



# *The Captain's Wench*

**Patti  
Shenberger**

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*By*

*Patti Shenberger*

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## *Dedication*

*To Randy who makes all my dreams come true!*

## Chapter One

Cape Cod, Massachusetts 1852.

Captain Alexander London's luck had just run out.

The *Jeunesse*, his prized sailing vessel, heaved and bucked beneath his firmly planted feet. Drenched by the storm's onslaught, his white shirt and black pants lay plastered to his cold, clammy flesh. His grip tightened on the ship's wheel. White-knuckled, he fought the beast. The wind whipped his dark hair about his face. The abrupt storm urged his crew into action. No warning sounded from the on shore bells to guide their way through the thickening night. No glow shone from the lighthouse at the point. A brilliant flash of lightning zigzagged across the sky, cutting up the night like a giant jigsaw puzzle. The waves pounded unmercifully time and again over the bow of the ship.

Alex knew if this punishment continued all would be lost. As he scanned the ship's bow, he watched as a carelessly hung lantern crashed to

the deck, engulfing the forward sail in flames. He clenched his jaw and cursed a blue streak as the acrid scent of burning timbers assailed his nostrils. Chaos reigned supreme.

The ship floundered amid a whirlwind of thick, black smoke. The glow from the bright orange flames illuminated the stark terror Alex saw upon his crew's faces. Their sheer panic chilled him to the bone.

Alex knew the craggy cliffs of the shoreline and jagged edges of the rocks that lined the beach loomed ominously ahead in the inky darkness. The squall tossed the *Jeunesse* like a rag doll being handled by an exuberant child.

Time was of the essence as he yelled out orders to abandon ship. Precious seconds remained before the flames reached the powder kegs stored below deck.

A loud hiss drew his attention upward as the main sail broke free of its lashing. Alex threw his hands over his head too late to ward off the impending blow. He pitched forward over the side of the ship, and into the icy water far below.

He fought hard, struggling against an invisible foe forcing his way to the surface of the churning water. His lungs burned from lack of air. His head pounded.

A deafening boom filled his ears. The ship shuddered a final time, readying herself to succumb to a watery tomb. A sick feeling went

through him. Alex prayed for a miracle. Don't let me die like this, his last thought before pain exploded anew in his skull.

His ship and cargo were gone. Blown to bits by the explosion. What remained was battered beyond recognition against the rocks. A piece of broken, burned mast slammed into his chest, the sickening crunch of timber connecting with bone echoed in his head. The icy water reached up frigid fingers to claim her next victim.

Suddenly, a woman's anguished cry of distress pierced the darkness. Alex tried to make out a human form among the debris. He could see nothing. Was it possible in all the commotion they'd struck another vessel? His mind fought the searing pain. He needed to get ashore and secure help.

His arms and legs slowed to a crawl. Exhaustion tugged at his waning strength. A weary sigh escaped his lips and Alex let his head loll backward, oblivious to the waves that continued to pound his back. He scanned the inky waters for signs of his crew or the *Jeunesse's* lifeboats.

*There was nothing.*

What seemed an eternity later, Alex dragged himself upright to wade through the shallows. The storm had abated to leave a calm, clear sea in its wake. Dawn broke across the water, the pinkish hues of the sunrise reflected on the now tranquil

blue waves. He scanned the shoreline. No sign of wreckage littered the beach. White sand stretched for miles, unbroken except for clumps of vegetation and driftwood.

Alex turned in a slow circle to face the land, his eyes widening in surprise at the sight of a dwelling. Bone weary and bleeding profusely from a sizable gash on his forehead, he limped toward the house. Surely, he could find help there. Smoke curled lazily from the chimney, a welcome sight to his eyes.

The front door swung silently open before him. Cautiously, he stepped across the threshold and felt a tingling sensation. It started in his toes, to work its way upward through his body. The pain faded as odd warmth filled his body. The fireplace beckoned him; to rest his tired bones in a wing chair placed cozily before the hearth.

Alex sank down into the welcome relief the chair offered, and then abruptly stood back up afraid his wet clothes would damage the fabric of the cushions. Slowly, he reached out and touched his fingers to the velvet material. Odd, there wasn't a damp spot anywhere on the chair. Nor on him. His clothes were completely dry.

He turned toward the hearth, to the large mirror that graced the mantel. He could see the chair reflected there, but not himself. Alex passed his hand back and forth in front of the glass, watching in amazement. The room remained



frozen in the mirror, his own presence oblivious from sight.

A low keening filled his senses as he remembered the old gypsy woman. Their last day in port, Alex had been helping to stow cargo when she appeared. She had grabbed his hand and started to stroke his callused palm. Her gnarled fingers traced a ragged path, her grubby fingers poking and probing at his skin.

"You will see what others will not. Your time is not now. You are destined to walk for eternity, lest you find true love."

Alex shook his head to clear his thoughts. His knees felt weak as he braced his hands against the mantelpiece. In the hall, the front door closed silently, the latch clicking softly into place.

## Chapter Two

New York 2008.

Meg tossed and turned restlessly, the pale green cotton bed sheets tangled around her sweat-dampened body. She stood atop a cliff. Below her, the waves pounded against the rocky shoreline. The wind howled, blowing her short blonde hair around her face with its fury. She lifted her face to the mist that drifted over the land, the tang of the sea filling her senses.

It was then that she saw him. She reached out her hand to call him back from the cliff's edge.

With slow, definite movements, he faced her. The wind blew his long sun-streaked brown hair back from his face. Vivid blue eyes seemed to bore right through her as he met Meg's stare, before returning to his silent vigil.

Who was he?

Meg thought about the words she would use, if she were to describe his look. Three immediately popped into her mind. Intense, determined, haunted.

He turned and caught her hand within his grasp,

*drawing her near.*

*She found herself mesmerized by his eyes as he closed the distance between them and covered her mouth with his own. A stranger's kiss, yet it felt so right. Feather soft and painstakingly sweet, the sensation brought tears to her eyes.*

*He backed away from her, a sad forlorn look crossing his features.*

*"Wait. Don't leave me," she called out in desperation, unable to halt his retreat. Meg watched in confusion as he disappeared from sight before her eyes. He was gone. Vanished.*

The lilting strains of a country song slowly penetrated her consciousness, forcing Meg awake and back to reality. The clock radio played on, while Meg shifted in the bed to pull herself upright against the bed pillows. She moaned and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyelids in frustration.

It was only a dream. The same dream she'd had every night for the past week, ever since Eric's funeral.

Meg had watched the funeral from start to finish, until the last shovelful of dirt rested atop the ornate casket.

The funeral had been wall-to-wall mourners. Future wannabe starlets and big-screen hopefuls all had succumbed to Eric's savvy good looks and smooth talk. Each eager to share tales of their one night stand with the famous director. Every one of them the next in line for his casting couch. He had

died attempting to choreograph a dangerous stunt for the movie he was currently producing.

An avalanche of advice had poured in from friends offering polite suggestions as to how she should get on with her life, now that her fiancée was dead. If one more person patted her arm and told her she would one day find someone new, she swore she would throw up.

Meg bit back the urge to laugh, as a fit of hysterical giggles fought to escape her lips. She pushed back the rumpled covers of the bed. Her gaze landed on the large manila envelope on the nightstand. She reached for it and drew out the stack of papers nestled inside.

"Heron House is exactly what I need. Three bedrooms, kitchen with large eating area, spacious home surrounded by nature and water." The spec sheet went on and on. Meg squinted at the grainy photo she held in her hand. Her fingers absently traced a small round blur on the shiny facsimile page.

"I wonder who that is in the upstairs window?" With a shrug, she shoved the photos back in the envelope and dropped it atop the dresser. "Probably the previous owner," Meg observed to no one in particular.

A sense of calm surrounded her. Buying Heron House sight unseen seemed impulsive, even for her. Yet, in some strange way, it felt right. She couldn't figure out why, it just did. Heron House

would be her new home. A place she could finally call her own, to put down roots and establish a future.

"Today's the day we start over, Hershey. Time for a change of scenery. You can't cure heartache with Ben-Gay, that's for sure. Even if he did end up being a two-timing, double crossing womanizer."

A shiny, wet black nose poked its way out from the under the bedcovers, followed by a pair of intensely sorrowful black eyes. The chocolate brown Labrador Retriever yawned loudly, then flopped back down against the pillows.

"Some help you are." Meg scratched the lab behind the ears and was rewarded with a low groan. Smiling at the furry beast lolling on the bed, Meg stood and headed for the shower. Business awaited, there would be time to play later.

Oblivious to the magnificent skyline just beyond the floor to ceiling windows, Meg paced the spacious office. Restlessly, she shoved her hand through her hair, then shook her head. "It isn't worth my time or effort anymore, Lila. Everyone knew what Eric Malone was, so why deny it? I was the one who was blinded to the truth. Even you knew."

"I didn't want to hurt you any further."

"So, you chose not to tell me?" Meg turned and

faced her.

Lila nodded and rose from her desk to walk toward Meg.

"It doesn't matter." Meg declared. "It's over. That chapter is closed. I'm moving on. Away from the stares and the whispers, away from the jeers and rumors."

"You've never backed down from a challenge before. Why now?" Lila inquired softly, settling herself on the arm of the green leather sofa.

Meg sighed and let her forehead rest on the cool window glass. Traffic twenty-eight stories below looked like colorful bees, their shapes darting to and fro.

"Sweetie, do you really have to do this? I'm sure there's something we can do to change your mind. It's not too late, you know." Lila continued.

"Lila, my mind is made up."

"Meg, as your agent and friend, please reconsider. What in the world are you going to do in that god forsaken place all alone? If it's privacy you want, take a suite at the Plaza. You can afford it."

After the sale of her last two books, *King's Ransom* and *King's Return*, Meg had pocketed quite a tidy nest egg. Twenty-four weeks running on the New York Times bestseller list and both were still going strong. Meg exhaled and shook her head. "Lila, we've been over this before."

"Let me make you a nice pot of chicken soup."

"I'm not sick."

"Okay, how about a pound of chocolate and a Playgirl, then?"

"I'm not depressed, either."

"Who said anything about being depressed? Have you seen this month's centerfold? Honey, the ass on that man would heat up anybody's oven. What I wouldn't give to be his wallet." Lila's throaty chuckle filled the room.

Meg flopped down on the overstuffed leather sofa next to her friend and propped her elbows on her knees. "I'm going. Besides, I'm only a phone call away and roughly a nine hour drive from the city."

"Nothing I can say will change anything, will it? Your mind is all ready made up. You are so stubborn."

"So you keep telling me."

Lila enveloped her in a motherly hug. "Well then, darling, have a safe trip and call me when you get in so I know you arrived in one piece. Besides, I'll see you in August when you turn in *King's Renegade*."

"Don't remind me," Meg groaned.

\* \* \* \*

Twenty-four hours later, Meg tossed the mangled road map onto the passenger seat and smacked the steering wheel in frustration. "Where is that

turn?" She squinted in the bright sunshine and searched the road before her. Had she made a wrong turn? Story of her life. Wrong turns at every step. So far, she was batting zero. The Realtor assured her she wouldn't have any trouble with the directions.

"Whoops, almost missed it." Seeing her turn, Meg eased off the gas and tapped the brake. She turned up the crushed seashell drive and found herself speechless. Her gaze darted back and forth eager to encompass everything all at once. She parked, dropped the car keys in her pocket and slid out from behind the steering wheel. Hershey bounded past her in his haste to bark at the low flying gulls overhead.

The hustle and bustle, frantic pace of New York City seemed years behind her. The serene image the house presented took her breath away.

Above, an endless sea of puffy white clouds drifted in an azure sky. Below the translucent turquoise waters beckoned to her. Whitecaps chased one another to shore across the wide expanse of never-ending sand that shimmered like glass. Meg looked down the shoreline in both directions, and then swung her gaze back to the house.

Constructed of fieldstone and white washed wood, the house supported a red-shingled roof that shaded two-second story gabled windows. The overgrown hedge partially covered the front



porch, the faded wood rail almost obstructed from view.

The beep of a car horn off to her right broke into Meg's thoughts.

"Miss Carroll, you're here." Mrs. Boone, the Realtor, walked quickly across the drive to Meg and put out her hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I hope the directions were satisfactory?"

Meg nodded. "Everything's fine. You have the necessary papers for me to sign and the key?"

Mrs. Boone paused, her lips pursed into a frown. "I really wish you would reconsider, Miss Carroll. There are a number of other lovely seaside properties I would prefer to show you."

"Is there a specific problem with Heron House, Mrs. Boone? Perhaps there's something you're not telling me. The plumbing or maybe the wiring?"

"No, no. Everything within the dwelling is up to code. It's just..."

"Just what?" Meg prompted.

Mrs. Boone tossed a quick look over her shoulder at the house in the background and shuddered. "Heron House is haunted," she whispered.

"What?"

"Some say the house is haunted, Miss Carroll."

"You're kidding?" Meg shook her head in disbelief. "You expect me to believe that a ghost is running around scaring people here in Heron House?"

"It's true. All the previous occupants have been unable to last more than a week in the house."

"Well, not this one. I bought Heron House and I plan on staying a very long time. Forever, in fact. Now, shall we?" Meg declared emphatically, gesturing toward the front door.

Mrs. Boone nodded, reached into her pocket and extracted a solitary brass key.

Meg took the key and pushed open the white picket gate. She strode up the walkway, Mrs. Boone tagging along at her heels. Meg put the key in the lock and listened to the hollow clank as the lock turned. She shoved hard against the door, but nothing happened.

"It's the Captain," the woman whispered from behind her. "Oh, I fear we've made him mad."

"The door is stuck, that's all." Meg leaned harder against the faded red door, finally feeling it give. She pushed the door open slowly, and stepped into the entryway. A cold chill wafted over her as her body shivered slightly in response.

Meg turned to face Mrs. Boone. "See, told you, it was just stuck."

The house smelled pleasantly of dust. The ceilings were high, the windows tall. Despite the dust, the place had a certain grace, an elegance and sophistication. Before her, a centrally located staircase curved its way up to the second story. Meg looked to her left toward the kitchen, and then moved to her right toward the study. She

reached for the window's drapery cord, flooding the room with sunlight. Books lined the floor to ceiling shelves. The great masters of literature covered every row, she noticed. A massive stone fireplace took up an entire wall. Nothing else remained, except for a large bulky object swathed in a white sheet, set back in the corner. Meg carefully tugged the sheet free and let it drop slowly to the floor.

"Wow. Very impressive." The granite statue felt warm and almost lifelike beneath her touch as she caressed the contours of the piece. A tingling sensation started at her fingertips and worked its way up her arm. The feeling continued as though someone were running their hands over Meg's body, touching her everywhere. She backed away, but continued to stare at the statue. The broad forehead and high cheekbones of the statue gave way to a square, determined jaw. Obviously, a man accustomed to getting his own way. But it was the eyes that drew her attention. Although carved from stone, Meg had the distinct impression that they seemed to follow her movements about the room.

"That's Captain London." A voice behind her softly intoned.

