause as he discussed the possibility for a plant to create a nacre within its husky shell as did the clam and oyster. "Both hosts are living things," he continued droning on, talking above her head and beyond her desire to really understand the topic. She had just thought it would be something interesting to see, a pearl from something as large as a coconut. Then a thought occurred to her.

"Sir Joseph, for the natives to believe in the power of a coconut pearl, wouldn't there have to have been at least one? And wouldn't it have to have worked?"

"Two very good questions, my dear." Margaret was also getting slightly tired of being called 'my dear' every third sentence. "There was supposed to be a man by the name of Hassan in possession of one, but he died and it was never found or recovered in his possessions."

Up the road she spotted a wide, leveled-off spot devoid of trees and plants. Even the birds and animals seemed to avoid the spot, staying to the cover of the surrounding forest. Any sound that filtered through the cover was muted, as if they feared calling too much attention to themselves in such a place.

Kanani pulled the shaggy brown pony to a halt, ignoring his passengers. Upon seeing the pony cart, Margaret had snuck a small handful of sugar cubes from the dinner table. As Sir Joseph excitedly photographed and catalogued the plants and trees surrounding the site, she watched as their guide loosened the straps on the small horse and led him to a stream for a drink. That accomplished, he dropped the thin leather leash attached to the halter and the animal slowly moved off to graze.

"Won't he run away?"

"No, he has been trained not to run so long as his lead drags the ground. It is a trick that the Bedouin teach their own horses for battle." He sneered as he spoke, but dutifully turned and secured the wagon for the evening. Not wishing to startle the pony, Margaret walked near where he grazed and slowly lowered her offering to the grass. Retreating to a safe distance, she watched as the animal lifted his muzzle and

sniffed the air before venturing over to see what she'd left. Contentedly, he munched the treat and eyed her hopefully, looking for more.

"Sorry, I only brought that handful for you," she apologized, earned a woebegone look from the pony and a derisive snort from Kanani. The sun was beginning to drop towards the horizon so she hurried forward to see what assistance Sir Joseph needed when she fully caught sight of where he intended they spend the night.

There were four squared off trenches dug as deep as a man was tall and as large as any home in the village they had left. A part of her mind wondered if that had been their original intended purpose, basements for homes before another decided to dump armies of the dead in them. Each hole was full of the polished bones of innumerable bodies. Skulls lay grinning up among criss-crossed arms and legs, here and there twisted a spine as the arch of a ribcage rose above the pile at an unnatural angle. Some of the bones were a radiant white, others had yellowed or were stained an earthy brown.

Words failed Margaret as she stared in horror at the massive number of bones, human bones, lying at her feet. Each opening in the earth easily held at least one hundred bodies if not more. But all her mind could summon was an idle prayer of thanks that there was no odor. The unfortunates below her had been dead far too long.

"Killed in battles with pirates and soldiers." Kanani's normal bluntness was tempered with an emotion she couldn't identify.

"But...but why leave them like this? Without cover or prayer?" It was sacrilege to almost every faith she knew to treat the dead with such disregard. Nothing in her life prepared her for such economy of caring.

He merely shrugged. "It could be there was no one left to mourn them. It also could be that these were ones who turned against the Sultan and were executed. It is not for us to question why they were left here, never to enter the gates of Paradise." With that, the taciturn guide unrolled his prayer blanket and looked towards his own salvation, the army of the dead silently resting behind his back.

Margaret shivered and resumed taking notes as her mind conjured clacking sounds of bones shifting and moving to test her mettle. It was unnaturally quiet and her imagination sadistically filled the void with whispers, tears, and awful sighs that vanished as she turned to find the source.

As the sun set and the sky turned dark, she followed Sir Joseph's direction, walking into the woods, marking down descriptions of key plants and hunting for a trace of anything unusual or forming a recognizable pattern or path. The only problem being almost every plant looked unusual to her. Her feet ached and her mind was numb from the horror of staring into the empty eye sockets of so many skulls. All she wanted was for the trip to end right here and now. But that wasn't to be. Kanani had lashed some poles together and made a small place for him to sleep, raising another question.

"Sir Joseph, where are we to sleep tonight?" She cringed at the thready sound of her voice. It now made sense why even the birds refused to sing here. It seemed wrong, as if the scattered dead would be offended by the sound and rise up.

"Sleep? Good God, girl haven't you been paying attention? We aren't to sleep, we are to wait at the edge of the pits and watch the woods for the lights of the eyes of the Berbalangs."

Stunned, her mouth fell open; he was serious. He intended for them to stand all night at the edge of the most distressing assemblage of human remains she'd never dreamed of while staring into the dark jungle for supernatural eyes.

"What if...what if we see the eyes?" her voice didn't want to work.

"Then we advance into the forest and confront the beasts!" he declared full of scholarly bravado, adding in a gentler vein, "more likely than not we'll find a prankster if anything should happen." That said, he tied a scarf around his middle and slid the machete she spied on the boat at his side.

The way his pockets bulged, she knew he was armed with limes. She had no short sword, no basket of limes and no mythic coconut pearl. All she had was the hope

## Night Lights

that Rizal would find where they had gone and be at the ready with a candle to offer her hope.

\* \* \* \*

The night in Cagayan was at once terrifying and enthralling. Margaret had found a rolled travel rug in the wagon and laid it on the ground near the corner of the pit farthest from Sir Joseph and the small cooking fire Kanani laid. It had been hard pulling herself from the reassuring light of the fire, but she wanted to be as far away as possible from the others in case Rizal came.

There were no street lamps, electric lights or even the flicker of candlelight in homes as parents readied themselves for bed. She had gotten used to the muted glow of oil lamps in the evening aboard ship. Now that they were gone entirely, Margaret keenly felt the loss.

But for every difference, there was a similarity that made her feel more comfortable in the night. There were the bright green flickers of fireflies, chirrups from crickets and the rhythmic chirruping of frogs. Hearing the familiar sounds, she closed her eyes against the distraction of starlight and heard the distant rushing note of a flowing stream. It was almost the same as sitting in her father's yard at night when sleep eluded her. Stars, the sound of wind in the trees and the occasional cry of a night bird, all the same but at home the birds were familiar, here their cries were startling.

As the moon lifted above the trees, a bright thick crescent in the clear sky, the sounds of the night creatures intensified. Margaret couldn't prevent her heart from lurching at every loud cry, wail or chatter, any more than she could stop her body from flinching and turning looking for the creatures heard rustling through the undergrowth.

*I shall never make it to dawn; I'll scare myself to death first.* She closed her eyes and strove to find the inner peace she had discovered when all the night air held were crickets and stars. Just as she found the edge of her control, the night went silent and still.

The cool night air stopped flowing, the wind withholding her embrace as silence fell like a curtain over the rough clearing. She marked the progression of time against her racing heart. One heartbeat, then two and three. But the sound echoed in her ears and for a moment it seemed that time itself stood still. Turning towards the others, she saw in the faint glow of the dying fire the pony's hooved feet drumming the ground in terror. He reared back, snapping his line and raced pell-mell down the road towards the safety of his long distant barn.

Margaret rose to give chase, but something stopped her. Their guide, Kanani – if anyone should have gone to the horse or hurried after it, he would have. There was nothing but silence from the small canvas cave where he slept. *He could not have missed the commotion.* She pulled her shawl around her shoulders and rocked soothingly on her feet.

A rustling in the grass had her whipping around. It was Sir Joseph. Something moving just beyond the tree line must have caught his eye. Starlight raised a gleam along the hammered edge of his short blade as he waded into the woods with a hefty crash. The sound of wings whirring and a low, pain-filled moan carried on the night air. She couldn't help but think of Skertchley's accounts of hiding in a ditch as the altered form of the Berbalangs coursed above his head in the dark, hunting for victims.

In her mind, a coolly rational voice soothed her fears. *Why would eaters of the dead come to a place where no one had laid a body in years? If they need living food,* the voice argued, *there are animals in the jungle. They don't need to bother with you.* Breathing hard, she nearly laughed in relief. It truly didn't make sense; the sounds were just night birds or perhaps bats mixed with an animal on the prowl.

"Here I am sitting in the dark like a sacrificial lamb and I never even thought to ask if there were predator animals to fear, I got so wrapped up in the folktales," she poked fun at herself. The sound of her voice soothed her worn nerves as she sank back to her rug. But the pony had been genuinely frightened and ran away from something.

Looking at the spot where field and jungle met, she stared intently, looking for the signal she and Rizal had agreed on. The first time her eyes swept the clearing, she'd

made a hash of it; she kept getting side tracked by the flashing fireflies. On the second, goose bumps wound around her arms as a low wailing sound issued from the wooded grove to the far side of the road. Sweat beaded on her skin and slid in cold rivulets down her spine as she held on to the ends of her wrap, desperately watching the woods a last time.

What was that? A flicker of orange-red caught the corner of her gaze and she turned back. There, between a banana tree and a young rubber tree were twin points of brilliant flame. Relief flooded her system as she lurched to her feet. She had crouched on the ground for so long that her lower legs had fallen asleep; pins and needles of pain mixed with her relief and made the short trip feel like an eternity. Never losing sight of the unblinking fiery gaze, she halted before the tree line. Taking a deep breath she stepped between the trees slowly, not watching or caring if her feet should trip, mind consumed with following the receding flames to Rizal.

Was it a trick of the moonlight or her fears playing on her mind that her eyes caught fleeting images of pale, striped forms clothed in loincloths moving past her? *You expected to see ghosts and so you did*, she told herself sternly, but the foggy, haunted feel of the dense jungle didn't subside. She wanted badly to call out to Rizal, to ask him to wait for her, but didn't dare speak for fear of Sir Joseph and his nervous blade running towards her voice. More than one danger lurked in the dark.

Tripping and stumbling on tree roots, she came to a small clearing. There, on a stump sat a small lantern with shielded sides. Rizal's eyes reflected the flames of the candle, showing her what she had chased. He looked primal, standing nearly naked in the moonlight clad in nothing more than dark stripes of camouflage and a sort of loincloth.

She wanted to run to him but there was something about his stance; a tense half-crouch as if he waited to move on an advancing enemy that made her stop and wait. He looked like the imagined apparitions flittering through the woods. Reacting to an unseen signal, he suddenly relaxed and opened his arms. "*Babae*, come, the old one has been led a merry chase by my men."

