



CUTLASSES & CARESSES

JEAN FULLERTON

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Chapter One

Port Royal, Jamaica. 1691

"I am sorry to tell you, Miss Stone, that you have come an awfully long way just to hear bad news," the attorney peered over the top of his spectacles at her as she stood flanked by the local minister and his wife.

Bad news!

"Is it about Edward and why he was not on the quayside to meet us?" Prudence Stone asked, her brows drawn tightly together.

"It is. That, and your inheritance," the elderly attorney replied with a slow shake of his head.

The scrubbed floorboards of William Pilkington's overcrowded office came up to meet her then resumed their usual place below her feet.

Edward. What's happened to Edward?

"What has happened to Miss Stone's fiancé?" the young woman beside her asked from under her black, close fitting bonnet.

William Pilkington leaned forward and laid a blue-veined hand over Prudence's small white one.

"I am afraid the Reverend Edward Matthews has been kidnapped," he said simply as both women gasped, "by Diablo Ted, one of the most notorious pirates in the Spanish Main."

Prudence felt a lump in her throat blocking off her air. She put her hand to her throat. *My love, in the hands of a pirate. No, it can't be.*

She heard her own strangled cry.

"When? How?" she asked automatically as she thought of the man she had traveled the Atlantic Ocean to marry.

Dear Edward. How would he fare in such company?

Salty tears erupted and coursed down her face. She dived into her carpet bag to retrieve a handkerchief. Martha Truman's arm squeezed her shoulder.

"There, there, my dear, try not to think the worst," Martha said, then looked back to the attorney behind the table. "And Miss Stone's inheritance?"

Mr. Pilkington shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "It wasn't as much as first thought," he said, raising his hand palm upwards

"Wasn't it?" Prudence said in a hollow tone.

The attorney fiddled with a goose quill pen on the desk, "It was a mere twenty pounds and an old Bible, Miss Stone. Not the fortune anticipated."

Isaac Truman's voice boomed around the low beamed office. "And where is the money, Mr. Pilkington?"

"Gone," Mr. Pilkington shook his head dolefully

"Edward," whispered Prudence, who had just gone from heiress to pauper in three sentences. No one heard her.

"All of it?" asked Isaac Truman from somewhere outside her head.

Visions of Edward filled her mind. Edward smiling. Edward walking her to church. Edward swearing undying love for her.

"Unfortunately, yes," the attorney said, patting Prudence's shaking hand. "Edward

had it in his possession when he was taken."

The light touch on her shoulder changed to a painful grip. "Put not your faith in earthly riches, my dear," Isaac said.

Despite the pain in her chest, Prudence pressed her lips firmly together as she looked up at him.

"That's all very well. But how do you propose that I start the school as I intended?" she asked sharply.

Isaac's face fused with blood above his starched white collar and his eyes bulged from his round face.

Martha gripped her hand.

"Prudence," she said as she looked up at her red-faced husband. "Forgive her, husband, Prudence is upset."

"Um, that may be, but I expect a godly woman to respect"

"You look very like him you know, Miss Stone," Mr. Pilkington interrupted as Isaac Truman continued to splutter.

"Edward?" Prudence said, wondering how her fair, willowy looks resembled Edward's stouter physique and ruddy complexion.

"No. Your Uncle Jack. Same brown-green eyes and mass of unruly hair." Prudence repositioned the lock of her golden hair again. "Same determined chin. Knew Jack since he arrived on the island twenty years ago, old friends we were, old friends." Mr. Pilkington gave a dry laugh. "We were young men then, both of us. He one of old Cromwell's soldiers, come from England, and I a young lawyer still wet behind the ears."

Prudence put her hand to the bridge of her nose and gave a ghost of a smile.

"It is true. But our fair skin does not favor the fierce sun of the tropics. I have already grown freckles where none existed before and I am beginning to look a little toasted."

"What will you do now, Miss Stone?" Mr. Pilkington said, sending her sympathetic look. Prudence blew into the handkerchief and opened her mouth. "I—"

"Why, Miss Stone will of course stay with us," Isaac said before she could answer, "until she books passage home."

"I haven't decided yet," Prudence answered ignoring the increased pressure from Martha's hand and her fervent looks at her husband. "I will of course be praying for Edward's safe return." Prudence's eyes snapped a challenge to Isaac Truman looming above her. "And I will seek a meeting with Governor Morris to find out what steps have been taken to secure his release. After that I will decide what to do."

She saw the elderly lawyer's eyes flicker to the window through which could be heard the noise from the teeming street outside. He looked slowly back at her and bit his lower lip.

"Have a care, Miss Stone, those who ask too many questions in Port Royal are apt to meet an unsavory end."

She stood and offered Mr. Pilkington her hand. "Thank you for your concern. But surely a couple of questions about a missing clergyman won't harm anyone?"

Nathan Frazer leaned against the upright mooring stone, stretching his long legs in front of him. He was dressed like most planters and exporters in Jamaica in buff-colored breeches above stout black boots. His loose shirt billowed in the light breeze and pressed

against his hard, muscular arms and body. A large hat shaded his eyes from the glare of the midmorning sun.

Casually he took in the bustling waterfront scene, smiling at the many women who sent him inviting glances and acknowledging business acquaintances, with a nod. Outside *The Bunch of Grapes* inn, a group of sailors from *The Lincoln* were already in full voice and swallowing rum as if the world were about to end.

His gaze returned to *The Lincoln* docked on the busy quay, watching the disembarking crew.

Where on earth was Enrique?

His fingers drummed rapidly on the stone that he lounged against.

Then he saw the wiry Spaniard making his way down the gangplank. Nathan remained still and waited until Enrique spotted him. With deliberate nonchalance, he stood up and stretched, then, stepping over a drunk in the gutter, he sauntered after Enrique. Just before he ducked under the overhang and entered the narrow alley, his progress was blocked by two figures dressed in black.

Suppressing his frustration, he swept off his tricorn hat and bowed civilly at them.

"Reverend Truman, Mrs. Truman I am pleased to see your safe return. Was your crossing fair?" he asked, not at all interested.

"Tolerable," Isaac answered stiffly. "We docked two hours ago and have been engaged with Mr. Pilkington," he indicated the brass plank on the wall beside him, "ever since."

God damn it, Enrique had better have some information for me.

Nathan smiled. Duty done he had risen on the balls of his toes in readiness to depart when he noticed a figure of a woman behind the local minister and his wife.

He raised an eyebrow. Isaac's face took on an irritated look and reluctantly he stood aside.

"May I present Miss Prudence Stone, the late Jack Stone's niece," Isaac said between tight lips. "She is newly arrived in the Indies from Lincolnshire on the 'London Prince.' She hopes to start a school for the poor in Port Royal. Miss Stone, Mr. Nathan Frazer," the Reverend said, waving towards Nathan.

The young woman stepped forward and Nathan looked sharply at her down turned face, seeing the crown of her black bonnet and hearing sniffing sounds from beneath.

Just what Port Royal needs. Another bookish young woman ready to set the world to rights.

"Miss Stone, welcome to Port Royal," Nathan said perfunctorily, as he took hold of her hand.

Slowly she turned her face up to look at him and Nathan heard himself take a sharp breath. The young woman, despite her tear-stained face, wouldn't have looked out of place in the celestial choir and here she was standing up to her ankles in the slime of Port Royal. The gallant knight in him stirred, but his less gallant part, tucked firmly in his breeches, noted the slightly parted lips as she looked at him.

He took her hand and gave her the smile that had caused female hearts to quake since he was fifteen. Her eyes opened wider. Then Nathan gently kissed her fingers.

Even in the shadow of her hat brim Nathan could see she had a clear complexion with high cheekbones. Her small, turned-up nose dusted with freckles but her large, hazel eyes with long sweeping lashes were dark in contrast to the rest of her coloring, and they were full of unshed tears.

She was biting her lip, Nathan guessed in an attempt to keep the tears at bay.

The young woman who scrutinized him so closely was quite unlike the usual sloe-

eyed women normally found in the Caribbean, but pleasing to the eye for all that. Actually, very pleasing.

He found himself speculating what might be hiding under the severe serge dress and starched white collar.

Nathan, my boy, leave be and remember what you're about.

Then his body ignored his mind's good advice as the young woman in front of him was staring at him in a most gratifying way. He gave her a sympathetic look.

"You seemed distressed, Miss Stone?" he said, forgetting Enrique and concentrating on the motion of her breasts as they rose and fell. He had seen her reaction as he looked in her eyes and he liked it.

Nathan smiled as he noted the faint flush of her cheeks.

"Miss Stone is under my protection, Frazer," Isaac Truman said sharply, "I will have you know that I will guard her virtue as if she were my own sister."

Nathan tried to assume an expression of hurt indignation but instead a sensual smile crossed his well-defined lips.

"Naturally, I will have the same regard to Miss Stone's virtue as have for any other woman's," he said lightly.

Martha gave shot her husband a furtive look and bit her lip as the veins on Isaac Truman's head stood out in relief.

Nathan took a step nearer.

"Miss Stone's fiancé is missing. He was—" Martha Truman started to say.

Nathan cut across her. "There, there, Miss Stone," he said with a light laugh. "I am sure he will turn up soon," he raised the corner of his mouth and the corresponding eyebrow. "Port Royal may look enormous to someone who has just come from the wilds of Lincolnshire, but it is not so big. If this hapless young man of yours has taken a wrong turn, someone will put him right."

To his utter amazement instead of a breathless thank you and a flutter of eyelashes that he would have expected, Prudence snatched her hand back and glared up at him, lips pressed firmly together. Taking a step forward she dug her fist into his hips.

"What kind of fool are you, Mr. Frazer, to think that I would weep, merely because my fiancé had taken a wrong turn in the road?" she said, giving vent to her fury. "My fiancé has been *kidnapped* by pirates."

Prudence looked up to see who could own such a warm, resonate voice to find she was fixed to the cobblestones by a pair of dark brown eyes.

My God what a face, she thought as Nathan bowed over her hand.

Warm lips pressed her hand, the heat of the light kiss seared through her whole body. As he leaned down over her hand, she looked along the broad back and shoulders now very close to her eyeline. She could see the hard muscles under the thin linen shirt and had an urge to run her hands over them to feel their tensile strength. As Nathan straightened up and looked deep into her eyes, she stared back finding herself unable to break away from his gaze but instead wanting to go deeper. Her stomach flutter and turn and a humming seemed to start in her very marrow. A sensation of warm honey oozed through her veins.

Edward! Prudence dragged her eyes and mind away from Nathan.

"Thank you, Mr. Frazer, for your kind welcome."

He inclined his head and Prudence found herself wondering what he would look like when he smiled.

Before she could gather her thoughts and respond the deep rumble of his laugh washed over her. Prudence forced her mind to concentrate on his word not the shape of his mouth as it moved.

"— This hapless young man of yours has taken a wrong turn, someone will put him right."

What!

Shame swept over her. She had been standing there staring at Nathan Frazer like some halfwit while poor Edward was suffering God only knew what in the hands of a some scurvy cutthroats. Suddenly the hurt, pain and desolation of the past hour surged up in her.

Unthinkingly Prudence thrust herself in front of the Trumans and, with her hands balled into fists, she glared at Nathan.

"What kind of fool are you, Mr. Frazer, to think that I would weep, merely because my fiancé had taken a wrong turn in the road?" she said, giving vent to her fury. "My fiancé has been *kidnapped* by pirates."

Prudence blinked at the expression on Nathan's face. A spark of something she couldn't interpret, but liked, flashed into his eyes. In repose the black brows were straight, almost forbidding, but now raised, as they were, caused Nathan's face to invite intimacy and the hard mouth widen to a sensual smile. Of their own accord, her eyes focused on the expanse of brown chest showing through his shirt front and the mass of dark hair that crowned it.

The cool elegant gentleman was gone. The intense dark eyes focused on her and for a moment Prudence thought he would take hold of her. The gaze changed as he recovered from her onslaught then the polite expression returned. Nathan spoke.

"Miss Stone, Rev Truman, Mrs. Truman I have intruded on your time too long," Nathan said, giving Prudence an icy look. "Good day."

All three pairs of eyes followed Nathan as he marched past them and up the quayside. Then Isaac and Martha turned to her.

"Prudence Stone, that is hardly what I would have expected of a young woman with your genteel upbringing," Isaac said with a down turned mouth. "I thank God your Uncle Ezra didn't hear that unladylike outburst."

So did Prudence. Uncle Ezra, Rector of Deep Dene, her guardian, was most particular about good manners. An image of her kindly uncle back home in Lincolnshire flashed into her mind and she felt a wave of homesickness wash over her.

"Mr. Frazer wasn't to know, Prudence," Martha said, taking hold of her husband's arm.

Prudence pulled her brows together hard and stared at the Trumans. She shouldn't have let go of her temper at Mr. Frazer but... She put her hand to her forehead. Her eyes ached in the midday sun and she closed them momentarily trying to avoid the headache that threatened.

"I'm sorry, I—"

Martha was beside her.

"My poor lamb. It's this heat," she said laying the back of her hand onto Prudence's flaming brow. She tutted and turned to Isaac. "We should get Miss Stone home, husband. She has suffered a terrible shock and if she's not to suffer the hysterical vapors, she needs to rest."

Isaac looked as if he were about to argue, when Prudence swayed against Martha.

"Very well," he said as if he were agreeing to jump in the harbor and strode off up Fishers' Row with Prudence and Martha trailing behind him.

Nathan gladly left the heat of the sun and Prudence Stone's biting tongue behind him and entered the cool of the alley.

Blasted woman, he thought, as he looked around. *What a temper. How was he to know that her fiancé had been kidnapped? It must be peaceful for him on a ship of drunken sailors after keeping company with the fiery Miss Stone.*

He looked up the empty alley but there was no sign of Enrique.

Handsome woman though, he thought, remembering the shapely curves of her figure and the deep green-brown of her eyes. Nathan felt the interest that had abated under Prudence's outburst rise again.

Nice armful. And passion, like that. Well – He leaned back on the wall in the shadow and his mouth turned upwards as he gave a hard laugh.

Passion yes. Trouble definitely.

The sight of Enrique slid down the side of the alley towards him cut through Nathan's thoughts.

"Where have you been?" Nathan asked in fluent Spanish. "I have better things to do than wait for you all day."

"Sorry, *señor*, but there are soldiers everywhere."

"Of course there bloody are, it's a naval dockyard."

Enrique waved his hands. "*Si*, but now they are led by the new commander of the garrison, Captain Bennett, and 'is eyes are everywhere."

Nathan gave Enrique a nod. The Governor of Jamaica, Sir George Morris, might be a blundering fool, but Captain Henry Bennett was not.

"What have you to tell me?"

Enrique looked relieved. "It is as you thought, *Señor Frazer*, naval information has been sold to our enemies."

Nathan cursed roundly. "Who?"

"I do not know."

Nathan cursed again.

"But he is clever." Nathan's mouth tightened, so Enrique added hastily, "He must be. He is able to move around in the towns in the Americas and the Spanish Main without arousing suspicion."

Nathan had to agree. Whoever he was the informant could blend into the colonial life of New England and the Carolinas, probably using different guises. His face reflected his frustration.

"*Señor*, I have heard there has been a priest who has visited a number of the colonies who seems to have been very interested in naval installations and the movements of our ships."

Nathan gave him a sharp look. He must look ferocious for Enrique to offer up such a useless piece of information.

His mouth relaxed and he looked back at his man. "Frankly, Enrique, the few priests in the colonies tend to be either Spanish or Italian and they stick out like a sore thumb. As you say, we are looking for an Englishman."

"No, *señor*, I don't mean a Catholic priest." Enrique crossed himself fervently. "I mean— 'ow you call them - Pre - Prespt—"

"Presbyterian?"

"*Si, si*, you know with the tall, black hats and long faces."

"You mean an English Presbyterian minister?" Enrique nodded as Nathan looked concerned. "Enrique, there are hundreds of them up and down the Americas all traveling between the towns and all dressed practically the same."

Nathan stopped and bit his lip thoughtfully. 'Hell, how on earth was he going to find one po-faced minister among hundreds?

He frowned again.

"You must get me a description of this minister and I will see what I can find out about him from my sources in Panama. "

At the end of the alley, the sound of marching feet cut between them Nathan and Enrique pressed themselves flat against the brick wall of the house and waited.

The footsteps got closer. Nathan found himself wondering why anyone would want to kidnap Prudence Stone's fiancé. All pirates were interested in was money, so why take a minister?

Minister! A Presbyterian minister!

Nathan turned to Enrique. "This mi—"

But, as he turned, he saw Enrique making a hasty departure as the narrow street filled with the red-coated soldiers.

The troops formed ranks and stood to attention. The ranks of red jackets parted and Captain Henry Bennett stepped forward. Nathan inclined his head in the minimum of greetings and gave the captain a cool look, which Bennett returned.

Henry Bennett was a shade shorter than Nathan and about the same age. His hair was a light sandy, as were his eyebrows and lashes, giving his face a boyish look. His youthful air was counterbalanced by a deep scar gouged along his left cheek.

As Enrique had noted correctly, his eyes were everywhere. The Captain glanced casually down the alley behind him.

"Is there something I can do for you, Bennett?" Nathan asked, dusting the sleeve of his jacket and yawning.

Bennett looked hard at him.

"It's Captain Bennett to you, Frazer. And you want to be careful down those dark alleys. I thought I saw a shifty-looking Spaniard around. You do know we are almost at war with Spain, don't you?"

Nathan raised an eyebrow. "Thanks for your concern, Bennett. But I'm not at war with anyone."

"*Captain* Bennett," Henry said sharply. "And might I suggest that you choose the people you talk to more wisely in future."

"You might," Nathan countered. "Now, if you would excuse me, Bennett?"

He walked past the commander and back towards the dock.

Chapter Two

The large clock in the hall chimed the hour as Prudence put her hand on the round door handle that led to the Truman's dining room. She stood for a moment then took a deep breath and walked in.

Isaac was already sitting at the head of the table with his Bible open to one side of his large breakfast plate. He was reading while he ate his bacon and eggs. Beside him sat Martha nibbling some bread and butter. Both looked up as she walked in. Isaac grunted a greeting then turned back to his reading. Martha was more vocal.

"Good morning, my dear," Martha said indicating the seat next to her at the white linen covered table. She signaled for the maid to come over. "Do you feel better, Prudence? Jenny said you were poorly last night," she asked as Prudence settled herself down.

Poorly. By the time that had reached the Truman's neat house on the outskirts of the town, Prudence had spots dancing before her eyes. She had all but knocked Jenny over in a dash to the privy to vomit, as soon as the front door opened. Prudence had spent the rest of the day lying in the dark of the small back bedroom with a hammer beating time in her head. She beamed Martha a reassuring smile.

"Much better, almost back to my old self," she said, thanking Jenny for her breakfast.

Prudence turned to the two hot muffins on her plate. Her mouth watered as she watched the golden butter slip majestically down the starboard side of the floury baps.

She picked the white, starched napkin and covered her lap with it. The crispness of the material caressed her fingers. Her mind flitted back to the white shirt billowing around Nathan Frazer in the harbor breeze the day before. Her mind and body recalled the way it was casually open. Her stomach flutter at the thought.

Edward would never dress so casually.

She had seen him take his shirt off once, after he had been helping remove a dead tree from around the church wall. But she couldn't recall it having the same effect on her as seeing Nathan Frazer's bare chest with its mass of dark hair, yesterday.

Stabbing the first muffin with her knife, Prudence forced the vision of Nathan Frazer out of her mind. It was a familiar task now as she had done the same several times the night before. He was handsome, there was no denying it, but in a dangerous unfathomable way that ruffled her Edward has such a frank, honest face. Not as handsome, but trustworthy, and that was more important in a man.

After the roasting she gave him yesterday, Prudence doubted Mr. Frazer would ever want to take the time of day with her again. An unexpected pang of regret caught in her chest.

She turned her mind to Edward. With a clear head and revitalized after a good night's sleep, she was ready to execute the plan she had formulated as she dressed an hour ago.

Isaac leaned back and Jenny collected his plate and placed a small beer next to him. He shut the Bible with a thud and looked up at her.

"I'll see about booking your passage today," he said. "'The Derby' sails in a week. I'll ask around and see if there is anyone willing to chaperone you home." He wove his fingers together over his rounded stomach.

Prudence's mouth dropped open as she stared up the table at him. Remembering

how her temper had run away with itself the day before, she careful folded her napkin and placed it on the table before she answered.

"Thank you, for your consideration, Reverend Truman. It is most kind of you," she said in a controlled tone. "But I have no intention of leaving Port Royal."

She let her gaze sit steadily on Isaac for a second watching his face color.

"I came here to marry Edward and I will not be going home until I do," she told him firmly, her hands gripping together under the tablecloth.

Isaac leaned forward. "May I remind you, Miss Stone that Edward is aboard a pirate ship, God in his wisdom only knows where."

Prudence felt her resolve waver a little under the minister's hard gaze, she steeled herself. She was grateful to the Trumans for their care during the passage, but she was over twenty-five and quite able to make up her own mind.

"I know that, Mr. Truman, and that is why I intend to seek an audience with the Governor as soon as possible, to see what is being done to rescue Edward," she said, noting Martha's agitation out of the corner of her eye.

"The governor has more pressing matters on his mind," Isaac answered, taking a noisy mouthful of beer. He gave a hard laugh. "Come, my dear, this is the West Indies, not a backwater in *The Lincoln Fens*."

Isaac's condescension gnawed at Prudence's nerves, but she calmed herself.

"But what will you do?" Martha interjected before her husband said anything further. Thankful for a kinder tone, Prudence smiled at the young woman next to her.

"What I always intended to do, which is to start a school for the poor," she said. "That is why Edward and I planned to settle in Port Royal. We intended to use my money to buy some land and start a school."

"But your money has gone," Isaac said in a sharp tone, stabbing a sausage with his fork.

"Not all of it," Prudence said, noting with satisfaction how his expression changed to one of surprise. "I have four and a half sovereigns sewn into my petticoat."

Isaac opened his mouth and was just about to say something when Martha clutched hold of her forearm.

"How clever of you, Prudence," she said excitedly. "I would have never have thought of that."

"Hum," Isaac muttered. "At least you're not penniless. But it is still hardly enough to buy somewhere to live and house a school."

That was a good point.

Prudence opened her eyes wide. "But, Reverend Truman, you offered me lodging under your own roof until I was married to Edward, did you not?"

"Well, yes, but that was when we thought Edward was meeting us and you were to be married within a week or two," Isaac blustered, his chin trembling as he spoke. Prudence felt Martha's hand grab her shoulder and squeeze. "I hope you weren't suggesting that dear Prudence seek lodgings in the town," she said with a trembling timbre in her voice as she gathered Prudence to her thin bosom.

Isaac spluttered in impotent outrage for a second or so, then regained his voice.

"I suggested nothing of the sort," he said, puffing his chest out, "but," he waved his arm in a half circle around him, "where do you propose to run the school? Not here I hope."

Prudence smiled warmly at Isaac and nodded her head. "I propose to rent a room in the center of town for the school."

Isaac was speechless. Martha was not. She clapped her hands together and looked at the plaster ceiling. "What constancy. To wait faithfully for her fiancé to return, starting good works they had planned together," she said with a distant smile.

A stab of guilt shot through her as she was just wondering if she might see Nathan Frazer again in the town.

Prudence saw that Isaac was getting ready to speak again, so she turned to Martha.

"Do you know anywhere that might have a room to let?"

Martha tapped her chin with her finger.

"There is the Potters' back yard." She shook her head vigorously, making her ringlets bob. "No, too far out of Town. And Potter's old father is touched in the head and will frighten the children."

"Really, Martha, I don't think—" Isaac started to say pushing his plate away and leaning forward.

Prudence tapped Martha's arm to keep her attention from straying. "Anywhere else you can think of?"