Meg jumped and whirled around. Mrs. Boone stood just inside the front door, peeking nervously around the corner. "Captain London?"

Mrs. Boone nodded. "He owned the house back

in the 1800's. He had it built for when he retired from the sea, but alas never returned from the sea to live here. His ship went down in a terrible storm, and now he walks the corridors of Heron House. It's in the will that the statue must remain in the house, passing from buyer to buyer."

"Really, I wonder why?" With a last lingering look at the statue, Meg shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Boone, but surely even you must know there's no such thing as ghosts. Simply one's overactive imagination at work. Now, where can we sign the papers? I'd like to get settled."

\* \* \* \*

Meg bent down and added another bottle of kitchen cleanser to her already overflowing grocery cart. So much for easing into home ownership, she thought. Here she was practically breaking the bank on day one.

An older man wandered down the aisle toward her, his eyes bright as he planted his wizened fists on the edge of her cart. "So, you're the one who bought Heron House."

Gee, news travels fast around here, Meg thought. She smiled in return. "Yes, I did."

"Seen him yet?"

"Who?"

Indignant, the old man stomped his foot. "The ghost, of course."

"Look, there's no such thing as ghosts."

The old man cackled in glee. "That's what they all say before he runs them off scared and crying in their soup."

"Well, as you can see, I'm still here."

"Sooner or later, they all leave. Just a matter of time." He squinted one eye to get a closer look at Meg. "Then again, maybe the Captain's taken a shine to you. Never know."

Meg felt the rush of goose bumps rise on her bare arms and fought the urge to brush them away. "It's all just an old wives tale. Nothing more."

"Suit yourself, girlie. Suit yourself." He shuffled off down the aisle, laughing merrily.

Meg followed his retreat with her gaze. Did everyone believe that a spirit roamed Heron House?

\* \* \* \*

Exhausted, she carried in the last load of groceries from the truck, while Hershey bounded around the room in playful exuberance. The whole town was full of loonies. Everyone believed in the ghost of Captain London. Everywhere she had gone, people had commented.

With a weary sigh, Meg leaned her head against the window and stared out at the cove. Fog gently covered the land, creeping in on cat's paws. The

clouds hovered like wet, gray woolen blankets. The ebb tide revealed sand, crustacean-coated rocks and a mirrored sunset painted with a myriad of colors. She'd gotten what she wanted. A new beginning. A chance to start over. "This is our new home, Hershey."

Hershey surveyed his new surroundings with a loud sniff and happily wagged his tail.

Meg knelt in front of the hearth and rubbed her hands together. "At least I can still start a fire. Well, looks like tonight the floor and in two day's we'll be back in our nice comfortable bed."

Slipping out of her jeans, Meg neatly folded them and set them aside. The cottage wasn't the warmest place at the moment, but she couldn't bear the thought of sleeping in the only pair of pants she had at the moment. Straightening the sleeping bag in front of the crackling hearth, she picked up the leather bound book. "Now, let's see what we can learn."

A short while later, Meg shut the book with a heavy sigh. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the pile of rolled up blankets that served as a temporary headboard.

"Oh, to have lived back then in the days of the swashbucklers. To have been a pirate's wench, to have lain in a pirate's arms aboard a sailing vessel, being made love to over and over..." She mentally gave herself a pinch. Get with the program, she chided. You're supposed to be doing research, not

romanticizing. Meg felt the tug of sleep pull at her and gave herself up to the sound of the nearby water as it lulled her off to dreamland.

Tomorrow she would begin her next novel. One with a pirate and a wench, Meg thought with a dreamy smile.

\* \* \* \*

Just what he needed, another noisy tenant to deal with. The last one was bad enough. When were they going to leave him alone, in peace and quiet?

His strength waning, he walked slowly forward to face the woman on the floor in front of the hearth. Her eyes were closed in slumber, oblivious to his scrutiny. He watched as she tossed her head back and forth on the makeshift pillow, murmuring incoherently.

So, this chit thought she could make his home her own. The last tenant thought he could raise chickens in the living room. Pity the poor fool, he thought, recalling the ruckus that ensued when he had appeared before the man. He couldn't decide who had made a larger fuss, the astonished tenant or the frightened fowl, cackling loudly and leaving a trail of feathers in their wake.

Well, he hadn't walked the floors of Heron House for the past two centuries for naught. He paused and stared down at her once more. She looked weary, almost to the point of exhaustion.

Enough said, tomorrow would be soon enough to begin, he thought. Then again, maybe not.

The big beast by her side growled, and then whined.

Alex held out a hand and the dog padded forward cautiously. "Come here dog, I won't hurt you."

The dog moved slowly forward and sniffed the man's outstretched palm. With a whine, he nuzzled against the man, eager for attention.

Alex smiled. So, the beast liked him. What more could occur? First, that mousy Realtor came prowling around his home, then she brought this woman with her, and now the dog pressed tightly to his side. Alex struggled to maintain his footing as the animal leaned into him, sighing loudly. "Go lie down, you overgrown canine."

Alex turned back toward the hearth, eyes narrowed in concentration. The fire grew, the flames lighting up the dark corners of the living room. Higher and higher they climbed, filling the hearth with a vivid orange glow. Alex nodded in satisfaction, and then shook his head. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to get the hang of this ghost nonsense. Burning down the house around them wouldn't solve anything. That wasn't the way he wanted to remove her from his premises. With a rueful sigh, he concentrated his efforts and let the fire return to normal, then glanced back at the woman. A long, lithe tanned



limb slid out from under the sleeping bag and lay draped across the covers.

A deep sigh escaped her lips as he heard her mumble, "A wench, the sea, a strong, handsome pirate, mmm..."

So, she dreamt of pirates and wenches. Heat suffused his loins as he found himself unable to look away. The last time he had pleased a woman and been pleased in return was... He couldn't remember. Had it been that long ago?

Alex trailed his hand across her skin, up her thighs to the valley between, letting his fingers linger on her bare flesh. She moaned and stretched, her eyes still closed. The simple movement tugged the covers lower, exposing creamy white skin. It would be so easy to let his fingers dip beneath the scrap of lace and caress her intimately. He closed his eyes and let the feelings wash over him. He wanted more, he wanted to peel back the blanket, remove her clothing and bury himself deep within her flesh. Taking release from her, pleasuring her.

With a frown, he shook his head. Now, wasn't the time to lose sight of his objective. Pleasures of the flesh were beyond his realm, out of his control. But apparently not out of his thoughts. Or hers. Alex smiled. This could prove to be the most fun he'd had in years. A deep chuckle filled his throat. So, she wanted to be pirate's wench, did she?

The curtains wafted with a gentle breeze, the

fire flickered and died, then rose to a steady glow. The room empty, except for the lone woman asleep on the floor and the big brown dog, alert in the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Meg's eyes popped open. What had she heard? What was that odd sound? She sat up and leaned forward to listen. A thump, almost inaudible, but definitely a thump pushed her exhausted nerves into overdrive. She groped in the dark for the baseball bat she kept ready by her sleeping bag. Five years of living in New York had honed her survival skills considerably. Except this time, the baseball bat wasn't there. It remained packed among the boxes the moving company would be delivering the following day.

Noiselessly, Meg pushed back the covers and grabbed the fireplace poker from the hearth. She crept toward the door as quietly as possible. Hefting the poker in her grasp, Meg pushed herself back against the wall and tried to blend into the shadows. Nobody messed with her new home, she thought angrily.

The house was dark, except for the soft glow of the nightlight plugged into an outlet in the back hallway. Meg slipped quietly along the hall, her T-shirt cold and clammy against her skin.

She flattened herself against the wall and

peeked around the doorway of the study. Her breath caught in her throat. Someone had broken into the house. She could see his silhouette outlined in the moonlight from the window. He stood perfectly still. Sweat chilled her palms as she tightened her grip on the poker. She sprinted forward with a loud war whoop and brought the metal rod down toward his head.

Her body slammed into an unmovable force. Pain shot up her arms and jarred straight through to her teeth. When she closed her hands tighter and tried to move, it was as though she fought against an unseen opponent.

“Never touch my statue, madam.”

It wasn't a question, most definitely a command. Meg opened her mouth and quickly closed it again. She couldn't find her voice, fear paralyzed her throat. Never touch the statue? She raced for the wall switch and bathed the room in bright light. The fireplace poker fell from her limp fingers to crash loudly onto the wood floor as she stared in stunned surprise at the man before her.

“No need to fear. I won't hurt you.” He moved toward her.

Part of her wanted to flee, but she knew that it would be foolish. He would follow—of that she was certain. She reached up to touch the man now standing directly before her. Meg watched his gaze roam over her, raking her with his eyes. His square jaw felt smooth beneath her palm, his lips

warm and soft. He leaned closer, pressing a kiss to her lips.

“Welcome to Heron House, my dear.”

Then he vanished beneath her tentative touch, leaving her staring openmouthed. A distant hum vibrated through her, growing in intensity until it engulfed her every pore. Meg raised her hand to her lips, touching where seconds before his lips had been.

Her legs felt weak. Her knees threatened to buckle beneath her. She placed a hand on the doorframe for support and closed her eyes to wait for the sensation to pass. When she reopened them, the room remained empty, the spot he had occupied moments before bare. Meg darted a quick glance around her.

Where did he go? And, from where had he come? The warmth of his jaw lingered against her palm. Her hands trembled as she crossed them tightly across her chest. So real, so clear. Meg slumped against the door and sighed. Something told her this wasn't the first, nor the last time she would see him.

## *Chapter Three*

Meg's encounter with the mystery visitor last night kept her up for hours. She checked the locks repeatedly until satisfied no one could get in. The sun dawned slowly, softly lighting the sky in muted shades of pink when Meg finally gave in to sleep.

It was almost noon when she groaned and turned toward the clock radio atop the living room mantel. Her bones protested as she rose from the cold, hardwood floor. Meg kneaded the small of her back in an attempt to ward off the ache she knew would be forthcoming.

After downing a less than nutritious breakfast of cola and crackers, she set out to brighten the dark and dreary interior of Heron House. Armed with paint and rollers, Meg tackled the walls of the rooms with renewed vigor. Luckily for her, there were only two painted walls in each room to contend with. The other walls were either windows or stone hearths.

Hours later, a new soreness settled into her weary bones, the kind that came with the satisfaction of hard work well done. The walls of the study and master bedroom shimmered in the afternoon sun. Through the open window, the smell of lavender from across the fields mixed with the salty breeze to dispel the odor of freshly painted walls. She surveyed her handiwork and smiled. "Perfect. Two done, tons to go."

Dusk fell as Meg stood on the front porch savoring her tea and watched the sun sink slowly into the water. Blue herons and gray osprey dotted the shoreline, wading in the shallows searching out their evening meal, their beaks dipping swiftly into the receding tide. Daisies spread a vivid carpet of white across the open fields around her. The rustle of the windswept grasses and the smell of sea salt filled the air. Across the hills, clapboard houses stood, a profusion of vivid colors:—autumn red, mustard yellow and forest green. Bright lights adorned the windows. Even from afar Meg could see their welcoming glow.

With a contented sigh, she walked down the steps and wandered toward the rear of the house. The back gardens were in no better shape than the front appeared to be. Both overgrown and choked with weeds. The once fragrant blooms of the flowers hidden, buried deep among the undergrowth. But not for long. Meg had plans for

that, too.

According to her paperwork, the yard had once been a massive flower garden. Now, all was lost, untouched by human hands for many a year.

Tea sloshed over the rim of her ceramic mug, as Meg stumbled and sought to regain her balance. Slowly, Meg lowered herself to her knees and set the cup aside to pull away the clinging weeds. A square memorial marker lay buried beneath the wild vines. "Captain Alexander London. Born October 17, 1822, died at sea August 15th, 1852..."

Meg brushed the dirt off the surface, her fingers tracing the letters. The brief inscription piqued her curiosity as her eyes fixed unseeing on the marker, her thoughts drifting to a forgotten time and place. As the leaves rustled a sad forlorn melody, the wind rose to pluck at the tree branches. Her neck tingled. Absently, Meg rubbed her hand across it, goose bumps chasing down her spine.

Then she felt it again, the warm breath that fanned the back of her neck. She didn't move, just stayed silent. After a minute, she blinked and shook her head. "Must have been my imagination again."

"I think not, madam."

The voice caught her by surprise. Meg leapt to her feet in a mixture of surprise and fear. Her gaze darted around the empty yard, finding nothing unusual. She could feel her heart hammer as she raced for the security of the porch, through the

back door, to lock it behind her.

Her breath came in frantic gulps as she forced herself to breathe normal. Across the kitchen the telephone rang, shattering the silence. Meg warily lifted the receiver. "Yes?"

"Phone check, ma'am. Phone's operational." A nameless voice confirmed.

Meg exhaled loudly. "Thank you." Replacing the handset, she pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes. Less than two days of living alone and already she was seeing and hearing things.

\* \* \* \*

Alex found himself intrigued by the petite auburn haired dynamo that bustled about the room in front of him. Her bright green gaze darted back and forth as she unpacked large metal boxes, placing objects in the room. She dressed like a boy in those faded clothes she wore, but Alex knew underneath she was all woman. Soft and supple, with generous curves to warm a man's lonely nights. To cushion his head when times became rough, to...

Alex bit back a curse. What was this chit doing to him? All the others had gone shrieking into the night, some never returning to retrieve their belongings. This one made him think of making love into the wee hours of the night, exploring her body, touching her with his hands, his mouth, and



then his.... Banish the thought, Alex told himself.

A strange combination of wooden tables lined the wall of his study as he watched her crawl beneath one with a skinny cord. A smile crossed his face as he moved forward.

\* \* \* \*

Meg pushed herself backward out from under the desk. Rising to her knees, she gave the table a final shove to put it back in place. "There, everything's all set up," she said with a satisfied smile. "Hey, what the..."

"Bring me ale, wench." A voice boomed behind her.

Meg jumped to her feet. Her hand rubbed her stinging backside. She had the strangest sensation of having just been pinched. But it was impossible, wasn't it? She looked about the room. Slowly, her gaze moved right to left, then back once more. No one there but her and Hershey.

"Where's my ale, wench?" A rich deep laugh filled the room and her ears.

Meg pivoted; and her eyes grew wide at the sight before her. She covered her eyes with both hands and took a slow cleansing breath. "Okay, deep breath. Exhale. I've just been working too hard."

Alex folded his arms and calmly regarded the woman.

She slowly opened one eye. The figure still stood before her. Meg stared at him in disbelief. Her stomach flip-flopped. "Who are you?" She tried to sound brave, but the words came out more like a squeaky whisper.

"Captain Alexander London, at your service." He smiled a sad smile and bowed low.

"That's impossible. You're dead." Meg replied, nervously licking her lips. She tried to look away from him and found she couldn't. His arresting blue eyes and fierce scowl only added to his ruggedness.

"Do I look dead, madam?" He took a step forward.

Meg fought the urge to move back. "No."

Another step closer. "Do I feel dead?" Tenderly, he ran his fingers down the side of her neck, stopping at the swell of her cleavage.