Sobbing, she fell into his arms, relishing the warmth of his skin and the strength of his embrace.

"The figures I saw were real?" She never thought that speaking would be such a hardship; she shook like a leaf in the wind.

"You saw them?" He seemed inordinately proud of her for having done so. "They are very good at moving through the night. My warriors and I have trained for many years to repel pirates and invading soldiers."

"The stripes?" She asked, her fingers sliding along his skin.

"Taken from our name, my *mahalin*, or have you not figured out my secret?" His face was beautiful in its male power, haloed by his silky mane of black hair. "It is very much like your own."

"I have a secret?" The discovery made her lean back to stare at him. Pulling back meant arching her lower body against his and he was more than happy to see her. His immediate male reaction made her blush and she was glad of the darkness covering it.

"You are a woman, of course you have secrets," he teased. "But there is one I will reveal to you before the night is over. But first," his firm hands gripped her buttocks grinding her stomach against his thrusting erection, "your name is too cold and proper, do you have another?"

Nonplussed, she felt arousal slam through her body at the point where they touched. Words couldn't form in her mind, let alone on her lips. Dipping his head, Rizal nuzzled her neck; teeth dragging against the soft skin making her shudder, needing more. Moving of their own volition, her hands kneaded the thick muscles of his shoulders like a cat. Laughing, he pulled back.

"You haven't answered, my *sinta*. What can I call you?"

"Maggie," she croaked out. Her mother had been the only one to use that name in her dreamy singsong voice. "Maggie is what my mother called me."

"Then my Maggie you shall always be." He cradled her face, pulling her mouth to his. She felt weightless in his arms, cherished and desired. With every stroke of his thumbs across her cheekbones, her body heated in answering waves. Dimly she

registered the loss of her shawl as it slipped to the ground. A tug and the snood covering her hair was gone, flung sideways into the night letting her hair tumble free down her back.

"I wish to make love to you in the sunlight, to watch your hair turn to yellow fire as you ride me," he whispered against her lips, capturing her mouth in another mind-drugging kiss. The image made her heart trip and slam against her ribs.

His hand wrapped in her hair, arching her backwards so his mouth could follow the line of her throat to the plane of her chest. The feeling of his lips, hot and wet, made her legs shake. Gently, he nudged her legs apart, widening her stance. The other hand cupped a breast, rolled and squeezed the aching globe before sliding across her belly to her cloth-covered mound. Cool night air rushed past her legs as the material of her skirt lifted, but she was lost to the feeling of his mouth sucking a spot on the side of her neck. Moisture gathered at the delta of her thighs and she moaned as painful lances of pleasure arced between her core and the spot where his mouth played her flesh.

He didn't allow her time to think, to be scared or nervous, one moment she was aching and wanting, the next his fingers found her slick opening and built the flames of need to a fever pitch.

"Please," she begged, not even knowing what it was she wanted. "Rizal, please." Fire wracked her body as his finger slid slowly inside her opening, stretching her in a way that made the ache almost cramp inside her stomach.

With a whispered curse, he stopped, lifted and settled her on her discarded shawl on the ground. "This is not what I wanted for us, for our first joining," he made to apologize as his hands gently eased her chemise and shift over her head. "But I cannot wait, you are too hot, too tight, and my body..." his voice dwindled away as he lifted her hand to grip his cock through the strained material at his hip.

Groaning, he pulled the loincloth away and placed her other hand on his flesh, teaching her the feel of his thickness from the furred nest of curls to the soft, dewy head. He was on his hands and knees above her and she watched the different expressions that crossed his face as her fingers stroked the silky soft skin. There was no fear in her

heart, only joy that she had the ability to bring him to this state, moaning and thrusting between her fingers. Her body wept for the feel of him inside and she wriggled beneath him.

Opening his eyes, he clasped her hands, halting their caress. Lifting one and then the other, he wrapped her fingers around a slim sapling that had grown out of the stump at one point. "Hold on to this and do not let go." His smile was full of wickedness as he looked over her body, splayed beneath his, her skirt bunched around her hips. Without even being touched, her nipples hardened to painful nubs under his hungry gaze. Tauntingly he licked one, then the other, his warm tongue lapping at the turgid points like a cat with cream. Each wet caress made her writhe as liquid spilled from her lower lips to coat his fingers brushing across the hungry opening of her body.

When she closed her eyes to savor the feeling, he hissed and bade her to watch. His eyes held hers as he licked the skin of her breast, suckling the soft pink nub between his firm lips. Teeth grasped the nipple and milked it, each tug splashed through her stomach making her rub wantonly against his fingers still lightly brushing her sex.

Lifting her hips, he slid the skirt free and arranged her legs wide to see her virgin flesh. For a moment, she felt shy being on display like this, until he looked back to her face, shaking with his own need. "Beautiful," was all he said, as he stroked the inside of each thigh, watching the flesh of her womanhood swell and blossom under his fingers. Whimpering, she clutched the wooden pole in her hands and remembered the feel of his hot slick flesh as it slid between her fingers.

"There will be pain, Maggie, for this I am sorry," she heard the words but didn't care, her sisters had said the same but with this man it didn't matter. She welcomed the pain if it would quench the burning in her body. She felt her hips being lifted in his hands and watched as he knelt between her widespread legs, gently he guided his thick shaft to her opening and she felt her body stretch accepting him a little at a time. It burned and ached, but he pulled back and slid in a little more each time. The candlelight caught the glow of sweat on his shoulders as he held her body, teaching it

how to accept and love him. Crying out, he thrust in hard and deep and Margaret bit her lip as pain ripped through her body. What had been pleasure turned to torture as he pushed in and pulled back, sliding into her abraded flesh again and again. Through the roaring of blood in her ears, she heard him cry out in release and nearly sobbed in gratitude that the pain was over. She made to let go of the branch but his hands were there.

“Hush,” he called over and over, kissing the trails of tears on her face until her ragged breathing calmed. But he didn’t stop, his lips moved from her tearstained cheeks over her throat, making her body respond again. This time her body responded by clenching her center where it ached. The pain made her shudder, it hurt but still felt delicious as his mouth and hands found one breast then the other. When his head dipped across the soft expanse of her stomach, the muscles twitched sending spasms through her pelvis.

In the glow of the candle, he caught her chin and inserted a finger in her mouth; instinctively she suckled it as he again parted her legs and lifted her hips. Dipping a finger into her slit, he felt her try to pull back against the invasion. Margaret watched in trepidation as his dark fingers disappeared into her sore flesh. Then fear morphed into an ache as he lifted the fingers to his mouth and suckled the digits coated with her wetness.

Rizal removed his finger from her mouth and cupped her buttocks, lifting her hips. With his eyes, he bade her watch as his tongue slid between the folds of her labia, circling the pearl of her clit. His thumbs slid into her opening, holding her hips steady as his mouth covered her lower lips, kissing the hungry flesh with long strokes of his tongue. The sounds of her cries made his cock ache but he couldn’t take her again this night. Instead, he thrust his tongue into her again and again, drinking her passion and sweet uninhibited response to his touch.

Margaret wanted and needed but she was lost to knowing what, so she begged and pleaded with soft moans and cries as his mouth and fingers drove her to the edge of sanity. Her hips tried to move, to find a rhythm, but his hands wouldn’t allow it.

When his tongue thrust into her body she cried out incoherently as wave after wave of hot, aching pleasure twisted through her veins. His mouth didn't stop; it worked her flesh through the tide and spiked a second wave that made spots dance behind her eyes as she begged for mercy.

"Let go now Maggie," he laughed in a low voice, freeing her hands and pulling her onto her side, spooning around her nakedness. Gently he rubbed her tummy and she held her breath as aftershocks flooded her system making her moan and press back against him restlessly.

"We belong to each other, do you not agree?"

Margaret nodded and felt the brush of his lips against the crown of her head. Never had she felt anything to compare to what she experienced in his arms.

"I will tell you what secret we share, but you must promise to hear me out." She had been on the edge of falling asleep in his arms when he uttered those words against her hair.

"I promise," she whispered back. As the candle burned low and guttered out she listened as he told her of her mother's misadventure in the popular Gothic cemetery, Highgate. For the first time in her life, Margaret heard how Phoebe was found, broken-minded wandering among the graves, pregnant. Her heart felt like a stone settled in her chest as he recounted her father's fear of the rumored vampire that was supposed to prey on the people who stayed overlong.

"So," she said, her voice full of suppressed tears, "the secret we share is that stupid Englishmen both believe that we are the get of vampires?"

He rocked her against his heart and wished to take her pain away. He had hoped to make her understand for her own safety, not to inflict pain. "My *timawa*, my warriors were trained by our fathers in secret. We became the Berbalangs. There was no such creature on these islands until the Arabs with their *djinn* came. Their stories and prowess in battle mixed with superstition, and we were born. In the light of day we are called *timawa* and respected, at night we are called Berblangs and feared."

"But...but why?" She lifted her head and pillowed it on his upper arm.

"If you would ever see what is left of a man following a sword fight you would think that an animal had got at the body. The people had never seen such before and the tales spread. Not unlike the Celts believing that the Romans had horses' manes," he teased. "Those born of the *timawa* and trained to its ways know the truth. We have no need of the witch hunters coming to our shores looking for our secrets."

"But I don't have a secret," she mumbled, tiredness pulling at her mind.

"Do you look like your father?"

Margaret thought for a moment to the rare photograph she had of her mother. It was one of the first done in Suffolk and she cherished the only memento she had of Phoebe.

"No, and I don't look like my mother either." She felt Rizal go still behind her.

"But Hooker said - "

"I don't care what he said," she felt strangely numb inside, "in my bags, at your father's home, is a small wooden box with a photograph of my mother. The only way we resemble one another is that we are female and have long hair. My mother was petite and dark haired. The Reverend Thawley is tall and also dark haired. I stand alone in the family."

"No," Rizal urged, "you did once, but no longer. I stand with you. You were a gift they didn't want. I want you."