The Reverend's wife shook her head slowly, and then her face lit up. "I know, there is a courtyard at the back of *'The Two Puddings.'* The rooms there are rented out from time to time. You could ask there, Prudence dear."

Isaac let out a very un-clergyman like profanity and both women looked round sharply.

"*'The Two Puddings?'* Have you taken leave of your senses, woman? *'The Two Puddings'* is a bro—" he coughed, "—a tavern of dubious reputation."

"But, Isaac, I heard you say to the captain of *'The Prince of London,'* what a fine woman Big Mary was and that he should call in to *'The Two Puddings'* while he was in port," Martha said with a baffled look at her husband.

Isaac's cheeks quivered. He threw the soiled napkin from his lap onto his plate. "I—ah—yes—yes, but I hardly think it the sort of place that Miss Stone should frequent."

"Prudence is not going to drink in the bar," Martha said with a light laugh. "She is renting rooms in the courtyard." Martha gave her an indulgent smile, which Prudence returned. "Besides, there are a number of young women already lodged in *'The Two Puddings.'* I'm sure Prudence will fit right in," Martha said folding her arms across her unassuming bosom.

Isaac's eyes seemed ready to pop right out of his head and Prudence wondered in passing if he had seen his physician recently.

"If you object, Mr. Truman, I could see if I could tidy your empty outhouse at the back of the house," Prudence said, forcing her face into an uncharacteristically compliant expression. "I could fit a dozen or so children in there." Isaac's eyebrows shot upwards and nearly reached his receding fair hair. "It does mean that they would have to walk through the house to attend school but if you think Martha's idea is not —"

Isaac shook his head to and fro, his mouth hanging open. "On second thoughts I think there is some merit in my wife's suggestion," he said with a much good grace as he could muster. "If you avoid the public rooms and use the entrance at the back of the courtyard it might be suitable," he said, yanking down the front of his jacket and smoothing the long white collar flaps over the front.

Prudence let out her breath. It had worked.

Although Isaac could not actually stop her from going to this tavern to try to start the school, she was alone in a foreign port. Determined she might be, but even she couldn't well ignore the advice of the man who was giving her board and lodging. Before there

could be further discussion, she stood up.

"What are your plans for today, Prudence?" Martha asked. "Mrs. Lyle, the planter's wife has sent word that she would to call on us this morning."

Prudence moved to the door.

"If you can spare me, Martha, I thought I might take a stroll into town this morning and try to see the Governor."

Prudence reached the door and turned back as if she had just had an afterthought. "Um – while I'm there I might as well go and see – Big Mary?"

Nathan threw back the dark rum and stared at the door. Enrique had said he would bring a sailor at noon and it was an hour past that now.

At any other time, he would not have been so patient but all the clues to the identity of the clergyman had dried up. So Nathan was desperate for any information no matter how slight.

Raising his eye to the narrow bar, Nathan signaled for Tom to refill the glass.

The door opened a crack and light streaked into the dark interior of *'The Two Puddings,'* showing dust particles in the beam.

At last.

Nathan watched Enrique and the swarthy man with him slide into the room and sit in the far corner.

Nathan stood up and made his way over to the bar, smiling broadly at one of the women lounging against the wall. She sauntered over to him, hips swinging. Nathan grabbed her and walked her over to the bench behind where Enrique and the other man sat then sent the sullen woman on her way with a couple of coins.

"Is this the man?" Nathan asked looking ahead.

"*Si, si 'e* has seen the man you seek."

Nathan moved around so he could see the man next to his contact out of the corner of his eye.

He dropped his eyes under Nathan's steely gaze.

"Tell me then, man," he said

The man scratched his head then started to bite his nails. "I am just a poor man, sir, wiv a missis and two brats to raise, if you understand me like."

"Tell me what you know and I'll pay you its worth," Nathan said with an edge of steel in his voice. He saw Enrique nudge the man and more fingernails disappeared.

"Well, sir," the informant said with a grin revealing broken, tobacco-yellowed teeth. "This man you'll be asking after is about a hand short of your height. With a mop of blond hair cut to here." He indicated just below an unshaven chin.

"I need more than that. Your description could fit half the men on the island," Nathan said sharply.

"And 'e has funny eyes like."

"Eyes?"

"Strange, if you take my meaning. When 'e looks at you there somefink amiss."

Nathan took out a florin and placed it under the flat of his hand. "Anything else?"

"He has an accent –"

Suddenly all conversation in the taproom ceased, Nathan, like everyone else turned to see what had caused the silence. His mouth dropped open. Standing by the rough-

hewn bar was the young woman Isaac Truman had introduced to him yesterday, Prudence Stone, resplendent in full Puritan attire.

Around the room, drinks were hastily consumed and men were sliding out of any and every door. Behind the bar, Tom had stopped mid-wipe of the glass in his hand.

Undeterred by the bartender's lack of response Prudence caught hold of a seaman who hadn't managed to get away in time. As she spoke, he noted the pleasing way her face moved and the slight furrow of the brow as she thought of something. She released the man who shot away as if on fire.

Turning she started to look around the room. Nathan saw her eyes alight on him and he groaned inwardly.

"Mr. Frazer," she called across the room. "Maybe you can help me."

He heard the scrape of chairs as Enrique and the informant beat a hasty retreat.

Nathan rose and met Prudence halfway across the room.

"This is no place for you, Miss Stone," he said, a frown now etched on his forehead. He took hold of her elbow and propelled her towards the door.

As she tore herself from his grip, he saw her look around. Her mouth dropped open as her gaze drifted up to the floor above and slowly returned to him. Nathan saw understanding in her eyes.

"This is a — Bro — a —"

As Prudence dipped down to allow her tall hat to pass under the lintel and entered the public lounge of *'The Two Puddings'* nothing in her previous life could have prepared her for the sight that greeted her.

The large parlor in which she found herself was partitioned with benches around the wall. Inside the partitions were tables. Centrally in the room were other tables around which various men and women sat. There was sawdust, as well as several unconscious patrons, on the floor. Every table had tankards of ale on them, many had bottles as well. At the far end was a large black man with a gold earring and a wide grin playing a merry tune on an old violin. It was a sweet sound and, oddly, the rhythm fitted in well with the activity in the room.

It seemed to Prudence there was a party in full swing, although it was now only an hour after noon. But what made Prudence's mouth open in horror was that the women in the room, a selection of blondes, brunettes and redheads, were in fact dressed, or more accurately undressed, in their underwear. All of them seemed to be sitting on the laps of the soldiers and sailors who were drinking from large flagons.

On hearing loud raucous laughter coming from above her head, Prudence's gaze roamed upwards to the open gallery that ran around the upper part of the downstairs parlor and off which there appeared to be various doors to rooms. On the stairs that led to the gallery there were a number of men and woman all clutching onto one another as they made their way to the rooms above.

Despite her bravado to the Trumans when she had walked in the inn, her heart had been in her mouth and her resolve to find out more about Edward's disappearance wavered.

Her mind already reeled from the walk down the high street with Isaac's large manservant, Job. Along with the usual sights that could be seen on any busy thoroughfare, like shops and merchants, there were other sights, like two women fighting with knives

and a monkey with gold teeth. She saw Job give them all a cursory glance and realized that such sights were the norm, not the exception, in the streets of Port Royal.

Despite the thrill of unexpected pleasure at seeing Nathan sitting in the bar, when he came towards her and took firm hold of her arm with the intention of leading her from the tavern, Prudence's resolve and purpose returned. Pulling herself free she turned to find a woman in her late thirties facing her.

"This is a tavern," finished a woman's voice with a Somerset lilt, her eyes focused on Prudence's unwaveringly. "We also entertain gentleman in need of company, as do many others in this Port."

The blonde who stood looking her up and down had curly hair piled high on her head. She was plump with fair skin and bright blue eyes, a small, turned-up nose and full lips, painted bright red. However, the most striking thing about the woman in front of Prudence was that she had the largest pair of breasts that Prudence had ever seen.

Like the other women in *The Two Puddings*, the blonde was wearing her underwear with the addition of a striped skirt. Encasing her upper half was a tight, black, low-cut bodice over which her large, juddering breasts threatened to spill out of at any moment.

"I am Big Mary, the owner of *The Two Puddings*," said the woman. "Who the devil are you?"

Prudence recovered herself. "I'm sorry. It is impolite of me to stare so," she said, offering her hand to the still motionless Mary. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mary. I was looking for you. I am Prudence Stone."

Mary looked suspiciously at her then accepted the proffered hand and nodded her head. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Stone. And I commend you on your good manners. But I'm surprised that a young woman of your persuasion," she indicated Prudence tall hat with her eyes, "should visit a place like this." She jutted out her chin. "I don't want no trouble," she added acidly. "As I don't expect that you are looking for work, what can I do for you?"

Prudence felt her face burn hot and she forced herself to look straight at the woman addressing her and not at the half-dressed women behind her, who were now looking their way. A couple of the remaining customers beside Mary were smirking at her blushing face. She studied the backs of her hands for a second then felt the presence of Nathan beside her.

"Miss Stone has come to be married, but her fiancé has been kidnapped by pirates," Nathan said looking down at her with an unsettling expression in his eyes.

"The good Lord preserve him," Mary exclaimed, putting her hand to her mouth. "What was his name?"

"Mr. Edward Matthews, curate to my Uncle Ezra, rector of St Ethalward's in Lincolnshire," Prudence said. She saw Mary bite her lower lip and draw her fair brows together as she gave Prudence a furtive look.

"Did you know him?" Prudence asked.

"Should I?" Mary said, picking up a glass and polishing it furiously.

Silly of me to ask.

She felt Nathan look towards the tavern door and Prudence glanced up at him. Her eyes glided over the strong determined line of his jaw with dark bristles showing just under the surface. There was a faint aroma of rum about him but not the tobacco which seemed to linger around most of the men in the colonies.

Edward? Her conscience prodded her. *Your fiancé!*

She tore her gaze away.

"Anyway, why are you looking for me?" Mary asked.

Just as Prudence was about to ask her about the rooms in the courtyard she was thumped in the legs by a small flying body. Stooping down she picked up a small child of no more than three.

Settling the child on her hip comfortably she beamed at Nathan and Mary who were regarding her with surprise.

"This," she gave the astonished child a small kiss on the cheek, "is why I am seeking you, Mary," she said, turning to the child and smiling fondly down at it.

As Prudence was otherwise engaged talking to Mary, Nathan had a chance to study her. Although after her rude behavior yesterday he had vowed to avoid her if at all possible. He now found he was mesmerized by her red mouth that fashion would say was too wide, but he would answer was perfect—had she ever been kissed before, he wondered, as he watched her lips move as she talked. Nathan could see her delicate ear and long slender neck where her hair swept up into the snood.

As he heard Mary's question Nathan stopped, his mind wandering down a path his body was taking.

He saw Prudence stagger as a small girl who ran out from behind the bar collided with her. Her smile as she scooped the child up and held in to her made Nathan blink twice with astonishment at its maternal nature.

"This is why I am looking for you, Mary," she said and hugged the child to her. "I'm Miss Stone. What's your name, my sweet?" she asked the small girl in her arms.

"Daithy," the child lisped. "Are you staying wiv uth, Mith Thtone?"

Prudence let out a peal of laughter and shook her head. "No, Daisy. But I hope that Mary will let me visit each day."

If she thinks she can save the girls' souls by driving away trade, Mary will soon put her right.

Taking a handkerchief out of her sleeve, Prudence licked it and cleaned a spot of dirt off Daisy's cheek, then wiped the child's nose.

"I came to ask you, Mary, if you would consider renting me one of your larger rooms in the courtyard?"

"Whatever for?" the toughest landlord in Port Royal asked with a simpering expression on her heart-shaped face.

"I would like to start a school for Daisy and any other children of the waterfront who want to attend," Prudence said. "It is what I came to Port Royal to do with dear Edward."

Brainless Edward.

Nathan saw tears gathering in Prudence's eyes. She blinked them away.

"Anyway," she said with a tight little smile, "will you let me rent a room?"

Mary's face was such a picture of astonishment that Nathan had the urge to laugh.

"Well, I—" Mary started playing with a blonde ringlet thoughtfully.

Daisy, like Nathan, had been enthralled by Prudence. She had sat quietly in her arms and gazed up into her face. Suddenly the toddler reached up, took hold of the brim of Prudence's broad-brimmed hat and tipped it off her head.

It took the crocheted snood with it, releasing the golden abundance of Prudence's hair around her. A masterpiece that Nathan had seen some years ago in Florence, of Venus rising from the sea, flashed into his mind.

"Pretty," said Daisy taking hold of a thick lock and inspecting it closely.

Pretty? Beautiful.

Nathan's eyes hooded as he looked at Prudence in a totally new light, an interesting sensual new light.

Good two handfuls. Nice rump. Not too tall but long legs. Her hair is more golden brown than blonde. I wonder if—

"Yes," Mary said, cutting through Nathan's thoughts just as they had reached a point of intimate speculation. "I like you, Miss Stone, and as long as you promise that you won't do anything to upset my girls or customers, you can have the large room across the courtyard. I might even get Moses, my potman, to hammer you up some benches." Mary reached her hand out and stroked Daisy's cheek lightly. "I have a deal of children here," she said and gave Prudence a sad look. "Some taverns won't have them, but," she tickled Daisy under the chin and the child squealed, "I'll not turn them or their mothers away." She looked back at Prudence. "Maybe with a bit of lettering and some figuring, these angels might have a better chance than their mothers."

Prudence handed the child to Mary.

"Thank you, Mary," she said with satisfied look on her face. She retrieved her hat and re-arranged her hair. "Now that I have the school in hand I can make a start on securing Edward's release."

Edward's release? How?

A cold hand clawed at his chest.

It's not your problem. You have other foxes to chase. His mind told him, but Nathan didn't hear it.

"It's a dangerous town, Miss Stone, beware. Those who asked too many questions are found dead in the gutter daily with their throats cut. It might seem like a fine adventure to travel to meet your fiancé, but under the circumstances surely it would be better for your safety to return to England as soon as possible?"

Nathan saw her hands clench tight and her nostrils flare, but she managed to form her expression into a sweet smile.

"Thank you for your advice, Mr. Frazer, but I came to open a school and now, thanks to Mary here," she smiled towards her new landlord, "open a school I will. Now if you would excuse me, I—"

"You can't just wander the streets alone, Miss Stone," Nathan said taking a step towards her. "You'll be abducted, possibly even raped. What are you thinking of?"

He saw the color rise in her cheeks but again she managed to marshal herself.

"I have Job, the Truman's manservant, outside. Now, good day to you both."

Nathan watched as Prudence's hips swayed rhythmically as she turned and left the tavern. She disappeared leaving the door swinging behind her.

The room seemed to be devoid of all light to Nathan now that Prudence had left. The patrons sloped back into the bar and the usual business of *The Two Puddings* resumed. He stood stunned with his arms loosely by his side.

The spy? The information you were after.

He would have to stop this. He had willing women enough to give him ease he didn't need to complicate the already tangled web of his life with a virtuous woman like Prudence Stone no matter how appealing.

He looked around for Enrique.

"She's a beauty our Miss Stone, is she not?" Mary asked, giving him a wily look.

He gave a studied laugh. "Miss Stone is easy on the eye to be sure." He winked

shamelessly at Mary. "But a little straitlaced for my taste."

"If you say so, Nathan," Mary replied with a raise of a fine blonde eyebrow. "If you say so."

Chapter Three

After an hour's wait the door to the Governor's office opened and a tall, fair-haired officer came towards her, he smiled warmly and offered her his hand.

"Good afternoon, Miss Stone, welcome to Jamaica. I am Captain Bennett and have come to escort you to see the Governor. My apologies for the delay, but he was otherwise engaged."

Prudence harnessed her temper and stood. Her eyes went to the deep scar gouged along Captain Bennett's right cheekbone.

"You had a very near miss at some time," she said, matching his friendly manner.

"It would have been a deal closer had a friend had not dragged me aside." He touched his cheek momentarily and indicated that she should follow him.

They walked the down the short corridor to Governor Morris's quarters.

Sir George Morris, their Majesties' Governor to Jamaica and the West Indies, sat sprawled behind a large desk. Its surface was strewn with papers and there was a plate with the remnants of a large meal on it. He sat up and belched as Prudence walked towards him.

"Miss Stone," Captain Bennett said as they stopped at the table's edge.

Without attempting to rise, the Governor waved her into a chair.

"Now, Miss Stone, what can I do for you?" the Governor asked looking at her over red-veined cheeks.

"I wrote to you last week," Prudence said.

The Sir George rummaged frantically around on his table, letting letters fall to the floor unheeded.

She continued. "I wrote to you concerning my fiancé, Reverend Edward Matthews, and his abduction by pirates."

The governor folded his hands across his ample stomach and looked blankly at Captain Bennett.

"If you recall, sir," the captain said with slow deliberation. "Mr. Matthews was the unfortunate young man who unwisely took passage on *The Fallen Angel* with Diablo Ted and hasn't been seen since."

She was confused. "He took passage? I thought he was kidnapped."

The Governor shrugged and waited for her to continue.

Prudence heard the blood rushing in her ears. "No matter how my fiancé fell into this Diablo Ted's hands, Sir George, what has been done to rescue him?"

"You must understand, Miss Stone," the Governor answered, dislodging his powdered wig as he scratched beneath it, "the Caribbean seas are vast, with many islands in whose shallows craft can stay hidden for days."

Prudence looked expectantly at the Governor, who shifted under her scrutiny.

He coughed loudly and belched again. "The Spanish and the French are crawling all over the Indies. I have to have my men off war in readiness to engage England's enemies at all times. I can't send a squadron off to chase after one missing clergyman. I'm sure you can understand that."

"What about bringing this pirate to justice for abducting a British citizen?" Prudence said.

"I know my duty, Miss Stone," Governor Morris said, picking his teeth. "But I have

to care for *all* British interests in the Indies and I will not jeopardize the fleet and fighting men for your fiancé, who joined the ship of his own accord. I believe he let it be known that he was going to the Americas to make his fortune. Is that not so, Bennett?"

Prudence looked at Captain Bennett as did the Governor. Bennett went to a shelf and pulled out a book which he opened.

"According to my investigation, after he arrived Edward Matthews, whom I am surprised to hear now is a clergyman," he gave Prudence a pained look. "Edward Matthews took possession of the inheritance left to you by old Black Jack Stone, and then set about enjoying the town."

Her mouth dropped open. "Enjoying the town? What do you mean 'enjoying the town'?"

Again, Captain Bennett gave her a sympathetic look. "I am afraid the tropics do strange things to a man," he said with a shake of his head. "They can make a man, even a clergyman, forget what he is about."

"Edward?" Prudence was struggling to keep the floor beneath her and the ceiling above, as what the captain was saying about Edward sank in.

Governor Morris clicked his fingers at his captain. "Wasn't he the young man thrown in jail for fighting?"

The floor lost its alignment again.

"Fighting? Edward *fighting*?" Prudence's hands slid off the armrest of the chair and hung limply at her side.

"He was drunk at the time of course," Sir George said, as if that made it reasonable for an ordained clergyman of the Church of England to find himself in custody.

Outwardly Prudence sat stupefied in the chair. Inwardly she was roaring.

Where was Edward? Was he kidnapped or sailing the seven seas with this pirate and where was her inheritance? If it wasn't taken from him when was captured then he still had it and was now "enjoying" the Indies spending it freely. What of his undying love? What of his promise that they would wed as soon as she arrived? And what about the hundred pounds her uncle and his father, the bishop of Spalding, had advanced him to set up the school for the poor? Where was that? The key to Edward and what had really happened to him was this Diablo Ted rogue.

"I demand that, as the representative of the Crown in the West Indies you send out a squadron to apprehend this Diablo Ted and find Edward," Prudence snapped.

Sir George gave her an apologetic grin, revealing a set of brown and misaligned teeth.

"I might consider it, if I had any idea where he was," he shrugged. "But Diablo Ted has been sighted all over the Caribbean"

Prudence stood up sharply and the Governor drew back. "So if you have reliable information as to where Diablo Ted is, you will send out a squadron to apprehend him."

"Possibly, but information about Diablo Ted is difficult to obtain. Most people enquiring into his business too closely find themselves in Davy Jones's locker."

"Where?" Prudence asked, thinking she must have missed a piece of the conversation.

"Dead," Captain Bennett told her seriously.

Prudence considered this piece of information then inclined her head towards the governor. "Thank you for your time."

She turned to leave, then looked at Captain Bennett and Governor Morris, who was in the process of pouring himself a brandy.

"I'll inform you as soon as I have some reliable information about Diablo Ted's whereabouts."

She walked out of the door and back into the corridor. Captain Bennett followed her. Stopping her, he gave her an earnest look.

"For your safety's sake, take heed of what I say, Miss Stone," Captain Bennett said earnestly. "Don't ask too many questions about Diablo Ted."

A chirpy bell rang as Nathan entered the chandler's shop. The smell of tar, beeswax and rum mingled together in the overcrowded shop. He scanned the bright interior until he saw what he was looking for. Prudence Stone.

She was standing chatting to Thomas Trenwith at the far end of the counter and did not turn around. The jovial merchant, with his sleeves rolled above his elbows, was showing her some calico. She already had a sizable pile of slates and chalk beside her.

"Good morning, Frazer." The merchant saw in him in the doorway and untied his striped apron. "I have just been down to see my new cargo on 'The James'. There's some fine brandy if you've a mind for it."

He smiled and made his way to Prudence. She turned and faced him. How different she looked. Her eyes ran over him and he found himself wondering, uncharacteristically, if she liked what she saw.

It had taken him a moment to realize that it was indeed her when he had spotted a trim figure walking purposely up Queen Street. She had changed from wearing her usual severe Puritan dress and was now dressed in a cotton dress with small green flowers over it and a draped lace collar, the type that any respectable woman would wear. She also had a large-brimmed straw hat instead of the black conical one he had seen her in previously.

He took a step closer and bowed. "Miss Stone, how pleasant to see you again."

As he got closer Nathan noticed that color of her new day-gown highlighted her delicate complexion rather than sapping it like the drab browns and grays that she had worn previously.

"Mr. Frazer," she replied, giving a small curtsy and sweeping her eyes up to him. It was a demure gesture, but its effect on Nathan was provocative whose body jolted unexpectedly. Nathan's brain reminded of his mission in the Indies.

"I see you are provisioning your new school," he said, nodding towards the pile of slates.

From where he stood above her Nathan could see the arch of her neck and the swell of her breasts just above the lace collar. It wasn't very much at all, Prudence's neckline must have been the most respectable in the whole of Port Royal—but Nathan found it mesmerizing. The urge to kiss down that neck and across the delicate skin of Prudence's chest came out of nowhere.

Prudence saw his gaze and tugged the shawl up higher on her shoulders. "I am. And as you see I have not yet been thrown over anyone's shoulder or been ravished."

"You've only been here three days, Miss Stone. Give it time," Nathan said without thinking.

Prudence bristled.

"Your pardon. I seem to always say entirely the wrong thing to you. It wasn't my intention to be rude, merely to ask how you were getting on with setting up the school and finding out anything about your missing fiancé," he said and gave her his most winning

smile. Prudence's shoulders slackened a notch, but she lowered her eyes and turned back to the shopkeeper.

Mr. Trenwith placed large pink-and-white hands on the scrubbed counter-top and beamed at them both.

"Is there anything else I can get for you, Miss—some cotton perhaps?" he waved towards the bale on the shelf to his right. "Or ribbons. I have an apple green satin that will sit in your hair just right."

Nathan glanced over the golden-brown locks not now confined in a tight snood but pinned up with a few small ringlets left at liberty.

Prudence shook her head slightly. "No, thank you. I have enough to be going on with," she said laying her hand on the pile of slates.

Before she could scoop them up Nathan had hold of them. "Allow me to escort you back to *The Two Puddings*. I would be interested to see what you have done to that old storeroom of Mary's."