"No." Meg gulped. She shuddered, though not from the cold or fear. It was the touch of his flesh to hers that gave her goose bumps. His very real, very warm flesh against her skin. And where his hand was currently positioned did nothing to calm her nerves.

"Pity, isn't it? Though I fear I am most certainly dead." He removed his hand from her chest.

She'd never seen a ghost before, except in the movies.

"Another innocent sent to evict me from my humble abode, I see."

"I'm hardly an innocent."

"Shall we find out?" He took another step closer, his hip brushing her thigh, closing the distance between them.

"Stop right there, buster." Meg held up her hand to halt his forward progress.

Alex reached out and laced his fingers within hers, his palm warm against hers. "Your wish is my command, madam."

Meg tried to focus on the man before her, to ignore the butterflies that threatened to escape from her stomach. "How come you're not gross?"

"Should I be?"

Meg looked him up and down, confusion clouding her mind. "I thought a ghost would be more disgusting looking, all blood and guts hanging out like *Beetlejuice*."

"Beetle juice? They make beverages from insects, do they?"

Meg shook her head. "No."

"So sorry to disappoint you. Do you know many ghosts, madam?"

"No, you're the first one."

"Obviously, your observations are mistaken."

Meg nodded, but didn't offer more. A loud bang drew her attention to the front window. She crossed the room and pulled back the white lace curtains. "Quick, recycle yourself. The movers are coming."

"What?"

"You know, vaporize—whoosh out of here. Regurgitate or something. Whatever you ghosts do to disappear."

"You want me to vomit? Here? I think not, madam." He crossed his hands over his chest.

"Please, just go," she begged him. "They'll see you."

"No one can see me but you. Others are oblivious to my being. Unless I deem otherwise."

"Please, I really would prefer that you go hide somewhere, at least until they're gone. Please, Captain London."

"Oh, bother."

When she turned around, he was gone. Meg clasped her hands over her stomach and took a deep breath. "I can do this." Then she opened the front door and gave direction to the movers. The two workmen carried the furniture into the living room through the space recently vacated by the ghost.

A few hours later, Meg dropped into the chair and pushed her hands through her hair. Captain Alexander London's ghost was real? Had she really carried on a conversation with a ghost? Bemused, she grinned. Things were getting weirder by the minute and yet, for some strange reason she couldn't comprehend, Meg found herself looking forward to his next visit.

\* \* \* \*

He stared at the unfamiliar brightly colored walls. What had happened to the dark tones of his study and the wood panels in his bedroom? A strange, yet not unpleasant odor filtered into Alex's senses as he entered the study of Heron House, coming to a halt behind Meg. "Blast it, madam, what have you done to my walls?"

Meg jumped and placed a hand to her racing heart. "I changed the color."

"Why. What was wrong with the way they were?"

"Too dark and depressing. Cream is much more fresh and appealing."

"Change it back," he ordered.

\* \* \* \*

"No can do." Meg shook her head and swiveled around in the chair to face him. He stood in front of her, arms crossed angrily across his chest. His open white shirt revealed a muscular chest sprinkled with curly hair. She noticed he adopted that defiant stance a lot.

A lock of wavy brown hair fell casually across his forehead, and Meg fought the urge to brush it back. She paused, giving herself time to assess the man before her. His blue eyes bore into her, compelling and magnetic. He had an air of authority and the appearance of one who

demanded instant obedience.

Too bad Meg had always had a problem with authority figures. She bit back a grin and thought back to Sister Mary Margaret and the sixth grade science class. If God wanted frogs to fly, then he would have given them wings, Sister had said. How was Meg to know that four Popsicle stick wings duct-taped to the frog's legs weren't enough to keep him airborne from the second story classroom window. And cleaning up splattered frog wasn't exactly a fun way to spend her lunch hour.

"I said, change it back," Alex repeated, his voice low.

She rose from her chair and stopped an inch short of his chest. "And I said no, I won't change it back. For your information, I bought and paid for Heron House and the wall color stays."

"Heron House is mine and I won't have some young slip of a woman telling me what to do," he bellowed.

Meg stamped her foot on the wooden floor. "Stop treating me like I'm a child."

Captain London merely cocked a brow sardonically. "Next, you'll be asking me to help pick out draperies."

"No thank you, Captain London. They're already chosen."

"I won't stand for it, madam. This is my home, do you understand me?"

"Then, Captain, I suggest you find yourself a seat before you huff and puff and give yourself some ghastly ghostly affliction."

Alex sputtered and let out a string of curse words that would darken even the sunniest sky.

Meg closed her eyes and drew in a shaky breath. "Listen here, Captain Bly, I'm not going anywhere. If you think you can scare me out of here, and then go for it." She marched through the open front door, letting the screen slam loudly behind her, Hershey in hot pursuit.

Without conscious thought, Meg hurried her way down the stone steps carved into the hillside. Waves pummeled the beach. Blinding spray pelted her cheeks. A milling kaleidoscope of sea gulls flew overhead, hoping for a handout as she fought to calm her nerves.

"Cold day in hell before I leave here," she muttered. "Let him try and spook me." She looked up at the house, to the figure that stood framed in the living room window. "Got that, Captain. I'm not going anywhere," she shouted.

The chilly water surrounded her ankles as she stood glaring at the house atop the cliff. Meg gasped and looked down. She'd forgotten how cold the sea could be. She kicked at an incoming wave with her bare foot. Hershey bounded through the surf by her side, his excited barks frightening the sea birds into flight.

Alex moved to the window and watched Meg pick her way carefully down the rocky hillside to the beach. Who in blazes was Captain Bly, he wondered? He wandered about the study in her absence, his fingers lightly touching the strange metal boxes on the wooden tables. A blinking red light flashed on and off, and then a shrill ring pierced the quiet.

Alex moved back a pace with a scowl on his face. Through narrowed eyes, he watched the slip of paper slide out of the gray box. His eyes honed in on the black print. He picked up the paper and read the first few sentences.

"Heron House deed recorded yesterday at Point Blanc Courthouse. Documents will be sent to you by mail within two weeks."

Alex dropped the paper as if it were on fire. So, it was official. She had succeeded in purchasing Heron House out from under him. But he would be damned sure she didn't reside in it a minute longer than necessary.

His gaze lifted to the window, to the lone figure pacing on the beach below, the huge creature she called Hershey beside her. Stupid name for man's best friend. How could a dog be man's best friend, when all it did was slobber all over you, lose its hair on your furniture and drink from the commode. Not exactly his idea of a perfect



companion. From this view, the woman looked small enough to be a child. An innocent babe out for a day at the shore.

An impatient sound escaped his lips. He had seen enough of her to know she was no child. Long, tanned legs tormented his thoughts; while her sleepy whispered sighs tortured his brain. Flashes of bare skin burned themselves into his memory. No, she had to go. The sooner the better, he decided. There was more to this woman than met the eye.

Alex strode from the room, his temper flaring as he formulated his next plan of attack.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning Meg stood in the kitchen doorway and surveyed the mess. Pots and pans littered the counters, silverware lay strewn across the table and her temper was on the rise. Her dishtowels littered the floor, as did an entire package of shredded paper napkins. Meg shook her head and mentally counted to ten. So, the Captain wanted to play. Fine, she was game. Anything he could dish out, she could handle.

Somewhere she'd read that apparitions were like animals, you should never let them see your fear or they'd get the best of you. *Not this time*, she promised herself. Behind her the refrigerator door opened and closed with a bang, time and again,

the sound echoing in the otherwise silent room.

Captain Alexander London's spirit was in an uproar and on the prowl.

"While you're in there Captain, would you mind pulling out the chicken? I think I'll make a casserole for dinner. Oh and grab the carrots, too, please."

The package of frozen chicken hit the countertop beside her with a dull thud. Then the refrigerator door slammed shut a final time.

"You forgot the carrots." Meg smiled in satisfaction, slid the chicken into the microwave and hit the defrost button. Round one to her. If this was the best he could do, she was in for an easy time of things. Then again, maybe this was just the calm before the storm.

After the casserole was assembled and back in the refrigerator, Meg poured herself a cup of tea and headed to the study, ready to immerse herself in her work. *King's Renegade* was still just a kernel in her brain, yet she needed to turn it into at least fifty pages before the next week ended. Settling herself into her office chair, she took a deep breath.

"What's all this?" His deep voice boomed from behind her.

Startled by the Captain's sudden reappearance, Meg jumped. Putting her hand to her chest to try and clam her wildly beating heart, she sighed and hit the save button on the keyboard. "This is what

I need to work."

"What are you doing?" the Captain asked, as he wandered about the room picking up pencils, pens and anything else within his reach. He stopped in front of the fax machine watching as the green light blinked off and on.

"Don't touch that."

"Why do you need all this?" he asked.

Meg groaned. His questions were getting on her nerves. He sounded like an impatient three-year-old, out to play twenty questions, except his version felt more like fifty questions.

She chose her words with care, trying not to sound too harsh. "I write romance novels. My publisher is in New York and I'm here. All this equipment helps me get the job done and my manuscript where it needs to be."

"What's wrong with the mail service? That demented man who drives like demons are after his very soul whenever he is around here."

Meg shook her head and turned back to the keyboard. "Almost outdated. The mail service takes too long. The fax or even email can have it there in minutes. Soon mail carriers will go the way of the dinosaur."

"I see," he said, not quite sure he did at all. "That's too bad."

"Captain, with all due respect, I really need to work. If you wouldn't mind," Meg motioned to the hallway, "maybe you could go for a walk

outside or something."

Alex shook his head and clasped his hands behind his back. "No."

"Why not?"

"I can't leave the house. I must reside within these walls for all eternity. To remain among the living. Yet not truly alive..."

"Well then, would it be possible for you to go somewhere else in the house then?" She watched him pace around the room, reaching out to touch each piece of equipment in turn, then stop and stare in fascination at the screen saver.

He touched the computer monitor in wonder, only to draw back his hand and look at it in dismay. "What is this device?"

"This is a computer monitor. And this is called a screen saver." Meg pointed to the image on the glass screen.

"And its purpose?" he asked.

Meg sighed. More questions. "A screen saver allows you to leave your computer on all day while you work. If you leave the computer for any length of time, this comes on the screen and sort of puts everything in a holding pattern until you return."

"Are all screen savers, as you call them, half naked men and women?"

Meg could feel herself blushing clear to her toes. She forgot how different things were in her time than in Captain London's. "No, this is the

cover of my last book. King's Return." She pointed to the monitor.

"Hmm, very odd," Alex reached out and touched the screen again, this time tracing the outline of the woman's form.

"It may be odd, but it gets the job done. Something I can safely say is not happening with me at the moment."

The Captain had the good grace to look ashamed. "Dear, Miss Meg, please don't let my presence interrupt you. I'll just sit back here and observe." He lowered himself onto the sofa and crossed his arms. "Please go right ahead."

Meg shook her head. With just a nudge of the mouse, she sent the screen back into action. *Okay, back to Chapter One.* She closed her eyes and focused. *Blaire and Morgan were on the beach. They were saying their goodbyes.*

She positioned her fingers over the keys and started to write. The words flowed, the scene appeared before her, played out in her mind as though watching a movie. The characters came alive beneath her hands as she interwove their thoughts, feelings and lives with one another. Her words poured onto the pages in a rush, each sentence more poignant than the one before.

"Why does he hold her like that?" Alex's voice broke her concentration; and her thoughts scattered as she came to an abrupt stop.

"What?" Meg looked over her shoulder to find

the Captain scant inches away from her.

"A real man would not hold a woman thusly. He would take her into his arms, hold her tightly to him and never let her go if he thought they were to be separated for all eternity. Not hold her at arm's length as though she were his sister. But more so, the night before he left for the sea, he would have taken his woman to his bed. Give himself to her, pleasure her, and in return, slake his own needs. He would make love to her all night long, claiming her, marking her as his own."

Alex tugged at Meg's arm until she stood. "Like this. He would do this." He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her tight to his chest. "Then he would lower his gaze to her, look into her eyes and see only her."

His hands moved across Meg's back, lower to cup her butt in his grasp, to pull her even tighter to him. Alex lowered his head and kissed her neck, light, soft kisses meant to show her what his words were trying to say.

Meg gave in to his ministrations, tilting her head, exposing her neck further. She knew she should tell him to stop, but she couldn't.

"He would take the woman to his bed, remove her clothing piece by piece, kissing the flesh bared in the process. Then he would raise himself over her and bury himself within her body, giving them both the release they sought."

His nearness unnerved Meg. She forgot her

anger at the interruption as she found herself fascinated by his touch. So warm, so alive. He held her tightly to his chest. She could feel his heartbeat as strongly as her own. She could also feel something else. His erection, pressed snugly to her stomach. Funny, she thought ghosts couldn't get erections. Especially not ones like this. How odd. His voice sent shivers up and down her spine. "Captain, please..." Meg broke in. Forcing herself to take a step back, she broke contact.

"A man who goes out to sea on a regular basis knows the loneliness the nights can bring. Hours away from loved ones, with nothing more than his crew and past memories to keep him going. Such a man would put all his hopes and dreams into that last kiss. He would make sure the woman he left behind knew he would one day return to reclaim her love and her bed." Alex took a step back.

"Oh, that's so beautiful." Meg stared at his face, and sought to memorize every inch. His sun bronzed jaw, the jagged, time whitened small scar that graced his left temple, even the glint of silver that flashed in his eyes as his words impressed themselves on her memory.

\* \* \* \*

"The sea can destroy you. A Captain must ride out the heavy winds and rough seas, lest they devour

his soul," he added quietly. "No woman should endure the loss of her man to the briny depths. No one should."

Alex experienced a flood of sensation so intense, it felt as if his body had been jolted back to life. He looked down at the woman in his arms and fought back the impulse to kiss her. To show her exactly what he meant, to impress upon her the loneliness a man of the sea endured. He drew a deep breath to curb his arousal. That would never do. Somehow, she had once again gotten under his skin, gotten inside his head to test his resolve.

He turned toward the window and closed his eyes to compose the fire raging within him. If she had not pushed herself away from him, Alex had no doubt he would have continued touching her, kissing her and yes, even removing her clothing to bury himself within her. Good Lord, how could she invoke such feelings within him? He was a ghost, a spirit, the mere shell of the man who had been known as the *Devil of the Deep*.

"Were you that man?" she asked him softly.

"No," he replied hoarsely. "I chose to go down with my ship, not abandon her. I'm neither a coward nor a martyr, madam."

"I never said you were either one, Captain."

They stood staring at each other for what seemed an eternity. Then with a resolute sigh, he turned toward her. "Write it down before you



forget." His voice sounded unsteady even to his own ears.

"Huh?" She blinked up at him. "Write what down?"

"Have you not heard a word I said to you?"

Alex watched as she pulled herself up to her full five foot five height. "Of course I heard you. I'm not deaf." She lowered herself back down into the desk chair and swiveled to face the screen. He noted her hands faltered on the keys. He knew there was one inevitable question she desperately wanted to ask him, but didn't. Did a woman await his return that fateful night? Was there someone who longed to share his kisses, his touch and his bed?