It seemed as if hours passed as they lay talking and touching, but Margaret knew that the morning wasn't far off when he pulled her to her feet and helped her dress. Willfully her fingers traced the pattern of dark and light stripes running over his face, chest and legs. Even his arms sported tiger stripes to help him blend in with the shadows of the jungle.

"I am taking you to the clearing." He captured her face in his hands, forcing her tired mind to listen. "Sleep. If Hooker asks about you leaving, tell him you chased fireflies and got lost. Tomorrow he'll insist you go to the Berbalangs' village. I will come for you again, okay?"

When she agreed, he silently led her through the trees back to where she entered the woods. Tired beyond words, Margaret stumbled forward and collapsed onto her abandoned travel rug. Pulling her shawl around her shoulders, she fell almost instantly into a deep well of darkness and sleep.

"Swim with me Maggie-Pie," the softly spoken words roused her from her bed. "Sshh," a gentle finger forestalled questions. "Come." Wearing only her nightshift, she followed her mother out the rear servants' quarters to the woods. There was someone waiting there with a light. She didn't hear what was said, but her mother grabbed her hand and pulled her forward, running into the dark woods.

"See ahead Maggie-Pie, see those lights? Run to the lights, you've got to get to the lights." She reached down, grabbed the hem of her shift, and ran behind her mother, heading for the lights in the distance. When they reached the bank of the river she balked.

"Come with me sweet-pea, I've taught you how to swim well," Margaret watched as her mother waded into the river and pushed off, swimming strongly. Floundering, her toes sinking into the squishy muck, she tried to catch up. Making more noise than she wanted, Margaret swam after her mother. Fighting to keep her nose above the inky waves, she paddled with all her might against the current, fighting to follow her mother's voice.

"Mama," she sputtered as water surged into her mouth. Straining, she pulled through the choppy flow and called again, "Mama, wait for me. Not so fast." Gritting her teeth against the brackish water, she swam harder. She was more than halfway across. The cold of the water made her tired arms and legs go numb, making it harder to keep them moving her forward. In the distance, she could see her mama's dark head as she walked out of the water and onto the bank.

There was no moon in the sky but she could see her mother as she walked towards the two torches placed on the banks. Margaret had to stop and tread water to catch her breath. Her nightclothes were water logged, heavy and cold, and pulled at her

body. Mind now numb with exhaustion, she pushed on, swimming towards her mama and the bright lights.

Why did mama get her from bed to go swimming? Father would be so mad. Water plugged her nose and she floundered, as she struggled with the soft ground of the shore. Just thinking about how mad her father was going to be made her want to cry.

"We're going away, it's All Hallows Eve and we're going to take a boat and ride the sea of winds," the words had sounded like a lullaby. Margaret sighed unhappily. Her mama always sang, why couldn't she just say what was going on?

A sound like thunder cracked in her ears and she jumped. Just past the light of the torches, she saw a pale man standing between the torches as her mother fell backwards. "Mama!" she yelled as the limp body smacked into her, carrying them both back into the water.

Flailing, she tried to get free but was tangled in her mother's gown and hair. Water stuffed up her nose but she couldn't blow out to clear her nostrils; her lungs were empty. *Come up for me mama*, she willed, lifting her hands to her mother's blank staring face. Desperately she looked past her to the dim light of the torches on the bank, the receding glow of fiery eyes. *Come up for me*.

Coughing and crying, Margaret rolled to her hands and knees, and came painfully awake in the predawn light. Sir Joseph was wandering the field as if drunk, muttering and slashing at nothing with his short sword. Turning her head, she saw Kanani wiping the fat rump of the pony with his rag. He smiled at her and winked.

Suddenly she knew too much.

## Chapter Ten

"Sir Joseph, I really don't see what last night proved," Margaret repeated yet again. After waking, she dutifully listened as the aging botanist detailed his midnight romp through the woods chasing motes of light and what he thought were winged, moaning humanoid creatures roaming the forest.

"I heard you the first three times, Miss Thawley," he rebuked, brushing imaginary lint from his lapels. "No, I didn't get the physical proof required and I will not send a report to the Royal Society without it, that I do promise. But what I saw was incredible." His voice was full of awe and his face lit from within as if he had witnessed a miraculous event.

She made a disgusted sound. "If I may Sir Joseph, my father had a favorite saying that he used to make us repeat whenever one of us had the occasion to be caught passing gossip. 'Believe nothing of what you hear and only half of what you see.'"

With an indignant harrumph, he turned and studied the rice fields to the left of their swaying wagon like a chastised toddler. Maybe she shouldn't have spoken so tartly, but really, the man needed to hear it. Even though she knew the truth of what he saw, the way he went on and on made him sound utterly deluded.

After recounting his adventure, they had spent the next two hours combing the area looking for evidence of his nocturnal visitors. They hadn't found as much as a footprint. What they did find were a large number of slashed tree branches and topless

saplings. There was certainly no mistaking the path Sir Joseph carved in the underbrush.

When he put Kanani to the question, the terse guide professed to having heard or seen nothing. "I slept the night through," had been the nicest of his responses when pressed. The others didn't bear remembering.

Knowing the truth, Margaret lifted her head, challenging the grinning guide to call her a liar as she admitted to seeing something but being distracted when the pony bolted down the road. "I dashed into the woods as you directed, Sir Joseph. But as I entered the darkness, I heard the pony's hoof beats returning and I hoped to catch him, so I abandoned the hunt and wandered the road until I was exhausted. I am sorry. Perhaps we should abide here another evening?"

"The pony!" he exclaimed, charging off to the rotund equine, completely ignoring her question. He spent another half hour patting the contented beast, talking about the mid-October pagan festival of Equirria where a horse was sacrificed in a festival celebrating war. "You see, it *was* an important date, which is why our night was so successful."

Margaret shared a very confused look with Kanani as Sir Joseph bustled about, tossing items back into the wagon. In defense of his bizarre conclusion, he romanticized the battles that claimed the lives of the dead. With a flourish, he indicated the sad trenches and then introduced the pony's fear of being sacrificed to draw the Berbalangs. Another dramatic wave covered the ears of the shaggy brown beast as he climbed into the back of the wagon with an excited, satisfied glow.

"I think you are reaching," she concluded aloud, crushing the man's high spirits. "Honestly, none of that made any sense." But Margaret quietly reasoned that perhaps she lacked the education and insight to piece together such a hodgepodge of bizarre, unrelated paganisms so successfully as he subsided into a pout.

Three hours later, when it became blindingly apparent that they weren't headed back to the seaport village, she risked asking where they were headed. It seemed he viewed their "success" an omen that they needed to journey on to the reputed

homeland of the Berbalangs. She shook her head. Rizal was right. The man wouldn't rest until he penetrated the interior and saw the village, met the people, and found nothing.

Which led to her problem; given what she had remembered of her mother's death and what happened after, she couldn't return home. She wasn't expected to return home. Either Sir Joseph didn't fully understand the situation or something more sinister was planned for the coming night.

After a second day of sitting on the hard wooden seat, swaying and bouncing down the rutted dirt roads of the Cagayan interior, Margaret was nearly in tears of joy when she saw the line of thatched roofs appear in the distance. Once the village was in sight, Kanani pulled the pony up and refused to move closer.

Sir Joseph clambered down stiffly but his face was full of excitement as he collected up his satchels full of clanking bottles and papers, and his rolled bedroll. Margaret wasn't nearly as thrilled to be on foot again. Her feet were sore from her new wooden shoes and her spirits were heavy as she collected up her dusty rug.

"I shall see you in the morning, yes?" Kanani called after the pair, waving happily as he headed down a path between the worked farm fields flanking the narrow road.

Margaret suspected that they would be seeing the man sooner than that, but kept her observation to herself.

Walking along the road, she noticed that the ruts slowly faded making travel easier. In fact, she frowned looking at the hard packed soil. The surface went from hard clay to being lined in thick flat stones like a proper roadway. It seemed so very out of place that she stopped to make note of it in the record of the journey she was obligated to keep.

Once inside the village proper she found a stone ledge to sit on and sketched a rough layout of the houses. The Berbalangs' 'village' was more an arrangement of homes in a circular pattern bisected by two roads. None of the structures were taller

than two floors and all looked vaguely the same. Where the town center would be, was a grassy field featuring a plain wooden post with a metal ring. A hitching post, she frowned. Around it grazed a small herd of goats.

She had just finished sketching the layout when Sir Joseph stood over her shoulder, agitated. "I just do not understand where everyone went. How does an entire community just up and leave without leaving trace of where they went?"

He walked up to the first house and knocked impatiently. When no one answered, he barged in, searching every room, touching cooking surfaces and meals left on tables. After the third house inspection, Margaret lost her temper.

"Honestly Sir, I cannot blame the folk of this town a jot for bolting if this is how all visitors treat them. How would you feel, a simple farmer, if you were getting ready to sit down to dinner and word came that strange looking foreigners were coming? You'd probably hide." She stormed from the house, moved to the central post and pointed at the silent, shuttered homes.

"What possible reason have these poor people been given to be open and welcoming to strangers? The last visitor told strange tales of their being mosquito-men that ate the dead, and the newest ones just walk in uninvited, poking dirty fingers in their evening meals!"

The sun was fading into the hills and a vague buzzing sound could be heard in the distance.

"Now, where are we making camp tonight? I am tired and utterly uninterested in spending another sleepless night in a spooky place. And for the record, I find this deserted place spooky." Hands on her hips, she stared down the disgruntled knight of the realm.

He sighed and rubbed his bald pate. "I see you've a point, Miss Thawley, let's leave the village and allow these people to get back to their lives. We can bed down in the fields outside of town."

Slowly they made their way down the road they arrived on, Sir Joseph paused every few steps to look back in confused longing. There was nothing remarkable about the place but that no one was there – just as reported in Skertchley's accounts.

Shadows were long on the road when they laid out their bedrolls and settled to share a meal of travel bread and dried fruit, washed down with stale water from a canteen. As before, Margaret watched as Sir Joseph covertly splashed lime juice over his food. But tonight he went a bit farther, liberally anointing his clothes and bedroll.

Yawning, Margaret snuggled under her shawl watching Sir Joseph as he sat keeping a vigil, as the droning hum grew louder. As her mind slid towards sleep, she absentmindedly wondered what could be causing the annoying sound.