He saw her hesitate, so quickly added, "Have you any news about Rev Edward Matthews?"

"Edward Matthews? The Edward Matthews who was here six months ago? He was a minister?" Thomas Trenwith asked incredulously, his bushy eyebrows disappearing into his hairline.

"You met him?" Prudence asked, giving Thomas he complete attention.

The merchant took off his glasses, breathed on the lens, then looked studiously through them.

"I never saw him in his clerical garb," the merchant said scratching his head. "And you say he was your fiancé?" Prudence nodded. "He never mentioned he was engaged either. He didn't beh—" The merchant stopped and took his glasses off again.

Why didn't he wear his clerical garb in Port Royal? And why hadn't he mentioned her to anyone? Nathan thought he knew. He too had been making enquires and Edwards Matthews time in Port Royal had not been one of quiet contemplation and prayer. His guts told him there was more to the missing Edward than at first appeared.

"I heard he had gone after a lucrative speculation," Thomas Trenwith said.

"What else did you hear, Taffy?" he asked over Prudence's shoulder as the faint aroma of violets assaulted his senses.

Isaac started on his glasses again. "I don't want no more trouble."

"More trouble?" Frazer asked in a strong vibrant voice.

Thomas Trenwith put his spectacles back on and gave Prudence a paternal smile. "How can I put this delicately? When your fiancé found that you were only left twenty pounds and a Bible by Black Jack Stone he was — disappointed."

"Disappointed?" he and Prudence said in unison.

"Mad. Hopping mad, Miss Stone. Mad as the Devil on Judgment Day. See that window?" Thomas pointed to the large bay window looking out to the street. "I had to replace every pane of glass in it after I told Edward that he could have no more credit from me. Cost me a small fortune I can tell you. You may well look astonished."

"Why did he need credit when he had Miss Stones twenty pounds?" Nathan asked as he felt Prudence grow tense beside him.

Isaac gave her a pitying look. "Because he had spent it."

"What? Twenty pounds? What on earth had he spent it on, Mr. Trenwith?" Prudence asked.

"I can't rightly say, Miss. You'll have to ask others about that."

He heard Prudence catch her breath, then she mumbled something and shot out of the door. Nathan picked up the slates and pencils and followed her out.

Taking in a deep breath to stop her head spinning Prudence leaned with her back on the chandlers shop wall. The door opened Nathan, an anxious look on his face and stood beside her on the narrow pavement.

"Are you all right, Miss Stone?" he asked.

Looking up Prudence found herself locked into Nathan's intense gaze. A small vibration started deep within her. He took hold of her arm to move her out of the strong midday sun while she adjusted her straw bonnet. Someone spoke to him briefly and as he answered them, Prudence found herself staring at Nathan's expressive mouth. She began to wonder what it would be like to feel it pressed onto hers.

Edward, remember Edward. But Prudence didn't want to remember Edward. She wanted to gaze on Nathan.

He looked back at her. Prudence put her hand to her forehead to break Nathan's gaze as much as to calm the storm raging inside her.

"The children will be waiting for me soon. I had better go," she said moving away from Nathan as they set off up the street.

"You mustn't take it too hard, Miss Stone. As Taffy said, the tropics do strange things to men." Nathan said tipping his hat to a woman across the street. Prudence sent her a narrow look. "Has your fiancé ever been to the Indies or the Americas before?" he asked as they stepped over the stream of dirty water running along the gutter.

"No, he has spent most of his life in Lincoln," she replied.

Two drunken sailors were weaving their way towards them. Nathan stepped in front to protect her as they passed, then resumed his place beside her.

"Has he ever been in the army or navy?"

"No. Although he does like ships," Prudence said remembering the young Edward on the quayside watching the ships. "He even ran away to Yarmouth to join the Navy."

"Do his people come from Lincoln?" Nathan asked.

"I don't know," she said with a sigh. "Edward was a foundling. He was abandoned on the steps of the Bishop of Spalding's house as a newborn baby. The Bishop and his wife were childless, so viewed the abandoned infant as an answer to prayer, so to speak. The Bishop and his kindly wife raised him as their own son. I can only think that, after spending my money, he was overcome by remorse and has gone off to try to make good."

"So he should," Nathan said whipping off his tricorne hat and running his hands through his thick black hair. "After spending your inheritance on rum and wome—" Nathan's eyes flicked over her face.

Say it. Rum and women. That what Edward spent my inheritance from Uncle Jack on, rum and women.

"And what kind of heartless blackguard is he," Nathan continued, "to leave his fiancée alone and unguarded in a hellhole like Port Royal?"

His dark eyes were hard and his nostrils white as he looked down at her. Tears reflected on her lower lips His face changed and he gave an apologetic smile.

"Forgive me, Miss Stone,"

She did. If Nathan had looked dangerous when his eyes roamed over her before, now acting contrite he looked deadly. Prudence found herself noticing the thick blackness

of his hair tied back in a functional bow at the nape of his neck.

"I shouldn't have let my tongue run away with me, but it is hardly the action of a gentleman," he explained.

They stared at each other for a second, then Nathan gave her an unfathomable look and turned back to the road.

They reached the front of *The Two Puddings* twenty minutes later, to find a cart blocking the alley to the courtyard entrance.

"The front parlor should be quiet enough at this time of day," she said and sent him an appealing look. Would you mind carrying those in for me and through to the schoolroom?"

Looking up Prudence found herself gazing into Nathan's eyes. In the shadow they were almost black. The expression in them was most unsettling.

"My pleasure," he said in a voice that told her he was not just being polite.

With a smile on her face, Prudence pushed open the door and walked into the front parlor. The bell tinkled overhead as they entered.

Inside there were a couple of customers already sitting drinking from tankards. Moses was mopping the floor and one of the skivvies was washing down the table. The smell of stale beer and tobacco was not as pungent as usual. There was a pleasant breeze airing the room from a high, open window. On hearing potential customers enter, Mary appeared from the back parlor.

"It's you, Miss Stone" she said with a smile. She raised an eyebrow and gave Nathan a smirk. "Oh and Mr. Frazer."

"We in the chandler's," she answered, glancing up at Nathan.

"Did you get what you were after at Taffy's store?" Mary asked as Prudence and Nathan walked towards her.

She was about to answer Mary when a voice from behind her shrieked, "*Mais oui*, there is a God because one of 'is angels' as just come to earth."

Prudence heard Nathan mutter an oath as she turned to see who was addressing her.

She found herself inspected through a quizzing glass by a man an inch or two taller than herself wearing a full curly red-brown wig a shade lighter than his waxed mustache. Bows and lace competed for space on his frock coat and matching blue pleated pantaloons. His stocking legs were white and just avoided being too thin. The shoes he wore were of finest black leather with impossibly large polished buckles. He swept the wide-brimmed hat before him as he bowed to her. It was the same color as his jacket, turned jauntily back and secured with an extravagant plume.

"May I introduce myself? I am *Monsieur* Evreux, but I would be honored, nay, I beg you, to call me Louis. And you are?" he said to her.

"I am Miss Prudence Stone from England. Pleased to make your acquaintance *Monsieur* Evreux," she said, avoiding taking his outstretched hand.

Nathan stepped between Prudence and Louis. "Might I say, Louis, you look elegant enough to be strolling down Pall Mall not sitting in a tavern in Port Royal."

"One 'as to keep up appearances, Frazer, *n'est-ce par?*" Louis answered, without taking his eyes off Prudence.

"I'd say you look quite at home in a tavern, Louis's Mary said. "You're wearing more lace and perfume than any of my girls."

Louis ignored both Mary and Nathan as he continued to regard her with undisguised interest.

"Louis, please," he said capturing her hand and taking it slowly to his lips. "Tell me,

Mademoiselle Stone, what brings you all the way from England to our fair island of Jamaica?"

"Miss Stone has come to be married, but her fiancé has been kidnapped by pirates," Mary said.

Nathan cursed again and went to walk Prudence through to the courtyard, but Louis staggered theatrically back for a moment, then put the back of his hand to his forehead and shut his eyes.

"No." He took Prudence's hand again and gave her a look like a scolded spaniel. "*Mon Dieu*, who know what horrors he 'as endured. What was the name of this fortunate man would 'ave you travel 'alfway around the world to marry 'im?"

"The Reverend Edward Matthews" Prudence said and noticed the muscle on Nathan's jaws tighten.

"Edward Matthews, Edward Matthews was your fiancé?" Louis asked incredulously.

Prudence looked at him, her face animated by the news. "Did you know him?"

"In passing. I believe that we met in town a couple of times."

Prudence cast her eyes down. "I thought from the way you reacted to his name you might have known something about what happened to him."

"Did I say a couple of occasions, *pardonnez-moi*, my English, you know," Louis said in perfect English with an apologetic shrug. "I meant to say that Edward Matthews and I met on several occ—" he looked at Mary who stood, arms akimbo, glaring at him. "Why, I believe I meet him here a couple of times."

"Edward came here?" Prudence heard herself say in an incredulous voice.

Mary left her place by the bar and came and put a motherly arm around Prudence.

"I didn't want to tell you my love, but some people don't know when to keep their traps shut." She sent Louis a murderous look which he shrugged off. "I am afraid your fiancé did come here."

"Edward visited here." Prudence said in a barely audible voice. Nathan put down the slates and came towards her. For one moment she thought he was about to take hold of her, but he stopped and stood next to Louis.

"I'm afraid he visited here, and *The Mermaid*, and *The Bunch of Grapes*, till his money ran out," Mary said giving a mirthless laugh. "I had to ban Edward Matthews from *The Two Puddings* because he made such a nuisance of himself and if you ask me, you're too good for him, so you are."

Prudence shook her head in an attempt to clear it. "Edward didn't drink."

Mary came over and gave her a sympathetic hug. "I am afraid your fiancé's trouble was that he *couldn't* drink, Miss Stone. Two Jack Tars and he was under the table blubbering like a baby.

Louis waved a scented lace handkerchief in the air. "*Mademoiselle*, it is common knowledge in Port Royal that your fiancé was often— 'ow you say? — incapacitated and that he was thrown in jail twice for brawling in the streets." Louis paused and put his hand on his chest in a dramatic gesture. "I wish, dear *Mademoiselle*, it were not so—" Louis placed his hands together in a prayer-like gesture and looked up to the smoky rafters. "God has directed me to *The Two Pudding* this day." Prudence heard Mary snort. Louis looked back at Prudence. "I insist on 'elping you find out what 'as 'appened to your missing fiancé, Miss Stone. I feel it my duty, a heavenly directive, if you like." He leaned towards her and gave her a wicked smile. "I know everyone on the island."

From the back of *The Two Puddings* young voices shouting and laughing drifted out.

Prudence forced a smile. "I'm afraid I have to go," she said. Snatching up the slates, she spun on her heels, but not before Nathan saw the look of intense pain on her beautiful face.

Chapter Four

Prudence inhaled the fragrance of the hibiscus that rambled up the church wall. She let her eyes take in the beauty of the scene before her. Sitting on the church wall, she could see down the wet, cobbled street to the harbor.

The clock chimed the quarter past midday and Prudence glanced across the square. No sign of Job. A cart trundled by loaded to the top planks with newly cut tobacco. The pungent smell swamped the hibiscus as it passed and Prudence's mind drifted onto Nathan Frazer.

Each time she saw Nathan she seemed to forget completely about Edward and this was very wrong. Whatever Edward had done, he was still her fiancé. Although she was no longer sure she wanted a fiancé who could so easily succumb to the temptations in Port Royal.

"Miss Stone, what on earth are you doing alone?"

Prudence was jarred out of her daydreams only to find Nathan Frazer in person now standing in front of her.

"Oh, Mr. Frazer," she said, trying to stop herself looking at the corded muscles of his forearms. With the bobbing pink flowers around her, the warm sun and Nathan's dark eyes caressing her Prudence's heart burst with the joy of being alive. "Isn't the Caribbean beautiful after a tropical shower?" She hugged herself and smiled.

Casting his eyes around, Nathan nodded sharply. "Yes, yes but why are you here alone?" A deep frown etched across his forehead. "What can Truman be thinking of, not to provide you with an escort?"

"I am waiting for Job," Prudence said, pleased that Nathan was concerned for her welfare. "He has had to go to see his sister who has contagious boils or something so he said I should wait in the church for him. But it was such a lovely day I thought I would sit on the wall instead."

"Boils, my eye!" Nathan said. "I have just seen him going into *The Bunch of Grapes*."

"Oh! Don't tell Mr. Truman," Prudence said, not wishing to get the old retainer into trouble. "The Reverend has 'views' about drinking."

"Does he?" Nathan said with half a smile. "Well, I have 'views' about men who leave beautiful young women alone. I'll talk to Job myself." Nathan offered her his arm. "Now may n I escort you?"

Beautiful!

Prudence jumped off the wall and laid her hand on his forearm, her fingers curling gently over the soft hair.

"Any news of your fiancé?" Nathan asked as they made their way down towards the harbor.

Beautiful!

Prudence shook her head. "I tried to see the governor again, to make him send out a squadron to find Edward and this Diablo Ted but—"

"Diablo Ted?" Nathan said stopping and looking keenly at her.

"You've heard of him?" Prudence asked.

"Heard of him? Oh yes, I've heard of him, who has not? His depraved cruelty and ferocity is legendary. And that is no mean achievement among the murderers and devil worshipers on these islands."

No more than Edward deserves.

The thought came unbidden. Prudence drew in a sharp breath, shocked at her change of heart, but could she wonder at it? He had promised to marry her. Then he abandoned her halfway around the world with no money and without even a note of explanation. As Nathan had said, not the act of a gentleman, even less that of a clergyman.

"Rumor has it that Diablo Ted was killed last year but recently his ship, *The Fallen Angel*, has been seen again in local waters preying on Spanish, French and English ships," he told her glancing down at her hand on his arm.

"If Edward did intend to go to the Americas to make his fortune that might explain why he went on board *The Fallen Angel*," she said, feeling her anger surge.

If she ever got her hands on him!

"A damn foolish thing to do," Nathan said fiercely, slicing across her thoughts.

Prudence felt a lump in her throat.

"Yes," she squeaked. "Even before you informed me of such, I had heard tales of Diablo Ted and none of them pleasant."

Nathan looked as if he was about to say something but didn't.

"Monsieur Evreux said he was going to try to find out some more about Edward," Prudence said hoping Louis name would elicit more information from Nathan.

He gave her a disbelieving look. "I wouldn't count on it. Louis Evreux is as colorful with his promises as he is in his attire."

Prudence laughed. "I thought he was your friend."

To her utter surprise and pleasure, Nathan mouth turned up at the corners causing his eyes to crinkle. "I have a great regard for Louis' talent and charm, but I wouldn't ask him to find out the right time by the town clock."

She lifted her head and laughed out loud at the remark, sending him a provocative glance. She saw his raised eyebrow and a sensual look spread across his face.

Prudence Stone, shame on you. You're flirting. She coughed and looked ahead again.

"Miss Stone," she heard Nathan say gently. "I am truly sorry that you have arrived in Port Royal only to find that your fiancé is not here waiting for you. And I can understand that you want to know the circumstances behind his behavior. But surely the best and safest course for you would be to book passage home."

Someone pushed past her and Prudence felt herself collide with Nathan. His arm went around her to steady her. She looked into his strong face and her head spun.

Standing so close Nathan's potent masculinity was overpowering. She was now too close but could not move away. He was so—so—dangerous. That's what Nathan Frazer was—dangerous. Handsome, mesmerizing, practiced and very dangerous.

"Your fiancé," Nathan asked with a thoughtful gaze. "What does he look like?"

"He is twenty-seven with light-brown hair, down to here," she indicated just below her chin with her hand, "and a small mustache and beard. Shorter than you by about five inches and average build, not thin but not as well built as y—not broad either."

"Has he got any distinguishing features? A broken nose, large ears, broken or crooked teeth?"

"Really, Mr. Frazer, you must think I have a poor choice in men, if you think I would be engaged to a man with all those attributes," Prudence said with a laugh.

He laughed with her. "I wasn't suggesting that your fiancé had all of these. I was asking if there was something about him that would distinguish him from others."

She shook her head and a curl fell on her shoulder. "Nothing that I can think of."

"What about his eyes?"

"He had two of them." Prudence giggled.

She was high-spirited by nature, something her Uncle Ezra had remonstrated with her about on more than one occasion. So a walk in the warm tropical sunshine with Nathan, was raising the gloom she felt after thinking of Edward.

"I assumed he had, but were they different in any way?"

She shook her head. "Just the usual on either side of his nose, except th—"

A loud pistol shot rang out down the narrow street there was an explosion of activity as people dashed for cover.

Nathan took hold of Prudence and shoved her against the wall, wrapping his arms around her and covering her with his body. Pandemonium exploded behind them as several other shots rang out. A gang of drunken sailors careered up the street followed by a company of soldiers from the garrison. He held her tighter and looked behind him.

"Don't move," he said as he pressed her even closer into the wall.

Move was the last thing on Prudence's mind. In fact, there was nothing in her head but the feel of Nathan's hard, strong body pressing against hers. She could feel the tensile strength of his arm around her waist, his broad chest was hard against her breasts and his thighs felt firm and tight against her.

She felt her stomach start to flutter and turn, sending pulsing swirls to the private area at the junction of her legs.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Stone. The ruffians will be rounded up soon by Bennett and his men."

Prudence was afraid, but not of the sailors. She was afraid that she was going to give in to the overwhelming urge she had to kiss Nathan's tanned neck that was only inches from her mouth.

Her eyes roamed up and over the strong chin and the tan of his skin. She continued up to his eyes which were averted, riveted to the ensuing commotion. Her gaze took in the fine line of his eyebrow and the way his hair swept away from his face. She breathed in the smell of his body and the rum that he must have splashed on his freshly shaved face that morning.

Another shot rang out and some plaster from above them broke loose and showered down. Nathan ducked and Prudence put her hand up, placing it without thinking, on Nathan's chest. Under the thin fabric of his shirt, she could feel the springy chest hairs and her fingers moved ever so slightly across them.

She stared up at Nathan. He filled her senses. She wanted nothing more than that he should continue to hold her. Although she knew she shouldn't, Prudence was vaguely aware that she was tilted her hips into him.

Then he turned his head to look at her. With a jolt, she could see his desire blazing from his eyes and she was proud to have made him want her. Nathan's fervor was burning into her soul and she wanted more. It left her feeling weak, yet bursting with life.

But it was wrong. She loved Edward. Although, with Nathan Frazer holding her and filling her vision, Prudence found she couldn't remember exactly what Edward looked like.

She should not feel this way for a man like Nathan Frazer. *He is unsettling.* She came here to marry the man she loved, not to throw herself into the arms of another.

She tried to push up and felt Nathan's arm tighten around her. There was a hardness against her thigh and her eyes grew wider. Then she lowered them as her legs buckled.

Nathan's legs braced to support her as he lowered his head towards her. She drew

in a breath and waited, knowing she should stop him, but powerless to do so.

"Can I be of any assistance, Miss Stone?" a voice said from behind Nathan.

Prudence opened her eyes again and saw Henry Bennett looking at them both. She struggled to stand and free herself from Nathan's embrace.

Whatever was she thinking? She had almost kissed Nathan Frazer, a man she hardly knew, in the street in broad daylight. She tried to appear normal, but she was aquiver with raging emotions.

"Oh, Captain Bennett, it's you."

She felt Nathan reluctantly let go of her and turn to face the captain of the garrison. He gave Henry Bennett a livid look as he straightened his waistcoat.

Ignoring Nathan's hostility, Bennett addressed her. "There are some rough elements in this town, Miss Stone. You would be well to avoid them if you can."

She adjusted her bonnet. "Thank you, Captain Bennett. Mr. Frazer was escorting me back to my lodgings when the disturbance broke out."

"Um, as I said, rough elements." Captain Bennett stared hard at Nathan. "I have heard that your name has been mentioned in the taverns of late, in connection with the Spanish."

"Is that a fact?"

"That it is. I make it my business to know such things. Just as I make it my business to ensure that gentlewomen are not molested in the street."

Nathan stiffen beside her and his hand went to his sword.

"Mr. — Mr. Frazer was merely protecting me — keeping me from danger."

"Keeping you from danger, you say? There are many different kinds of danger in Port Royal, Miss Stone. I doubt Mr. Frazer could keep you from all of them." Captain Bennett said with a half-smile, looking at Nathan.

"Is there something you want, Bennett?"

"As I said before, it's *Captain* Bennett, and I don't want anything from you Frazer, except that you stay out of my sight and out of trouble."

"Then I'll bid you good day." Nathan said as he held out his arm to Prudence.

"Have you heard that Diablo Ted has asked the Governor for a letter of marque?"

She heard Nathan curse under his breath. Bennett continued.

"As war with Spain seems inevitable and we need all the guns we can get. A full pardon from the Crown and a promise of good behavior on Diablo Ted's part and the Governor is likely to grant the marque when the rogue arrives in port," Captain Bennett formed them.

"If you would excuse us, Bennett, Miss Stone has had a nasty experience this morning," Nathan said guiding her hand to his arm.

"I saw that when I arrived."

Nathan ignored him and escorted Prudence past him and back down to the quayside in silence.

Prudence's mind whirled. Had not Captain Bennett come across them, Nathan would have kissed her. But what was really making her heart race was the fact that she had wanted him to, and still did.

She glanced up at him as he gazed towards the harbor. Prudence took the opportunity to study his profile.

So intent was she on Nathan's face that it was only when they stopped that she realized that they were outside the Trumans's house.

"Oh—oh —um—thank you for escorting me home, Mr. Frazer, and pro—pro—

protecting me.”

Nathan turned and looked down at her and Prudence drew in her breath. His eyes were liquid and there was a sensual expression on his face. She put her hand on the Trumans’ door. Nathan took a step nearer.

For one moment Prudence thought he was about to take her in his arms again but instead he took her hand to his lips, gave her a small bow and walked away.

When he was sure that she had gone inside Nathan stopped turned and stared back up the street. It had taken him all his willpower to leave Prudence. Having experienced her in his arms every nerve in his body demanded that he feel her against him again. The blood pounded in his head and in his loins. He was raised, ready and alone. He couldn’t speak, he could barely think. He had sought only to protect her, as he would any woman, but the look she gave him had cleaved to his very soul.

He wanted her. It was as simple as that. At this time and in this place Nathan shouldn’t even considered trying to know her better. Until a half an hour ago, nothing was further from his mind, but when he felt Prudence’s body yield to him, Nathan started to rethink everything.

It’s lust, you fool, his crotch informed his mind by way of reassurance. *Go and find yourself a less complicated relief for it.*

He turned abruptly and spotted Louis sitting elegantly outside *The Bosun’s Rest*.

The Frenchman flicked a speck of dirt from his sleeve. “Was that the delectable Mademoiselle Stone I saw you with in the High Street a moment ago, Frazer?”

“It was. I was out to stretch my legs and catch the air when I happened to meet her in town.”

And almost kissed her.

Louis wrinkled up his nose. “Air? More like stench. “He kicked a fish head away from him with a well-polished toe and gazed towards the dock. “I see that the Navy is in town. There’ll be plenty of work for Mary’s girls.”

Nathan said nothing but looked towards the flotilla.

Prudence, Prue. His mouth turned slightly at the corners.

“I’m sure that you have received an invitation for the Governor’s reception in four weeks,” Louis said, stroking his mustache.

Nathan nodded. “That I have. So we both have the same bloody, dull, boring evening to look forward to.”

Louis gave Nathan a sly look, “I wonder if my ‘Eve’ will be there.”

“Eve?”

“For my new painting.” Louis looked at Nathan’s bemused face and gave a smile. “My masterpiece? Eve in Paradise before the Fall? I’ve just been waiting for the right model.”

With brows tightly drawn together Nathan turned to the man next to him. “You cannot possibly mean Miss Stone?”

“She would be perfect.”