\* \* \* \*

Kicking off her slippers, Meg dropped the hairbrush on the dresser and gave a soft sigh. Today had been one of the most trying days of her life. She propped her elbows on the dresser and stared hard at her own reflection in the mirror. What was wrong with her?

Life was going good. No, make that great. Yet at the moment, all she could think of was how Captain London had held her, looked into her eyes and made her feel as though she was the only woman on Earth.

Mentally shaking herself, Meg shrugged out of

her bathrobe and draped it across the foot of the bed. It figured, the only man who stood a chance with her was dead. Why couldn't she find a living, breathing guy? What was so hard about that?

With a quick tug on the comforter, Meg pulled the bed covers back and plopped unceremoniously onto the bed. The cold sheets hit her body, causing an involuntary shiver to run across her spine.

Summer couldn't come soon enough, she thought, clicking off the bedside lamp. Spring in New England was bright and cheery, unlike the snow and slush of New York. But still chillier than she would have preferred. Meg closed her eyes and let the softness of the bed surround her. After her earlier demonstration with the Captain on proper goodbye etiquette, her concentration had been ruined. Hard as Meg had tried, the words weren't there. A half a dozen times she stared at the blank computer screen, unable to get past the scene that repeatedly played itself out in her office that afternoon.

With a groan, Meg raked her fingers through her hair and turned on her side. "This is ridiculous. Get over him. He's a ghost," she muttered to no one in particular.

Just then, a loud crash came from the general vicinity of the kitchen. *The Captain was up to his old tricks again, no doubt.* Meg sighed deeply, and then shoved the covers aside, sat up on the edge of the

bed and fumbled for the lamp. Drawing a deep breath for strength, she moved to the door, pulled it open and came face to face with her new blue paisley bed sheets. *First it was her pots and pans. And now, her best linens. This time the captain had gone too far.*

"Look bucko, those are brand new sheets. You better not have cut any holes in them. Besides, I can see your feet sticking out from beneath the edges." Despite the overwhelming urge to laugh at the captain's latest attempt to scare her off, Meg turned and walked calmly back into the room, and did her best to ignore him.

"Blast it all." Alex swore from behind her.

"And ghosts aren't paisley." Meg tossed the comment over her shoulder.

Alex evaporated into midair leaving her sheets to puddle on the floor. Meg waited a moment or two for him reappear and, when he didn't, climbed back into bed and drew the covers up around her.

"You certainly do not appear to be a ghost expert," Alex said suddenly, hovering far too close for comfort.

"Do you have to do that?"

"Do what?" he asked innocently, a roguish grin belying his true feelings.

His smile unnerved her. She couldn't concentrate when he looked at her like that. Meg took a deep breath and fought to remember what

she was about to say. "Just appear like that? Couldn't you at least warn me of your impending arrival? I swear, Captain London, if I die of fright, I'm coming back to haunt *you*."

"What would you like me to say, Miss Meg?"

"I don't know. Shazam. Poof. Anything. Just don't pop in and out like that."

"I see," Alex stroked his chin in thought. "And I suppose this haunting nonsense isn't working either, is it?"

"No, it's not. I'm here to stay, Alex. Nothing you do will change my mind. And another thing, stop calling me Miss Meg. My name is Meg, just plain Meg."

"Goodnight then, just plain Meg." With that said, Alex vanished once more.

"You forgot to say, shazam," she mumbled with a yawn.

"Shazam." Alex's hearty chuckle echoed all the way down the hall.

## *Chapter Four*

Alex slowly stepped forward and paused by the bed to stare down at Meg. She lay asleep under the lumpy green bedcover. He watched her lips purse as she wrinkled her brow in frustration. Yet, her slumber continued on.

He drew closer still, studying her features. This young woman continued to defy him at every turn. Her sense of calm unnerved him. Had he lost his touch? Could he no longer scare those who resided within his house? Alex frowned and scratched his chin in consternation. What ghastly deed could he conjure up to scare her off for good?

He turned and paced the spacious bedroom. *His room.* Her belongings now occupied what was once his domain. Her furniture graced the room. The flowers in the brightly colored pottery vase atop the large wood dresser beckoned him closer, fluffy pillows in the chair offered up downy comfort. Everywhere he looked the homey touches reached out to him, and reminded him of

how long it had been since the house had benefited from the soft touch of a woman. How long had it been since he had benefited from the...

Alex swore under his breath. No matter where he looked, her presence set his blood to boiling, his pulse to racing and his body to stirring. A man's home should be his castle, yet the frilly, feminine pieces told an entirely different tale, he reminded himself sternly.

Alex strode to the glass balcony doors and, with just a glance, unlocked and opened the portals. As the doors swung inward, the cool night air drifted softly throughout the room. The scent of the sea teased him, taunted him to come back, to return once more to the sanctuary of the water. A past he would gladly give anything to reclaim, pay any price to obtain, yet...

*The old crone had scraped her ragged nail across his callused palm, her own fingers pale and gnarled against his own tanned skin.*

*Her lips parted, her breath strained and weak, as Alex bent closer to comprehend her words. Strange gibberish mixed with incoherent ramblings mumbled on the afternoon breeze. "Away with you, hag. Best be off." Alex tried to pry her hand from its death grip on his arm.*

*Her laugh filled the air as she jabbed at his chest. "You are the one." Her bone chilling cackle followed as she lifted her head to the sky and chortled again.*

*Alex shivered remembering her words. You will see what others will not. Your time is not now. You are*

*destined to walk for eternity, till you find true love.*

Was Miss Meg the one who would capture his heart? His true love? A mere mortal woman able to free him from his torment. At this point, she was more than a bane to his somewhat limited existence. She hindered his every move, yet frustratingly enough occupied his every thought. Something about her kept him from succeeding in his quest to evict all tenants. To spend the rest of eternity in the solitude of his home. He stared out at the dark night, his thoughts troubled.

Like a sail, the wind tacked and her perfume lingered in the air. The light floral scent tickled his nose. Alex fought off the urge to sneeze. Odd, how could he retain some of the Earthly habits that once were commonplace to him, when now the slightest task was a momentous obstacle he must overcome?

Alex sighed. Possibly his powers were waning. Could Meg be the one the gypsy woman had spoken of? A frown etched his face as a twinge of regret touched his soul. How often during his misspent youth had he proclaimed that someday he would own a sailing vessel, command a crew of well over a hundred men, chart his own course and set sail for ports unknown. His name would be spoken in a combination of awe and fear, his mere presence daunting.

He'd planned to return to Cape Cod in a different manner, fame and fortune following in

his wake, to reclaim his intended, to... His thoughts broke off at Meg's soft sigh. He shook his head and moved beside the bed, his gaze caught on her sleeping form.

Meg was different. What was it about this woman that intrigued him so? What was it about her that forced him to be on his toes at all hours of the day or night? The other tenants had given in without a fight, allowed themselves to be run off at the first sign of trouble. Not this one. Not Meg.

Ah, dear, Miss Meg.

His gaze skimmed over her body. Mind over matter, he chided himself. Always in control. He willed the tension from his limbs as he exercised that same control. It was time to get down to business. She had to go. The sooner he got rid of her, the better, his last thought as he faded from view.

\* \* \* \*

*Meg turned toward the dock, her steps slowing as she faced the man standing there. Her breath caught in her throat as he moved forward, his steps sure and steady.*

*"I must leave."*

*"So soon. We've barely had time..."*

*He silenced her words with a finger pressed to her lips.*

*She reached up to touch his face as he pulled her into his arms. Held tight to his body, she felt his arousal. He*



*threaded his hands through her hair, twisting the strands through his fingers, drawing her closer, filling her senses with him.*

*"Wait for me, my love. Wait for my return, will you?"*

*"For always, Alex. I'll wait for you forever."*

*He caressed her cheek, his callused palm rough against her skin. Then lowered his head and captured her mouth with his own, claiming her very being.*

*Meg surrendered to the sensations running through her, and prayed he would never let her go. If she released him, he would be gone from her life forever. She feared for his safety. The sea would swallow him whole if allowed the opportunity. She couldn't and wouldn't allow that to happen.*

*She dragged her mouth from his. "Stay with me. Don't leave," she pleaded, gasping for air, her shaking hands clenching at his broad shoulders.*

*He shook his head. "I can't, you know that, my dear. This will be my last voyage. Of that, I promise you, my love. This is the final trip. I must leave. It's time."*

*"No," her anguished cry split the air as he lifted her fingers to his mouth and placed a tender kiss upon them. "Alex, please don't leave me." She watched him turn and stride down the dock toward the waiting vessel. The white sails billowed in the wind, straining at their moorings to get underway.*

*At the end of the dock, Alex stopped and lifted a hand in farewell.*

*Meg trembled violently, frightened by the premonition that she would never see his safe return.*

Meg struggled upright in the bed, her thoughts jumbled. Her hand was unsteady as she pushed it through her tousled curls, and drew a shaky breath.

The sun streamed through the windowpanes of the balcony door, reaching into the corners of the room to chase away the chill and shadows. Meg rubbed her eyes and tried to remember her dream. With a groan, she allowed herself to fall back against the oversized bed pillows. She had dreamt of Captain London. He was leaving, off on another long sea voyage and she was the woman he had left behind. What did it mean? She shook her head and tried to make sense of it all.

Could her dream have anything to do with their conversation the previous day? Meg shivered despite the warmth of the down comforter wrapped around her and pressed her hand to her lips. His touch, his kiss. Everything had seemed so clear. As though it had really happened. But it was only a dream.

An odd sensation flitted through her stomach as she recalled their kiss. So soft and tender, yet it had filled her with a longing she had never known before. A knock on the bedroom door broke into Meg's reverie.

Alex slowly opened the door and peered around the jamb. "Just plain Meg, are you awake? Shazam, my dear."

Meg smiled. "I'm awake. Come in."

Alex strode forward, a large tray cradled on one arm.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the room, causing Meg's stomach to growl loudly. "Captain, you never cease to amaze me." Meg tried to sneak a peek at the tray.

Alex quirked an eyebrow. "Quite unladylike, my dear. Didn't they teach you anything in finishing school? Most unbecoming behavior."

"I never went to finishing school, Captain London. I chose college instead."

"College?" Alex tested the unfamiliar word on his tongue. "What is college?"

Meg opened her mouth, and then paused. How did you explain college to a ghost? "College is like a university. After regular schooling, you can further your education by attending college."

"What do they teach you there? How to keep a home, clean and cook?"

"Not quite," Meg smothered a laugh. "They taught me how to further myself as a novelist."

"Interesting concept, this college of yours. Do other women attend or only novelists such as yourself?"

"Anyone can attend that has the inclination and the money. There's always something to learn, regardless of your age." She replied, bringing the cup to her lips, the aroma of the coffee invading her senses.

Alex frowned. "Did this college teach you it was permissible to steal a man's home out from under him?"

Meg choked at his words, the hot liquid burning her mouth. "I didn't steal your home, Captain London. I paid for it. A legitimate business transaction, something you do not seem to understand. Nor are you even willing to try, I might add."

Her words fell on empty air as Alex faded from sight.

"Coward," Meg whispered. "Can't even stay around and finish a fight."

A mocking laugh filtered through the room. "Fair is one thing, my dear Meg. Outright thievery is another."

Startled, Meg made a grab for the coffee cup as the hot liquid spilled all over the breakfast tray. She mopped at the soggy toast on the tray before finally giving up and dropping her napkin back on the plate.

*What a way to start the day,* she thought.

\* \* \* \*

Meg cradled her head in her hands and groaned. Why couldn't she concentrate? What was wrong with her? She yanked her notepad and pen from the desk and headed for the front porch. Maybe a change in scenery would do her some good.

"Come on, Hershey, let's go outside for awhile."

The big dog barked his agreement and ran in frantic circles around the foyer. Between the two of them, they had enough pent up energy to power a cruise liner, Meg thought ruefully.

Padding softly across the wooden planks of the porch floor, Meg settled into a wicker chair, and pulled her sweater tighter around her. Gulls circled low, their jarring sound filled the air overhead. Hershey bounded back and forth across the beach, his bark echoing off the rocks as he made one frantic attempt after another to catch the birds in motion.

Meg smiled and settled herself further back into the comfort the chair offered. "This is the life," she whispered.

A low chuckle drew her attention.

Meg started and sat up, as his form slowly took shape before her. She was unsure of his mood after their earlier argument. "Captain London, I need your help."

"If I assist you, will you vacate my premises sooner?"

Meg shook her head. "Nope, afraid not."

"Sorry, my dear, Miss Meg." He scowled and promptly vanished before her.

"Oh good grief. Must you always be so melodramatic?"

"I'm a ghost. Theatrics are my specialty."

His voice sounded low beside her ear, his

breath fanning her neck. Meg leapt off the chair, her note pad and pen falling to the floor as she pivoted to face him. His popping in and out without warning still unsettled her. "Damn you, Captain. Is this some sort of game you play with people? Do you enjoy scaring the wits out of them? Or is this some sick curse you inflict?"

Alex's face hardened. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to him. "What do you know about the curse? Tell me, Meg? What have you found out?"

Bewildered, Meg slowly shook her head. "Alex, you're hurting me."

Alex dropped his hold, set her from him and inclined his head. "Now tell me, what do you know of the old gypsy woman's curse? It is imperative that you tell me."

"I...I was only kidding. I don't know anything about a curse. I just meant..." Meg studied his face. "You're serious, aren't you? You have a curse on you. Is that why you can't leave here?"

Unwilling to answer, Alex looked away and moved to stand at the porch railing. His hands tightly clutched the faded wood.

Meg watched in wonder as a nervous tic jerked angrily in his left cheek. "I had no idea. I apologize, Captain London."

"It's nothing. I will deal with it myself. Please forgive me. I hope I didn't hurt you when I grabbed hold of your arms."

Meg shook her head. "I'm fine, really." She hesitated for a moment. "Alex, maybe I can help. This curse, is there a cure for it?"

Alex threw back his head and laughed aloud, the sound hollow and cold. "A cure? Of course, there is a cure. I must find my true love. Then I am free to pass on to my destiny. Very easy to accomplish, wouldn't you say, Miss Meg? What is that expression you are so fond of saying in this time period," he thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers together. "Ah yes, piece of cake, that's it, isn't it?"

Meg moved forward to touch his arm. "Let me help you. Let me find the cure for you, so that you can be free. Please."

"No," he stated flatly.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Do you ever do as you are told, Miss Meg?"

She grinned. "Not very often."

"I suppose this should somehow surprise me, yet oddly it doesn't. I wonder why that would be."

His muscles bunched under her fingers. The heat from his body seared her skin, as she fought the urge to pull away. For a ghost, he sure felt real enough.

Alex groaned and lowered his head. "Miss Meg, I can't allow you to put yourself in peril for me. I am a ghost. You are alive. This would not work."

She searched his face, seeing the sadness

reflected there. Maybe there was something she could do. Yet, was she prepared for the answers? Meg didn't know. "Tell me about the gypsy, Captain London. What did she say to you?"

"Why?"

"Maybe there's something you're missing, that I can pick up on."