It seemed that she had only closed her eyes and laid her head on the makeshift pillow when she was startled awake by Sir Joseph yelling for help. Margaret rolled unsteadily to her feet and was immediately engulfed in a swarm of small insects. She couldn't see them in the darkness but felt them crawling over her skin on sharp pinching feet. Swatting at her arms, she tried to hasten towards the sound of Sir Joseph's voice but found herself stumbling as wings brushed past her head.

*Bats!* The night sky was black with the flying furred bodies snapping up the plague of insects. Pushing down a wave of revulsion, she cheered the flapping predators as she brushed the stinging little insects from her face and neck. It seemed the sound from earlier must have been a swarm of insects headed towards the town following the rain.

An urge caught at the edges of her mind, she reached a hand up into the air and felt the surprising weight of a furred body sidle into the curve of her fingers. Hesitantly, Margaret looked at the body she had almost called from the air to her hand. It was snuggling up to her thumb, its thin leathery wings pulled protectively around its delicate body lightly clinging to her wrist. The face put her in mind of a newborn kitten, blind with a funny little pug nose above rows of sharp needle teeth. She should have felt fear looking at those blood stained teeth, instead she felt moved to protect the snuffling creature. It was larger than English bats, but its soft warm body cuddled in as

loving as any pet. She felt the delicate bones in the wings as they fluttered against her fingers, the tiny claws and toes. Opening her fingers from cradling the creature close, reality intruded and the small predator fell away with a squeak and darted back into the swarm of insects. She felt a momentary urge to follow that was quashed when a squadron of the gnat-like insects invaded her face making her cough.

Stamping and swatting, she cursed in understanding of the villagers' flight. Without secure doors and glass-covered windows, there was no real way of keeping the vile little bugs from saturating the homes. The Berbalangs hadn't been driven out by their presence, but from the threat of the swarm they could hear on the wind.

"Sir Joseph!" she called trying to make for the last place she'd heard his voice. "Sir Joseph, where are you?" Somewhere to her right there came a loud cry of discovery. Blindly she followed the sound until she floundered into ankle-deep muddy water. Through the haze of bats and bugs, she saw a stream that acted as a boundary between farm field and woodlands. Ahead, through the thicket, came triumphant calls of "I've got you now!" accompanied by thumping sounds as blade met tree. At least she hoped it was just trees he was attacking.

Preoccupied with finding a safe harbor from the itching, crawling insects, Margaret didn't notice the small red lights dancing in the distance until they had almost passed. Circling the homes in the village was a torrent of red sparks. Wiping at her face so she could see, she stumbled and ran closer. Wearing thin shirts and short pants, the youths of the deserted village held funny looking sticks with lit branches bound to the ends. They smoked more than burned, giving the impression of tiny red lights flying in the night air as the children ran around the clustered homes.

Whatever it was they burned, it did the trick of repelling the insects. The air around the children remained clear and Margaret gratefully moved past them and onto the road leading to the town center. Here and there, she spotted more of the burning aromatic branches. Stopping to examine one bunch she felt the dried stems and fronds were bound up almost like a broom, but one made of twigs instead of grasses. The smoke permeated the village keeping the insects at bay.

Slowly, as if she were walking through a dream, Margaret paced the circular road nodding cordially to the silent, striped islanders fixing burning fronds to special holders outside of homes. Others were kneeling, passing off bunches to bright-eyed children who viewed the infestation as a different game, made all the more exciting for being done at night. Twin flames caught her attention as she neared the south end of the village. Turning, she walked to the hitching post at the center, off to one side was a thatch-topped lean-to where the goats curled into a single furry ball, sleeping.

Watching the goats' peaceful slumber put her mind fully at ease. Looking up, she noticed for the first time that every person in the village had the same pattern of stripes to their skin as Rizal sported last night. Looking at her own hands in the dark, she was surprised to see just how brightly her pale skin glowed in the muted starlight.

"Beautiful," the word spun her around, "your skin is beautiful." Rizal stepped out of the night as if he had a magic wand and tore a hole in the fabric of reality. One moment nothing, the next he melted into being with a flash of dark gold skin and midnight eyes. She watched as the dark orbs caught and reflected the red sparks of the burning brooms, as giggling children raced past.

"My skin." She smiled looking at her hand. It was almost blue-white in the darkness, glowing with a muted radiance that shouldn't have been but was. A gift from her real father, her smile turned sad, heart constricting. "Yes, I suppose it is beautiful, but I prefer yours."

Tracing the stripes that patterned his skin around his wrist, above the elbow to where it disappeared under his shirt. "Tell me again Rizal, about your stripes."

Gently, he pulled her by the hand towards one of the homes. "*Berbelang-balang* from which our name is taken is an old, now unused, word meaning 'striped.' As you glow in the darkness, we are marked with stripes. We are warriors and use these markings to hide and remain hidden until we strike."

"And I would glow why?" She floated along in bemusement, allowing his words to carry her. Was it the smoke making her mind float or was it his presence? Margaret didn't know or care.

In this land, with these people she felt less the outsider than at any other point in her life. She didn't need to hide in the library, away from angry eyes and barbed tongues. No longer was she longing for a place to belong. Her sisters loved her, of that she had no doubt, but with husbands and children she saw them infrequently. Men that had pursued her never looked again after her father interceded. It was as if she was a distraction and, once out of sight, faded from memory. But in Cagayan she felt substantial, as if she had been a ghost and finally took corporeal form.

"Moths are drawn to flame, my dearest Maggie. Your glow draws me like the light of no other. In that way, you are dangerous." His slow, seductive smile made butterflies dip and whirl inside her stomach.

"More like a tiger than a moth," she teased, caressing a thin stripe on his neck just above the top of his thin shirt.

"Still, drawn to you, out of the safety of the shadows to stand in your light." He tugged and captured her mouth for a long, slow kiss that had her clutching his shirt in her hands, twisting the fabric. "We will go to my home and wash off the insects and smoke. Come." With a hand on her hip he swept her along the path to a house with a blade above the door.

Fascinated, Margaret stopped and looked at the long curve of thick steel. Stepping back, she turned slowly and looked to the lintel above the rest of the doors. Some sported blades, others arrows and one a hammer. "Why didn't I notice these before? They mark each house as different."

"I am at home, and when at home I put up my blade here." He pointed to the small wooden pegs above the opening. "There is always one who watches, and, when they are on duty, they take with them their weapon. I have many blades but only two such as this." He lifted down the weapon and laid the flat of the blade against his arm. "It is called a *falcata*."

Gingerly she touched the dark wood hilt. The area where his hand gripped the wood was worn smooth and bleached into a softly diffused tan but the end was carved into a sharp hooked beak, like an eagle.

"So, by your weapons you know your homes." She gripped the blade and moved to lift it but almost couldn't, it was a lot heavier than it looked. The first eighteen inches started thick at the base then narrowed like a scimitar, but the last foot or so flared into a wide curve reminiscent of a sickle. "A wicked looking thing." She handed it back, rubbing her hand on her skirt.

"One I hope you never have to see me wield," he agreed, replacing it. Opening the door, Rizal bade her enter first. The room was softly lit with shielded lanterns like the one he had carried in the forest. It was a single large room with a low table surrounded by cushions and a thick pallet to the rear. Along the far wall were a large metal tub and a tall table with a clay pitcher.

"No fireplace?" Margaret asked looking right to where the narrow stairs led to the second floor of the house. "No kitchen area?"

"There is a small one to the rear of the house. It is not so well stocked but I've fruits and breads if you are hungry." She tried to push down the urge to explore, but he seemed to read her mind. "Upstairs," he gestured, where her eyes were yearning, "is a study area. There are small windows you can see from as well as shelves with books and another bed for sleeping. Some nights it is too hot so," Rizal pointed to the low frame on the floor with the thick pallet strewn with pillows "you can choose where you would rather sleep this night."

Suddenly uncertain, Margaret backed up against the door. "I-I wish to spend the night with you. Don't you want the same?"

The warm glow of the candles made his skin seem darker than the shadows as he stalked forward, crowding her back against the rough wood of the door. His forearm pressed against the door above her head, framing her face and keeping her from moving sideways as the fingers of his other hand laced through hers. Gently he lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing the tips of her fingers before spreading them over his cotton-clad chest.

"Feel the way my heart beats, fast and crazy over you." His lips hovered scant inches above hers, making her own heart thunder like mad. The heat of his skin

radiated through the thin material and she rubbed at the cloth, wishing it gone so she could explore every sleek inch of his glorious hide. Last night everything had gone so fast, she wanted time to savor him.

"If that is not enough," he said, his eyes burned like banked coals as he slid her questing digits from his chest lower to press against the hardness tenting his pants. Remembering the soft sleekness she had cupped only hours before, she marveled at the way the erect flesh felt so hard and stiff poking into her stomach. Yes, it had hurt terribly when he entered her body, but the rest had been like riding a runaway carriage – too fast, thrilling and terrifying and over almost before it began.

"We have time." His lips moved across her temple, burying his nose in her hair. Her hair! With a groan, she closed her eyes and slumped against his chest, letting him catch her weight in amusement.

"I probably look a fright, and smell like one too," she said ruefully, tugging on stray hairs that escaped from her braids. Husky male laughter tickled her ear as he held her close, turning them both towards the airy room.

"Then allow me to bathe you."

The words rolled over the skin of her shoulders, making her shiver. There was no one to watch, not even a window to peek in, but she felt self-conscious as he urged her towards the table and tub.

Rizal noted the slight stiffness to her body as she stopped between the water-filled tub and the washstand. Staying behind, he slowly lifted the hem of her shirt, urging her arms to lift over her head. He vowed to move as slowly as she needed to accustom herself to his presence and lose her prudish desire to constantly remain under cover. It was expected for her to hide her beauty from other men, but with him, she should be free to lay naked, covered only by his hands and mouth. It was his hope that by standing behind and not staring at her female flesh, she would calm and begin to accept his touch.

"I-I can wash myself." God, she hated how strained her voice sounded, even to her own ears.

"Yes, I know you can, but I wish to do this for you, with you. Does it bother you?"

Lost on how to put the nerves she was feeling into words, she shrugged and shuffled her feet. She let him pull the chemise of her outfit over her head and nervously noted how he took the time to gently fold it and lay it on the table before returning.