“But your models are normally the girls of the town, and wives posing for paintings for their husbands, not – not –” Nathan trailed off. He didn’t like the thought of Prudence Stone being a possible model for anything Louis might paint.

“I know, I know, *mon ami*. But Eve was innocent before she ate the apple and

tempted Adam. I think that Miss Stone is one of the few women in Port Royal who is both innocent and tempting. She would be perfect for my virginal Eve, don't you think?"

An image of how Prudence might look in one of Louis's paintings sprang vividly into his mind. His body burst into life again. Prudence Stone was perfect, absolutely perfect, but not to pose for the lecherous Frenchman beside him. He knew how Louis cared for his models and innocent as she might be now, there was no guaranteed she would be after a couple of sketching sessions.

"No, no I don't think so. Leave Prudence be, I tell you. Find someone else for your Eve."

Louis threw his hand in the air. "O, la, la, Prudence, is it now."

Nathan shot Louis a furious look, reflecting his boiling temper. He stood up abruptly and, with the merest show of civility, turned and marched back to the quay.

Chapter Five

Isaac smiled and Prudence twisted the handkerchief in her hand, but she smiled back calmly. For the past week, she had nothing but a deep scowl from Reverend Truman every time they met so a generous smile was most unnerving.

"Come and sit, my dear. It's a long time since we all had a moment together," he said sweeping his hand to include Martha.

Prudence sat slowly down on the edge of the chaise longue next to Martha.

Isaac cleared his throat with a deep phlegmy rumble. "Now then —"

"We think you have made such progress with the school, Prudence dear, don't we husband?" Martha said, her ringlets bobbing as she spoke. She slid along and put a thin arm around Prudence's shoulder. Prudence twisted the handkerchief back again.

"Oh yes, great progress. But—" Isaac started again.

"How many children have you now?" Martha asked with a soft, pitying smile.

"Twelve on a regular basis and an additional four from time to time," Prudence answered looking warily at Isaac sitting in the leather-bound winged chair. "They all pay a farthing a week."

"Is that all?" interjected Isaac. "A farthing a week? That would hardly cover your costs." He snorted,

Prudence looked up to the rafters and clasped her hands together. "Did not our Lord say in Mark chapter ten, verse fourteen, 'suffer the little children to come unto me?'"

"Quite commendable I'm sure. But that was not Port Royal," Isaac countered. "By my reckoning you are out of pocket at the end of the week."

"I have a penny or two most weeks," Prudence said thinking how little a few pence bought in Port Royal. Especially when some of the children needed physicking at Dr. Cowper's last week. She shifted in her seat and went to rise, but Martha anchored her on the embossed upholstery.

"Isaac has some sad news, Prudence. I want you to be very strong." Martha said as Isaac mopped sweat from his brow.

"Uncle Ezra?" Prudence asked with a quiver in her voice.

"No, my dear, someone else you're fond of," Martha said as she wiped away a tear.

Nathan. A void opened.

"It's Edward, my dear," Martha said. "He has been killed."

Edward dead?

"Are you sure?" she asked Isaac Truman.

A sailor came to see me yesterday at the church and handed me these."

Reaching inside his fob waistcoat Reverend Truman extracted a small pigskin drawstring purse and emptied the contents on the small table at the arm of his chair.

Prudence's eyes strayed back to the collection of items on the desk. "Where is Edward's pendant?"

"Pendant?"

Prudence rummaged through the pens, papers buckles and buttons on the oilskin.

"A small silver token on a chain. He never took it off."

"This was all that was returned," Isaac said.

"Maybe whoever killed him stole this pendant," Martha said.

Prudence shook her head vigorously causing a lock of hair to escape. "Why would

they steal a silver pendant, but return his gold ring?" She looked directly at Isaac. "Was his body brought back?"

"Good heavens, no. The sailors who gave me these," he indicated the trinkets strewn over his desk, "had been six weeks at sea. The body would have putrefied by then. We would have had to pour Edward into his grave."

"Isaac!" Martha snapped at her husband.

"Uh, yes — well, your pardon, Miss Stone," Isaac said gruffly. "Edward was buried at sea."

A grim smile appeared on Prudence's face. "After two weeks in Port Royal I find my stomach is becoming a great deal less delicate. But why did they return his belongings? Surely the pirates would have kept his ring and watch."

"The sailor muttered something about it being bad luck and assured me that they wanted none of Edward's belongings."

She sat for a few moments absorbing all that she had heard. She felt Martha hug her again. "I know we all feared the worst but it is still a shock," she said.

Shock? What Prudence was shocked about was how swiftly Nathan Frazer's name came to her and how bereft she felt when it had. A cough ended her musing.

"Now we know Edward's fate, grim though that is, it is time for you to think of returning home. I'll secure a berth for you on a homebound ship in a day or so."

"I'm not going home yet. Certainly not until I find out exactly what happened to Edward and why he has been reported dead. And I have only just got the school started."

The Reverend Truman's face lost its veneer of sympathy and returned to its usual bombastic form. "He has been reported dead, Miss Stone, because he is dead."

Martha again admonished her husband. "Isaac!"

He waved at his wife sharply and spoke again. "I assure you, Miss Stone, that I have it on good authority that Edward Matthews is truly dead," he said with slow deliberation.

"I don't believe it," Prudence said, folding her arms smartly across her chest. "And what's more, I am not leaving Port Royal until I am satisfied that I have the truth about Edward and his whereabouts."

Stepping towards her Isaac pointed at his wife, who sat next to Prudence, holding on to her.

"This is the result of sparing the rod," he said as if his wife were responsible for Prudence's upbringing.

"I don't thin —" Martha started, but her husband ignored her.

"Not leaving Port Royal." He turned on her bearing down so swiftly she had to force herself not to shrink back under his onslaught. "As if it's not bad enough that you consort daily with whores and sailors in a dockside tave —"

Prudence stuck out her chin. "I am teaching the children their letters in *The Two Puddings*, not looking for custom," she said as Martha slumped back on the chaise longue.

"Don't take me for a fool, Miss Stone. I know why you don't want to leave Port Royal," Isaac said ignoring his white-faced wife who was fanning herself vigorously. "And it not because of the school or 'dear Edward.' It's Nathan Frazer that keeps you here, is it not?"

Prudence's mouth dropped open as she felt heat burst into her cheeks. "Wh — what do you mean?"

"I mean, Miss Stone, that you have been seen in the company of Nathan Frazer almost every day," Reverend Truman said and looked to his wife for confirmation.

"It has been noticed by a number of the parishioners that you are often in Mr.

Frazer's company. Why Mrs. Rodford saw you only the other day in the street with his arm around you," Martha said with a warble in her voice.

"He was escorting me through the town, as any gentleman would," Prudence explained.

"Gentleman! Nathan Frazer may look like a gentleman, but he has the habits of a tomcat."

"Mr. Frazer," Prudence said with a lump in her throat, "can therefore have no interest in me."

"Normally I would agree with you. Why would a man with the pick of the handsome women on the island look at a homely woman like you? Unless you have been encouraging him," Isaac said pulling his mouth in tight.

"I have done no such thing," Prudence retaliated.

"In that case, why is Nathan Frazer paying you more attention than any other woman on the island?" Isaac leaned forward and jabbed his index finger towards Prudence. "I can only surmise that you have been encouraging him and he now has designs on your virtue."

Paying me more attention.

Something fluttered in Prudence's chest as a vision of Nathan rose in her mind.

She was not going home. Not yet and certainly not because the arrogant Isaac Truman told her to.

Prudence stood and drawing herself up to her full five foot six, she picked up her skirts and swirled around. "That is preposterous—"

Paying me more attention.

Prudence stopped her emotions from running away with the possibility that Nathan might indeed be interested in her and focused back on the Reverend Truman.

"I thank you for offering me the hospitality of your house, but whatever you say I am not leaving Port Royal. And I am mightily offended by your insinuation," she said haughtily as she went to sweep out of the room.

"Offended or not, Miss Stone, I will be booking your passage, with a suitable chaperone, on the next homebound rigger."

Nathan had intended to visit some of the wives in the town but he did not. He told himself that he was too busy, but, as he lay awake on the fifth night staring at the rafters thinking about Prudence's slender fingers and how they might feel if he had them encircled around his shaft, he knew he was becoming obsessed.

Normally, when a woman took his fancy, he would have just overwhelmed her with his charm, and seduced her. Now he found that he couldn't bring himself to do this. Firstly, he did have genuine scruples about seducing innocent young women. He might be posing on the island as a worldly-wise Englishman, but he didn't have to behave like one.

Secondly, with the volatile situation in the Caribbean, he had to keep his wits about him and Prudence Stone was already taking his mind away from his task without him actually trying to seduce her. And lastly, if Spain and England did go to war, he might have to leave Jamaica smartly.

Therefore that morning he had awakened deciding to avoid Prudence completely until she abandoned this harebrained scheme of hers to find her missing fiancé and left the island, thereby letting him get on with more important things.

To his annoyance, as Nathan emerged from the gunsmiths into the narrow street, he saw her walking away from him at the other end of the lane. In a moment of uncharacteristic panic he saw she was heading into the notorious area around Eagle Row. All rational thought fled from Nathan's mind.

Forgetting completely that he was already late meeting the first mate from 'The Defiant' Nathan sped after her. As he adjusted his eyes to the lack of sunlight between the houses, he spotted her in conversation with One Leg Jem.

That bastard Edward doesn't deserve the love of a woman like Prue. If he is found, I'd like to have a couple of words with him myself.

She was bidding the old salt good day and was about to turn under the low eaves of Joshua Berry's Wine and Spirit shop when two skinny youths dashed at her, knocking her onto the floor.

Nathan took out his flintlocks and fired above the heads of those in the congested street. The crowd stopped for a split second then chaos broke out. Items hanging from shop fronts were hastily drawn inside and shutters the length of the street slammed into place. Women screamed, dogs barked and snapped at one another and at the fleeing passersby.

Both miscreants were shaking Prudence who was struggling to remain upright he threw the flintlocks aside and drew his sword. On hearing the shot, one lad shoved against Prudence. She screamed and the young man raised his fist above her. Nathan shoved past the fleeing people racing around him.

The fist descended and Prudence staggered. Her assailant sent Nathan a nasty look and then snatched at the gold cross locket around Prudence neck before he dashed away.

With his heart pounding in his chest and sweat running down his brow Nathan reached Prudence who was trying to remain standing. She looked up at him with a small blob of blood visible on her lower lip.

"Mr. Fr—" Prudence said weakly, reaching for her missing hat and finding her hair unbound and free.

"What on earth are you doing alone in Eagles Row?" he bellowed. "Have you completely taken leave of your senses?"

She didn't answer, just gazed up at him with a bemused expression on her face. Setting her on her feet Nathan pulled her to face him.

"You stubborn, pig-headed woman," he shouted at her surprised by his anger. "You were fortunate not to be killed. Most around here would slit your throat for the price of a glass of cheap grog."

Her eyes flashed at him and she looked as if she were about to answer when her eyes lost focus as she sank to the floor. He caught her before she hit the cobbles and lifted her effortlessly into his arms. Her head fell onto his shoulder and had the urge to kiss the golden-brown curls now inches from his lips.

The weight of her in his arms was pleasant and he was in no hurry to put her down. He gave her a quick look to see if he could see any further injuries. Although, her eyes were closed, she breathed easily.

The Two Puddings is around the corner.

Holding Prudence gently in his arms, Nathan turned in its direction.

With the blow from his foot, *The Two Puddings'* bar door swung back and Nathan

stooped to enter.

"My God, is she dead?" Mary asked as she came towards him, a look of motherly concern on her face.

"She could have been," Nathan replied and gave the unconscious Prudence a hard look.

Louis appeared and clutched the side of the bar when he saw who Nathan held.

"Mon Dieu, Mademoiselle Stone."

"Yes, *Mademoiselle* Stone. Who doesn't listen to good advice," Nathan said as he again gave the unconscious Prudence a withering look.

Louis clasped his hands together on his chest and looked up to where a number of Mary's girls hung over the balcony. "I implore you, Queen of Heaven, do not let dear *Mademoiselle* Stone die," he said wiping the corner of his eye.

"She is not going to die, Louis," Mary said coming around the other side of Nathan. "She has just fainted."

Louis' hand went to the sword by his side. "If you 'ave done anything, Frazer, to 'arm the beautiful *Mad*—"

"For God's sake, Louis," Mary said, sending the Frenchman an exasperated look. "Frazer wouldn't have ravished Miss Stone then brought her here, would he?"

"Then why 'as she fainted in 'is arms?"

"She was attacked, man," Nathan said, unable to stop a smile starting on his lips. "And for goodness' sake, put that sword away before you cut yourself."

"No," Louis said breathlessly, looking as he would need Nathan to pick him up from the floor at any moment. "*Monsieur*, I would defend *Mademoiselle* Stone's honor with my life if necessary."

"Take her through to my parlor, Nathan," Mary said, lifting the counter for them to pass into her private rooms.

Prudence's eyes fluttered open just as Nathan laid her down on the reclining couch in Mary's snug parlor.

For a second their eyes locked and he gasped at the unguarded look she sent him. He forgot everything but the woman cradled in his arms. Emotions exploded in his mind and collided with his senses. He wanted to kiss her. Then he wanted to kiss her again and again.

What fool of a man would leave such a beauty?

"Here, I have a cold flannel," Mary said behind him.

Nathan reluctantly let Prudence to let Mary tend her. Prudence blinked twice and opened her eyes.

Coming around and finding Nathan's face very near hers Prudence had the urge to kiss him. To kiss his lips, his eyes, his cheeks and his hair. She also wanted to run her hands over him and cling onto him.

When she saw him coming to her assistance in the Eagle Row, she could have wept for joy. Mrs. Truman had already warned her about the area, but she had heard that Edward had frequented it so she had to go. Until she was set upon, she had been glad she had ignored her friend's warning as the information One Leg Jem had given her had been most enlightening.

Then the two youths came upon her so swiftly that she didn't have time to think, but when she saw Nathan everything else faded from her sight, leaving only the feel of his

arms around her as the black swirled around her.

Shaking the fog from her mind Prudence opened her eyes to find herself staring at the fine planes of Nathan's his face inches from her. Then he moved aside and Mary leaned over her and put a cold flannel on her throbbing head.

"Where am I?"

"In my parlor. Now lay still, you have a nasty bump on your head, Miss Stone."

Prudence put her hand to her forehead and felt the lump under her fingers.

"*Mademoiselle* Stone, I could weep with joy at seeing you so recovered," Louis said as he grabbed hold of her hand.

Mary hustled him aside. "The poor girl will have headache enough without you paining it further with chatter."

Louis moved away, but continued to gaze at her with puppy-like eyes.

"Why were you were walking around Eagles Row by yourself, are you mad?" That was Nathan's voice and she shrank from its harsh sound.

She didn't know. All Prudence knew was she didn't like Nathan talking to her in such a callous manner. She wanted to feel his arms around her again, not his scathing criticism of her actions.

"Did you recognize the two dogs that attacked you, Miss Stone?" Mary asked before Nathan could say any more.

Prudence shook her head. "No. But they did say that it was a warning from Diablo Ted to 'mind my own business.'"

She heard Nathan let out an expletive and his eyes fixed on her.

Diablo Ted! Diablo Ted knew of Prudence.

Fear prickled Nathan's skin as he looked down at her with her ripening black eye. The urge to take her in his arms and never let her go swelled up in him and only the fact that Mary and Louis were on either side of her stopped him before the thought gave way to the deed.

Prudence gave Mary a sorrowful look. "Mr. Truman told me yesterday that Edward has been killed."

"Oh my love," Mary said as she took Prudence hand and patted it.

Prudence looked up sharply and swung her leg off the couch. "I don't believe it."

"I know you're upset, my dear, but Mr. Truman must have had reliable information that Edward was dead, or he wouldn't have told you so."

"Oh, he did." Prudence said with her mouth set in a firm line as she spoke. "The sailor who brought the news brought back Edward's belongings as well."

"Well then—"

"But not *all* of his possessions," she said with the characteristic small frown appearing.

Nathan matched her frown. "Just because a couple of his personal items are missing, that doesn't prove that he is still alive. Surely whoever killed him took them?"

He saw Prudence bite her lower lip. "Everything was returned except a silver token that he wore.

Giving them all a patient look Prudence explained. "The only thing that he had from his mother, whoever she might be, was a pendant with a coat of arms on it which she left with him in the basket."

"Did Edward know what the coat of arms was?" he asked, looking deep into her troubled hazel eyes.

Those eyes could cause angels to sin.

He watched the delicate shape of Prudence's mouth as she spoke to him. How would that feel kissing his body? The thought caught his cock swiftly and caused it to surge to life. He dragged his mind back from its pleasant wandering and concentrated on what she was saying. "The silver pendant never left him. I remember when it slipped off in church, he practically tore the flagstones up to find it."

"Why was it so valuable to him? It couldn't have been worth much," Mary interjected.

"You have a family?"

Mary nodded and Nathan thought briefly of his father, mother, brother and two sisters far away.

"So have I. My dear uncle Ezra and, until recently, my Uncle Jack."

Prudence sighed and he saw her eyes grow wide as they focused on the open front of his shirt. His mind started wandering again. She looked back up at him.

"You and I have families, people who love us, somewhere where we belong. Edward did not. All he had was that pendant to tell him who he was. He found out the crest was that of a French royal house."

Swinging her legs around, showing her trim ankles in the process, Prudence sat up. The frown appeared accompanied by a hard look at them all.

"Of all the stupid things to happen," she said, standing up sharply and swishing her skirt with snap.

Nathan's tension eased as at last Prudence seemed to have realized the danger of enquiring into the business of this murderous villain, Diablo Ted. Even he, who was experienced in handling the likes of Diablo Ted, trod cautiously.

"Finally," Nathan said, throwing his hands up in the air. "Finally, you see the danger in wandering about the dockyard asking about Diablo Ted."

Prudence's eyes flashed up at him and her lips pressed together. "I was referring to the fact that Reverend Truman insist that I go home and await news of Edward as he says it is too dangerous for me to stay."

"I would have thought after this morning that you would agree with him, Miss Stone," he said indignantly as Louis and Mary smirked at him.

Blasted stubborn woman. He let his furious gaze sweep over her. But still the urge to take her to take her into his arms and kiss her would not go away. Would nothing make this obstinate women see sense? Standing there with her hands—*delicate hands*—on her hips.

"Your pardon, Miss Stone. I thought that after being punched and threatened by a couple of Diablo Ted's men you would see your folly," Nathan said.

"Folly—Folly—How da—" Prudence gasped. Two red patches appeared on her cheeks. She jabbed her finger at him. "I'll have you know Mr. Frazer, now that I suspect that Edward is not dead I am determined to stay and find out exactly what has happened to him." Prudence stepped closer. "That sailor—" she waved in the direction of the bar door— "the one with missing leg, he told me that it was common talk around the dock that Edward was looking for a ship to help him with a business transaction."

"This is utter madness," he bellowed, feeling a little mad himself as an image of Prudence crashing on the cobbles flashed back into his mind.

"And," continued Prudence with a smug smile, "that Edward and Diablo Ted sailed

to Tortuga."

"Tortuga?" Louis crossed himself hastily. "The devil 'imself would be in danger in Tortuga."

Nathan saw a question forming in Prudence's mind as she turned towards the Frenchman.

I have to stop her.

Nathan gave a condescending laugh. "In truth, my dear, I question your guardian's sanity at letting you embark on such a perilous journey in the first place."

"How dare you stand there half-dressed—" her eyes flicked down to his chest again then back at his face, "—and question my Uncle Ezra's' sanity?" She clenched her fists tightly together at her side. "Now that Diablo Ted is coming to see the Governor I can find out what has really happened to Edward. I have to stay until he arrives.

"You are so clever, *Mademoiselle*," Louis said, applauding lightly.

"For God's sake, Louis, she's not clever, she's mad," Nathan barked at the flamboyant artist, his hands balled into tight fists. Then he rounded on Prudence. "How will you be able to stay?" he asked, taking up a belligerent stance to match hers. Her eyes blazed at him but Prudence didn't falter.

Sticking her chin out, she answered, "I'll find lodgings."

My God, she will as well.

"I doubt that you will be able to afford respectable lodgings in this town," Nathan said, the blood pounding in his ears.

"I'll find lodgings," she repeated, but less forcefully. Nathan let out a long breath.

"I take in lodgers from time to time, Miss Stone," Mary said. "I have a room well away from the parlor that you can have. It's next to mine so no one will bother you."

The cold hand of dread closed around Nathan's chest at Mary's words.

"I can't afford very much Mary," Prudence said as Nathan lost the power of speech.

"I'm not asking much. Just that—" Mary stole a glance at Nathan and Louis, "just that you teach me my letters."

"Mon Dieu! You are not seriously suggesting that Mademoiselle Stone stays "ere, in a —a—" Louis said in an appalled tone.

"A tavern," Prudence and Mary said together, both sets of eyes fixing on Louis.

Taking a step forward, Prudence let her hands rest on her hips. "In Matthew nine, verse ten, we read that our Lord himself sat and ate with publicans and sinners "She glanced at Mary standing next to her. "No offense, Mary."

"None taken, Miss Stone," Mary said as a small smile started to turn up the corners of her mouth.

"So I'll follow His example and take up Mary's kind offer." Prudence smiled and nodded towards Mary.

Nathan stepped forward.

Louis's upbraiding by Prudence had wrenched him out of his paralysis.

"Loath as I am to agree with Louis," Nathan said in a grave tone. "He is right. This is no place for you to stay."

If this stupid fiancé of hers is not dead, he'll wish he was if I ever get my hands on him.

He waited for Prudence's reply. Instead, she pressed her lips firmly together, sent him a livid look and turned to Mary. "Will you show me the room, Mary?"

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen I will take Miss—" Mary signaled for her potman.

Damn Edward Matthews. A pain cramped in Nathan's chest.

He had to stop her. "You may be safe enough in here but tell me, Miss Stone, who

will protect you when you go abroad unless you intend to spend all of your time in Port Royal hiding in Mary's loft."

"She can take Moses with her. I doubt many would touch her with him around." Mary said

Nathan glanced up at the large black man who stood behind Mary and grinned at him in a friendly manner. Mary was right. Nathan hadn't been bested in a fight since he was sixteen but it would have to be something pretty important for even him to tackle the kindly but formidable Moses.

Prudence folded her arms looking triumphantly at Nathan and defying him to say more. For some seconds they stood glaring at each other, tempers simmering. Mary broke the stalemate.

"As I was about to say, I have to show Miss Stone to her room, so unless you're going to buy some rum or take one of the girls upstairs I would ask you gentlemen to make way for my paying customers."

Prudence gave him a last cool look and followed Mary towards the stairs. Mary stood aside. "After you, Miss Stone."

"No, after you, Mary."

They reached the top of the stairs and Mary pushed open the door to Prudence's room. The sun was streaming through the window and the faint scent of flowers wafted in on the light breeze.

"Now, you lie down there, my love, and let Mary see to you."

She did as she was bid and Mary fussed around the room. She picked up the pitcher of water and poured it out into the bowl, wet a soft flannel and placed it across Prudence's forehead.

She smiled up at the older woman. "You're very kind Mary."

"Tush, tush, think nothing of it," Mary said, "Thought you needed a bit of motherly care after such a terrible experience."

Prudence winced as Mary dabbed her forehead. "Will I have much of a bruise?"

Mary gave a small chuckle. "You'll have a lovely shiner for a couple of days, but no permanent damage."

"That's what Nathan said."

"Nathan, is it now?" Mary asked, raising her eyebrows.

Prudence's cheeks turned pink.

"Fortunate he was there then."

Prudence sat up and rested on her elbows. "Yes it was." She recalled her relief at seeing him striding towards her. This thought was replaced by Nathan shouting at her as she lay battered and bruised on Mary's chaise longue. "But that doesn't give him the right to call me a fool or imply that Uncle Ezra was addled in the head."