Alex frowned. The gypsy's words were etched into his memory, yet he was loath to utter them aloud. "The woman warned I would never return home, that my voyage was ill fated. She came to me on the docks as I loaded cargo. She said...she said *I know of you, Captain London. I have seen you before, in my dreams. Soon your journey is at end, but not over. You will see what others will not. They are blind to your presence.*

He paused, and then continued. *Your time is not now, it has yet to come. You are destined to walk for eternity, lest you find true love. True love will set you free. Find it and you will find eternal happiness..*

He recalled the gypsy woman's cackling laugh as it had filled the air, and danced shivers up and down his spine. "I told her begone, and motioned to a crewman to have her removed from my sight. When I turned back, she was gone. She had said her words and disappeared. No one had seen or heard her. Only I. I never saw her again in port. It was as though she had vanished into thin air."

"No one saw her arrive or leave?" Meg questioned.



Alex shook his head. "I thought mayhap I had imagined her, had suffered a malady of sorts in the bright sun, yet I bear the scar of her touch. Look here."

He held out his hand, palm side up to Meg. There in the center of his lifeline was a small crescent shaped scar, puckered and white. Meg carefully ran her finger across it, feeling the tight, raised skin.

"Her touch seared my skin, as though she held a lit taper to my flesh." Alex unconsciously rubbed his palm against his side. "It is real, not imagination. The next four days were hell. My crew came down with influenza, some delirious with fever. Others were so violently ill they could barely hold their heads up."

"And you?"

"I suffered nightly. The crone haunted my sleep. Her keening bore through my skull and wove itself into my brain. I fought not to rest, to stay awake when exhaustion finally claimed me." He looked at Meg. "That was the night the storm hit. And..." His words trailed off as a grimace crossed his face.

"That was the night you died, wasn't it?"

"Aye, it was."

"The storm..." Meg prompted. A sinking feeling formed in the pit of her stomach when Alex closed his eyes and recalled events long past.

\* \* \* \*

The sounds, sights and smells from that fateful night drew him in, engulfing him, threatening to choke out all else. "A great fog came upon us and we were unable to see a hundred yards ahead. The storm swept in without warning. The waves pummeled the vessel, the wind tore at us, its mere presence threatened to send each and every one of us to the bottom of the sea."

He paused. "We fought to ride out the storm, but alas it was not to be. A lantern fell to the forward deck. The wind took the flame and carried it to every corner of my ship. I can still taste the smoke filling my nostrils, burning my eyes. The ship was torn asunder by the blaze and rocked to the bowels of the Earth by the explosion that followed. We were at the mercy of the sea. My men lay bleeding and dying around me and I was unable to aid them, unable to offer assistance of any kind. I couldn't save anyone." He turned his tortured gaze to hers.

\* \* \* \*

"You survived," Meg intoned gently.

A bitter laugh escaped his mouth. "For what? This?" Alex swept his hand toward the house. "I will never feel the roll of the sea beneath my feet as I command my crew. Never travel to unknown

ports of call and bring back treasures from afar. To never again feel the touch of a woman as she welcomes me home, to hold me in her arms after a long voyage and caress away my fatigue."

Meg stood spellbound before him as he moved nearer, his eyes raking her body.

Alex lifted his hand to her face and slowly traced a path down her cheek, lingering at her lower lip.

She closed her eyes as he slid his hand to her neck, to cup her head.

"Never more will I have the ability to love a woman as a mortal man. To feel the softness of her skin, to smell the scent that is uniquely hers, taste the lips that beckon me closer, and cry out to me in the night as I rouse her passion."

His mouth hovered mere inches above hers. All it would take was a shift in his position and they would...

Meg swayed forward into his embrace and Alex almost forgot how to breathe. He took control of her mouth, his lips claiming hers with a fierce desire. His kiss swept her far, far away. His tongue swept in to taste her, teasing and tormenting. He wanted more and prayed the moment would never end. He was drowning in a sea of emotions and sensations, whirling out of control. Emotions that were at the same time, strange and yet very familiar.

Alex pulled her to him, his body hard against

her soft, pliant form.

Meg moaned and clutched at the front of his shirt, her fingers bunching a handful of the linen fabric, eager to feel more.

Then it was over. The warmth that had filled his body abruptly chilled as Alex dropped his hands to his side and moved back a pace. "I am chained to this house, doomed for all eternity. Forgive my unwelcome liberties, Miss Meg. I was but caught in the past."

He watched as she opened her mouth, and then promptly closed it again. Her mind obviously racing furiously for an answer, for a solution to his problem, yet none came.

"Alex, do you believe the gypsy woman?"

"Aye, why else would I still be here?"

"Good point," Meg muttered. "But why?"

"That, my dear, Miss Meg, is a mystery. For until the curse is lifted, I will remain caught between worlds, lost to life and unable to claim death. Now if you will excuse me, I find myself rather fatigued at the moment."

Meg nodded and watched as he faded from sight, his solid form now opaque in the late morning sun. Dropping back down into the chair she recently vacated, Meg knew at that second her life would never again be the same.

## *Chapter Five*

*B*last the woman, she'd done it again! How had she managed to turn his thoughts of evicting her to those of passion? One minute he was telling her about his ship, the *Jeunesse*, the next he was ready to ravage her, to peel those odd-looking clothes from her body and learn what made dear Miss Meg tick.

Damn the woman, she turned him hard as stone in places he thought were long dead. The irony of that thought amused him. Her sun kissed skin, the soft clingy sweater, the swell above her top button. He needed her all right, just not in the sense she referred to. Her soft feminine body pressed tightly to his brought back memories of another time and place. To a night long ago when the only sounds were those of mutual pleasure being sought and given. Alex felt his stomach muscles clench and he grinned at the unwelcome reminder. He may be dead, but his body didn't seem to know, or mind the fact.

Alex paced the length of the living room, his thoughts at war. What was he to do now? He wouldn't give up his fight to reclaim Heron House. He had vowed many years prior that the world would leave him in peace, to endure the solitude of his lonely days without human intervention. Now, this chit thought to prove otherwise.

He stopped abruptly. Dear Miss Meg, could she offer aid for his plight? His lower body again tightened at the notion and he closed his eyes in repose. The aid he was thinking of at this exact moment had nothing to do with the curse, that was for certain. His aid required a bed and a lovely wench to wile away the hours. How long had it been, he wondered? Too long indeed.

Alex smiled, his mind drawing him back to a time and place many years past. Elizabeth. His willing bride. Eager to sample his kisses and mold her body to his. He remembered his last night before setting sail for New York. Elizabeth had hinted that she would not survive the long separation without a memento of his love, and boldly offered her body in exchange for one night of passion to sustain her through the lonely nights of his leaving. Alex obliged her to an extent. Though now he wondered why he had stopped her advances before they became too ardent. Their love had remained unconsummated. Elizabeth was not a woman to trifle with, she was to be his

wife. Unsullied, when she came to his bed.

Now, he was alone for all time. Alone in this house, alone with his thoughts and memories. And undeniably alone with Miss Meg. Alex's body argued with his brain. Ah yes, the feisty redhead who set his nerves on edge, and senses reeling every time she walked into the room.

He thought back to their kiss earlier that day. He hadn't meant it to happen. Caught up in his tale, one thing had led to another and he kissed her. Damn, it felt good. To feel her warm willing flesh beneath his hands. He could still taste her mouth, the lingering flavor of cocoa on her lips. Her scent—she smelled like fields of wildflowers, their essence blowing upon the wind. Her hands pressed against his shirtfront, her delicate fingers clutching at him, pulling him closer as she met his kiss.

Alex groaned. This was getting out of hand. He forced his mind back to the present. It was time to fall back and regroup. But how? Of that, he was not certain.

\* \* \* \*

Meg paused, her fingers poised over the keyboard. When had things gotten so complicated? She bought Heron House to escape the pressures of the city, but what had she landed herself into this time? A haunted house complete with a cursed

ghost. What more could a girl ask for, she wondered.

She lowered her hands to her lap, muttering. "Concentrate, you have to concentrate." Tapping a key, she brought up yesterday's pages, closed her eyes and forced her mind back to Blaire and Morgan, her current heroine and hero.

*Her hands reached out to him, drawing him near. Blaire pulled Morgan into her arms and vowed never to let him leave. "You can't leave me. Please stay."*

*He shook his head and backed away from her embrace. "I must go, my love. The sea beckons and she is my mistress. I will return to you. Of that, I vow."*

*"No, please." Blaire cried out, sure she would never see her love again. "You'll never come back to me."*

*He reached the end of the pier, turned and waved. "Wait for me, my love."*

*"I will. I promise I'll wait forever, Alex."*

Alex? Where had that line come from? Meg hit backspace and erased her last sentence. Great, first she couldn't get the man out of her thoughts, now let alone her manuscript.

Meg let her mind drift back to the previous night's dream. She'd been standing on the docks, watching him leave. He asked her to wait for his return. Hadn't she vowed to wait forever? Odd, now that she thought about it. Nah, it could never be. She was alive and he was dead. Well, okay so his body was dead, but boy did his flesh feel real and warm against hers.



Alex made her feel things she thought she would never again feel after Eric's betrayal. Things Meg could have sworn she would never trust herself to feel in a man's embrace.

"This is ridiculous," she uttered. "I haven't accomplished anything today." Meg reread the lone paragraph on her screen, and then pushed herself away from the computer terminal. Maybe a change of scenery would do her some good.

Heading into the kitchen, she paused and with a cursory glance, found the kitchen deserted. Since his abrupt disappearance earlier, the Captain had remained scarce all day. Meg poured herself a glass of ice tea and held the glass to her forehead. The cold felt soothing to her frazzled nerves.

Moving across the back porch, Meg let the screen door close quietly behind her and headed out into the overgrown garden. She really should do something about the mess, Meg thought. At least clear out the dead plants and work her way from there. Carefully skirting the tangled vines, she walked to the half buried memorial marker and sat down on the cool grass beside it.

Her hand lingered on the brass plate, the raised letters rough against her palm.

She thought about Alex, the terror he must have felt when his ship went down. The torture of knowing he alone had survived. Sort of survived, that is. In truth, he was stuck in his own personal hell without being able to pass on to the other

side.

If in fact the old gypsy woman had put a curse on Alex, would he really walk till he found true love? And more importantly, how was a ghost supposed to find true love if he was confined to the house for the rest of his life? "Captain, you have so many tales to tell, yet I fear your secrets far outweigh the stories." Meg whispered.

A slow rumble filled the air as she forced her mind back to the present and a quickly approaching storm. Rain splattered the ground around her as she rose and hurried to the security of the back porch. Great, she finally found a man who could set her senses on fire and he was dead. What more could go wrong?

\* \* \* \*

Meg sighed and hit the print key, then shifted in the desk chair, absently rubbing the small of her back. "This sure isn't getting me anywhere," she mumbled.

She picked up the stack of papers and paused to listen to the weather rage outside. The house shook under the pelting rain and gusts of wind that assailed the coastline. A loud crash drew her attention toward the back of the house.

Dropping the papers on the hall table, she headed in the direction of the kitchen and pushed open the door. Lightning eerily illuminated the

room in intermittent flashes of white. The raindrops sounded out an erratic rhythm as Meg crossed the room to peer out the back door. *What in the world?*

Grabbing her jacket from the coat hook by the door, Meg stepped out on the porch. The back yard was in shambles. A large and obviously very old oak tree lay strewn across the grass, torn from the ground by the sheer force of the storm. Meg picked her way carefully down the wooden steps amid the broken branches and leaves, then halted a few feet away from the tree.

The branches, looking like long spindly fingers danced crazily in the wind, swaying back and forth to snatch at her clothes.

Circling the mess, Meg stared down at the gaping trench in the ground where the tree once stood. A huge black hole, the dirt within slowly turning to mud with every pelting raindrop. She turned in a slow circle to assess the damage.

"Just what I need, more messes to clean up." Meg swiped a hand across her wet forehead, pushing back her sodden bangs. Thunder rumbled overhead reminding her that the danger from the storm had yet to abate.

Tugging her wet jacket tight around her, Meg gingerly skirted the waving branches. "Can't do anything more tonight, I guess. Might as well wait till morning." She turned back toward the house and took a step forward.

"What—" Her words were cut off by the peal of thunder as Meg tripped and hit the ground. Her palms sunk into the wet grass. Her knees stung from the unwelcome impact. Meg fumbled in the dark to right herself.

Streaks of lightning cut the darkness, chasing the shadows from the fallen tree and drowning out the sounds of the night.

Turning back to the tree, she eyed the oak warily, and then sucked in a deep breath. A glint of silver caught in the flash. Moving forward, Meg bent down, avoiding the swaying branches and peered amid the mess. Between the roots lay a silver box. Meg hesitantly reached out and pulled it free from its entangled position.

"Oh my," she exclaimed, dropping to her knees. Forgotten was the downed oak and sodden grass as she quickly turned back toward the house. Lightning split the sky, illuminating the box, giving Meg a clear view of the cover.

Bold tarnished initials graced the top. *A. L.* etched in what was once highly polished silver, Meg thought. Now, black and time worn from the elements. Drops of rain splattered across her face as Meg hastily tucked the box under her arm and carefully picked her way to the house. Upon reaching the kitchen, she kicked off her soaked tennis shoes and jacket, then padded across the room to head upstairs.

Once in the security of her bedroom, Meg

stripped off her wet jeans, and dropped them on the floor in a wet, mangled heap and settled herself on the bed, tugging the comforter tight about her.

Reverently, she fingered the ornately designed box, almost afraid of what lay within. Oblivious to the dirt and grime that streaked the exterior of the box and now her comforter as well, Meg reached for the clasp and slowly worked the rusted metal into the open position. Lifting the cover, she reached inside and withdrew a packet of papers. The packet was held together with a faded red ribbon, the color once vibrant, now pale and fragile. She ran her finger over the time worn paper, the ink faded and blurred from apparent water damage.

Eager to see what the letters contained, Meg shifted the bundle into the crook of her arm and moved back across the double bed. Carefully, she untied the ribbon. Strands of broken silk drifted down atop her comforter, the fragile fragments rotted by time.

Once the packet was open, Meg lifted the top letter and scanned the envelope. The handwriting stood out from the paper, bold and masculine. Alex's handwriting. She wasn't sure how she knew, she just did.

*Mistress Elizabeth Sage  
Heron House Heron Bay  
November 29th, 1861*

Elizabeth:

*I write this as the sky is bright and the clouds overhead are full of promise. The sea has been kind to us on our journey as we sail to New York. The winds have taken us far and the fates have been kind in our quest. It is my fondest wish to be reunited with you upon my return from my voyage. You have made me the happiest man on the Earth when you accepted my proposal of marriage. I could have shouted my happiness to the stars, yet I fear you outshine them with your smile. Your beauty bewitches me. I promise you will want for nothing from our union together. I assure you, my dearest Elizabeth, I will shower you with riches from far and wide as my bride. Please pray for our safe passage home and think of me on the long lonely nights.*

*With love, Alexander*

Meg gasped. Alex had proposed to Elizabeth almost immediately before leaving on his voyage. This was only the start of their courtship. He had left immediately after her acceptance and had not returned home to claim his bride. Meg closed her eyes and gnawed on her lower lip, feeling as though she had intruded on their personal conversation.