He could feel the tension vibrating in her body. "I wish to see you, to know you as no other. You have given yourself to me, do you regret that?"

"Never." Her heart was true but her voice sounded so small, unsure.

Rizal hesitated, perhaps he had rushed where he should have moved slowly, but she had lit such a fire in his blood that he couldn't stay away for long. As she traveled in that silly cart with Hooker, he had watched from the fields and trees, keeping her in sight, protected at all times. So he waited patiently as she drummed up the courage to loosen the ties at her waist.

As the creamy silk skirt slid over her hips towards the floor, Margaret sensed his quick movement as he captured the material. Moving according to a dance as old as time, she stepped slowly away from the garment, reaching for the stays that held her shift in place. To drop the ties would leave her naked, bare to his sight and scrutiny. Before uncertainty could stiffen her fingers, she let go of the slippery straps and let it fall to her feet.

"It is unnecessary to wear such a thick garment under your dresses, *sinta*." He stood as close as he dared, taunted by the nearness of her luminescent skin. "But I appreciate that you keep this bounty for only my eyes to see."

Twitching, Margaret made as if to turn to face him, but with the barest of touches, Rizal indicated she should move forward. She allowed his hands to guide her to kneel next to the muted glow of the washtub. Gently he guided her head over the surface of the water. Before the pewter pitcher shattered the still, reflective surface, she saw her radiant glow in the water contrasted by his shadowy form. Slowly she relaxed as the warm water rinsed through her hair. He murmured words of admiration for her beauty as his hands kneaded soap into the heavy weight of her hair. Kneeling easily

behind her, she gradually noted that the bouts of self-consciousness from earlier had dissipated under the gentle warmth of his hands.

As he rinsed her hair, she became aware of the way his thighs flanked hers, how his hips cradled hers. Yes, she could feel the weight of his erection, but he didn't rub it against her in unspoken demand, instead it was simply there, a silent testament to the truth of his words. Perhaps it was the sound of the water sluicing through her hair, but she decided she had never felt so safe in her life.

There had been times at home where she'd heard steps outside of her room, creaking floorboards where she'd held her breath in fear of the unknown. Not even the presence of servants and the overwhelming aura of her father's demeanor made her feel so surrounded in a cocoon of safety as did Rizal. It gave her the courage to speak.

"I know that when the sun settles, the stripes appear on your skin. I don't know why and I don't care. But I do thank you for trusting in me to share your natural state with me."

His hands moved past her face, gathering up her hair as he wrung out the long tresses. "How could I do otherwise? You are my mate, I cannot hide anything from you, nor should I." The quiet acceptance staggered her to the core.

"On the boat, I watched. You didn't trust any of the others, choosing instead to tend the fire until the rest were asleep." The silk of his shirt brushed her back as he laughed in pride.

"So you noticed where others did not, very good *mahalin*." She could feel his smile as his lips grazed her neck, making her shiver. "But were you watching out of curiosity or interest?"

"Both," she admitted bluntly, causing his laughter to ride on the night air again. "I couldn't help but watch you and wonder at why I found you so fascinating."

"Have you discovered why you want to watch me, little English songbird?" His hands folded a towel around her hair, settling the mass on a shoulder to dry as he reached for a rag.

"Simply because I wanted without knowing what it was that I wanted."

Rizal paused in the act of dipping the rag into the water. For her age, she was much more innocent than he had expected. Slowly he worked soap into the material as he waited for her to continue.

"My hands wanted to touch you when I've never wanted to touch another person. I wanted to sit near you and hear your voice in my ears. Mostly, I wanted to pull you close and bury my nose in your neck."

Considering the slim column of her neck, he daubed at her supple skin with the rag and delighted in the feeling of her soft flesh under his stroking fingers. His Maggie was surprisingly soft for all of her thin limbs and stiff bearing. Fascinated, he watched as her body responded to his touch, trying to anticipate where he would move next, arching under his questing fingers, seeking to connect with him.

"And what did you think that meant?" The husky note in his voice betrayed how much impact her words were having, but he didn't care.

"At first," she admitted, "I didn't know. I wondered if I found you so alluring because you were so different from what I've known of men. Then I questioned if I was interested only because you seemed to take note of me. In the end, I also considered that perhaps I had been too long without the company of any person, that I was simply... needy."

Rizal closed his eyes on the pain her words brought him. His body didn't care about her heart's uncertainty, but his heart did. *Time*, he told himself, *all she needs is time to see the truth of her own feelings.*

"But during the rainstorm you showed me otherwise." He stilled, waiting on tenterhooks for her words. "All my life I've watched people flow past; sat on the outside and didn't really care."

She shrugged and leaned back into his chest. Idly he wondered if she could feel the frantic pace his heart set as her words trickled out. "Oh, in some ways I cared, but it was more a feeling of want, like fancying a new hat. Here and gone in a moment's notice. But you touched me and I felt alive, really alive, and that want became need."

Margaret rested her head below his shoulder and lifted her face to study the underside of his jaw. Gently she guided his chin hoping he would look at her. Even in the soft candlelight, she could see the pained hope he tried to hide. "Before I met you I was a ghost, I didn't exist for anyone, let alone myself. I need you more than the air I breathe, your passion and strength. More than need," she smiled shyly at him, "love."

A dam of feeling broke loose in his chest as he stared into those liquid pools of placid blue. He wanted to crush her to him, never let her go, but another need settled into his loins.

"I think perhaps a little lesson in need and love wouldn't hurt." She saw the moment when his eyes changed from pools of love to something darkly wicked and she quivered in anticipation. When clever fingers found her rump and pinched she jolted forward more in surprise than pain and he laughed, following her pinning her thighs against the metal wash tub.

Almost indolently, his hands dipped into the water, cupping the liquid before drizzling it over her breasts. Margaret leaned her head back against his shoulder and gave in to the wet, delicious feelings he was stirring. The water was warm but her skin cooled in the air making gooseflesh rise. Another plunge of his hand and water trailed over her aching breasts, teasing her taut nipples to stand firm. Trickle of moisture trailed between her breasts, over her stomach and lower. Hissing, she shifted restlessly as the warm droplets penetrated the golden fur of her mound, sliding between her heated nether lips. When his other hand moved across her belly with the soapy rag, she moaned at the slick caress.

Mercilessly the rag circled her breasts one then the other, making the globes ache for his firm touch. She found herself arching forward, thrusting her breasts at the circling cloth. Bubbles slid over her ribs, tickling at her navel before obscuring her mound. Bemused, she watched as his dark hand shook off excess water and slid to her cleft, teasing her with his long fingers, pretending to wash the hair gracing her sex with the same thoroughness he had used on her head. Her hands reached back and framed his hips hungrily, clutching the fabric of his pants and pulling him closer. Restlessly she

rubbed her bottom against the thick evidence of his desire as his fingers slid over her mons, parting her lower lips with soap-slicked strokes.

Muffling a groan, he pulled his hips back, trying to slow the tempo of their lovemaking. He had hoped to move slowly, to bring her to release at least once before entering her, but when she slid her firm, round ass up and down his cock, all he could think of was throwing her down and pinning her to the floor.

Dipping a finger into her slit, he felt the muscles clench hungrily and he was lost. Leaning back, he pulled his shirt over his head. Impatiently he picked her wet, soapy body into his arms and carried her the few feet to his bed. With more speed than grace, he freed the stays on his pants and kicked free of them. Turning back to the bed he had to hold his breath on the sight that awaited him.

She had shed the towel and her hair fanned out over the pillows. There she waited, not half-hidden under coverings but in the open, her hands skimming the sides of her breasts and down to the inside of her thighs as she arranged herself the way he had positioned her their first time. The softly blushing skin of her slit caught his eye; dewy with more than bath water, the petals of her sex were parted and lined with moisture.

Settling between her legs, he lifted first one trim ankle to his mouth, kissing the delicate flesh behind the bone before placing the curve of her arch against his chest. Repeating the caress with the other leg, he watched as her eyes darkened, and her lips parted for her darting tongue to moisten her lips. Lifting her buttocks, he gently parted her folds and guided his thickness into her slit. When she stiffened, he stopped pushing only an inch inside her hot wet sheath. His fingers found her hidden pearl and teased it until he felt a different sort of tension build in her body. Slowly he slid in, inch by inch until he was seated deep inside, brushing her womb.

"Does this hurt?" Her eyes were large in her face, giving him pause.

"Just a little," she replied, feeling tension ebb as feelings warred in her body. The delicious heat he had built with his fingers distracted her from the slow ache inside her

sheath as he stretched and filled her. She was half afraid to move even as her body demanded she respond to the restless desire he had built in her blood.

A rolling thrust of his hips and she was lost to the sensation inside. Gripping the covers in her hands, she arched and writhed as he thrust, building the heat burning through her body. It felt like being rubbed everywhere at once with a fur-lined glove. Closing her eyes against the rising tide of feeling swamping her body, Margaret moaned and begged as he slowed to a torturous slide in and out that made her burn from the bottoms of her feet to the top of her head. In a frenzy of want, she opened her eyes and bit her lower lip, silently urging him by lifting her hips against his. Instead, he smiled and moved his fingers to where he sank in and out of her body.

Hypnotized by the sight of his thick length pumping in and out she shifted her gripping hands to the inside of her thighs so she could watch. Rizal saw her eyes fixate on the spot where they were joined and he slowed the pace again, this time gripping his cock in his hand, stroking it from under the head to the base before dipping it back into her creamy, plush slit. Nothing compared to the feel of her hot walls gripping him so he abandoned teasing her and slid home, resting his hand on her mound, his thumb finding the hooded treasure of her clit, working the raised flesh in time to his strokes.

Margaret felt her body falling into a deep well of liquid heat as her inner muscles clenched hard, milking his thrusting organ as she shook from the orgasm rocking her body. Out of control, she rocked her hips harder and faster as light exploded behind her eyes. Crying out, she felt him shudder as his own release took him, forcing him in and out faster and harder, aftershocks rocketed down her legs as he gripped her hips, thrusting a final time. His glazed eyes watched her core convulse around his sex as he spilled deep within her.