Prudence let herself fall back onto the bed. "I hope I never see him again." She set her mouth in a straight line.

Mary shot Prudence an amused look.

"Now you just lie back," she said and plumped the pillows, replacing the flannel as Prudence reclined.

"Mary?"

"Yes, my love."

"Does Nathan come here a great deal?"

"He does. He meets his clients here, the traders who buy tobacco. He also says he likes the port and brandy I serve."

"Oh."

"He has never been upstairs, if that's what you're asking, Prue."

"No, no — I just wo — I don't care," she gave the ceiling a cold look.

Despite being absolutely furious with Nathan about his condescending attitude she could still feel his strong arms around her and see the look on his face when she opened her eyes. Suddenly Prudence couldn't bear the idea of Nathan holding any other woman like that. The little vibration she felt every time she saw Nathan started again. She shook the thought out of her head.

"Have you been in Port Royal long, Mary?"

Mary laughed. "Seems like a lifetime but I actually bought the house five years ago. The place was called 'The Two Pails' before but I thought *The Two Puddings* would remind people who owned it."

Mary took hold of her breasts and squeezed them to emphasis her point.

Prudence lowered her eyes cheeks aflame again. "Oh, Mary."

"Oh, Mary, what? These 'ave made my fortune and allowed me to buy this place."

Prudence was now crimson with embarrassment. Thinking of what Mary might have done to make her fortune caused her to be acutely aware of the unmaidenly yearnings that had surged through her in Nathan's arms.

"A woman has to make the best of what she has," Mary told her in a matter of fact voice.

Prudence gave a wan smile from the bed. "I'm sorry if I have offended you." She saw Mary relax her stance, so she continued. "Do you know, Mary, that before I came to Port Royal I had never been inside a tavern in my life?"

"I should think not. A well brought up young lady like you!" Mary exclaimed reapplying the flannel. "Why did you decide to stay here?" she asked. "I know that you didn't have much in the way of funds, but you could have gone to the Quaker minister and stayed there."

Prudence rolled her head to the side and drew her eyebrows together in a frown.

"I'll tell you why, Mary. Nathan was so sure of himself, so patronizing, that I would have walked into the sea rather than admit that he was right."

She saw the corner of Mary's mouth start to twitch.

"I can't bear to be told what to do. My Uncle Ezra said it would get me into trouble some day and he is probably right."

Mary was still struggling to suppress a smile.

"And when Nathan referred to my 'adventure, 'I just saw red. I had come all the way expecting to be married. Finding that Edward was kidnapped was bad enough, but then I started to hear such tales about his behavior. And now to be told that he is dead when his gold ring and watch have been returned, but a silver token is missing, I can't believe. There is something not right and I intend to find out the truth about. Can you understand?"

"I understand very well, my dear," Mary said with a chuckle. "And although I am inclined to agree with Nathan a little, I wouldn't have missed you roasting him like you did. It took him quite by surprise." Mary gave Prudence a wink. "He has it too easy with women, does that man. Not used to them arguing with him," Mary finished, with a shrewd look at Prudence.

"Mary, do you know Nathan Frazer well?"

Prudence could not stop herself asking the question. For the past hour and a half, since she had woken up in Nathan's arms, she could think of nothing else.

Mary sent Prudence a shrewd look. "I'll tell you what I know. Nathan came here three years ago. He manages the Seton tobacco plantation, he has a house in King Street and he regularly sails to the New England colonies."

Prudence tried to lie down calmly as she felt Mary apply the cool flannel to her forehead, but she could still feel the small pulse in her neck racing.

"You won't be surprised to hear that he has a number of —friends among the planters' wives."

Prudence swallowed hard.

Mary gave a short laugh. "Nathan Frazer likes women and women like him. Even the Governor's wife would like to get him between her sheets."

"The Governor's wife?"

"Lady Morris would certainly like to be better acquainted with Nathan Frazer, but he is too wise to let her get her mucky hands on him." Mary sat back in the chair and laughed again. "Lady she likes to be called! Ha!" Mary looked back at Prudence. "There are some right goings on up at the Governor's house I can tell you." Mary stopped and shot Prudence a quick look then patted her hand. "No, I can't, because you are too young to hear all about the shenanigans up the hill. Now you rest for a while, my love."

"Thank you, Mary. I'll be down for supper."

"Are you sure?"

"I'd like to, Mary."

Mary closed the shutters and left Prudence lying on the bed.

Prudence shut her eyes and started to drift towards sleep. Nathan came back into her mind. The feel of him against her and the look in his eyes as leaned towards her. She smoothed her hand down over her skirt and onto her thigh. She touched the place where she had felt this hardness against her and she felt her stomach flutter and her hips flex as she pressed her hand on her leg.

What would it feel like if that hardness were not just against her thigh, but in her hand? Prudence felt the throbbing intensify and a warm feeling started to emanate down from her stomach toward the private area below. Her breasts tingled. She wondered what Nathan's male hardness would be like inside her.

She had felt Edward hard against her occasionally, normally just before she stopped his hands from straying. But that had never caused such a torrent of feeling.

What was she thinking? These are not the thoughts of an unmarried woman. They were shameful.

But in her head, the words sounded hollow and Prudence didn't feel ashamed of herself at all. No remembering the look of blatant desire in Nathan's eyes made every part of her feel proud.

She reapplied the cold flannel to her glowing forehead.

Nathan again, always back to Nathan. That man.

She tried to clear the disturbing thoughts from her mind. She tried to picture Edward's face in her mind but Nathan's image kept returning.

She sat up and plumped the pillows and lay back again, determined to sleep.

Mary's right. I've had a shock, and that what's unsettled me so. I will be more sensible in future and not let myself get into a situation that would cause me so much turmoil. With this resolve, Prudence finally slipped off to sleep. However, while she slept,

Nathan stole back into her mind.

She was standing in the slave market surrounded by planters' wives with Nathan coming towards her bare-chested, wearing tight breeches and smiling sensually. He looked her and the other women over, and then ordered her stripped. In her dream, Prudence was standing naked on a block before everyone and Nathan was choosing her.

Chapter Six

Prudence dashed across the slab stone courtyard and into Mary's parlor just as the heavens opened and the full flood of a tropical storm swept over the island. Moses followed carrying the basket for the school lunch.

Moses was a man of few words, mainly "Yes, Missy Prudence" and "No, Missy Prudence" but nonetheless his presence allowed Prudence to walk about the town without being accosted by every drunken seaman.

She shook out her bonnet and laid it on the oak table in the middle of the room. Moses took his leave and slipped out into the main bar.

The parlor of the foremost landlord in Port Royal had a homely, welcoming atmosphere, with the smell of new-baked bread in the air.

Prudence had found, much to her annoyance, that although she tried to rid her mind of Nathan after he blasted her with his temper five days ago, she thought of him constantly.

As she wandered through the town asking about Edward, Prudence found herself daydreaming about the way Nathan's hair swept off his face, the deep brown of his eyes and the dark tan of his face with the faint shadow of a beard. She had tried to distract herself with other things when she found herself thinking of Nathan, but somehow even the distraction brought her back to him. To counter this, Prudence argued with him in her head telling him how she felt about his patronizing interference. But at night, it was a different matter. Then she was powerless to stop Nathan slipping into her dreams.

She had known the basics of what went on between men and women before she arrived in Port Royal and the five days at Mary's had filled in many of the gaps. Given this new knowledge and an object to apply it to, while asleep, Prudence's mind set her in situations with Nathan Frazer that she never would have contemplated while awake.

She awoke from these dreams with her whole body throbbing and faintly irritated.

Handsome he most certainly was, but what arrogance too. He had practically patted her on the head and told her to hurry home before the bogeymen got her.

The street door swung open and Louis sauntered in. He smiled at her and ran his finger along his mustache toward the corner of his mouth. He looked around the parlor with a flourish of his lace handkerchief.

"I expected to find Frazer here. He was heading this way."

"Was he?"

"Are you in need of 'bold Sir Nathan' in 'is shining armor today?'"

Prudence giggled at Louis's amusing quip then wondered what Nathan looked like on a stallion.

"Not at present, thank you."

"Good. He can go and save one of his many female admirers instead."

Prudence looked intently at her nails. Louis touched her hand lightly.

"You must be wary of 'im," he said with a sincere look on his face. "I 'ave seen Nathan pursue women before. Women with less scruples than you have no defense against 'is almost irresistible charm and raw masculinity."

Louis is right. Prudence continued to study the backs of her hand.

"But you, *ma chérie*, are too fine a specimen of womanhood to fall for a handsome face and well practiced lines."

Was she?

Louis gave a cynical smile.

"Never fear, *Mademoiselle* Stone. Even a philanderer like Frazer knows that you would never entertain such impropriety. Frazer has the airs of a gentleman, but I doubt 'e 'as ever considered making an honest woman out of any of 'is past conquests."

That's how most of Mary's girls came to be here.

Louis was still for a second, then shot forward taking Prudence's hand again.

"What 'as caused that beautiful face to frown so? Just say what I must do to lighten your spirits."

He put on a face of pure misery. Prudence, thankful of the excuse, forced a smile.

"That is better now. Tell Louis what has caused you such sadness."

Prudence thought quickly. "Ah. I—It's my search—my search for information about Edward." She looked up and bit back the tears gathering in her eyes. "I am beginning to wish that I had not started. The more I find out the less I like."

Louis smoothed his mustache.

"Is that so, *ma chérie*? Well, you did vow to find out the truth and sometimes the truth is not what we would like it to be."

Prudence's brows drew together again, and a determined expression crossed her face. "You're right. I came to find the truth, whatever it is and that's what I will do."

"Bravo." He clapped his hands delicately. "That is my determined *mademoiselle*. You must continue, no matter what, using all that God has given you to find out about Edward."

Prudence nodded resolutely.

Louis coughed softly. "If you are determined to find the truth, I might be able to 'elp you. As I promised I have been making some enquires and I think I may have found something of interest. But it will cost."

Prudence looked worried, her small supply of coin had lasted quite well, thanks mainly to Mary's not charging her for her board and keep, but she doubted it would run to a bribe.

"I don't have enough money to pay for information," Prudence said with an anxious expression appearing on her face. "Is there some other way of getting the information?"

Louis smiled slowly. "There might be."

She brightened. "As soon as you have something that might interest me tell me what I should do."

Louis gave her an enigmatic smile. "I certainly will."

"I promised to help Mary with the accounts." Prudence told him as she stood up

Louis looked out of the open door where the rain had just stopped. "I too must go. I came to give you this." He offered her a folded manila parchment, sealed with red wax.

Prudence took the letter from Louis, opened it and found it was an invitation from Mr. Pilkington to accompany him to the Governor's reception next Friday. Prudence shoved it in her pocket and went to the back door to cross into Mary's quarters, but the rainwater running in a torrent towards the yard gate was over her ankles. Although Prudence rarely ventured into the main parlor, she would have to if she didn't want to have sodden shoes for days.

She pushed open the connecting door slightly and peered inside. All seemed quiet. She was just about to walk in when she spotted Nathan in the corner finishing his drink.

Prudence was hypnotized by the sight of him casually lounging in the corner. Unobserved, she let her eyes roam over him, still puzzled as to what he might be about.

She fixed on the long dexterous fingers as they played with the sparkling vessel. And felt the impression of them once again on her hands and arm where he had touched her lightly.

Goodness the heat has got up quick after that storm, she thought as she felt her cheeks glow.

Suddenly there was an explosion of sound above her and Prudence looked up to where Mary's voice could be heard hurrying the girls to come out.

"Come on girls, be quick," Mary shouted as various heads appeared out of open doors. "Where is Moses? 'The Dolphin's' in harbor and I need him to row the girls out to work 'The Morning Star.'"

She spotted the large black man standing in the middle of the parlor. "I have hired Tommy Roper's boat, Moses. He is waiting for them now. Get a move on or the girls from 'The Mermaid' will get there first and be pinching all the gold."

Prudence stood back openmouthed at the sight of Mary's twelve or so girls rushing down the stairs. They were mostly dressed in brightly colored gowns with very low necklines that they were struggling to keep from slipping off their shoulders. They screamed and shouted as they descended the stairs, playfully squabbling as to who would earn the most from the newly moored ship.

"Working the ship?" Prudence asked as she turned to Mary who had descended into the parlor.

"Oh yes, most of the taverns do it. The girls just row over to the ship and entertain the sailors there, before they have a chance to lose their gold gambling or spend it on liquor. Nice to see you again, Nathan. Not staying then?" Mary asked. Taking her usual place behind the bar. The parlor fell into silence again.

"No, Mary, I have finished my business," Nathan told her but showed no sign of leaving and now stood next to Prudence staring down at her.

She felt Nathan's gaze wander over her and she straightened up to face him.

"You look very well today, Miss Stone. That green gown suits your hair and shows the color of your eyes."

Pleasure burst in Prudence at Nathan's words and the appreciation radiating from his eyes. She had always liked the dress and Edward never had. She smoothed the skirt down and then tucked a stray lock of hair back into place.

"Thank you, Mr. Frazer."

She felt the invitation in her pocket.

"Louis came to deliver this." She flourished the invitation. "Have you got one?"

Prudence heard the croak in her voice and she saw his eyes flicker to the parchment in her hand.

"If that is too the Governor's reception, I have." Nathan replied drowning her in his dark eyes.

Beware. Who is Nathan Frazer? What do you know about him? You thought you knew Edward and now it seems you hardly knew him at all.

Beware, Prudence, beware.

Prudence willed herself to break Nathan's gaze before it became impossible.

"I have to help Mary with the books," she said, not moving a muscle.

"I'll bid you a good day then," Nathan replied, not moving either.

Turn around, she told her feet. They did reluctantly and Prudence walked to where Mary was waiting for her, aware of Nathan's eyes glued on her all the while.

Nathan's cool exterior belied the turmoil inside him and not just because he stood with his eyes fastened to Prudence's shapely rear as she followed Mary up the stairs. He hadn't realized that Prudence was behind him earlier.

Had she seen him talking to Smith and Enrique? How long had she been behind him? Had she heard anything? And if so what?

Damn, damn, damn!

Nathan felt torn in half. His duty told him that he had to get to Enrique. There was a gap in England's defenses and he had to get that information to the right people as soon as he could. Enrique had taken the map that 'The Defiant' bosun brought him but there still was danger all around. It was vital that no one find out his true identity or the whole mission would be in jeopardy.

With deliberate slowness, Nathan stood and walked back into the street only to find Louis sitting outside the tavern sketching. The Frenchman looked up as he approached.

"*Bonjour, Frazer,*" he said stiffly looking up from his work.

Although he was in a hurry to catch up with Enrique Nathan was more concerned to ensure that Louis did not return to *The Two Puddings*.

"'ave you seen 'Eve'?"

"I have seen Miss Stone in passing," Nathan said, standing above Louis, looking at the picture he was doodling.

It was a tropical tree with a snake wrapped around its stout trunk. There was a space in front of it that was bare of charcoal marks where a figure would eventually stand.

"I thought I would do some preliminary layout for my next work," Louis explained.

Nathan sent him a ferocious look.

"Miss Stone said you may have heard something about Edward."

The other man shrugged

"Per'aps," Louis said, not meeting Nathan's eye. "This silver pendant of 'er fiancé's. What did Miss Stone say was on it?"

"Maison de Valois."

Louis gave a short laugh. "A silver pendant with *Maison de Valois* on it has more than likely come from a high class Paris brothel."

Nathan looked incredulous.

"Silver pendants, such as you describe, are given only to the highest paid women in fashionable salons in Paris, to stop any interlopers so to speak."

"You seem to know a lot about these places, Louis."

"As do a number of people on this island who you wouldn't expect to," the Frenchman said noncommittally. "I when I was in Paris I was often commissioned to paint the women who worked in the different *maisons*. I still send my works to houses of pleasure in Paris. There is a great demand for them."

"I can understand that. They would fit as well on the wall of any salon in Paris as they do in *The Two Puddings*." Then Nathan lifted his head and let out a hoot of laughter. "So this fool of a curate who thinks he is of French royal descent is probably the son of a Paris courtesan?"

Louis continued to laugh, "It is possible of course that 'e is the son of nobility but 'ow would we know?"

Nathan slapped Louis on the back. "What a joke. I would love to be the one to tell him his true origins. I would like to meet this curate with royal pretensions and, more than that, I'd like to see Prudence Stone roast him alive if she ever sets eyes on her dead-but-not-

dead fiancé again."

"Do you like the painting Prue?"

Prudence's head shot around. "It certainly looks like you, Mary."

"I thought Louis caught a good likeness," Mary said coming to stand alongside her in her study.

Prudence let her mouth drop open in astonishment. She looked back at the canvas on the wall. "Louis painted it?"

"Surely you have noticed his other paintings around the place?"

"Others?"

"In the bar downstairs."

Prudence thought of the large canvas arrayed around the upper part of the walls in the public room.

"He painted them too?" asked Prudence incredulously.

"They are lovely aren't they? Well crafted and so he tells me, after the style of Rubens without too many large women."

"I can see that, Mary. All the women in the paintings are—are curvy in—in a number of areas. And quite bare in nearly all the compositions."

Mary beamed at her portrait in pride of place on her wall. "Yes, they're biblical themes you know."

Prudence nodded, but decided not to elaborate on the fact that Bathsheba looked as if she was exposing herself to David rather than being caught unawares. Likewise, Esther seemed to have rather a lot of tribal elders leering at her standing naked on a block while being chosen by the King or that, the unclothed Mary Magdalene appeared smug rather than contrite at being "caught in sin".

"They are excellent paintings and they look just right on your walls," Prudence said tactfully. "Louis is very talented."

"Yes, he is. Louis often pays the girls in *The Two Puddings* to model for him. He sends his works to Paris and London. He also painted the sign out front. Funny isn't it?"

A small smile crossed Prudence's face. "It is but do you realize, Mary, it looks like a bosom?"

"I asked Louis to paint me a sign that would show everyone that *The Two Puddings* was my establishment and he did. He said that every time he thought of me that was the first image that came to his mind."

Mary let out a loud laugh and, although Prudence never remembered having such a scandalous conversations in her life before, she too laughed.

Chapter Seven

Prudence laid back in the steamy hot water with her eyes closed and a contented smile across her face. When she had received the invitation to the Governor's reception, she was reluctant to go. But after some good-hearted bullying by Mary she agreed. Which was why she was now spending a few quiet moments wallowing in the tub before Mary and her girls descended on her?

As she snoozed in the hot water Prudence's thoughts wandered. She was surprised how quickly she had adapted to life in the pirates' refuge of Port Royal. Sights like men rolling drunk in the gutter day and night and knife-fights over the color of a whore's eyes, she no longer considered noteworthy.

Strangely, the thing that affected her most and had changed her view of life so much was getting to know Mary's girls. In Boston, Prudence would have had the obligatory Christian compassion for them, regarding them as worthy of pity but nothing more. She would have prayed for their souls, but without ever thinking that she and they could ever have a common bond. Now to Prudence the girls who lived and worked in *The Two Puddings* were not just 'those sort of women' but women just like her who laughed and cried and fell in love.

Fell in love! A small frown drew Prudence's brows together as her thoughts went back, as they always did, to Nathan. Since lodging at *The Two Puddings* she had seen him almost every day. He always had a plausible excuse as to why he was there and she thought that it just her imagination. Every morning Prudence told herself that it was pure chance that she saw Nathan. After all, it was a very small town and as most of her enquires about Edward took place in the town center as did Nathan's business of tobacco; it was quite natural that they should meet from time to time. But if she hadn't seen him by noon, she found herself looking for him and was most relieved when he invariably appeared. He would be at the reception tonight.

What Nathan will look like in formal dress?

Her brow smoothed out and a smile crept across her face. Prudence stopped her thought drifting off into their usual daydream and forced herself, yet again, to remember that she insisted on staying in Port Royal to find out the truth about Edward. But since she had met Nathan, he and not Edward filled her thoughts.

Prudence had continued to make her own enquires. But she found that in Port Royal everything had its price.

Port Royal might lack culture, education, and law and order, but it had more than its fair share of the Caribbean's wealth and the small amount of money that Prudence had was too small to get any useful information. Certainly she would need a great deal more money than she possessed in the world to get any information about Diablo Ted, so feared was he for his cruelty and vengeful nature.

Although she could find nothing that would indicate what had happened to Edward after he went aboard Diablo Ted's ship *The Fallen Angel*, she found out plenty about his time in Port Royal. Prudence finally conceded that she didn't know Edward at all. But of one thing she did know with absolute certainty. She would never, never marry him.

She had already resolved to break their engagement as soon as she saw him. It would leave her free if someone else should want to come courting.

Like Nathan?

She tried to laugh off the thought. *For goodness sake, Prue, he's certainly not the marrying kind although he is quite attractive.*

Quite attractive!

She had met him in the marketplace where he looked as if he was just leaving the ship's chandler. He had been dressed in his usual fashion. Dark breeches with thigh boots turned back at the top, white shirt open at the front and embroidered waistcoat, like any other planter on the island.

He had just seen her and had started to make his way across the square when a large insect of some sort flew inside his shirt. Nathan had opened it trying to flap the invader out with no success. Whatever it was continued to buzz angrily around inside the billowing fabric.

Nathan pulled the shirt out from his breeches in an attempt to let the angry creature out. But again the flying insect refused to take advantage of the exit provided. In a final attempt to free himself of the pest Nathan tore off his shirt and waistcoat and flapped them in the air.

She had been some way from Nathan when he had done this, but she stood rooted to the spot at the sight of him divested of his upper clothing. Her stomach had rolled and fluttered as she felt her body react to the sight.

As he flapped around Prudence could see the fluid movement of his arms and shoulders as the muscles slid over each other under his skin. Her hands itched to run themselves over his strongly corded stomach and chest. As Nathan, like most of the other men on the island, wore his shirt open, Prudence had already seen his tanned chest with its mass of curly brown hair, but now with his whole torso bare, she could see him fully and she liked it.

Prudence squirmed in the bath as the warm water waved over her breasts. All the feeling that she had experienced the day before came hurtling back. She smoothed her hands over her body as her womanly center pulsated.

Stop it. Stop it. She was supposed to be concentrating on finding Edward.

Even in her head it sounded hollow and, as her body remembered Nathan in the square, she knew it. She grabbed the soapy flannel and with a determined look on her face she ran it up and down her arm.

She should be more disciplined and concentrate on Edward and what has happened to him, not some womanizing planter with an unbelievably exciting body and eyes.

I've never seen eyes as dark as Nathan's before, so expressive and his skin so tanned. A lot of the Englishmen here just look like lobsters in the hot sun but Nathan is tanned, very tanned. He has those funny little white fan things on each side of his eyes where he crinkles them. She leaned back again and started to wash, less vigorously, across her shoulders and chest.

And his hair is so full and dark, but it ruffles nicely in the wind. I'm glad he doesn't wear a wig.

The flannel went across her breast and down her stomach.

He has a strong beard. When he took my hand and kissed it the other afternoon, I could feel the bristle growing through. He has clean nails and hands too and—

The door crashing open brought Prudence's contemplation of Nathan's perfections to an abrupt end.

"Look at you, like a mermaid floating in the briny," Mary said as she bustled into the room followed by Pearl and Jenny. "And by the look on your face you must have been dreaming of something sweet and tasty."

Prudence gave her a guilty smile.

"You've spent long enough in the tub. If you're not out soon, you won't be ready when Mr. Pilkington's coach arrives for you," Mary said as she offered Prudence a towel.

Prudence stood up and stepped out of the bath, wrapping the proffered towel around her.

"Look what we've found," Pearl said as she held up an apricot silk ball gown with delicate Brussels lace trim. "The neck was a little low for you so I've taken some lace from the back and added it to the front."