She reread the letter, slower this time, and then sighed. It was so romantic. His proposal and Elizabeth's acceptance. Even if Meg couldn't see or hear Elizabeth's words, she had a feeling they must have made Alex a very happy man indeed if the tone of his letter was any indication. Setting the letter aside, Meg reached the next one and

## *The Captain's Wench*

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opened it. Unsure of what she would find, she unfolded the faded paper.

*Mistress Elizabeth Sage*

*Heron House Heron's Bay, Massachusetts*

*February 1, 1861*

*Elizabeth, my love,*

*We have reached our destination safely. We made good time. New York is large and dirty. The streets are filled with vendors hawking their wares. Beggars openly canvass the streets, stealing and bribing money from the passersby. It is difficult not to feel their plight as we make our way to the merchant's storerooms. I have purchased lengths of silk from the Orient for Mother and you. I lie in my berth at night and imagine what you would look like, draped in nothing but the fine red silk and priceless pearls I carry upon my ship. I think of you day and night, you haunt my dreams with memories of your laughter and touch.*

*I miss your smiling face, my love. The nights are long and lonely without the familiar sounds of home to comfort me. With luck and prayer, we will be on our way home within the month. Then we can exchange our vows and start our family. I would like nothing more than to see you cradling our child during the day and locked tightly in my embrace in the wee hours of the night. Till we meet again, my love.*

*Alexander*

Meg sighed, his words caught in her head as she scanned the letter once more. The ink was smeared over the postmark, the address partially obliterated. With a groan, Meg leaned back against

the pillows. She lowered her head into her hands and shoved her fingers into her hair.

When had things gotten so messed up? Meg wondered. Paper crinkled under her palm and she looked down at the letter atop the comforter. Slowly she picked it up and slid the cream-colored paper back into the envelope, then laid it carefully back into the chest.

"Meg?" Alex's voice boomed through the closed bedroom door. "Are you awake?"

Startled, Meg shifted her gaze toward the door. She couldn't let him find the letters here. Not now. She had made it safely to the confines of her room without encountering Captain London; and she wasn't about to fail now.

"Just a minute please." Meg stuffed the box under the bed and adjusted the dust ruffle, then carefully settled herself back against the headboard. "Come in."

The door opened. and Alex peered around the doorframe, and then moved into the room. "Are you well? You look quite pale." He moved closer.

Meg shifted slightly and pulled the comforter higher, her fingers clutching the edge tightly. "I'm fine, just tired I guess. Is there something you needed, Captain London?"

Alex arched his eyebrow and glanced at her oddly.

Meg gulped and tried to meet his gaze.

"No. I won't disturb your slumber, Miss Meg.



Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Meg watched Alex pull the door closed behind him, staying silent in case he abruptly returned. After a few moments, she opened the folder she had brought up earlier from her office. The rest of the articles off the Internet confirmed what she had read shortly before.

The tale of the sea captain who died before returning home to his intended. His betrothed alone and waiting, for a suitor who would never arrive. The storm ended his life, taking away all he held dear, both on land and at sea.

Tears filled her eyes as she read on. Meg brushed a hand across her cheek and sniffed loudly. She pushed the clipping aside and reached for another. This one told of the wreck of the *Jeunesse*. How, due to the freak storm that the ship ran into, their chances for survival were slim at best. None of the articles mentioned that Alex had died trying to save his crew, nor did they relate the tale of his precious cargo stored safely below. Cargo which would have made him a very wealthy man.

\* \* \* \*

Alex stood by the bed, staring down at Meg. She looked so pale in slumber, so fragile. Yet when she was awake, she could beat down the fiercest man in battle, with her words alone. He slowly ran the

side of his hand along her cheek and watched her turn toward him.

She mumbled softly and frowned. "I'd have waited for you, Alex."

"What?" Alex's head snapped up. What did she mean?

Meg turned over in the bed, disturbing the covers. A sheath of papers drifted to the floor. Alex reached downed and lifted them up. He stared intently at it, and then looked to Meg. He read the contents. "Wake up, Meg."

\* \* \* \*

Meg struggled against the warmth of her bed, the sound of his voice cutting into her dreams. "Alex?"

"Miss Meg, we must talk. Wake up."

"Alex, what are you doing..." Meg saw the letters in his hand and gulped.

"How long have you had these?" he demanded.

"I, I printed them earlier this evening." Meg paled under his scrutiny.

"Have you read them?"

Meg nodded. "Yes."

"Then you now know why I am cursed for life."

"Alex."

"Don't deny it, Meg. You read the papers. Here tell me how I can cease this damned torture chamber and submit to eternal sleep."

"I don't know how, Alex. The articles don't reveal anything about the curse or the gypsy woman. Only that your ship went down in a freak storm and all were lost at sea."

Alex vanished before her eyes as Meg scanned the room. "What are doing? Where are you going? Alex, wait." She scrambled from the bed, tugging on her still wet jeans as she went racing down the hall in search of him. Meg skidded to a stop in the living room.

Alex hovered over the fireplace, the papers outstretched in his hand above the flames.

Meg reached out to stop him. "Don't destroy them, Alex. Please," she implored.

The curtains rose and fell as his fury filled the room. "Why should we keep them? They are worthless. Nothing is said about why I must walk for eternity, unable to find peace."

"No," Meg shook her head.

"Then what can you do to assist me?" Alex asked sarcastically. "Give your life to replace mine?"

Once more, Meg shook her head.

"So again, I am left with nothing."

Meg's gaze snapped to his face. "Listen buddy, you don't hold the monopoly on pity. It's better that you learned the truth rather than have everyone hide it from you. Your friends, your co-workers, even the people on the street knew more than you did."

Confusion etched Alex's features. "Why do I have the feeling we are no longer referring to me?" he asked softly.

"Never mind. Forget it." Meg turned away from Alex.

"Miss Meg," Alex gently took a hold of her arm, stilling her progress momentarily.

"Don't." Meg yanked her arm free and fled the living room. She tossed and turned what felt like a hundred times before she finally gave up, rolled over and looked at the clock. One in the morning. What seemed an eternity in actuality was only an hour. She pushed back the covers and rose, sleep eluding her for the present. With a sigh, she padded softly to the windows, barely noticing the cold wood floor beneath her bare feet.

Before her on the other side of the leaded glass, the world lay silent, unaware of her own inner turmoil. Meg pressed a shaky hand to the glass, her fingers outlining the occasional houses that dotted the countryside. Their vibrant colors now hidden under the cloak of darkness, their inhabitants snug and warm in their beds. She closed her eyes and let past memories engulf her. They washed over her in waves, first despair, than anger.

*"Hello love, so sorry I'm late." Eric breezed into the restaurant, nodding and waving, an occasional kiss to the cheek here, a pat on the back there before making his*

*way to their private booth in the corner. His cologne wafting through her senses, his attire impeccable. Heaven forbid, he ever showed up in disarray. That wasn't in his nature. But infidelity was.*

*"How could you, Eric? Doesn't our relationship mean anything to you at all?" Meg demanded, dropping the paper in the center of the table. Her anger simmered just below the boiling point.*

*Eric stared down at the picture, then slowly scanned the restaurant. "Keep your voice down, darling. People are beginning to stare. Besides, it was just a one-night fling. You know, sowing my wild oats before our wedding day," he replied.*

*"Your one night stand happened fourteen times," Meg said softly, tears burning the back of her eyelids.*

*"Meg, love, let's not make a scene." Eric turned and nodded to the couple walking past the table. "Greg, Marsha, nice to see you again." Then he turned back to Meg. "Besides, you know how it is."*

*"No, I guess I don't. I thought that two people who were supposedly madly in love with one another would be faithful to each other. I know I was. Apparently, you weren't."*

*"You know how it is in my business. You make a contact and you do everything in your power to keep it. For god's sake Meg, you're making a mountain out of a molehill. It was nothing. She meant nothing to me," he gestured to the photo, and then lifted a hand in greeting to another couple.*

*Meg shook her head. "It definitely won't happen again. This was the last straw, Eric." Meg tugged the*

*two-carat solitaire engagement ring from her finger.*

*"Have a nice life, Eric." Meg laid the ring on the table atop the front page headline article in the daily newspaper, across the photograph of Eric and his latest protégée locked in each other's arms, their eyes blind to the paparazzi snapping away with his camera.*

*Meg turned, head held high and walked from the restaurant. Her pride in tatters, she motioned for a taxi, closed the door behind her and let the tears fall.*

How could she have been so blind, for so long? Realization cut like a knife. Meg rubbed a hand across her cheek and felt the hot tears soak into her skin. She shivered and moved restlessly from the windows, pressing her shaky palms to her bare thighs. A thin silk chemise was no protection against a cold, wet spring night in New England.

Heron House was her sanctuary, her port in the storm away from the stares and whispers, the pitying looks and pointed fingers. With a shaky hand, she flipped on the switch for the bedside lamp, bathing the room in a soft glow. Meg jumped. "Alex, I didn't hear you come in."

Alex sat in the wing chair tucked in the corner of her bedroom. Dressed all in black from his shirt to the dark pants he wore. Head to toe, he looked a formidable foe, ready to do battle at a moment's notice. His face was hidden in the shadows, his countenance serious as Meg tried not to let him see her tears.

He shrugged. "There are some advantages to being a ghost."

"Very funny."

"Who did this to you, Meg?"

"I don't know what you mean," she moved toward the door, only to have her way blocked by Alex. "Can't you stay in one place? I really hate it when you pop in and out like that." She tried to step around him, but he refused to budge.

"I think you know exactly what I mean," Alex replied gently.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Meg turned away from him, refusing to cry.

Alex groaned, the sound loud and echoing throughout the room. "Why is it you females feel that you must drag out our deepest darkest secrets, but heaven forbid you reveal a speck of truth for us to assist you?"

"I don't need your help. I don't need anyone. Just leave me alone."

"I think not, Madam."

"Alex, please," Meg implored, close to breaking down in a puddle of tears.

"Tell me, my dear, tell me who hurt you so terribly."

Again, she shook her head, unable to tell him the truth.

A frown crossed his features. "Did he...?"

Meg looked up and held his gaze. "He lied to me, cheated on me, and then died in another's

arms."

Alex stood silent and waited for Meg to continue.

"I...I believed we would be together forever, just the two of us." She shoved her hand through her hair and laughed, tamping back her sobs. "I was so gullible. I believed every word, hung on his every breath." Meg sniffled and crossed her arms over her chest. "Then I found out the truth along with everyone else in the city. A day after learning he was unfaithful, I lost the child I was carrying. A child I believed would make everything right."

"Meg?"

She bit her lip, the sobs threatening to burst free, to wrench her heart from her chest with the sheer volume of her pain. Tears filled her eyes, drifting over her lashes to slide slowly down her cheeks.

Alex moved forward and pulled her quaking form into his embrace. "There, there, my dear. Ssh now. You're safe."

He stroked her back as she cried out her pain. The tears falling freely for the first time since Eric's betrayal. Minutes later, he felt her hand tentatively searching the front of his shirt. Then Meg lifted her tear stained face to his. "I'm sorry."

\* \* \* \*



Alex lifted his shoulders nonchalantly in response. "It will dry." His thoughts were jumbled as the feel of her brought back visions of long ago. Her attire left little to the imagination, but what it did not reveal was wrecking havoc on his senses. "So this is what you modern day women wear to sleep in. I highly approve, Miss Meg." He tried to lighten the mood, to alleviate her fears and draw his own attention away from her supple curves and dangerous scantily clad flesh.

"Alex, I..." Meg fought to control the flush that spread across her skin.

He traced a path along her bare shoulder, his fingers searing her flesh at the intimate contact. "This is much more appealing than the flannel gowns of my time. So much more accessible."

Meg was powerless under his spell as he caressed her skin through the silk gown. Goose bumps skittered across her legs as the night air teased her flesh. Alex lowered his head and captured her lips with his own. Meg moaned and clasped her arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

Unable to stop himself, Alex ran his hands down her back, the silky gown sliding beneath his touch, her sighs driving him to the edge of madness. Alex kissed her neck, and then trailed his mouth down her shoulder, pushing aside the flimsy thin strap. How easy it would be to carry her to the bed, lay her down and caress her body

until she surrendered to the passion that blinded them.

Her soft moans propelled him forward, as he raised his gaze to her face. She trembled within his embrace and he tightened his hold. "Meg."

She looked up at him with passion-dazed eyes. Alex bit back a groan and lowered his head, teasing the soft skin on her neck.

Meg tilted her head back, giving him free access to her neck.

He nipped and sucked, laved and caressed her before bringing his mouth back to hers for a blistering kiss. His fingers slid up the side of her nightgown, cupping her breast in his palm.

She groaned and pushed into his caress. "Yes please," she whispered.

Alex gave what she asked for. His tongue stroked the inside of her mouth, delving to taste her. His fingers toyed with her nipple, lightly squeezing, and then releasing. Pushing her gown off her shoulders Alex bared her to his gaze. "So beautiful," he murmured. He lowered his mouth to her breast.

Meg groaned, burying her fingers in his hair, tugging him closer. She wanted it all, and she wanted it now. "Alex, please."

He lifted his head. "Please what, Miss Meg. Please stop? Please give me more? Tell me what you want?"

"I want it all. I want you to make love to me."

Realization slammed into him like a raging bull. This could not happen. She was flesh and blood, while as he was nothing more than a thinly veiled resemblance of a man. Alex gently set her from him and struggled for conscious reason. "Meg, we cannot do this. We must stop. I, you..."

\* \* \* \*

Meg pressed a hand to her lips, shook her head slowly and focused on the man before her. What had she just done? She openly accepted his kisses and touch, to the edge of seduction. Taking a step backward, she put her hand out in front of her, not quite touching Alex.

"I'm sorry. This never should have happened. I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me, Alex. It won't happen again." Meg turned and fled the bedroom, unsure of where she was going, only that she needed to put space between the Captain and herself.

## *Chapter Six*

Alex braced his hands against the fireplace mantel, shook his head and swore. Whatever could he have been thinking? This was absurd, ridiculous, and definitely ludicrous. For god's sake, he was dead. Not some flesh and blood, living, breathing mortal man. It wouldn't ever happen again. Of that, he was damn sure.

As long as he could keep his mind and emotions under control, there would be no more episodes like this one. Then again, if this was any indication of dear Miss Meg's passion, he was damned sure no other man was going to sample her wares while she resided within the walls of Heron House.

Poor Meg, Alex thought. His intentions were to comfort her through her tears, to help her overcome whatever fears her ex-fiancée had left her with. Instead, he had found himself attracted to the feel of her warm flesh pressed to his.

Alex closed his eyes and groaned. Her skin, smooth as silk. The feel of her soft velvety hair

brushing across his cheek. Memories assailed him as he recalled the taste of her lips, the lingering scent of cocoa mixing with her fragrance.