Roughly, he turned her so that her backside nestled against his front without losing his still stiff member inside her tightness. The unexpected feel of his cock rubbing inside her body made her shiver and lift a leg over his, as they lay spooned in his bed. She felt him starting to soften inside her sheath seconds before his fingers found her clit. It felt like an explosion of fire detonated in her belly as he pushed her over into a second

orgasm. Shaking, she begged him to stop but he moved to pull her legs farther apart and continue the deep caresses.

"For the moment" he kissed her cheek, "but I want you again this night," he promised, nuzzling her ear.

"Just need a moment to rest," she promised, pillowing her head on his arm. The silence inside the house was so complete that she soon felt on the relaxed edge of sleep. Dreams pulled at her, luring her away from the warmth of his arms and the safety of bed when she jolted awake, feeling adrenaline flooding through her system.

"What is the matter, *mahalin*?" Strong arms pulled her close as soft lips soothed her brow.

"Every time I close my eyes I dream again and again of my mother. An old dream from my childhood that I fear is only too real."

He rocked her in his arms, murmuring an old island lullaby. When she stiffened in his arms, he urged, "Tell me of it."

Quietly she started in a jumble, talking about her mother always singing, never speaking. She slowly told him about learning to swim being held in her mother's arms, never wondering why her younger sister wasn't instructed.

"This morning when I woke on the ground, it struck me that my younger sister was never given swimming lessons. I learned at her age, it made no sense." Unbidden, tears dampened her eyes. "But always the dream is the same, my mother comes to my bed, begs me to follow her from the house and through the woods to the inlet. On the far bank are burning torches marking where we need to swim to."

Rolling in his arms, Margaret looked into Rizal's eyes as his hands lightly rubbed at her back. "In this dream she speaks, not sings, but actually talks to me." There had been a singsong cadence to her words but Margaret wondered how much of that was real and how much what her mind expected.

"What happens in the water, *sinta*?"

## Night Lights

Dazed, she recounted the cold swim, the way her mind made up verses that kept time with her swimming, the weight of her nightdress pulling her under before finally reaching the far bank behind her mother.

"She is standing on the bank, looking towards the torches and a sound like thunder fills the night. Mama falls back, hits me and we are knocked into the water. Her hair, arms, dress, I'm all tangled beneath her, but past her shoulder I can see the twin points of light from the torches. I'm out of breath, exhausted but the light calls me." Her voice trickled to a halt.

"For years, Rizal, I dreamed of a guardian angel who kept me safe by plucking me from the water in my dream. He had no face that I could see but his hands," she lifted one of her own and stared at it. "They seemed to glow in the dark as bright as the moon, reaching for me, pulling me from the water. Then I wake in my bed."

Tracing the muscles on his chest with a finger, she thought aloud, "The face of the man on the bank, the one who shoots my mother is that of the Reverend Thawley. The man I always believed to be my father.

"What if this isn't a dream but a memory? Mama had been trying to get me to safety." The words '*go to the lights baby*' echoed in her mind.

"On the boat," Rizal shifted, laying her back against the down-filled mattress, sliding a leg over hers, protecting her body from her thoughts, "Hooker told me that your father sent you here as an enticement to our native vampire. That 'like calls to like.' " She gasped and tried to sit up, but he pressed her back against the cushions. "You were to be used as a lure even if it meant your death." He palmed the side of her face lovingly.

"I'm safe in the light," Margaret smiled watching the banked embers in his gaze warm. "You are my light."

"Then it is time for you to vanish as your mother did."

## Chapter Eleven

When the insects boiled out of the dark horizon, Sir Joseph lit a torch in hopes of keeping them away from the rough campsite. He hadn't expected to see glints of reflected light in the distance. Looking at Margaret's sleeping form, he hoped that she was low enough to the ground to emerge relatively unscathed, at least until his return. He promised himself he wouldn't get carried away a second night in a row. It was embarrassing enough, a peer of the realm chasing will o' the wisps all night long while the girl he was supposed to be watching walked the country lane searching for their missing steed.

Tonight - tonight he vowed to get things right. With the time it took the poor girl to arrive and his own scheduled trip to India, he only had this night and perhaps another to indulge his long-time friend's insanity. If nothing happened, the way he suspected it wouldn't, then no harm would be done the girl beyond a few sleepless nights in distressing places. The girl would simply be shipped back home with his letter attesting to her overwhelming normalcy and the accompanying missive to the Society reaffirming what they all long suspected, Skertchley had been led a merry chase by the locals.

Stalking through the high grass as silently as a man of his age, bearing and size could, he admitted the truth to himself. He had used all of the props from Skertchley's accounts to show his willingness to be tempted, to buy into the myth and last night he

suspected his “guide” had been only too happy to lead him astray in the woods. Why else would poor Margaret have been left to retrieve the startled pony, an animal trained by the very People of the Horse to stand by his master?

Last night he played the fool. This night he’d either catch his tormentors in the act or sit and watch the poor girl sleep on her meager travel rug. He risked a look back, she was still deeply asleep, unmoving in the dark. Guilt crawled through his system as he found the edge of the creek bank in the dark. Ahead he could make out the sound of voices but not what was being said. Nervously, his fingers fiddled with the hilt of the *kris* at his side. What he wouldn’t give for one of those vaunted American revolvers that had gained such popularity, but no, he’d thought only of blending with the natives, and selected a Filipino blade.

A sudden disturbance and muffled cry caught his attention and he startled, moving forward towards the sound. Standing in the stream was his “guide” Kanani, holding a funny-looking lantern and wearing a most ludicrous getup of white and black greasepaint. Before the words “ah ha!” could even register in his brain, he noticed the silent shadowy forms surrounding them both. Native freedom fighters, the ones the Americans had warned him about, daubed in more subtle camouflage than stage paint, stood silent, holding assorted weapons, some ancient scimitars, others crude field tools, others gleaming and new, like the sharp barbed bow tip currently aimed at Kanani’s throat.

“Help! Help me!” Kanani screamed. Without thought, Sir Joseph waded in, pulling his *kris* and lashing out at the closest shadowy form. The warrior sidestepped and the thick blade thunked deep into the bole of a palm tree. Feverishly, he tried to yank it free as he watched the shifting forms in the muted light from the ridiculous lantern. All he could hear was the buzz of insect wings and the panicked wheezing of his lungs.

A sharp blow fell behind his ear and he turned, stunned. His brain registered the impact, but not the pain as he pirouetted with uncanny grace to face the scarred face of

Kanani before everything slowed and dimmed. The ground reached for him like the embrace of a friend and he fell insensate.

"Hooker." Hands shook his shoulders, pulling him here and there, "Sir Joseph!" A cool, wet rag washed his face and his eyes fluttered open to piercing light. "He comes around I think," the voice sounded familiar.

He shook his head to clear it but sharp, stabbing pain lanced from the back of his scalp to his eye. Groaning, he gingerly reached a trembling hand to the aching spot.

"No," strong but gentle fingers caught his hand. "We bandaged the wound." This time he opened his right eye and forced it to focus. Rizal. Rizal Malihim.

"Thank God," he wheezed, his voice dry and strained. "What happened? Margaret...where's Margaret?"

He tried to flounder to a sitting position but couldn't seem to make heads or tails of his arms and legs. Words flowed over him in a crazy jumble and hands eased him to a seated position. He felt sick to his stomach, as if he'd drank a quart of ale and chased it down with a pint of cooking oil.

The cool, wet rag returned to his face and Sir Joseph nearly wept for joy at the feeling. Everywhere it touched felt better, but once it was gone, the pain returned.

"My men are out looking for Margaret, she was not with you when they accidentally collected you and Kanani. I am sorry friend," Rizal's voice was tense and tired. "The men were on watch last night for looters. When the insect swarms come, the villagers flee the insects, and looters take advantage. My men were not apprised of your coming until this morning when I arrived."

He heard water, the sound of rinsing and felt the cool balm of the damp cloth again. Slowly things were coming into focus, making better sense. He'd been forcibly detained because the men thought he'd been a looter. "When I get my hands on Kanani –"

"Easy, sir. Kanani has been dealt with. I chained him myself and sent him to my father for judgment. Truly, the man was only supposed to lead you where you wished,

not act the idiot in the woods dressing up like a spook. One we've worked long and hard to erase from memory."

Sir Joseph peered at the younger man one-eyed; he looked grim and exhausted. A young boy hovered at Rizal's elbow with a cup. Despite the sloshing in his stomach, his mouth desperately needed moisture. As if sensing his need, the youth proffered the cup. Hand shaking, he gratefully sipped at the cool water.

"I can understand," he sighed, "the old tales only bring about pain and misery. Look how superstition ruined life for poor Miss Thawley."

He looked around again. His vision was still flaky, everything seemed over bright, but he could make out that he had been left in the center of the village. When he tried to rise to his feet he discovered his ankle had been shackled to the hitching post.

"Again, my apologies," Rizal muttered reaching for the rough, heavy band of steel and freeing Sir Joseph from the device with a curious twist of his hands.

"Where is Miss Thawley?" Surely she should have been spotted and rounded up by the over-eager scouts, but he didn't see her anywhere.

Rizal's worried dark eyes stared into his as long fingers grasped his face turning his head this way and that. This time the accompanying pain was more like small hammers smacking the bones of his skull from the inside.

"I told you, Sir Joseph, my men never found her last night. All they recovered was her valise, her travel chest of clothes, and her sleeping rug. Right now they are searching the wooded areas in case she heard the commotion and ran to hide."

"Oh dear God, let the poor girl be alright," he prayed fervently.

"Come, Sir Joseph," the tiredness fell away from Rizal's voice, "you expect me to believe you had a care for the girl. She honestly believed she had been sent on a great adventure to help you. That wasn't why she was sent at all is it?"

Despite the guilt eating him alive and the pain making his head feel deformed, he stonewalled with a harrumph. Alistair Thawley had been his friend for far too many years to air dirty laundry in front of strangers.

"Hooker, don't ignore me," the voice turned menacing. "Did you know that Maggie had nightmares of water? Water she nearly drowned in when her father, the man you are protecting, shot and killed his wife."

Stunned beyond belief, all he could do was sit gaping open-mouthed at the young man before him. Alistair couldn't have done such a thing could he?