From where she stood the neckline still looked a little lower than Prudence would normally have worn, but after half an hour of thinking of Nathan she had a warm, languid view of the gown and, rather than worrying if it showed too much bosom, she was curious to see how she would look in it.

She quickly dried herself and Mary, Pearl and Jenny fussed and laced Prudence into the becoming silk gown oohing and ahing as they did. They brushed and combed her hair, piling it high on her head, but leaving small tendrils of curls around her face and at the back of her neck, dressing its shining gold locks with tiny silk flowers in white, green and apricot. When they had finished, the three women stood back and admired their handiwork.

"Doesn't she look absolutely lovely?" said Mary with her head on one side.

"Oh, yes, and a real duchess," Pearl agreed.

"She looks better than a duchess," Jenny said with a wistful look on her face. "She looks just like an angel from heaven."

Mary tilted her head to one side and eyed Prudence in the tight-fitting gown, "No angel from heaven ever looked that tempting."

Prudence blushed. "Please I am not used to such flattery."

"'Tis not flattery, my love. "'Tis the plain truth," Pearl said, nudging Jenny.

"I 'spect Nathan Frazer will be there tonight, Prudence," Jenny said with a saucy smile.

Prudence blushed again. Was it so obvious to everyone that she found him interesting?

"No doubt he will or Lady Morris will be out of sorts for a month," Pearl replied pulling a sour expression.

Prudence felt a sharp twinge as the thought of this Lady Morris being anywhere near Nathan. Turning away she looked in the long mirror at the end of the room. What she saw amazed her.

It was her, Prudence Stone, but a different, more radiant Prudence Stone. The dress was perfect for her. It was simpler than most women in Port Royal wore, but it was still the grandest dress that she had ever possessed. She lifted her head higher and swung from left to right, wondering if she would look better tonight than this Lady Morris she had heard so much about. Would Nathan seek her out?

There was a loud whistle from outside in the street. Jenny raced to the open window.

"The coach is here."

Mary rearranged the short train and then opened the door and, with a quick smile and a deep breath, Prudence made her way out to the coach.

Nathan stood sipping brandy looking with disinterest across the ballroom in the

Governor's house. He had been there for half an hour and had managed to put off having to talk to Sir George Morris, the new Governor of Jamaica, but he couldn't do so for much longer. After all it was Sir George's reception and it was only courteous to greet the host when one arrived.

Lady Morris made her way across the hall to speak to one of her cronies. Nathan judged that this would be the best opportunity to greet the Governor without having to become entangled with his wife. He put down the glass and walked across the room.

Sir George Morris was a large, sweaty Welshman with an extravagant wig and bad teeth. He was from noble lineage and was supposed to be well connected at court. He squinted at the proceedings in the hall with his piggy eyes while chewing on a chicken drumstick. He acknowledged Nathan by waving it in his direction as he approached.

"Capital evening, Frazer, good of you to come," he said, dripping chicken fat down his chin.

Nathan bowed slightly. "I'm truly honored that I was invited."

Sir George grunted and continued to demolish the drumstick.

"Bennett. Glad you could get away from patrolling the streets to benefit from civilized company," Nathan said to the garrison captain who stood behind Sir George.

Captain Bennett looked skeptical. "Civilized? The Governor is limited in his choice of guests on an island like this. I see that he has been forced to invite some who would otherwise not be considered—how can I say this delicately? —ah—respectable."

Nathan said nothing.

Sir George couldn't quite work out if Bennett was insulting his guest or not, so gave up. "What do you think to this, Frazer? Bennett here thinks we have a spy in the islands. Giving our navy's position to the damn Spaniards."

Captain Bennett raised his eyes to the ceiling and a look of exasperation passed across his face. "The investigation is at an early stage, Sir George," he said in a tight voice.

Sir George waved his hand at Captain Bennett. "We are amongst friends here, Bennett. No need for your dammed secrets."

Nathan smirked at Henry Bennett, who was biting his lip.

"Secret, *monsieur*? What secrets?" asked Louis as he came up alongside Nathan.

"Bennett here is chasing a Spanish spy," went on Sir George. Captain Bennett let out a colorful expletive.

"Spy? How exciting," said Louis, airily, waving his handkerchief.

"Exciting?" exploded Captain Bennett from behind the Governor.

"Bloody Spanish, sort of ungentlemanly thing they would do. Bloody Spanish." Sir George threw the chicken leg on the plate and looked at Nathan. "You're half Spanish, Frazer, aren't you?"

Henry Bennett gave Nathan a sharp look but before he could say anything further a hush fell over the room and the four men turned towards the door.

As Nathan stared across the crowded ballroom everything else in the room paled as he saw Prudence standing nervously beside Mr. Pilkington.

Since the encounter in the street when he had come so near to kissing her Nathan had cursed himself for letting his instinct take him so far. He knew it was madness. Then seeing her assaulted in the street had sent him in to a fever of anxiety. He checked up on her every day. He had even asked Enrique to keep a watch for her. Thankfully, Enrique's Latin understanding of the madness a woman can cause a man meant that all Nathan had to endure from his request was his informant's sympathetic looks from time to time.

If his own lack of focus wasn't enough the situation in the Caribbean was becoming

more fraught with every passing day. The English and Spanish were on top of a powder keg in the Caribbean and the smallest spark could ignite it. If that happened Nathan's loyalty dictated that he join the ensuing war, regardless of his own feelings, so becoming involved with Prudence was sheer folly.

However, all was not lost. He hadn't kissed her and now he realized his weakness he could fight against it. Every morning he awoke and swore that he would not seek her out in the town that day. Only to find that by lunchtime he was actively looking for her.

He convinced himself that when he saw her he would just be civil, nothing more. But when they met, he found himself oozing charm and complimenting her. He had almost managed to fool himself into thinking that he was getting over the effect Prudence was having on him until yesterday, when the flying saboteur destroyed all his illusions. If that hornet had stayed out of his shirt Nathan would have believed his own lies, but after he saw the look of undiluted desire on Prudence's face when he took his shirt off, he knew that it was too late. He was already in too deep. As he watched her on Pilkington's arm Nathan knew that his fate was cast so he gave up and just enjoyed the dazzling sight.

The apricot dress Prudence wore perfectly complimented her delicate complexion. Her golden-brown hair was swept up and away from her shoulder to show the slender elegance of her neck. He let his eyes caress the softness of her skin as it shimmered in the candlelight and the graceful way she moved her arms. The neckline of the gown was higher than was fashionable, nonetheless the swell of her breasts was still evident above the fine lace that trimmed it. She was beautiful and Nathan gave up all pretense and just watched her.

"Mon Dieu! My Eve," sighed Louis.

"Miss Stone is not yours or anyone else's Eve, Louis," Nathan snarled at the Frenchman.

"Ah oui, monsieur, I grant that she is a little, 'ow you say? Full in the rigging for a classical Eve, but she is the first woman, non?"

Prudence *was* the only woman as far as he was concerned, but he didn't like Louis referring to her in that way. He didn't like it at all. In fact he didn't like the way Louis, Sir George, Bennett and every other man in the room was looking at her. He even thought old Pilkington was a little too close as he led her across the floor toward them.

"Sir George, I believe you have met Miss Prudence Stone?" Pilkington said as he stopped in front of the Governor.

"Charming, absolutely charming," Sir George said through a mouthful of cherry pie.

Prudence curtsied and Nathan's eyes alighted on the rounds and shadows of her breasts as she did. He had to stifle the urge to reach for her as she glanced at him.

Prudence had been acutely aware of Nathan as soon as she walked in the door. She had seen him standing tall and elegant next to the Governor. He was immaculately dressed in black breeches with polished square-toed shoes with the large brass buckle at the front and a crisp white, fine linen shirt with full sleeves over which he wore an embroidered waistcoat and a long dark green formal jacket with gold trim around the turned back cuffs and buttonholes.

She stole a glance at him as the kindly lawyer walked her up the length of the room. She quickly dropped her gaze again as she caught sight of him staring at her with an unfathomable expression in his eyes. She felt her heart pound in her chest and her mouth

became dry.

She had curtsied automatically when presented to the Governor, all the while thinking of the tall, handsome man beside him. She swallowed and raised her eyes to greet the Governor giving him a small, shy smile.

Sir George was just about to say something when behind Prudence a woman's harsh voice said, "So this is the famous *Mademoiselle Stone*."

She spun around and curtsied, then stood up and looked at the woman who addressed her.

Behind her stood a woman of about her own height with a tightly curled blonde wig with flowers and bows all over it and heavily rouged cheeks. She looked at Prudence through narrow eyes.

The woman snapped the fan in her hand. "You 'ave made quite an impression Miss Stone," she said waving around to indicate the men around her. "Even my George is giving you more attention than his dinner." Her gaze flickered on her husband who snapped his mouth shut. "You too, Nathan, seemed to be caught by Miss Stone's allure."

"Good evening, Lady Morris," Nathan said in an icy tone.

Prudence held Lady Morris's gaze while she wondered at the older woman's hostility.

Henrietta Morris sent Nathan a coy look. She tapped him playfully on the arm with the closed fan which sent the jewels which bedecked her twinkling.

"Nathan, I should not give you attention, you wicked rogue," she pouted, causing small lines to appear around her mouth. "You 'ave not yet visited me despite me 'aving sent you a number of invitations."

She saw Nathan's shoulders grow tense as Henrietta leaned towards him, so much so there was a very real possibility that the Governor's wife's breasts would fall out of the top of her expensive red silk dress. Prudence had rarely seen a neckline so precarious.

"You know 'ow I like to hear the stories of the bold adventurers who seek their fortunes in these waters. They divert me." Her eyes briefly rested on Sir George then back to Nathan.

"Alas, I am no bold adventurer, just an uninteresting plantation manager like a dozen others on this island. I doubt I would be able to offer you much in the way of diversion." Nathan said in a clipped voice.

"You are too modest, *Monsieur*. I 'ave 'eard you keep a number of women on the island diverted for hours on end."

Prudence watched Lady Morris as she slid around Nathan and thought there was something familiar about the Governor's wife but before she could fathom out what it was Sir George spoke.

"Ah, Miss Stone may I present my wife, Lady Morris."

"I have 'eard so much about you, Miss Stone," Henrietta said.

Thankful of the conversation change Prudence gave Henrietta a formal nod to acknowledge the introduction.

"I understand you have been in Jamaica just over a year, madam," Prudence replied.

Henrietta's mouth grew tighter and she raised her head as if trying to avoid an unpleasant odor.

"Unfortunately, yes. There was an enquiry at the Admiralty, nothing to do with Sir George you understand, about a recruiting fund and a number of senior men like Sir George were posted to the colonies."

"I'm s—"

"Sir George was completely innocent, Miss Stone, but as an honorable man felt he should stand with his fellow officials, which is why we are on this mosquito-infested island." Henrietta's face drew into a tight smile that did not reach her eyes. "How do you find Port Royal?"

"Ah, it's very different from Boston."

"Boston, la? I thought you came from England not the northern colonies."

"Boston in Lincolnshire, my lady, in the east of the country," Prudence said by way of explanation.

Sir George took a mouthful of brandy. "Lincolnshire, you say, Miss Stone? My wife spent some time there when she first came to England, fifteen years ago. Did you not, my dear?"

Lady Morris looked uncomfortable for a second, but then the tight smile returned. "*Oui*, I remember the place is very flat and boring," said Henrietta and wished that she could have said the same about the young woman standing before her. Her mouth tightened as did her grip on the fan. "I remember Boston, very provincial," she said with a sniff.

Prudence could feel her temper rising at Lady Evans's hostility but was unsure why she was the object of it. There was definitely something about the woman that made Prudence feel she had met her. She was about to defend Boston when Sir George interrupted.

"Who was it you stayed with in Lincolnshire, my dear?"

Henrietta smiled at her husband. It was no warmer than the smile she had given Prudence. "I stayed with Lord Kettlethorpe. Fine man. Large, over six feet tall with a thick mane of pale blond, almost white, hair. He was such a charming host, jovial and with such breeding, a true gentleman. We rode to hounds on several occasions. I remember he had a favorite horse, Rufus."

She raised her head slightly and looked down her nose at Prudence. "I doubt that you would know Lord Kettlethorpe, my dear. You couldn't possibly move in the same society."

Prudence felt her cheeks flame. "I think you must be mis—"

Henrietta carried on as Prudence had not spoken. "That was when I first came to England of course.

"You came from France?" Prudence asked automatically

"Not just France, my dear country girl, but from the court of the most dazzling king on earth, Louis XIV, the Sun King." Henrietta's face suddenly grew sentimental. "Ah I remember it so well. The balls, the fountains, the handsome men," She gave Prudence a hard stare. "I was but a girl then you understand."

Prudence heard Louis give a snort and Henrietta sent him a withering look. She fixed her gaze back on Prudence.

"One would 'ave to experience court life to fully understand, *non*?"

Undeterred by Prudence's clenched fist Henrietta continued. "After my time in the provinces I went to London and the Restoration Court of your 'merry monarch' Charles."

She clasped her hands together and looked sideward at Nathan. "Oh, but 'e was handsome. So dark, so mysterious, so virile."

Nathan took a slow sip of his brandy.

"A woman with wit and beauty was fully appreciated in London in those days. Have you ever been to London, Miss Stone?"

"Yes, I hav —"

"I hear that you staying in a whorehouse, *Mademoiselle* Stone."

"The landlady of *The Two Puddings* was kind enough to offer me lodgings," Prudence said, as she felt Nathan take a step closer to her.

"Oh la! I have heard she is very kind to some." Henrietta gave a sideways glance at Louis. "But how can you live there? Surely it must be against your beliefs to consort with such women."

Prudence grasped firm hold of her temper and answered as coolly as she could. "As the Lord himself said in the Gospel of John, chapter eight, verse seven, let him or *her*," she gave Henrietta a sweet smile, "without sin cast the first stone."

Louis snorted. Henrietta's eyes flickered in annoyance then her face resumed its cold politeness.

"*Mademoiselle* Stone quotes scripture to us, but consorts with whores." She looked back at Prudence. "Tell us, my dear, what else have you have learned during your stay in *The Two Puddings*?"

Prudence lowered her eyes. She knew that Henrietta was trying to goad her and she was determined not to rise to her bait, but she would answer her.

"I have learned that ladies can be found in whorehouses, and –," Prudence glanced around the ballroom then directly at Henrietta, "and whores can be found anywhere."

Prudence blinked her eyes innocently at Henrietta. Sir George and Mr. Pilkington sniggered. Louis laughed delicately and lightly applauded.

Two flames of red illuminated Henrietta's powdered cheeks. She shot Louis a hateful look. Prudence thought for a moment that Lady Morris was going to give her fellow countryman the sharp edge of her tongue for his impertinence. Louis gave her a challenging look as hostility crackled between them. Within the silence, Henrietta drew herself up and rearranged her face into a cool expression.

"I'm sure your fiancé, Edward Matthews, would agree with you."

Despite not wanting to give Henrietta the satisfaction of showing how angry she was Prudence's eyes flashed open. She felt Nathan move towards her and, it gave her courage.

"*Oui, Mademoiselle* Stone. I understand that Edward Matthews, or should I say the *Reverend* Edward Matthews was well acquainted with all the whores in Port Royal and not for the purposes of saving their immortal souls."

Henrietta gave a satisfied smirk when she saw Prudence's face drain of its color.

Nathan took a step forward as if to take Prudence's arm. "I would have thought, Lady Morris, that good manners would have prevented anyone here being so insensitive as to mention such matters out of consideration for Miss Stone and her recent loss," he said.

Tears stung the back of Prudence's eyes and she felt herself shake. Not for what Henrietta had said for she already knew that Edward. What made her tearful was Nathan's swift intervention on her behalf. She wanted to turn and thank him but could not. Prudence knew that if she looked up at Nathan at that moment she would burst into tears and she was determined, above all else, not to let Henrietta see her cry. So she stood stiffly, hands clenched at her sides, willing her tears not to fall.

Prudence saw Henrietta's neck grow red as Nathan moved to her swift defense. In contrast to the hungry looks she had previous given him Henrietta's gaze was now spiteful but she forced a casual smile on her face.

"Really, *Monsieur*, 'tis but the plain truth," Henrietta said with a shrug of her shoulders. None spoke.

Henrietta leaned forward, showing more bosom than was decent, and put her hand on Nathan's arm in a familiar manner.

"And, Mr. Frazer, if *Mademoiselle* Stone wants to find out the truth about her fiancé. The plain truth is that he got drunk every night, fought anyone to whom he took umbrage and bedded most of the whores in Port Royal," she said with a tinkling laugh, looking for those surrounding her to join in.

Nathan shook her hand off.

Mr. Pilkington turned to Prudence. "Miss Stone, can I escort you to the refreshments?"

Prudence smiled gratefully at the rotund lawyer. "Thank you; I would like some lemonade, if there is any."

She took his arm and with a nod of her head to Sir George, Louis and Nathan she walked over to where the refreshments were. Nathan turned to follow her.

"Nathan, would you accompany me to the refreshment table?" Henrietta said, smiling up at him, and taking hold of his arm again more firmly this time.

"No." Nathan removed her hand from his arm sharply.

"No! You are not very polite tonight, *monsieur*."

"I merely follow your lead. If you would excuse me," Nathan said and, without giving her a chance to say any more he turned on his heels and stalked away.

Henrietta turned elegantly to Louis.

"A thousand pardons, *Madame*, I 'ave to go with Nathan," he said, and sweeping a low bow, he too abruptly turned away.

"I'll take you to the food, my dear," said Sir George, as he put down his plate of half eaten supper.

Henrietta's eyes followed Nathan's tall figure as he made his way to the other side of the room, then she turned and gave her husband an exasperated look. "Don't bother. I have lost my appetite."

Nathan had never really liked Henrietta, but, as Prudence walked away from him, head held high and shining, half-formed tears in her eyes, he no longer disliked Henrietta, he loathed her.

He knew of her many lovers on the island. For that reason alone, even if she appealed to his taste he would never have considered a liaison with her. But after her behavior towards Prudence this evening, Nathan doubted that he could ever be in her company again and be polite.

As his eyes followed Prudence across the room he knew that jealousy had caused Henrietta's spite. He guessed that she saw his interest in Prudence, and that probably fired her. Nathan realized that his face must have reflected his feelings as Prudence walked up to them. It was pointless denying it. He could no longer fool himself.

He had repeatedly told himself that he couldn't become involved, not now. But after this evening the rest of him wasn't listening any more.

Pilkington had taken Prudence across the room where she now sat talking to a merchant and his wife while sipping on her lemonade. Nathan got a brandy for himself and he watched her.

He ached to go to her, take her in his arms and kiss away her sad face. He wanted to stop her hurting and to make her smile. Make her smile at him.

He saw her small, familiar frown. He might have called her stubborn when they had first met, but now he called her brave and loyal. She had come full of hope looking for

her love. Only to find that her bastard of a fiancé, Reverend thought, he might be, was the worst sort of man imaginable. But instead of turning tail and running off home, she had stayed and intended, with that determined little frown of hers, to see her quest through to the bitter end whatever that meant. That was courageous and steadfast.

He found that he envied this Edward Prudence's love, misplaced though it was, and found himself wishing that she loved him with such devotion. He wanted her to love him so much that she would travel an ocean for him. Nathan stopped with the glass half-raised to his mouth.

"She is full of fire and, passion, no?" Louis said to Nathan as he joined him.

Nathan nodded. "She certainly is. What a bitch Henrietta is."

"She "as always been so, ever since I first met her she has been the same."

"They only arrived on the island a year ago."

Louis gave a troubled glance at Nathan. "I knew her in Paris." His face took on a thoughtful expression as he continued. "Keep it, 'ow you say, under your wig?"

"Hat."

"Hat then. I met her in Paris when I was an apprentice. Henrietta was known as *La Maitresse au vert et bleu*."

"Mistress of the Green and Blue?"

"*Oui*, because her eyes are different colors. She has one eye green and one blue. You must have noticed?"

"Of course I have."

"I can't tell you her whole story, *monsieur*, but rumor has it that she arrived in Paris penniless, but found a place in one of the fashionable salons. She became the mistress of an elderly French nobleman and moved in all the fashionable circles. She was even welcomed at court. It was at Versailles that I first met Henrietta."

Nathan glanced across at Henrietta. She smiled seductively at him, running her fan across her breasts. Nathan looked back to Louis.

"You have some idea the sort of woman Henrietta is, Frazer, so it will be no surprise to you to hear that instead of being content with her elderly Comte she started to take lovers amongst the young men at court."

"Don't tell me that yo—"

"*Mon Dieu* No, no. I was a boy of twelve fresh at court." He grinned at Nathan, "Anyhow, the Comte turned a blind eye to this, letting Henrietta have her pleasure as long as his honor remained intact. But then Henrietta made a play for the King himself. Louis' mistress at the time, whose name escapes me at this moment, naturally took exception to this and let the whole court know that Henrietta was enamored of a particularly young man and that she was playing the Comte for a fool. The Comte was from an old and distinguished family so he couldn't let a slur like that go."

"What happened?" Nathan asked. Enthralling though the story was, Nathan hoped it would soon be over as he had more important things on his mind.

Pilkington had brought Prudence a small plate of light pastries. Nathan relaxed a little and turned back to Louis. "Then?"

"The Comte challenged the young buck to a duel. But before they came to blows, Henrietta absconded with a great deal of the Comte's wealth and the pretty boy who had so taken her fancy. There was a great scandal. I heard that she followed the young man to the Netherlands. They spent the money, he left her and she had gone to England. Which is how, I suppose, she is now married to Sir George."

Prudence stood up again. Nathan put his glass down. He saw her smile warmly at

the stout merchant's wife. The merchant's wife put her hand on Prudence's arm and asked her something. Prudence nodded, but Nathan saw the small frown appear. Then, picking up her skirts, Prudence walked away from the company and towards the terrace.

Nathan turned away from Louis. "As entertaining as this story is, Louis, I think I'll go to see if Miss Stone is in need of any assistance—"

"If I could have a word with you, Frazer?"

Nathan cursed roundly under his breath and turned to face Henry Bennett. "Can't it wait, Bennett?"

"It will only take a moment of your time."

"You stay and talk to our esteemed captain, Frazer. Do not worry. I will attend to any needs Miss Stone might have," said Louis casually as he bowed to the two men and strolled towards the terrace. Nathan looked after him and then back at Captain Bennett.

"What is it?"

Before Henry Bennett could answer they were joined by Pilkington.

"Gentlemen, splendid company," he said, as he came and stood alongside them. Both men nodded and Captain Bennett pursed his mouth together, giving the lawyer a look of exasperation. He turned back at Nathan.

"As I said the other day, Frazer," he said, "Diablo Ted is going to visit the Governor as soon as he is in port and will be getting a—"

"Does Miss Stone know about this?" Pilkington asked.

"Miss Stone? What has Miss Stone—" Henry Bennett said looking even more annoyed at the interruption.

"Yes, she does," Nathan answered. "Thanks to Bennett here she knows that Diablo Ted is in Port."

Henry looked baffled. "I still don't see what Miss Stone has to do with it."

"You don't know her very well, do you, Bennett?" Nathan said.

"I've met her a couple of times."

Nathan snorted. "Miss Stone is a determined woman. It was Diablo Ted who was supposed to have killed her fiancé, Edward. She has already asked every black-hearted scoundrel in Port Royal about him and now she knows that he is anchored in the harbor she's very likely to swim out to Diablo Ted's ship and challenge him to a sword fight."

"Surely not, Frazer?"

"She's got Black Jack Stone's blood running through her veins," Pilkington said.

Henry Bennett's mouth formed an "O" shape.

"Quite," said Nathan and Pilkington simultaneously.

Nathan was wild to get out to the terrace as he didn't trust Louis and the idea of him being with Prudence alone was interfering with his thought processes. Whatever Henry had to say to him would have to wait.