His emotions reeled out of control with their single kiss. She was his equal, meeting him kiss for kiss, touch for touch. No longer a scared and vulnerable woman, at that moment, instead a potent combination of temptress and vixen. Part of Alex wished they would have made it to the bed. To continue their exploration of one another, bringing fruition to their lust.

*Lust.* That one lone word stopped him cold and he hung his head in shame. How Meg must hate me, Alex thought. She had offered to assist him in his plight for an end to this eternal emptiness and in turn, he practically seduced the woman.

*Elizabeth.* Meg was nothing like his beloved fiancée Elizabeth. Elizabeth was tall and slender, her long dark tresses carefully coiled into a neat and tidy bun at the nape of her neck. Her clothes, tailored and chosen with care displayed nothing of the woman concealed within. She would never have allowed her temper to show in public, nor raise her voice in a display of defiance against him or anyone else.

Alex chuckled. No, his Elizabeth was nothing like the feisty redhead who roamed the halls of Heron House at this very moment. Miss Meg wasn't afraid of his abrupt appearances and departures. He startled her from time to time

causing her to call him all sorts of names. And her clothes. Alex groaned aloud. The thin chemise she called a nightgown could drive a man wild with desire. Her rosy skin glowed in the firelight, her hair loose about her shoulders in sleepy disarray. He felt his lower body tighten at the thought of what the chemise concealed.

No, that was definitely something Elizabeth would never consent to wear. She would have been garbed head to toe in white cotton, a prim high neckline and long hem covering every inch of her body, even on their wedding night.

What would Meg wear on her wedding night, Alex wondered? Would it be something like she had on this evening? Or possibly something with less silk. He tightened his grip on the mantel and shuddered. The last thing he needed right now was to think of Meg wearing less than that tiny scrap of silk.

Stepping back from the fireplace, he clenched his hands into tight fists, and then slowly released his bruising hold. His palms tingled. The sensation not entirely unpleasant, though definitely foreign.

Alex lifted his hand and stared at them. A frown marred his features as he slowly examined each finger in turn. It felt as though he had been frozen, the feeling akin to warmth flooding back into a numbed body part, circulation bringing with it sharp daggers of pain biting into his nerve endings.

But it was impossible. Being dead absolved him from such experiences. Again, he studied his palms in fascination, and then glanced up to the mantel mirror. The room lay reflected in the glass, yet he remained invisible even to his own eyes.

Odd, how it seemed every time he was around Meg, strange things happened to his body. Sensations buried long ago awakened with a single touch. Emotions hidden for over a hundred years surfaced whenever she was near. Something about dear Miss Meg set his body on fire and his mind to wandering in places better left alone.

Alex smiled and tipped his head in the direction of the hearth. The flames rose beneath his glance and the room filled with the orange glow of firelight. "Ah Miss Meg, if only we had met while I was alive. I would have shown you things that would make you blush more than my kisses did this eve."

His chuckle filled the room long after Alex's body faded from sight.

\* \* \* \*

Meg stumbled and tripped her way up the lighthouse stairs. In her haste to get away from Captain London, she had forgotten to grab her robe. The stone steps were cold beneath her bare feet, her arms rippled with goose bumps from the chilly night air. The warmth of the sun early in the

day had dissipated with the darkness.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she fought to calm herself. Upon reaching the circular room at the top of the staircase, Meg hugged herself tightly, trying to stop the shivers that raked her body. She couldn't decide if they were from the cold air or from Alex's intimate touch. More than likely a little of both.

Closing her eyes, Meg fought to quell the sea of butterflies that filled her stomach. Relax, she told herself, mentally counting to ten. "I'm up here in my office and he's down in his bedroom, I mean my bedroom, oh I don't know what I mean." Meg fumbled for the right words.

The image of Alex one level below in the bedroom brought back a flood of emotions. Meg recalled the feel of his lips on hers, the warmth of his body pressed tightly to hers, the swell of his arousal nestled against her thigh.

"No, no, no," she groaned aloud. Her thoughts were racing out of control and taking her down a road better left un-traveled. Her stomach lurched. Meg could feel heat suffice her cheeks as she remembered the gentle brush of his mouth on her throat. She lightly touched her fingers to the side of her neck as if imprinting the memory forever in her mind.

Meg turned toward the wall of windows at the front of the cylindrical tower. The moon hovered high in the sky, the silvery beams illuminating the



waves far below on the rocky shoreline. She let her gaze take in the scenery outside. The sight, though new, never failed to settle her nerves. It was here she had come to salvage her life. Here away from the prying eyes of the friends and strangers alike that whispered their stories to all whom would listen. Telling their tales like victorious warlords come home with their spoils.

Lowering herself into her office chair, Meg swiveled to face the computer monitor. The cursor blinked slowly on the black screen, the green underscore a hypnotic icon in the dimly lit room. If only I could capture those same sensations on paper, Meg thought.

If only Blaire and Morgan had a love scene that crackled with desire, such as hers and Alex's had. Meg stopped short, her fingers poised over the keyboard. Wait a minute. A love scene like she and Alex shared?

Meg shook her head. It wasn't a love scene that had occurred downstairs. It was a man comforting a woman. Okay, so maybe it was a ghost consoling a human. Whatever it was, it definitely wasn't a love scene.

No, most certainly not! What happened was a mistake. No matter how handsome and virile Alex was, there could be nothing between them, other than friendship. After Meg found the answer to his curse, he would be gone forever. Passed on to the other side, finally able to be at peace, and she

would be free of his grumbling and shouted demands.

Free of Captain London. Free of Alex.

If she was so eager to be rid of the man, then why did just thinking the words have to fill her with such emptiness. Meg sighed and hit the space bar on the keyboard, bringing the monitor back to life.

\* \* \* \*

Meg had to get away. Away from the serenity that had beckoned her here, and lose herself in the noise of others. Rubbing at her eyes, Meg ran a quick brush through her curls and reached for her sweater. Tugging it over her head, she bent down and tied the laces on her tennis shoes.

Hershey's tail beat a fast rhythm on the landing as Meg approached. "Sorry fellow, not this time. You stay here today." The big Lab lay down with a whine and watched Meg depart.

Shutting the car door behind her, Meg settled herself behind the wheel of the car and glanced back at the house. There in the living window stood Captain London, his expression hidden within the shadows where the sun had yet to touch.

Turning the key, and putting the car into gear, Meg backed out of the drive and headed for town. "He's not going to make me feel guilty for leaving.

Just because I said I would help him search for answers doesn't mean I can't have a life of my own, too." She thumped the steering wheel in frustration. "I'm entitled to have some fun, too, you know."

Meg groaned. "Great, now I'm talking to myself. This is ridiculous." She followed the road from Heron House into town and stopped at the main street. What to do now? Turning left, she pulled into the parking lot for the library, grabbed her purse and swung out of the car. Hitting the remote to lock the door, Meg headed for the entrance.

"Good morning, Miss Carroll. Nice to see you again." Mrs. Boone smiled and waved as Meg neared the front counter of the library.

"Mrs. Boone. How are you?"

"Fine, fine, busy as always. Just thought I'd take a look at the new magazines Esther got in this week." She pointed to the gray haired lady behind the counter. "Esther, this is Megan Carroll. She moved into Heron House last month."

The stack of books fell from the librarian's arms with a loud crash, hitting the tile floor. "Oh my, the haunted house. My goodness, will wonders never cease. The place actually sold. My heavens. What a miracle." Her words continued as she bent down to pick up the books. Popping back up over the edge of the counter, she nodded at Meg and asked, "Will you be featuring the Captain in your

next book, my dear? He is a cutie-patootie, you know. But of course, you already knew that." She settled the spectacles back on her face and resumed her crouched position on the floor.

Meg peered over the counter. "Have you seen the Captain, Miss Esther?"

Up she popped again. "Of course, my dear, talked to him quite a bit back in the early 60's you know. He is such a sweet man, but watch out for that temper. It's a doozy."

Mrs. Boone looked at Meg, then back to Esther with a nervous grin. "Now, Esther, you know the Captain doesn't actually come out and talk to people. That's just a rumor." She smiled weakly at Meg, and then suddenly busied herself digging in her purse. "Oh my, my beeper just went off. Busy, busy time of year right now what with all the cottages up for rent. Miss Carroll, it was wonderful seeing you again. Esther, I'll talk to you later."

Meg watched as Mrs. Boone hurried from the library, casting furtive glances back over her shoulder.

Esther sat the last stack of books on the counter and smiled at Meg. "Well, now that the old bat has gone, what can I do for you today, dearie?"

\* \* \* \*

Meg turned the car up the drive and killed the

engine. So it seemed everyone in town had their own theories about Captain Alexander London. Most thought it was nonsense that a ghost haunted the halls of Heron House, while others, such as Esther at the library, made no bones about the fact she had had a dalliance with the sea captain on more than one occasion in her younger days. Meg shrugged. It was possible, stranger things have happened, she told herself.

While she had learned everything else, she couldn't come up with a single way to help Captain London pass on. Letting her head fall against the steering wheel, she let out a big sigh. If anything, all she did was confuse herself more with what to do next. Grabbing her folder, she let herself out of the car and headed for the house.

"I'm sorry, I have no clue where to turn to next." Meg stacked her dinner dishes and turned toward the sink with one last look back at Alex.

He shrugged. "I find it all to be so confusing. There must be something we are missing. Something to aid in my plight to be rid of this world." He pushed himself back from the table and paced the room.

"If there is, I don't know what it would be. Are you sure there isn't anything more you can remember about the gypsy woman?" Meg prompted.

Alex leaned against the counter and shook his

head. "Nothing, I have told you everything there is to tell."

Meg turned from the sink and laid her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, I let you down." The sizzle of awareness raced through her body and Meg closed her eyes to savor the sensation.

"Meg."

She heard his voice, but didn't open her eyes.

"Meg, look at me."

Reluctantly Meg opened her eyes and looked into his face. "What is it, Alex?"

"I wish to thank you for your help. You gave more of yourself than any one person has helped me in all my years on this Earth. For that, I will never forget."

"But it didn't help you Alex. It didn't give you the answers you need to pass on, to put the past to rest and finally be free of wandering aimlessly through the rooms here at Heron House."

Alex smiled. "But it did give me the chance to meet you."

"Fat lot of good that did," Meg snorted.

"True, but it amused me."

She whirled around. "It amused you? Amused you? Oh very amusing to find your home invaded by a ghost. Even more to find my best bed sheets cut to shreds by you to scare me off. And have the people in town think I'm a nut case myself for moving in here. But you know what bugs me even more? I'll tell you." She paced back and forth,

agitated by the fact it amused Alex to have her here. Now he would get an earful of how she felt. It was time she told him exactly how she felt.

"What gets me the most is the fact I've come to care for you. Yeah, that's right, care for you." She poked her finger on his chest. "So much so that I wouldn't refuse you if you carried me upstairs and had your way with me. I don't know why I'm telling you this. Maybe I am losing my mind. Who knows? Maybe I am as batty as Esther at the library. Oh yeah, she claims the two of you had an affair back in the day, as she put it."

Alex stroked his chin, trying to hide his shock at her revelation about wanting to make love with him. "Esther, hmm? Name is vaguely familiar. Would she be the buxom blonde or the thin, tiny redhead with the cute dimple in her chin?"

Meg gaped at him. "Tell me you really want me to answer that question. If you can't remember the women you have slept with, I'm sure not about to."

"True, how unkind of me. Besides, I have something much better in mind." He moved forward and picked Meg up, slinging her over his shoulder.

"What do you think you are doing? Put me down." Meg pounded her hands on his back.

"I'm doing exactly as you asked of me, my dear. I'm taking you upstairs and ravishing you." Alex strode through the kitchen and up the front

staircase, never breaking his stride.

"Oh." Meg promptly closed her mouth and held on to the waistband of his pants for fear of falling. From this angle, the stairs looked really steep.

\* \* \* \*

Alex deposited her on the bed and looked down at her. Her eyes were wide and her breath was coming in shallow pants. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. But would this work? Only one way to find out. Leaning down he placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I won't do anything you don't want me to, Miss Meg. Of that, I assure you."

She sighed against his mouth. "Just start doing something, and I'll let you know if I don't want it." A small smile played about her lips.

Alex brushed his mouth to hers, and then deepened the kiss. She tasted sweet, like the strawberries she had consumed for her dessert. He wanted more, he needed more. Tugging her t-shirt over her head, Alex let his gaze wander over her flesh. She was beautiful. The thoughts that filled his mind did nothing to compare with the woman before him. He brushed his fingers over the lace at her shoulder, nudging the strap down her arm, and then moved to do the same with the other strap.

Meg reached up and popped the clasp at the



front of her bra, letting the sides fall apart. Alex quickly divested her of the undergarment. "You are beautiful, just as I knew you would be."

She smiled shyly. "Thank you."

He inclined his head and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "You are very welcome, Miss Meg."

She wound her arms around his neck, drawing him closer, as Alex fought for control. The sight of her bare flesh was playing havoc with his self-control. Her sighs made him harder than he had ever been and he wanted the night to go on forever, not dissolve within the first few minutes. Pushing her back against the covers, he lowered his mouth to her breast. Laving the nipple, Alex swirled his tongue around the tight bud, suckling, and then nipping at it until Meg squirmed against him.

"Alex, please."

He had heard these words before from her and knew she desired him. Encouraged by her please, he lifted his head and focused on the other breast. Trailing his tongue across her sensitized skin, he suckled at the moist nipple, drawing it in his mouth.

"Yes, more please more." Her hands were now on his back, tugging at his shirt, lifting it over his head and tossing it to the floor. "I want to feel you," she whispered softly.

"Anything you wish, my love. You have only to ask."

Meg stilled and looked up at him. "I want you to make love to me. Now, Alex."

His self-control snapped at that moment. Her words shook his very soul. He knew he would do anything for her. Anything within his power. Reaching for the snaps on her trouser, Alex lowered the zipper and slid them from her legs, along with the scrap of lace she called a thong, baring her to his view. Then he ran his fingers across her leg, starting at her toes and working his way up across her knee, to her thighs, then between her legs to dip into her sex. She was wet, so very wet and Alex fought down the urge to take her right then and there.

No, he vowed to make this last. To make this an experience neither of them would forget for the rest of their lives. Gently, he tugged her legs apart, and then knelt before her. Lowering himself to rest between her knees, he parted her with one finger, and then slid his tongue across her wetness. Slowly at first, then faster until she was crying out beneath him, her hands clutching at the bedcovers. Easing his finger inside, he felt her body clench. He pressed his mouth to her sex, teasing and swirling his tongue, then sucked gently.

Her thighs clasped his head as she cried out, "Yes, yes."

He felt her release as clearly as if it were his own. He continued suckling her until the feel of her hands tugging at him drew him upward.

"That was wonderful." She smiled at him and Alex felt a piece of his heart break.

She fumbled with the waistband of his pants, pushing at them until they also rested on the floor beside his shirt and her jeans. Her gaze raked over him and she gasped.

He chuckled. "Do I meet with your approval, Miss Meg?"

She blushed. "Oh yes, most definitely. Now it's my turn."