Too many things fell into place and he closed his eyes against the grief welling up inside his chest. It wasn't until rumor of Phoebe's death carried to the village that the constable went out to investigate. The girls were in mourning and Alistair just sat in his study compiling notes.

Sir Joseph had stood at the constable's side, wanting to help his friend but unable. At the time, he had believed that grief had addled his friend's wits, warping his wife's disappearance into her death. Searches yielded nothing, not a hint of her fleeing, or a scrap of cloth in the woods surrounding the manor. Through it all Alistair remained stolid, unruffled, shepherding his daughters from the house to church and back with regularity, as he went about life as if nothing untoward had happened.

After a few weeks, tutors had been hired to take Phoebe's place, as daytime guardian of the girls. "If that be true, then the girl must be taken back to England to offer testimony against her father. This wrong must not be allowed to stand."

Tears trickled down his face as he remembered poor simple-minded Phoebe dancing and singing among her flowers.

"Hooker, you truly are a fool." The cold words shook him out of his reverie. "He laid his plans many months ago. Do you think that you were the only one to know of her arrival? This country is unsettled, we just emerged from throwing off the Spaniards and are now fighting to be free of the Americans. There are pirates and looters. A single letter in the wrong hands and she is gone forever, just like her mother."

Icy fingers gripped Sir Joseph's heart. "Help me to my feet lad! We must be about working to find the girl." He pushed down the nausea and closed his eyes as the earth tilted beneath his feet. It was imperative they find Margaret, the sooner the better.

## Night Lights

\* \* \* \*

Stalking the haphazard path through the jungle put Sir Joseph in mind of the night his lady wife insisted they go to the symphony to hear the works of Charles Gounod. The hunt began quietly, creepy with furtive movements, then crashing to a crescendo as birds and animals screamed and careened from the underbrush while they steadfastly trailed scuffed foot tracks and tell-tale drag marks.

The wind whipped through the dense green canopy, offering relief from the oppressive heat and humidity and laying a whip to the backs of the searchers. Wind meant rain and rain would obliterate the scant trail found leading from the clearing where Margaret had slept. He was too hot, too tired, and too numb from the constant upheavals of flora and fauna to feel anything but joy in the wind.

Stopping to take a drink of the tepid water in his canteen, Sir Joseph felt his guilt morphing into anger. Why hadn't the girl fought back? Why hadn't she called out? With all of the natives beating the brush for looters and pirates from the outer islands, a single cry would have ended all of this nonsense. No sooner had the irritated thoughts filtered through his mind when one of the men called out in excitement. Impatiently he blundered through the thick vegetation to the spot where Rizal hunkered in the path.

On the floor of the forest was a small spattering of blood. Knuckling sweat from his eyes, Sir Joseph looked to either side of the game trail they'd been following. There, a shaking hand reached for the saw-toothed leaf of a palm and grasped the frond. The vibrant green was edged in red-black blood. Terse instructions were fired at the men who surrounded Rizal as he stood, staring bleakly ahead.

"Sir Joseph, there is a small cove ahead where the villagers do some fishing. Perhaps it would be better for you to return to my father's house instead of seeing what may lie ahead."

Rizal wouldn't meet his eyes, but the incredible toll of whatever the men reported must have been great. He watched as the younger man aged ten years, his fingers caressing an oddly-shaped sword at his hip.

"I must see this through to the end," Sir Joseph croaked out.

Another wave of guilt twisted his stomach. He hadn't realized how much Rizal had come to care for Margaret in the small time they had spent together. Perhaps all the tales of love at first sight weren't as fatuous as he had always believed.

Slogging those last few hundred yards through the jungle were the roughest. The ground turned rocky underfoot but the foliage never lessened. It was there and then, instantly, it was gone. If it weren't for the storm clouds massing on the horizon, the transition would have blinded him as he looked ahead to the thin spit of land exposed by the tides. Though the water was returning, he could clearly see where the miscreants had pulled in a dinghy and dragged the young woman aboard. His blood ran cold as he watched Rizal pick up a sodden slip of material. It was drenched in blood and seawater.

"Without a boat, there is nothing more to be done here," his voice was deadly solemn, matching the dull-eyed stare.

"Surely they couldn't have taken her far?" Sir Joseph protested, following Rizal's rapidly retreating form as he disappeared back into the jungle.

Rounding on the older man, Rizal spit out, "There are eight islets around this single island. There are more islands in the Sulu Sea than that. Then you have Bataan, Corregidor, Mindoro, Luzon, the Visayan chain, Leyte, and Cebu." He advanced, poking a harsh, bloodstained finger in the old man's chest.

"That doesn't include the mainland or any of the smaller islands surrounding each. In our waters, we have the Americans, Spaniards, and scores of traders from Singapore, Asia and India. Do you know the value of a white woman as a slave in those countries? Or what worth her hair and skin would have for an Arab sheikh? She is *gone!*"

\* \* \* \*

"I hate to say I tell you so, my friend, but," Hari expansively shrugged, "I did tell you that you needed more men with you."

"This is so hard to accept." Rubbing his forehead with a clean handkerchief, Sir Joseph felt the actuality of the situation sink in. "I wouldn't have thought things so perilous here. The Spanish reigned for many years and now the Americans - "

"Have granted us our freedom." Rizal walked into the antechamber carrying a letter loaded with ribbons and stamps. "They have agreed to respect the right of the islands of the Sulu Sea to remain with our Sultanate."

Sir Joseph looked blankly at the piece of paper that essentially left his failed expedition at the mercy of the tribal chief. *No wonder the Americans never established a base or sent soldiers*, he thought as his mind tried to process the new information.

"This means," Hari said the words not unkindly, "that your hopes of more travels on my island are dashed, my friend. I welcome your visits, but nothing else. My island needs no more tall tales told of it. Write the girl's family and your society of the truth of what happened, how you were led astray by a foolish man and that the girl was lost to slavers. Should anything else be written, it would mean your life to return."

"It would mean your life anywhere in the Muslim world you traveled," Rizal added with a dark look. "I will escort you to the docks."

Nodding almost absently, Sir Joseph rose and bowed a quick goodbye. He still had his photos of the island, the notes he had taken and more importantly the ones Margaret had written to send as an offering to her father along with her trunks of clothes. The trip to the docks passed in a daze as he mentally made lists of things that needed doing before joining his men off the coast of India.

In no time, he was standing on the small clipper that brought him, rather than, to Cagayan, staring at the desolate little desk where Margaret had sat so primly making notes. Heavily, he dropped to the squat chair, ignoring its groans and protesting squeals as he pulled parchment from a bag at his feet.

Quickly he penned a letter to the Royal Society explaining about the subterfuge and the man's arrest. He also took time to explain how swarms of insects drove people from their homes at certain points of the rainy season. The hardest part was admitting

his foolishness in indulging in Skertchley's primitive wards and how he fell victim to a patrol looking for looters.

He never made mention of the presence of Margaret Thawley. She had been part of his personal quest only at the insistence of her father. The Society would have been scandalized; the consequences of her presence would have been a death knell to his last planned safari into India.

With an economy of motion, he blotted the letter, folded it and slipped it into a thick envelope already inscribed with the London address for the Society. Once he reached the mainland, he'd drop it at the post station. Now for the hardest letter, he mused, staring at the unblemished parchment.

Unbidden, he thought of his own daughters and his eyes stung with tears. Granted, he might not have been home as often as other men, but with each, he had a close and loving relationship. He never saw the same between Alistair and his girls, on the few occasions he stopped. In fact, Alistair never even bothered to introduce his friend to his offspring.

The only way he knew of the quiet eldest was from catching sight of her huddled under the stairs to Alistair's office, one quiet rainy day. Instead of being worried about the noticeably sad child, Alistair flew into a rage, talking about her mother's unnatural dalliance with a vampire leading to the girl's weird behavior.

\* \* \* \*

*31 October, 1899*

*Sir Rev. Alistair Thawley,*

*My deepest condolences to you my friend, I've sad news to report. No, your fears were not confirmed, this island has no vampires anymore than your daughter being a creature of the night. Due to circumstances beyond my control, slavers captured your daughter and carried her*

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*off. We've searched and sent out word, I even posted a reward of my own accord, but there hasn't been a single sighting of the lass. Given evidence at the site where she was taken, she may not have survived the abduction and may indeed be in the arms of the Sulu Sea.*

*Words alone cannot express my sorrow at the loss of such a vibrant creature as your Margaret.*

*Dutifully yours,*

*Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker*

"In the arms of the sea? You *fool!*" Withered fingers crushed the letter before tossing it into the flames of the fire grate. "Water would never kill such a creature." Reverend Alistair Thawley pulled his lap rug up to his waist and shivered as the faint sound of male laughter carried on the night air from the direction of the inlet cove.

## Epilogue

Margaret sat in the prow of the small boat, her body covered in a black *abaya*, hair demurely tucked under a *hijab*, face obscured by a *niqab*. The Muslim family on the islet she had stayed with insisted on the outfit for religious reasons; she agreed out of concealment ones. Now after having worn the same for the better part of two weeks, she found she enjoyed the idea of only allowing her soon to be husband to see her.

A slight wind stirred the tassels that had been added to the outfit. For some reason the family had believed that her blue eyes were capable of giving “the evil eye.” She didn’t object, as the tassels made it even harder for the nosy to see her eyes and remark on the unusual color.

The night of the swarm, Rizal had signaled his Arab friend from a small cove. There had been a moment when one of the crew on the boat had seemingly lost his mind, diving at Margaret with knives in his bony fists.

She would never forget the speed with which Rizal moved, in one instant he was a warm presence at her back, the next his sword was in hand and sweeping in an inexorable arc that sliced the man from hip to shoulder. A curious numb detachment settled in her brain as she watched the light in her attacker’s eyes dull as he stared into Rizal’s face. As he lowered the man to the sand, she saw a new line of stripes marking his forearms. From a distance, she heard the sound of the Arab directing his men away from the shore.

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Rizal tried to shield her from the grisly sight, but it didn't sicken her; another feeling rose, but the shock of water at her feet made her mind tumble in another direction. For a moment as she waded into the water, she had a flashback to the night her mother begged her to follow across the inlet. Unlike that night, there was no light to guide her, only the distant bump of darkness indicating where the low-slung boat waited. Her arms and legs were tired long before she made it to the boat, but she carried in her heart the hope that this water crossing would lead to a better life away from a haunted one.