"Now, if that is all gentlemen," Nathan said and, without waiting for either to answer, he turned on his heels and shot toward the open door to the terrace. He met Louis coming back in.

"I'm sorry, I have to get some air," Prudence said as she stood up to part company with the pleasant but talkative merchant's wife beside her.

"Are you unwell my dear?" the older woman asked.

"No — no I'm just very hot, that's all." She gave Mrs. Morton a reassuring smile.

"Oh, well, it will take you a month or two to adjust. When we first came ou—"

Prudence cut in. "It's been very nice talking to you, Mrs. Morton" She moved away.

As she made her way to the open veranda door Prudence saw Nathan look her way. He looked as if he might follow but Captain Bennett had engaged him in conversation.

She crossed the flagged tiles and made her way under the canopy of sweet smelling creeper that grew up and over a marble colonnade at the side of the house.

Resting her head on the cold marble, she took a deep breath. The garden she now stood in was softly lit by the tropical moon and the scent of the exotic flowers and plants filled the warm night air.

No wonder Uncle Jack never came back once he saw the Caribbean. It was truly beautiful. Paradise, if you discounted the biting insects, tropical storms and roasting heat.

Prudence thought about Uncle Jack and his inheritance, and how Edward's coming to find it had caused such a change to her life.

She now knew that Edward was not the person she thought he was but she still couldn't believe that he had courted her just because of her inheritance.

Why had Edward behaved in such an appalling way in Port Royal? Prudence couldn't understand it.

This place did something to ordinary Englishmen and made them wild in some way. Wild!

It seems it had that effect on Englishwomen too. It had made her wild. Or was that just Nathan Frazer?

Prudence sighed and forgot about Edward as a vision of Nathan came into her mind. She thrust it aside.

She could see what a fool she had been over Edward. Although Lady Morris was vicious and nasty, in truth Prudence was angry because she now knew that all the waspish wife of the Governor said about Edward was true. Did she ever really know him? Prudence didn't think so not after hearing about his exploits over the last few weeks but what ever happened she had to find out why he went on board Diablo Ted's ship in the first place and if he is not dead, where the blazes is he?"

She heard footsteps behind her and swung around expecting to see Nathan but instead Louis stood before her.

She regarded him coolly. Since Mary told her he had painted the picture in *The Two Puddings* and the arrangement with the artist Prudence had looked on Louis in a different light.

She hadn't been able to resist asking Louis about his work and found that he was delighted to tell her about it. This left Prudence in a quandary. Amusing though he was, Prudence wasn't sure she should be too friendly with a man who got women to take their clothes off and painted them naked for other men's enjoyment.

Louis seemed to imply that asking women to take their clothes off and pose in erotic attitude was quite normal.

If that wasn't bad enough, since then Prudence had had several dreams about posing for such a painting except in the dreams it was Nathan who was painting her not Louis, which made her even more annoyed with Louis for putting the idea in her head.

"Monsieur," she said, acknowledging him with a small nod and turned away.

"Dear, *Mademoiselle* Stone. My artist's eyes rejoice to see your beauty so framed in this wonderful garden. You are Eve, the first woman."

Prudence couldn't suppress a smile. "Really Louis."

"But *non*, sweet *Mademoiselle* Stone, you are more than Eve. You are Aphrodite and

Venus too, you are Love personified. I must congratulate you on how well you dealt with Lady Morris and her vicious tongue. The woman has no breeding, decorum or tact. You showed her how a lady should behave."

Prudence's shoulders relaxed a little.

"*Oui*. Such restraint, such humility, such unswerving faith in your fiancé."

The shoulders tensed again. "I no longer consider Edward Matthews to be my fiancé."

"I understand," Louis said, shaking his head and putting on a face of sympathy. "I expect you will stop searching for him now and take ship back to England."

He watched her mouth pull together in tight line and the small frown appear.

"I wish it were that simple, Louis."

Louis took a step nearer, then stopped. Questioning expression formed on his face. "Why? Surely now you know what Edward is really like, you can leave him to the devil and the sea and go back to England. You are now free marry someone more worthy of your steadfast love."

Her nails dug painfully into her palms. "Because—because he has made a fool of me, his parents and my uncle and he needs to answer for that."

Louis nodded seriously. "But you still have to find him, *Chérie*, no? Have you got any further with that?"

Prudence's eyes darted up at him. She bit her lip.

"I have a few enquires yet to make," she said noncommittally.

"It is as I suspected. Diablo Ted is so feared that no one will give you information about 'im. It is frustrating *non*?"

Prudence gave a sharp nod.

Louis shook his head dolefully. "I understand how you have to continue no matter what. But I may be able to 'elp you."

Prudence face lit up. "You have found out something about where Edward went?"

"I may 'ave," Louis said noncommittally

"Please tell me what you have heard, Louis."

"I would be only too pleased to, *ma chérie*. But I have a living to make, you understand?"

"I hope it will not cost too much. You know I haven't much money."

"I thought maybe we could come to some arrangement, like I have with Mary." "Do you want me to teach you to read?"

Louis smiled broadly. "Tush— tush. Of course not, my dear, but there is some other service you could do me."

Even an unprincipled scoundrel like Louis wouldn't ask that, surely?

Louis leaned back on the balcony opposite her. "You admire my paintings, *non*?"

"Well yes, bu—"

"I 'ave wanted for a long time to paint a masterpiece, but I have never found a model yet who would embody the perfection of the subject that I intend to paint."

Prudence was intrigued. "What is this masterpiece?"

"Eve in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall," Louis said coolly, looking Prudence straight in the eye. "She will, of course, be nude."

"Naked?"

"Nude is the artistic term."

"Nude or naked, Eve is without her clothes, is she not?"

"*Oui*."

"Surely you are not asking me to—I mean th—there must be one of the girls here who could model Eve for you."

"Eve was a virgin. I doubt that anyone in *The Two Puddings*, other than you, qualifies on that account. It is a Biblical subject, my dear," Louis said his eyes traveling slowly over her.

"Ye—yes, I know, but even so—nude." She looked at Louis hard. "I couldn't do it."

"Not even for the truth about Edward?"

Prudence stood up abruptly. "No. Not even for that."

"Pity, because I'm sure that my informant is very reliable."

Prudence stood away from Louis, who remained standing in a relaxed manner looking at her with half-closed eyes.

"I'm sure he is. But I will just have to find out what he knows from another source, one that doesn't demand so high a price."

"As you like. But if you change your mind, *ma chérie*, just let me know."

Prudence felt her face flame as she struggled to remain calm. "Thank you, Louis. I will remember that."

Prudence turned around for a second then backed to face Louis. "Take my advice, look elsewhere for your 'Eve', Louis."

"I think not, Prudence. Now I have seen you I don't think there is a woman alive who could be my Eve but you."

For one split second, Prudence found herself thinking that she would do it. She stopped the thought dead.

"It is nude. But I will be seeing you with the eye of an artist, not a man, *Mademoiselle* Stone."

Prudence saw Louis's eyes flick down to her breasts then quickly up again, an innocent smile on his face.

"Is it not the same?"

"No—not at all. It is with the eye of an artist who sees only God's perfect creation in the body," he said. "I would prefer you standing in the garden holding an apple thus," Louis raised his right hand and looked up at it. "It would show your—um— shape to perfection." He gave her a frank look. "One hand held high that would bring one breast up and if you stand facing me then I would be able to paint you in your full glory."

Louis's hand went to the front of his breeches briefly as Prudence's mouth fell open.

"I must 'ave you as my Eve, *chérie*. No one else will do."

"I can't believe what I am hearing. No. Never. It is too high a price."

"Even to find the perfidious Edward and make him answer for what he has done, to you and to others? Too high a price to put this terrible hurt and betrayal behind you and love again?"

Prudence glanced towards the open veranda doors and back into the ballroom. Louis saw and smiled.

"Who knows when you might meet someone else? You could never be able to give your love to another if you still had unanswered questions about Edward."

Prudence bit her lip again and she looked thoughtful. Louis bowed.

"I can see that you have been distressed by Henrietta. So I will leave you to compose yourself, *ma chérie*, before you come back in the ballroom," Louis said with a gallant bow. "But remember if you change your mind, just send me word. My oils are always ready."

Chapter Eight

Relief swept over Nathan when he met Louis coming back into the ballroom. As he strode across the room towards the veranda door, he knew that he would not be responsible for his actions if he had found Louis molesting Prudence in any way.

Granted it wasn't Louis's way of operating, but then he didn't usually chase inexperienced young women like a raw youth either. Besides, it would have been bad form to start a knuckle fight at the Governor's reception and Louis's reappearance from the garden had avoided that.

Louis gave him a quick nod as he passed which Nathan barely acknowledged as he strode out onto the veranda.

As his eyes adjusted to moonlight that streamed across the garden, he saw Prudence at the other side of the veranda leaning against one of the neoclassical columns that supported the canopy. He drew in his breath and stared at her.

She was sitting on the balcony half-turned away from him, with her hand lightly resting beside her as she gazed out at the harbor. The pale apricot gown showed white in the moonlight, but her golden hair still had its rich honey color.

Time stood still for Nathan as the image of Prudence in the moonlight seared onto his mind. The man in him relished every part of her curvaceous figure, with its full breasts and slim waist, swathed in the becoming silk gown.

He wanted to slide his hands around her and pull her against him. His body remembered what she felt like when he had held her in the street and again he cursed Bennett's inopportune interruption before he had sampled her lips. A sensual smile broke across Nathan's lips as he vowed he would feel Prudence in his arms again before the sun rose and no longer have to wonder what it felt like to kiss her.

He stepped forward.

"Louis, I have already told you, no," Prudence said, not looking around.

A weight lifted off Nathan's shoulders.

Although he was not averse to seducing a woman who took his fancy, he wasn't at all interested in ruining young women, especially when there were enough willing women with little regard for their virtue. But as he stood looking at Prudence in the moonlight, Nathan realized that his main reason for not wanting to take advantage of Prudence was that he didn't want to bed her. His mouth turned up at one corner at the thought.

Well, yes. Of course he bloody did. A man would have to be in his grave not to want to make love to Prudence, but now watching her in the moonlight Nathan knew that he wanted much more.

Prudence interrupted his thought processes by turning and looking at him. Nathan's body took over from his mind.

"Oh, it's you, Nathan," Prudence said as she stood up and faced him. "I thought it was Louis coming back."

"You look a little distressed. Has he done anything to upset you?" Nathan asked feeling his fist itch to find Louis's face if he had.

"No, he just —I was just talking to him about Edward," Prudence said. She clenched her hands together and gave him a shy smile. "The Bishop and his wife were quite elderly when they found Edward deposited on their doorstep and had somewhat old-fashioned views on a child upbringing. I fear Edward led a very sheltered life."

Well, he made up for it while he was here by all accounts.

Nathan loathed the man. That lying bastard had taken Prudence's fine, loyal love and treated her so showed him to be the worst kind of villain. He would kill him.

Prudence lifted her chin in a determined fashion and looked Nathan square in the eye then continued with a quiver in her voice. "But I will never have any peace until I have found out the truth about Edward's disappearance."

Nathan found he had nothing to say as he suddenly focused on something else completely.

As she stood and faced him a breeze from the shore stirred around her, causing her to shiver. It also caused the tips of her breasts to stand up and the outline of her erect nipples was visible through the fabric in her bodice. Nathan's cock burst into life.

He took a step closer and looked down at her and hearing her indrawn breath. His eyes were liquid and there was a sensual expression on his face.

Don't touch her, his mind told him.

Nathan ignored it and lifted her hand to his mouth. "You deserve better than Edward."

"It's kind of you to say so," she said in a breathless whisper, her eyes locked in his.

She gave a shudder and reached for her wrap lying on the balustrade.

Don't go any nearer, his mind insisted, but he ignored it again. "Allow me to drape your wrap for you, Miss Stone."

She lowered her head slightly and Nathan reached around and placed her wrap lightly around her shoulders.

Don't slide your hand around her waist. Nathan's mind shouted, as it was still trying to save him.

Nathan slid his hand around Prudence's waist and pulled her to him under the pretense of moving her out of the way of an overhanging branch.

"Thank you, Nathan." She smiled up at him her mouth slightly open. He took a step nearer.

He loved the way she said his name.

"What Lady Morris said was quite uncalled for," he continued while his eyes concentrated on the small area of bare flesh just behind her ear.

Prudence was silent for a moment.

"She was quite right about Edward of course."

"Even so," Nathan continued, gazing down at her. He knew that for both their sakes he should move away, but found himself unable to.

"The strange thing was that, when I first saw her, Lady Morris looked familiar. I can't think for the life of me why. I must be mistaken as I'm sure that if I'd met her before I would have remembered." She struggled to form her face into a smile. "But I can't argue with her assessment of Edward. To tell the truth I was more annoyed with her about her description of Boston. Flat and uninteresting indeed!" Prudence looked indignant at the insult to her home. "Also her memory is at fault."

Nathan was not interested in Henrietta's memory, but Prudence had leaned towards him conspiratorially and, from his position above her, he could see the rounds of her breasts above her neckline so he was not in a hurry for her to move. To cover his real curiosity Nathan feigned interest in the conversation.

"How so?"

Prudence leaned further forward. "Because the only horse the Earl of Kettlethorpe was riding fifteen years ago was his hobby horse. The earl that Henrietta said she stayed

with was his father, who died eighteen years ago, just before the present earl, Nigel, was born."

Nathan's mind just about managed to hear what Prudence was saying, but he didn't take any notice as the rest of him was alive with the closeness of her.

He needed to take her in his arms. It was beyond explanation. It was as if his life depended on it. Nathan had to hold Prudence to him, to feel her softness against him. He glanced down at her, his eyes dark and fathomless. All his well-honed skills of seduction came automatically into play.

Nathan needed no more encouragement. He pulled her close. His arm around Prudence's waist tightened while the other wound upwards and caught the back of her head, fixing it there.

Her large hazel eyes looking at him, at first with wonder, but as his body pressed the full length against her, he saw unmistakable desire. Her lids fluttered down, half closing her eyes. He felt her put her hand up and on to his chest. Her slim fingers seared through his shirt and he held her closer in response.

This is wonderful, truly wonderful, he thought, as he stood, taking his time to savor the moment before his lips touched hers. He knew that once he kissed Prudence it would ignite an unquenchable fire. He could already feel it kindling as they stood there. He was hard and ready. He rocked against her and smiled knowingly as Prudence flexed back.

Enough. Nathan looked one more time into Prudence's upturned face then lowered his mouth onto hers.

When he put his arm around Prudence, Nathan had thought only to kiss her. They were, after all, on the terrace of the Governor's house. But now, with her in his arms and under his lips, he forgot everything but the woman he was holding and his need to possess her fully.

His experience told him that Prudence was responding to him in a way she had never responded before and he liked the thought. But now he had her against him, Nathan found that he couldn't stop.

He could feel her hands on his chest and he wanted to rip open his shirt to feel them on his skin. Her lips were soft and warm and were kissing him as hard as he was kissing her. He knew that he was rocking against her with his manhood to set up the rhythm that he would use when they became one and that, no matter what, he had to have this woman.

Prudence broke free from his mouth and he heard her gasp deep and low. He kissed her cheek, across to her ear and then down her neck. He kissed slowly and deliberately feeling the delicate skin under his lips. Prudence rolled her head aside to allow him greater access, all the while breathing hard.

Kissing down and across her shoulders, he made his way further down on to the swell of her breasts. His hand went up and cupped her breast. As Louis said, Prudence was heavy in the rigging, but Nathan liked that. He let it go, temporarily, to slide the thin fabric of her gown away to expose the breast to his view.

Lifting his head back, Nathan looked at the large breast in his hand. It was not easy to see as he was standing in his own light, but he could faintly make out the large, dark circle of Prudence's areola. He grazed his thumb over it, then took the pliant nipple between his finger and thumb and squeezed firmly.

"I see that *Mademoiselle* Stone 'as learned a number of other lessons from 'er time in *The Two Puddings*."

Nathan heard the harsh sound of Henrietta's voice behind him. He straightened up taking the dazed Prudence with him.

Henrietta had a satisfied expression on her face. She was flanked on either side by Louis, Pilkington and Sir George Morris and a few other guests all looking aghast at the scene in front of them. He cursed himself for allowing Henrietta to achieve such a spectacular coup and embarrass Prudence.

"Do you always steal up on your guests?" he asked as he shielded Prudence from their view.

The governor's wife's face took on an expression of innocent surprise. "What is this steal? I merely invited my guests to take a turn with me in the garden. It is you, *monsieur*, who 'as stolen off with Miss Stone as we can all see, for a— a—" Henrietta looked with amusement at those around her, "a lovers' tryst, a—" Her eyes rested on Prudence, who had just emerged from the side of Nathan. "A roll in the 'ay."

Nathan heard Prudence draw in her breath and the rustle of silk being repositioned. He felt her come around him and all eyes turned on her. Her face was red with embarrassment.

"If you would excuse me, Lady Morris, I suddenly have a throbbing headache."

Henrietta sniggered. "I am sure it is not the only bit of you throbbing."

Nathan sent Henrietta a hateful look and stepped forward. "I'll escort you to your carriage Prue—Miss Stone," he said holding out his hand.

"I think not, Frazer," William Pilkington said as he stepped between Prudence and Nathan. "Miss Stone has had more of your attention this evening than any respectable woman should have."

He led her away from all on the terrace and into the ballroom where he instructed a servant to fetch their cloaks.

In the silent assembly room, all eyes including Nathan's followed the elderly attorney and the red-faced young woman as they left.

Prudence managed to hold herself together as she thanked Edgar Pilkington and bade him goodnight, but it was a struggle. It was only when she stepped into the parlor of *The Two Puddings* and saw Mary and the girls smiling expectantly at her that the tears started to fall again.

The main parlor was lively as there were a number of ships berthed in the harbor. Mary was standing in her usual place on one side of the bar overseeing the proceedings.

When she saw Prudence start to weep, Mary pushed him away and started over to the young girl.

"Whatever is the matter, my love?" she asked.

"Oh, Mary," Prudence said, trying unsuccessfully to stem the flow of tears.

Mary put her arm about Prudence's shaking shoulders and moved her through towards the private parlor. Sitting her down in the chair by the hearth, Mary poured her a small brandy and pulled up a stool and sat opposite.

"Now, tell me what has made you so upset, my dear?"

Prudence took a long breath and stopped crying. "It's Nathan." Her face crumpled again. "Oh! Mary it was horrible."

"For God's sake, what did he do? I have never known Nathan abuse a woman, but if he has hurt you in any way, Prudence, I'll set Moses on him."

Despite her tears, Prudence smiled and Mary's shoulders relaxed a little.

"No, no. Quite the reverse. He kissed me."

Mary smiled. "There no harm in that, I'm sure, Prudence. You might have had a strict upbringing but you can't think there is any harm in a small kiss."

"No, of course not." She gave Mary another little smile as she remembered the feel of Nathan's lips on hers. "In fact it was a bit more than a small kiss."

Then the tears started to flow again.

"Whatever is it then, Prue?"

"Lady Morris and a whole company caught us in the garden." Prudence's eyes flicked up to Mary. "They found us in — in some disarray"

Mary blew through her nose. "What on earth could Nathan be thinking of letting that bitch catch you in such a compromising position?"

"It wasn't his fault. She just came out on to the terrace as we were—." Prudence trailed off not wishing to explain fully even to Mary.

Mary dug her fists in her hips. "Whose fault is it, then?" Prudence went to open her mouth and Mary cut in. "No, Nathan Frazer should have known better. He knows what Lady Henrietta 'Trollope' is like. It'll be all over the island by morning." Mary put her arm around Prudence's shoulders and gave a squeeze. "I always thought Nathan was a little cleverer than the rest of his sex, but after tonight I can see he is just as bone-headed as the rest of them." She looked down at Prudence, who gave a shudder from time to time. "Bloody man! If he had any feeling for you at all he would have let his head do his thinking, not his balls."

Prudence looked up at Mary forlornly. "But he doesn't."

"Doesn't?"

"He doesn't care for me." She broke free from Mary and wring the handkerchief in her hand. "You told me Nathan has lots of women, all over the island."

Prudence looked at Mary, willing her to contradict her. She didn't.

Prudence let out a sob. "How could I behave so indiscreetly? I am supposed to be mourning my dead fiancé. Instead of which I am found in the arms of the island foremost womanizer by most of Port Royal society. I came here to be married. Instead of which I am behaving like a trollop."

"One kiss in the moonlight hardly qualifies you as a trollop, Prue."

"It does in Lincoln. I came here to be married, not find romance."

Mary gave her a crooked smile.

"I thought you girls dreamed of both," she said slowly. "I don't think Nathan is the marrying kind and he must know that you would never in ten oceans consider any other type of liaison." Mary looked fondly at the young girl in her arms. "And nor should you." She kissed the top of Prudence's head then put her from her.

"I thought I loved Edward." The little furrow appeared on Prudence's forehead. "But the more I found out about how Edward behaved while he was here, the less I liked it. If all those stories about him are true and he is pretending to have been killed, I can honestly say that after all I have heard since I arrived, I have vowed never, never to marry Edward."

"I'm very pleased to hear it."

"I thought that I was interested in Nathan because I was so disappointed by Edward. But tonight, when Nathan took me in his arms and kissed me, I know that I never loved Edward, because," Prudence looked Mary straight in the eye, "I'm in love with Nathan." A large tear brimmed over and ran down Prudence's cheek. "Oh, Mary, what am I to do? Do I love him? And if I do, it's hopeless, because I am nothing to him."

Mary shook her head, but said nothing.

"You think he does love me? Has he said something? You know about men, Mary. Does he?" Prudence asked hopefully.

"I know about men, do I?" Mary gave a hard laugh. "I tell you what I know about men, my dear. My first 'usband beat me black and blue. My second stole every penny then ran off with some floozy. All I've got," Mary swept her hand around the room, "I've got with my own hard work. I got a good body and know how to please a man and I made that work for me. I used it to get what I wanted and I don't regret it, not one bit. But, as I said before, men are only after one thing. Don't trust them."

Prudence dropped her eyes down to her hands that were twisting the handkerchief into a knot.

"I'm sorry, Prue, I know you want me to tell you that I think Nathan is in love with you. If he is then he'll need to do the telling. I love you like the daughter I never had and I'm not going to let you go any further into the muddy water you're already splashing about in. You ask me what you should do. Sorry as I would be to see you leave, my love, I'd be telling you to finish your business off, pack your things, get on the next ship bound for England and leave Edward and Nathan behind you."

Prudence gave her a forlorn smile. Mary opened her arms and Prudence fled into them sobbing again. Mary hugged the girl to her and let the emotions work themselves out. After a moment or two, she put Prudence from her.

"Now, my next bit of advice is that you finish that brandy, and get yourself in bed. It will all look less bleak in the morning, I'm sure. And if Lady Morris starts rumors about you then we'll make sure the whole town knows what she gets up to, and with whom, in the Governor's chambers."

Half an hour later, with the brandy flowing through her veins, Prudence lay looking at the rafters in her room, listening to the noise outside and thinking over the evening.

She came here to marry Edward. She had been engaged to him after all for three years. But now she was beginning to wonder if she really knew him at all.

Then there was Nathan. Did she love him or was it he was just so different from Edward and every other man she had ever met. She didn't know. Was it just a physical attraction?

Did she or did she not love Nathan?

It didn't matter because the truth was she was just another woman to him. She felt a shudder run through her body as she remembered the feel of him against her. An ache welled up in her and she ran her hand down her body to where his hardness had pressed hard against her.

She had always believed that when she fell in love it would be for life, but now it seemed that this was not to be.

But is it really love? How could she love someone she hardly knew? She thought she knew Edward and look what he had done. She had believed herself in love with him but was absolutely sure she wasn't. Although she felt very differently about Nathan was it love? It could it be just infatuation. Nathan was handsome and she couldn't deny she found him fascinating, but surely love was more than just a physical attraction.