\* \* \* \*

Pushing him to his back, Meg straddled his thighs, her naked butt pressed against his skin. She ran her hands over his flesh, raking her nails across his nipples, then following it with her lips. She suckled his nipples, while her hands continued to torment his skin. The hard planes of his body turned her on more than she ever would have dreamt. Reaching between his legs, she cupped his balls, giving them a light squeeze. Beneath her, Alex groaned.

"Meg."

She lifted her head. "Yes, Alex."

"As wonderful as that feels, I fear if it continues I will be forced to spill my seed in your hand."

"Hmm, don't want that to happen now, do we?" She caressed him again, this time cradling his erection within her hand, sliding it up and

down, loving the velvety feel.

"Meg." He growled.

"Fair is fair, Alex."

Sliding herself backward, she knelt between his knees and took him in both hands. Meg then lowered her head and swirled her tongue across the rigid flesh. He tasted hot, and she wanted more. Opening her mouth, she slid her lips over the tip of him. His groans urged her on. His fingers were now buried in her hair, pressing her closer to his body. She sucked him, her own body responding in kind. She grew wetter and knew she couldn't wait much longer.

She smiled up at him, and then shifted, slowly settling her weight across his thighs. "Make love to me, Alex. Now." Slowly, she impaled herself on his shaft. Her eyes closed, her head thrown back as she took him in. Riding him, feeling the sensations race through her body as she neared her climax.

Alex grasped her hips, lifting her and then bringing her down atop him, over and over.

The wave built and Meg clenched her thighs. "Touch me, Alex. Now, touch me now."

He complied, sliding his finger into her wetness, stroking her, mimicking the motions his body was making deep within her body.

Meg felt her world spin out of control as she cried aloud. She could hear Alex's own groan of release as he came inside her.

## *Chapter Seven*

Meg lifted her head from the pillow and looked to her left. The bed was empty. No Alex. Then again, ghosts didn't need sleep, did they? She stretched remembering every glorious detail of the previous night. It was fantastic. She couldn't even dream something this wonderful.

Pulling her robe around her, Meg headed for the kitchen. The room was empty. Only Hershey thumping his tail in greeting. She poured dry food in his dish, gave him some biscuits and headed for the living room.

There she found Alex leaning against the stone hearth. "Alex?"

He turned to face her.

Instantly, Meg knew something was wrong. "Alex, what is it? Talk to me?" She moved forward, reaching for his arm.

"Something is happening. I don't know exactly what it is, but something is different today."

Meg shook her head. "I don't understand."

What's happening? What do you mean?"

He moved away from the fireplace, stumbled and would have fallen had it not been for Meg's hand as she grabbed his arm. "Come sit down. Maybe you're ill."

He shook his head. "Ghosts don't get ill. They don't eat, they don't drink, they don't get ill, they just are." He lifted her hand to his lips and brushed a gentle kiss across her palm. "It is time, my love. It is time for me to go."

Meg jumped up from the sofa. "No, you can't go. I won't let you. I've only just found you and I love you and..." She stopped, pressing her hand to her mouth, she stared at him. "No, it can't be. Not now, Alex, please not now."

He nodded. "I feared it to be such after last night. You have found the answer for the curse, my dear, Miss Meg, but it is not what we would want it to be."

"No, I don't believe you. I don't believe that one night with you would put an end to the curse."

"Not just one night, but one night with my true love. You, Meg, you are the reason I have walked the halls of Heron House for as long as I did. It was you I was waiting for. You the gypsy woman foretold of. And now, I must leave you."

Meg shook her head emphatically. "No, I won't let you go. There must be some other way." As Meg looked at him, Alex smiled a small sad smile.

Meg closed her eyes, and then reopened them. It wasn't possible. He was fading from sight before her eyes. She reached out her hand to touch him, and it slid right through him. But worse yet, she could see her hand through his body. "Alex."

"Goodbye, my love." He lifted his hand in farewell and was gone.

"No." Her cry echoed through the house as Meg sank to her knees on the rug. "Don't leave me, I love you."

\* \* \* \*

A month later.

Staring out to sea, Meg wondered what it would be like to just let herself fall over the rocky cliff. Her body hitting the sand below, lying in a crumpled heap. What did it matter anymore? The one man she had come to love was gone. Gone by her own hand. Geez, that sounded melodramatic, she thought. Granted, he was gone because she had figured out the old Gypsy curse and allowed his body and soul to pass on to the other side. Gone from her life forever. She wished she had never seen the real estate advertisement for Heron House, had never moved here and everything.

Brushing the tears from her face, Meg sniffled. No, that wasn't right. If she hadn't seen and done all this, she never would have had the chance to love a man as wonderful as Captain Alexander

London. Never learned what it was like to fully give yourself to a person and get back as much in return.

What she had done was throw herself into her work after a week of grieving his passing. Now, *King's Return* was at the top of the New York Times Bestsellers list. Right where she wanted to be and yet all Meg could think about was how much she wanted Alex back. A foolish wish, never to happen.

Turning back from the cliff, Meg tugged her sweater tighter about her shoulders and headed for the rock path to the sea. As much as she doubted it, maybe a walk on the beach would do her good. Besides, she needed to let Hershey run as well.

Picking her way gingerly down the steps, she noticed the amount of debris kicked in by the previous night's storm. Mounds of seaweed littered the sand. Sand pipers scurried across the beach picking at the remains of last night's weather.

Hershey bounded down the steps and headed for the birds, his excited barking scattering them in all directions.

Meg looked at the sea, so calm and quiet after last night's debacle, though she knew this was only the beginning. The Nor'easter's in this part of the country were vicious and came up without advance notice.



Hershey's barks changed to more frantic.

Meg turned in his direction and saw the white sail lying on the sand. Moving closer, she could pick out the remains of a broken sailboat, as Hershey circled the wreckage.

Her heart started pounding with every step. Oh no. This couldn't be good. As she drew within five feet of the boat, she saw a hand sticking out from the bow. Meg gulped. Please, not this.

She dropped to her knees and crawled gingerly across the broken timbers to the body. A man. Blood streaked from his forehead to his chin, a sizeable gash. His right eye was badly bruised and swollen shut.

"Hey, mister, can you hear me? I've got to get you out of here and get help." Leaning over she pressed her fingers to his throat and struggled to find a pulse. It was there, but very faint. At least he was still alive.

She pushed the timbers aside in order to free the man. After what seemed like hours, Meg carefully rolled his injured, though still unconscious body, atop the remaining portion of the sail she was able to salvage. Using the sail as a makeshift litter, she slowly dragged the man back to the house. Taking the hillside route was far longer, but less dangerous than trying to lift him up every step of the rock path. And wind, and now a pounding rain, dogged every step of the way. Meg looked skyward. Could things get any

worse, she wondered.

Tugging him over the doorsill of the front door was more than she bargained for. Meg was thankful he was unconscious or he would have been cursing her good when she whacked his head, not once, but twice on the stoop.

"Sorry bout that," she said to his still not moving body. Meg ended up dragging him in front of the fireplace, then adding logs till she got the fire blazing hot. Lightning lit the sky as she stared down at the man. Reaching for the phone, she pushed the On button. Nothing. Meg punched it a few more times. Noting happened.

"Great, the phone is out due to the storm." She announced to no one in particular. She stared at the man. He was too heavy to try and drag back down the driveway to her car, and without a phone, she was sunk. She would have to do the best she could under the circumstances. Grabbing three spare blankets, she tucked them as tightly as she could around him, and lifted his head to carefully position a pillow beneath it.

Heading for the kitchen, Meg mentally ran through first aid directions in her head. If someone has a head injury, don't move them. Well, she blew that one right off the bat. CPR? Okay, he seemed to be breathing so she was all right there as well. Running warm water into a basin, Meg pushed her damp hair off her forehead, and then frowned as the water trickled

off. The lights in the kitchen followed suit, leaving Meg in the semi darkness.

She groaned. "Not the power, too." No sooner than the words had left her mouth, than a crack of thunder split the sky and the kitchen went dark. She could hear the sound of Hershey's nails skidding on the wood floors as he searched her out. "It's ok, big guy. I'm coming. Nothing to worry about." Poor thing headed for under the bed every time it rained hard. Problem was with his size, under the bed wasn't really an option.

Lifting the basin from the sink, Meg grabbed two washcloths, dropped them in the water, and then headed back for the living room. Sitting the bowl on the floor, she sat down cross-legged and surveyed the man before her.

Starting with his face, she washed the blood off his forehead and carefully eased the cloth around his swollen eye. The cut was long, but not deep, so she doubted stitches would be required. Wiping off his scalp, she encountered a good size lump about the size of a goose egg. What little she knew brought up concussions. It was quite possible he had a concussion. The minute the power came back on, she'd call for help. Until then she would do the best she could under the circumstances.

He looked from what she could see to be quite nice looking, granted the swollen eye and the cut did detract a bit from his handsome looks. And of course how pale he was brought her quite quickly

back to the present.

"Great, Meg, now you're evaluating an unconscious guy over his looks. Get a life," she chided herself. The events of the past came rushing back and Meg did her best to push them away. "No I will not allow myself to go there. Not now, not ever."

After carrying the basin back to the kitchen, Meg returned to find the man literally shaking from head to toe. His teeth were chattering and he was muttering incoherently. She thought this was a good sign.

"Cold, so cold," he muttered.

Meg pushed the blankets tighter around him, and then realized she was only holding in the cold from the wet clothes he still wore. "Hey, mister, I'm going to take your clothes off. I'm not going to hurt you, but I gotta get you warmed up. You might be going into shock." Meg kept talking as she pulled back the blanket and started to remove his clothes. He was barefoot so it made it easier to pull off his pants, though Meg gulped and felt herself flush when she saw he wasn't wearing any underwear.

"Great, figures he would be the commando style." Averting her gaze, she continued pulling at his clothes till he was naked. Racing upstairs, she got the comforter off her bed and two afghans to wrap him in. He was still shaking even after she had secured the covers around him.

"Help me, I'm so cold." He started thrashing back and forth.

It was all Meg could do to try and quiet him. With a sigh, she stood up, and removed her own clothes down to her underwear. "Ok, supposedly body heat will warm up a cold person. At this point, it's all I've got left that I can do. Under the circumstances, mister, you're lucky I'm doing this. I don't take my clothes off for just anyone. Now keep your eyes closed." She kept up a running chatter to try and ease her own nervousness. The man was injured and unconscious, it wasn't like he was going to sit up and admire her underwear anytime soon.

Throwing more logs on the fire, Meg then climbed under the covers and spooned herself into position behind the man. Hershey, not wanting to be outdone, curled up in front of him. "Good dog, Hershey, the more the merrier at this point." She wrapped her arms around the man as best she could and snuggled closer.

"Come on mister, stop shaking." Meg whispered to his back. She rubbed his arms up and down, trying to bring some warmth back into his body, then skimmed her legs over his. All the while, he kept shaking.

His skin was cold against her breasts, her thin lace bra and panties doing nothing to provide warmth for either of them. The fire kept the room toasty, but to no avail. She curled herself tighter to

him and secured the blankets under his chin. For a brief minute, Meg thought she heard him say her name. But that was impossible, wasn't it? She drifted off to sleep.

Meg burrowed closer trying to get warm. She really needed to have the furnace checked, she thought drowsily. Then she wrinkled her nose at the offending tickle. Moving her head to one side, she felt it again. "What the..."

"Meg?"

Meg started, bolting upright amid the pile of blankets. Blinking quickly, she looked around. "What? Oh."

Looking down, she stared into the now open eyes of the man she had rescued the night before. "Alex? It's you. I had the most horrible dream. I dreamt..."

"May I have some water?" The man croaked, and then licked his lips, staring at her in obvious confusion.

"Of course. You're awake. But, I don't..." Meg stood, the blankets falling in a heap at her feet. Then she paused as the man's gaze widened, and traveled up and down the length of her. The look on his face made her stomach flutter. He wasn't Alex, or was he?

"Oh my, whoops." Making a wild grab for the blanket, she wrapped it tightly about her body. "I can explain, really I can. You see you were wet

and shivering and I dragged you back here to the house and covered you up, but it didn't do any good, so then I remembered that body heat will warm someone up and I took off my clothes and held you so you could get warm and..." Her words trailed off at his raised hand.

"Slow down, my head is swimming." He then touched his fingers to his forehead and groaned.

Meg exhaled deeply. "Right, I'll just get your water." She hurried to the kitchen, grabbing her clothes from the floor in the process. Throwing on her jeans and sweater, she filled a glass with water and headed back to the living room. The man was now sitting up, the blankets tangled in a heap at his waist. Meg followed the line of crisp chest hair down to his navel, then lower, to... Guiltily she forced herself to look away. "Here you go."

The man looked up at her. "Thank you." He took a few sips, and then sat the glass down on the floor. He slowly turned his head, taking in the room, the fireplace and big dog still by his side. "Where am I?"

"Heron House, I live here." She replied.

"How did I get here?"

"I found you on the beach and dragged you to the house. There was a storm coming and you were injured. But the power was out so I was unable to call anyone for help." She finished.

He gave a brief nod, and then groaned again. "My boat?"

Meg shook her head. "I only saw pieces of the wreckage. Do you remember anything about what happened?" She lowered herself to the floor and sat next to him. Her fingers toyed with Hershey's ears as the dog sighed out his pleasure at being touched.

"I remember being out on the ocean, then... Then a storm came up and I tried to turn back, but the wind was too strong. It ripped the sail in half. I couldn't get the rudder to respond. Then I remember hearing a cracking sound." He paused. "That's the last thing I can recall."

"I found you on the beach the morning after the storm had cleared. You're very lucky to be alive."

"Thank you for helping me. I'm sorry to have put you to so much trouble."

"No trouble. My name's Meg."

"Alec." He held out his hand.

She shook his hand and a shiver skittered across Meg's spine. No, this wasn't possible. This was too much of a coincidence. A boating accident, same type of injuries, similar names, but this man was still alive. Releasing his hand, Meg tucked her hand behind her back and tried to ignore the race of tingles his touch had incited.

"You seem very familiar to me." Alec stared at her. "Do I know you?"

Meg swallowed past a lump in her throat. "I don't think so. I've been here two months now, before that I lived in New York my whole life."



Alec frowned. "Never been to New York and this is the first time I've been to Massachusetts since my childhood."

Meg said nothing, her mind whirling as she tried to work this through in her head. It couldn't be, there was no way humanly possible. Things like this didn't happen now in 2008, did they? "Then I can't imagine where we would have met."

He smiled. "Maybe in my previous life I knew you?"

Meg smiled at Alec. Fighting the urge to throw herself in his arms and kiss him. "Maybe, Alec, maybe."

## *About The Author*

Patti has been writing all her life. This is her fifth published book and she has no plans to stop writing anytime soon. Married for over a quarter of a century to her wonderful hubby, she is also the mom of two grown kids. Most days Patti can be found typing away at her PC with her canine companion Cassie curled up at her feet.

For more about Patti and her books, please visit [www.pattishenberger.com](http://www.pattishenberger.com)