Haunted...laughing she shook her head making the tassels of her veil dance merrily. Watching the water swirl past, she dipped a finger in the silky wake before slanting a glance back at Rizal. His arms worked steadily, rowing the boat closer to shore as he asked, "What makes you laugh so pretty, my soon to be wife?"

"This is All Hallows Eve, the night my true father pulled me from the water and into the light." She tilted her head and watched as his muscles rippled under the light silk shirt. "The Celts believed that lights left shining attracted souls hungry to possess the living. They doused all flames on that night and refreshed it the next day, when it was safe with the Druid fire at Usinach."

"And this makes you happy?" Banked embers, his eyes nearly glowed in the darkening air. Most of the short trip had been accomplished due to his rowing because of the lack of air to fuel the single sail. She enjoyed the flicker of fire in his gaze.

"You are my fire, you call my soul and with you I am replenished." It was heart's truth and more.

A week after she fled Cagayan, he'd shown up in the middle of the night. The family wouldn't allow them any time alone. In the end, they had the courtship that she'd once felt so necessary. All it did was make her body ache as she'd watched his hands touch his water glass, his lips purse to drink. Every movement, each nuance in his voice awakened another memory of the stolen nights when they indulged their hungers.

The boat bumped into the pier and hands appeared over the side, reaching for the secure lines. Moments later a small ladder was lowered. Remembering the rules of comportment she was drilled in, Margaret waited for Rizal to go first. Instead, he smiled and shook his head, motioning for her to climb. Once he reached the pier, however, he didn't mind leading their small procession to his father's home.

The sun was setting in the rear garden when they entered, painting the walls in bands of yellow, orange, and red. Hari waited with the contracts and the requisite witnesses. *Muslim weddings were worlds different from Christian ones*, she marveled. All those mock weddings she and her sisters had played out dreaming of cakes, gowns and peacocks and here she was, happy to do away with the bans, flowers, and frippery. All she wanted was the man and to be part of his life. Somehow, simply agreeing was more than enough--it was perfect.

"I have looked at the picture my son retrieved from your trunk," Hari said gently. "You did not know until just recently about this other man?"

For the sake of credulity, Rizal had agreed with not mentioning the Reverend's thoughts of vampire rape.

"Yes." She looked at the photo in its simple wooden frame sitting on the table next to the marriage contract. Her father, rather the Reverend Thawley, never looked so young to her. Despite the weight of his years, he truly looked youthful standing behind his seated wife in her wedding dress. Without her veil, Phoebe was radiant, long, dark curls cascading over her shoulders. Oh, there was a resemblance to her daughter, in the line of her nose and the shape of her jaw, but Margaret's hair and eyes were from her unusual father.

"As there are no parents to guide you in this, there are ones who have agreed to act in their stead for you. Are they acceptable?"

Margaret smiled even though she knew neither could see it, it was the old grandmother from the dress shop, and Kanani. "Yes, they are acceptable. I thank them both."

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Hari beamed at the pair and spoke the words of the contract getting the necessary signatures. With that, it was over. Everyone moved to the interior of the house where a celebration dinner was laid, but Rizal called to his father, making the old man laugh in joy.

“Yes boy, be English and kiss your bride.”

The sun was down and the night air turning purple in the shadowed garden as he turned back. Already the telltale stripes marking his lineage traced his skin. “I have a confession to make. Not all the tales of the Berbalangs were fabrications.” Twin points of fire ignited in his eyes until the iris reflected the glow, burning a vibrant red.

Margaret tilted her head and considered her husband before lowering her veil. “And as you have pointed out, women also have secrets.” She smiled at the last, flashing the dainty tips of her newly discovered fangs.

The End

Author Melissa Glisan has a rich imagination and has shared several of her stories with Aspen Mountain Press including *Fool's Gold* and *Ware Wishes*. If you'd like to keep informed of Melissa's releases, please join our newsletter at [www.AspenMountainPress.com](http://www.AspenMountainPress.com) or one of our yahoo loops at [www.AMP\\_Community@yahoogroups.com](http://www.AMP_Community@yahoogroups.com) (for chatting) or [www.AMP\\_Mountaineer@yahoogroups.com](http://www.AMP_Mountaineer@yahoogroups.com) (for announcements pertaining to Aspen Mountain Press only).

And now, for an excerpt from *Fool's Gold*

Jade looked out from the safe confines of the bar, over the small dance floor to the ring of seats lining the far wall. When she had bought *Fool's Gold* from the last owner, the front window had been nothing more than a massive series of cracks and spider-lines from all the brawling. Practicality pushed her to dump the glass and wall-in the huge opening. Not for the first time, she mourned not being able to see outside the bar. Maybe this month she would be able to set aside enough cash to buy a video camera and small closed circuit television so she could watch the activity outside the establishment.

For the last few weeks she'd been working hard to keep the slimier elements out of her new home. Drug dealers were the first she caught and slung out, then the 'working girls' but the worst had been the shifty eyed Adonis who hogged the corner table at the front. He rarely bought anything but his visitors did. A steady flow of people came and went but the blond god of a man simply sat, smiling with his chiseled lips, never the eyes as he sipped from a glass of white wine.

Two nights ago, Jade had been forced to leave the bar to do an ID check on an apple-faced teen she spied sipping beer at a dark table. Between her swaying hips and low cut blouse neither her mark nor his companion had been able to bluff their way around their bad fake IDs. Escorting the pair out she'd caught a glimpse of something shining under blondie's shirt, something that looked like a gun. It was against state law to wear a gun inside bars.

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Bold as brass, Jade made herself saunter up to his table, plant her hands in the middle and lean over to give him a clear view of her best assets. She knew she was in trouble when his ice blue eyes met hers and never dropped. Quietly she told him he had to go and why. Lips twisted into a rictus of humor, he stood and proffered a handful of bills before walking out. It had been her intention ever since to hire a bouncer, she just couldn't seem to find a likely candidate.

Until tonight, when nearly seven-feet of rock hard male poured himself into the back corner of her bar. He was still nursing his second draught but his tired eyes missed nothing. They were a contrast to the rest of him, a worn denim shade that had a soft fuzzed out feeling not reflected in his brutish form. He was darker skinned, not just tanned but golden under the sun's touch of brown with deep brown hair liberally shot through with strands of silver. Not quite military cut but close, the ends curled and made her fingers itch to comb them. Her arousal surprised her. Mostly she was attracted to the slim, bookish types with soft almost feminine beauty. This man was a displaced gladiator with an affection for dark ale and a shadowed corner behind his back.

Normally Jade kept the corner clear. It was too hard to watch the till tucked there and a few too many college boys had wandered into her work zone, begging an impromptu dance. Now a single gold tasseled rope hung in the opening. It gave her the time to repel would be Romeos and a small measure of control over the approach to her cash register. Something about the huge, hulking male with the soft watchful eyes didn't trigger her normal alarms. Instead the only ones shrieking were the clanging bells over her heart.

"How's the drink?" her voice purred with more heat than intended. Balls and sass, she smiled slow and tilted her head, catching the light on her better side. He blinked slow and deliberately, like a star struck bull and her insides cheered, point one for the home team.

"Good, thank you," his voice was rough either with disuse or passion. She was banking on the latter. Holding her elbows she walked into the cut, moved the chain and

leaned her arms on the counter beside him, so both could watch the bar patrons. She felt his gaze, hot and hungry covering the tops of her bared breasts, but when she turned to look, his eyes were there waiting on hers. Awareness burned from the nape of her neck down her spine and lower. She breathed a sigh of thankfulness that the designers at Fredrick's of Hollywood thought to include that small degree of padding that hid her taut nipples from his gaze. Somehow his eyes warmed every bit of her body without even looking down. It was like standing before an open furnace door and she loved it.

Quickly her tongue caressed her upper lip, his eyes followed and Jade nearly grinned in triumph. "I have a proposition for you," she breathed next to the shell of his ear. Faded sapphire daggers stared into heated green pools and considered. At that moment she knew she won, no matter what his lips may say.

"Miss, I'm honored, but I'm sure any of the studs here tonight would service you better."

Jade felt the floor dip under her absurd shoes before she managed to reexamine his words. Grasping her waist in the throes of mirth, she plumped up her breasts, accented her narrow waist and gave him a long look at the thin creamy line of her throat. Small hiccupping trills of laughter were still leaking from her lips as she felt the heat from his body intensify; he had shifted closer and looked angry.

Placating his ire, she stepped close and ran her fingers playfully through his hair. Jade felt a light gasp slide out from between her lips at the downy feel of his hair, like the coolest silk spun out under her fingers. Of their own volition, her fingers flexed in the slightly longer strands at his nape and tugged his head forward. She was drunk on his presence and nearly forgot what she really wanted when she had started out this game. A thick arm wrapped around her middle and hefted her between his stocky form and the bar. He was impossibly hard against her soft curves and all she wanted was more.

"This isn't what I wanted when I came over," she pouted, her hips arched hungrily into his.

"No?" he grinned. Her eyes were the purest green, brilliant dark emerald with

## Night Lights

striations of moss, leave and mint running in starburst patterns from the abyss of her pupil. He shook his head and leaned his upper body away. Falling into the small pinpoints of midnight reminded him that any kind of plunge with her could be terminal.

Biting her lower lip, he noticed that her teeth weren't perfectly straight, slightly crooked with a small overlap near an incisor. Her flaws seduced him as much as her luscious breasts and hips. He was rock hard and her hips rocked to the beat of some primal rhythm pounding from the jukebox in the front. Slowly her hands slid from his neck, over shoulders until they helped her swaying hips measure his arousal.

"Lady, if this isn't what you wanted, you're going to get it anyway if you don't stop," he growled in her ear. Impossibly he felt himself grow harder as her body shivered in his grasp.

"Mmm..." she purred, "this may not have been what I wanted when I walked over, but it's what I want now." She felt him quake under her hungry hands and relented.

\* \* \* \*

## *Fool's Gold*

Now available at [www.AspenMountainPress.com](http://www.AspenMountainPress.com)