Prudence felt a bit more back in control of herself. Many people had infatuations and they got over it. The process might be painful, but they did. They went on and met other people, got married and were happy. Prudence thought of living without seeing Nathan every day and a pain shot through her chest.

Stop it.

Mary's right. She should finish her business in Port Royal and go home. She set her

face into a determined expression as she lay staring at the ceiling. She was almost finished finding out about Edward anyhow.

She had managed to find out a great deal. According to the men at the docks Edward and Diablo Ted got on famously. When *The Fallen Angel* sailed, Edward was invited on board. As she was convinced that her delinquent fiancé was alive, Prudence concluded that he must have bribed the pirate to let him off in the colonies somewhere and concoct the story of his being killed to cover his tracks.

But she needed to find out where Edward went to in New England. Her thoughts suddenly went back to Louis. Was that the information he had for her? Did he know where Edward had gone?

If she got the information from Louis, she could leave Port Royal and avoid becoming more and more obsessed Nathan.

But the price was too high.

Mary's words came back to Prudence.

"I got a good body – "

Prudence running her hands down over her thin nightdress.

"And know how to please a man"

Thankfully, Louis didn't ask that.

"And I made that work for me. I used it to get what I wanted"

Dare she? Dare she pose for Louis to get the information about Edward? Who would know? The painting is bound for Paris and no one would recognize her. Would she regret it? Mary said she never regretted it.

Prudence pictured herself naked, posing for Louis. Instead of feeling shocked as she thought, Prudence felt strangely excited by it.

She would insist on a chaperone.

No, she couldn't

Prudence smoothed her hands down again, feeling her breasts and hips. She bit her lip in the dark.

No one would know and she would be back in England before the paint was dry. In the dark, Prudence pressed her lips firmly together. She would do it. Anyway she wouldn't be naked, she would be nude.

Chapter Nine

All eyes in the ballroom watched as Prudence left on Mr. Pilkington's arm and then they turned to Nathan. He went and got himself a brandy and continued to circulate the reception. He chatted amiably to a couple of merchants about the price of tobacco and the evening resumed.

He could see that Henrietta too was circulating the room and talking animatedly to a number of the women and men in the assembly. He doubted she was talking about the price of tobacco. He ignored her totally. He refused to catch her eyes, although he knew that she was looking at him as she spoke. Nathan could see her tittering behind her fan and he heard her say Prudence's name on several occasions. He cursed himself again, but remained cool on the outside. He saw Captain Bennett make towards him, but stop after he sent him a thunderous look.

Nathan stayed. It was a struggle, as all he wanted to do after Prudence left was rush after her and take her in his arms again. It was only his steely determination that kept him at the hateful reception until almost the last guest had left.

After what seemed to be an eternity, but was in fact two hours, Nathan judged that he could leave with his dignity still intact. He thanked Sir George politely for his invitation and wished him well. He reached the fresh air of the street, turned in the direction of the harbor and then marched through the town and up to his townhouse on the eastern hill. Thankfully, he had given his man, Rogers, the evening off so his house was empty, which was just as well because he was not in the mood for company.

There were the usual drunks loitering around the main thoroughfare of Port Royal but after a quick glance at Nathan's face, none approached him.

Smashing open his front door he walked into his small study. He poured himself a brandy, downed it, then hurled the empty glass into the fire grate. He gulped down another and the second glass joined its companion in the hearth.

Unable to stand the inaction, he made his way to his bedchamber and ripped off his coat, waistcoat and shirt, then threw back the shutter over the window and stood staring blankly in the direction of *The Two Puddings* and Prudence.

What kind of man are you? he asked himself, as he felt the cool air circulate and stir the hair on his chest. *You're an utter bastard, that's the sort of man you are, a bastard.* He knew what a bitch Henrietta's was and still he exposed Prudence to her vindictiveness. He, and his lack of control, had given her the powder and the fuse.

He punched the wall and pain shot through his hand. He had only meant to kiss Prudence when he found her on the terrace alone, but once she was in his arms and pressed against him he could not stop.

Was he surprised? He hadn't been with a woman since he set eyes on Prudence and that was almost four weeks. He had only been celibate that long when at sea. There was no point pretending surprise. He knew the moment she opened her mouth under his, he was lost.

He could still feel the sweetness of Prudence's lips on his and his body responded of its own volition. He felt himself rise at the memory.

But you didn't just kiss her, did you?

No, he did a whole lot more. He leaned forward and gripped the windowsill.

His mind clearly remembered the beautiful flow of Prudence's neck and shoulder

and the way her soft skin felt to the touch. His cock reminded him of the look and feel of Prudence's breast in his hand.

Oh, God that was wonderful.

But it was more than that and Nathan now knew it. It was wonderful because it was Prudence.

He had told himself all along that his main reason for not wanting to take advantage of her was that she was an innocent and he could offer nothing more than a temporary liaison. But after feeling her arms around him and her kissing him back, Nathan knew the truth. He wanted more, much more.

Looking out of the window on Port Royal, Nathan faced the fact that his behavior towards Prudence wasn't based on being fair or honorable or the bad timing of their meeting. It was based on the undeniable fact that he was in love with her.

It was inconvenient, given his task on the island, but from this moment onwards, whatever his plans, Nathan would have to include Prudence in them, because he knew he couldn't live without her.

He took off his remaining clothes and lay on the bed, unable to sleep, with his thoughts and emotions colliding with each other as they raced around in his mind. As the first cock crowed over Port Royal, Nathan decided what he would do and sleep finally came.

Nathan got up the next morning well after dawn with a determined look on his face and a steely resolution in his heart. It was later than was his usual custom when he strolled down to the harbor in the late morning sunshine.

As he turned the corner, he heard a patrol behind him, so he stepped aside to let the soldiers pass. But as the front of the column marched past him, it turned and the sergeant in charge accosted him.

"Nathan Frazer?"

"Yes."

"You're to come with us, Captain Bennett's orders."

"What the blazes is this all about?"

The sergeant signaled and two of the soldiers came forward. "I don't want no trouble, but if it's trouble you're after, Mr. Frazer, then me and the boys will be right 'appy to oblige," he said in a broad London accent.

The soldier nearest to him had taken hold of his arm. Nathan shrugged him off.

"Take your filthy hands off m—"

Four men grasped Nathan firmly on both sides.

"As I said, Mr. Frazer, I'm 'appy to oblige," the sergeant said as he punched Nathan squarely in the stomach. Then he took his pistol out, cocked it and held it to Nathan's temple.

"Captain Bennett's orders," he said and motioned with his head in the direction of the barracks.

Nathan sent him a furious look, but moved with his escort up the hill.

On reaching the lock-up, he was unceremoniously thrown into a filthy cell in the empty prison block and left. Nathan got up, dusted himself down and waited. He did not have long to wait as within a moment or two the door to the cell block opened and Henry Bennett strolled in, alone. He casually made his way to Nathan's cell, unlocked the cell

door, sauntered inside and leaned on the wall next to Nathan. Nathan flicked his sleeve in an exaggerated fashion.

"If you value that smart coat of yours I wouldn't lean against that wall, Bennett."

Henry Bennett stood away from the wall. "It's *Captain* Bennett to you."

Nathan inclined his head. "Well then, *Captain* Bennett, what do you want? I have a pressing engagement."

"At *The Two Puddings*?" Nathan didn't answer, so Henry continued. "I thought I would repay you for this," he said touching the scar on his cheek.

Nathan gave a short laugh. "Shouldn't have got your thick head in the way of the shot."

Captain Bennett moved forward and grabbed hold of Nathan's upper arms and a wide grin spread across his face. "And you should have pulled me away smarter, old man."

Nathan grinned back and punched Henry lightly on the shoulder.

"How's your family, Nathan?"

"If you mean my sister, Isabella, she was well the last I heard."

"I'm going to marry her, you know."

"More fool you then, Harry. You're the nearest thing I have to a younger brother, so I feel I should warn you. I have never met such a stubborn, headstrong woman as Isabella, but if you want her then who am I to say no." Nathan dropped his voice lower. "Anyway, Henry, what do you want? I am on my way to *The Two Pudding* as it happens."

Henry leaned against the bar close to Nathan. "Going to apologize?"

"No. I'm going to ask Prudence Stone to marry me. Yes, I thought that would surprise you," he said, seeing Henry's astonished face. "It was a bit of a surprise to me as well, when I realized that I was in love and couldn't live without her at three o'clock this morning."

"I noticed that you were taken with her. We all saw it last night," Henry smirked and Nathan shot him a severe look which Henry ignored. "But marriage?"

"I confess the thought hadn't crossed my mind until last night. I knew that I would have to some day, of course, for the sake of the family, but I now find that I am deeply in love with Prudence Stone and I want nothing more than to marry her."

Henry raised his eyebrows.

"I know, I know, it will take a lot of explaining, who I am and what I am doing in Jamaica, but I'm afraid that I love her and I must have her for my wife, as soon as possible."

"I could see your urgency last night, Nathan," Henry said. His words earned him another sharp look from Nathan, and then he grew serious. "It's Miss Stone that I need to talk to you about."

"Don't tell me that you dragged me in here to warn me about kissing her in public?"

"Unfortunately not. Miss Stone has been asking too many questions around the Port about Diablo Ted and I have had word from a very reliable source that he has got to hear about it and is not happy, not happy at all. And, as I told you, the Governor has granted him a *marque*, which he is coming to collect. I was about to tell you this last night, but Pilkington came over."

Nathan looked serious. "I told her, Louis told her, and Pilkington told her it was dangerous to ask about Diablo Ted. But, knowing Prudence, I'm not surprised that she didn't listen." He ran his fingers through his hair. "She is the most stubborn, headstrong woman I know."

"I thought that was Isabella."

Nathan gave him a sardonic look. "They are two horses in the same harness. When does he dock?"

"Sometime today, so I think you had better keep an eye on your future wife and keep her from harm." Henry walked his friend over to the wall away from the door. "I'm afraid that's not all, Nathan. I also hear that Diablo Ted has been making enquires about you and may have found out who you really are."

"It hardly matters now as I will have to go north to find out this minister. I'm sure he is the spy we are searching for."

"I hope you find him soon because whoever he is knows his stuff. The Spanish seem to know all our plans before we do. Johnny Marshall's *Seahorse* ran into a whole squadron of Spaniards last week on his way to St Christopher's." Nathan whistled. "They were just waiting for him. Johnny showed them a clean pair of heels, but not all in the Navy can master a ship like ol' sea salt Johnny. There'll be losses soon. That's why the Spanish are so set on war, because with their man inside our defenses they think they can oust England from the Caribbean forever."

As Nathan went to move, a grimace crossed his face. "Did you have to send Burton to fetch me?"

"He's my best man. I told him to pull his punches."

"No doubt, but he's still got a fist like a hammer. Now, Harry, you had better let me out of here."

Henry produced a key from his fob. "Are you taking Miss Stone north with you?"

"I will take the Honorable Mrs. Nathan Frazer with me. For my sanity's sake alone I wouldn't dream of leaving her behind," Nathan finished as he dashed past Henry.

"Are you sure she will marry you?"

"Yes, because I'll not rest until she does," Nathan shouted behind him as he ran up the stairs two at a time.

Half an hour after leaving Henry, Nathan arrived at *The Two Puddings*. On his way he decided that, although it would be better for him and Prudence to go back to England to marry, in view of the circumstances, he hoped that she would agree to be married as soon as possible here in Port Royal.

As *The Two Puddings* came in sight it did just pass through Nathan's mind that Prudence might still be in love with Edward, but he dismissed it as too ludicrous. No woman of any sense would still be in love with such a man.

Prudence might be hot-headed, stubborn and single-minded, but she was no fool. But she didn't know that he wanted to find Edward almost as much as she did.

It was too much of a coincidence that Prudence's Edward disappeared from Port Royal just as the leak of naval secrets started and a Presbyterian clergyman had been seen in Panama and Portobello. Nathan couldn't remember if she had mentioned anything about Edward that would distinguish him at all. And the man he was seeking had eyes that were memorable in some way. He had a number of contacts in the colonies and, if this Edward had gone to ground there, Nathan was confident that he would be able to find him.

He forgot about Edward as he dipped under the beam and entered the parlor of *The Two Puddings*. He was greeted affably by Pearl and Rosa, who were sitting with a couple of sailors, and strode over to Mary who was standing behind the bar. She gave him a guarded look.

"Morning, Frazer," she said polishing a glass vigorously.

"Uh, morning, Mary. Is Prudence about?"

Mary sent him a sharp look. "Why don't you leave her alone Nathan? She shouldn't be here in a place like this, at the mercy of you men, she's too good for that. Just go and find some other pretty face to warm your bed and leave Prue be," Mary said, slamming the glass on the counter.

"I wish I could, Mary, but I can't. I can't leave her alone not now, not ever. Now, if you would be so kind as to tell her that I wish to see her? You can stay if you like to safeguard her honor, but I have to see her now."

Mary looked mollified.

"She's out." She considered Nathan for a second, then continued. "She was very upset last night. Crying, you know."

He could imagine.

"I told her she should finish her search for that pig of a fiancé and go back to England before she gets into real trouble."

"So where is she now?" Nathan asked as uneasiness crept over him.

Mary shifted her weight and started polishing the glass again. "She told me that Louis had some information about Edward and offered to give it to her."

"Give? Louis give?"

"So Prudence said. She's there, now. Went about an hour ago."

Nathan stood for a moment. What possible information could Louis have and why was he being so uncharacteristically generous as to give it away? Then he remembered what Prudence had said when she thought he was Louis on the terrace last night. Nathan's blood turned to ice in his veins. Louis wasn't giving Prudence information, he was selling it and Nathan knew exactly what his price was.

"Stupid bloody woman!" he shouted at the ceiling.

"Don't call Pru—." Mary started but Nathan interrupted her, his eyes blazing and his jaw taut. "When did Louis ever give something for nothing, Mary?"

"Oh."

"Oh, indeed."

Nathan's mouth grew hard. "I have to go."

He turned and dashed from the parlor and into the street.

Prudence awoke with the same grim determination as Nathan, but with a totally different objective for the day.

She still had a great number of misgivings about what she was intending to do, but could see no other way. For her sanity's sake she had to leave Port Royal sooner rather than later.

So, before she could change her mind, Prudence she sent word to Louis that she agreed to his request, but would only sit once, today, and she would want the information as soon as it was over. The boy came running back almost immediately, saying that Louis would be ready for her as soon as she arrived.

She had felt bad about lying to Mary, but she couldn't have told her what she really intended to do.

On the way to Louis, she had enquired as to the next ship sailing for the Northern colonies. The Annabelle was due to sail the day after next. So Prudence had booked

passage.

She argued with herself all the way to Louis' front door, telling herself that she had to do this and it would be another thing the Edward would be called to account for. As she turned into Lime Street where Louis's studio was, Prudence almost turned tail, but she had never run from any situation in her life and she wasn't about to start now. She squared her shoulders, pressed her lips firmly together and continued her journey hoping that she didn't look, to those who saw her pass by, like a woman who was about to strip naked. Half an hour after leaving *The Two Puddings* Prudence was ringing Louis' doorbell.

The stout blue door was opened by Louis's elderly housekeeper, Juanita, who showed her into a small downstairs room.

Prudence swung round as Louis burst into the room. He stepped forward, took her hand and kissed it.

"I am so pleased you 'ave changed you mind, *Mademoiselle* Prudence," Louis said trying to look artistic and not lecherous.

Prudence saw his eyes move down to her breasts then snap sharply back to her face. He adjusted his waistcoat over his crotch.

"You look exquisite in that dark green." She saw his eyes stray downwards again.

"Let me show you to my studio," he said, indicating the door.

Prudence inclined her head and swept out and up the stairs to the light, airy studio above.

As she entered she smelled the linseed oil and spirit that Louis used for his oils and the starchy smell of the resin on the fresh canvases stacked neatly in the corner. As she looked around there were several completed canvases on display.

They contained scenes of the countryside around Port Royal and several character studies of natives and locals. There were also some of mythical scenes with unicorns and lions. They were very good. Prudence felt a little better.

Louis was a great artist with a real eye for color and form. Perhaps he only painted the pictures in *The Two Puddings* to get started.

"I'm shipping them off at the end of the week to the court in Lisbon," Louis said by way of explanation. "My work is displayed in the most elevated settings throughout Europe."

Prudence turned back to face him. "You understand, Louis, only one sitting and I mean *sitting*." Louis looked disappointed, but nodded. "And Juanita will be in the room as a chaperone?"

He nodded again.

"After which you will tell me what you know of Edward."

Louis nodded for the third time.

"When you 'ave disrobed, I would like you to stand here." Louis indicated a light area near the window. "I will go while you – you prepare yourself. There is a long mirror over there and a comb. I will tell Juanita to come up in a quarter of an hour." He raised his eyes heavenward and murmured something in French, then left.

Prudence stood for a second and then looked around again. Louis had already set up a large canvas on his easel and there were fresh paints and six or seven long charcoal sticks on the table next to it.

She took off her straw bonnet and moved over to the dressing screen.

Come on, come on, stay calm.

She started to undo the small buttons of her gown. *Louis is an artist. He is used to looking at models. He's probably seen hundreds of women nak – nudes before.*

She kicked off her shoes and whipped her stockings off in one movement. Then she slipped the bodice off her shoulders and hung it on the hooks behind, before giving her attention to the ties of her skirt and petticoat. Having unfastened and removed them speedily, Prudence hung them alongside the bodice. She quickly unlaced her corset and put that with her other clothes. Then she freed her hair from its bun and let its golden waves fall down around her.

She now stood only in her thin under-chemise and boned stays. The furrow appeared in her forehead.

No, she couldn't do it. A vision of Edward laughing at her came to her mind. Prudence's hands went determinedly back to the ties.

What wouldn't she do when she got her hands on him? With trembling fingers, she quickly undid the remaining ties and stripped off the flimsy item. Before her resolve could waver again she ripped open the laces of her stays and stepped out of them and her under-chemise into the center of the studio.

A sense of freedom came over her. She was standing in full daylight naked, with the sun streaming over her. She had taken her clothes off before in her own room, but only to have a bath or change her day clothes for night. She had never taken them off with the intention of leaving them off for any length of time.

She turned towards the mirror and looked at herself. Her stomach churned as she looked at her reflection. She was right. She was as lovely as any of Mary's girls. Better in some ways, Prudence thought as she moved from side to side looking at herself. She shook out her hair and felt it ripple against her thighs, then flicked it back and lifted it up and over her shoulders with both hands.

She turned again and ran her hands downward over her waist and hips, then up to her breasts where she held them for a moment turning from side to side.

Thoughts of Nathan came to her mind and her stomach churned. A warm throbbing sensation started between her legs. It was very pleasant very pleasant indeed.

What Nathan would think if he could see her now?

She heard a shuffling noise behind.

Prudence turned. Nathan was standing behind her and, by the look on his face; he was going to tell her.

Chapter Ten

Nathan had run to Louis's house thinking of all the excruciating ways he could inflict pain on the Frenchman when he got his hands on him.

He tried to blot out what he might find Louis doing with Prudence. He reasoned that, although Louis's objective was obviously to seduce her, he would have to pretend that he was painting her at first, so he was optimistic that he could stop Louis from really harming Prudence. He didn't think that Louis would rape her, so she was probably untouched, as yet. Thoughts tumbled over unchecked in Nathan's mind.

Why did she change her mind and agree to pose for Louis? Prudence was no fool and she knew what that slimy Frenchman was after. Why did she do it? Did she still love Edward?

Pain shot through Nathan. Could she still love that lying, cheating scoundrel after all he had done? Nathan didn't know. He had very little experience of love, none, in fact, until he met Prudence.

It had occurred to him as he watched the first streaks of light appear in the sky that she might not feel as deeply for him as he did now for her, but she was attracted to him and he had been confident that, given his experience, he could make her love him. Finding that she had gone to Louis for information about Edward, started a nagging doubt in Nathan's mind.

He had known many fine women who had loved total bastards, putting up with any number of heartaches and disappointments over the years. He didn't think that Prudence was like that, but how could he be sure? After all, if someone had told him four weeks ago that he was about to fall so deeply in love with a woman he hardly knew, he would have laughed in their face, but now look at him. Frantic and insecure, what did he know about love?

Unable to answer these questions and with his heart beating wildly in his chest, Nathan reached the front of Louis's house. He was about to knock when he decided against it. He wanted physically to get hold of Louis and see his fear. He guessed that he would be in his studio up on the top floor. No doubt Prudence would be there also. He looked upwards and considered what to do next.

The front of Louis's house was clean, but the house next door had a large creeper climbing up its side. Without a second thought Nathan scaled the creeper as far as the balcony adjacent to Louis. He climbed onto it, then leaped across the space between the two wrought iron balustrades, landing lightly on Louis's balcony.

He dusted himself down and was just about to climb through the open window when he spotted Prudence coming out from behind the screen and into the stream of sunlight that illuminated the room.

Nathan's mouth dropped open in wonder as he saw her rear view as she looked at herself in the mirror. His whole body came alive as he saw her rounded bottom and long, slim legs as she pirouetted around. His cock surged to life and strained in his breeches. She turned towards him and looked behind her, giving Nathan a full view of her front.

His eyes roamed over the high, full breasts with their large dark tips. Then down to the nipped-in waist and her rounded hips, flaring and subliminally suggesting maturity and fertility.

Below the indent of her navel, Prudence's stomach rounded out a little, almost as an

invitation towards the dark blonde triangle of curls between her legs. All the questions that his body had been asking since he held her in his arms last night were answered, as Prudence stood naked yards away from him.

He was about to move when she turned back and lifted her arms under her hair moving it across her as she did.

Still holding him mesmerized, Prudence turned again and Nathan's hands, lips, chest, legs and cock wanted to hold her against him as he watched her smooth her hands sensually over her body and take hold of her breasts.

Nathan groaned. *God, she is beautiful.* Then he remembered why she was naked in Louis's studio.

Anger tore through him. He remembered what he had come for and climbed in through the window. As he did, Prudence heard him and whipped around, looking straight at him.

They stood for a moment. Nathan expected her to grab for a gown, but instead she just stood while he raked his eyes up and down her. There was a faint knock at the door.

"Are you ready, *chérie*?"

They both looked in the direction of the door and then Nathan exploded.

He strode across and ripped Prudence's clothes from off-the-peg, knocking the screen flying in the process.

He rounded on her, a deep frown on his face and his mouth turned down hard at the corners and threw them at her. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I—"

"I knew that you were stubborn, but I never thought you stupid enough to be hoodwinked by that randy Frenchman."

"He had some information about Edwar—"

The door opened and Louis stepped in.

"My swee—" He stopped as he saw Nathan in the middle of his studio with murder on his face.

Nathan strode over to him, grabbed Louis by the shoulder and dragged him into the room. "Prudence tells me that you have some information for her."

"I-I—" he blustered and Nathan glared at him.

"Well, let's hear it then," Nathan said, dragging Louis further towards Prudence. "Come on, Louis, tell Prudence what information is worth her stripping naked for you."

"I only want to paint her as Eve—"

"It's not naked, it's nude," Prudence said as she tried to pull Nathan off a rapidly choking Louis.

Nathan glared down at her. "Put your clothes on."

"I don't see what business it is o—" Prudence started to say.

He caught Louis's gaze on her and he shook the Frenchman to draw his attention away. Louise head whipped back.

"I thought I told you to put your clothes on," Nathan growled at her.

He still had hold of Louis around the neck and Prudence was holding onto his arm. Both he and Louse looked at her. She had managed to struggle into her chemise, but most of the ties were open showing best part of both breasts.

Nathan felt his loins stir at the sight. He pushed the thought away.

"If I have to tell you again, madam, to put your clothes on I will do it myself," he said, seeing Louis's eyes drawn downwards to Prudence's bare flesh.

Red mist started to crowd into Nathan's mind. His head snapped back at Louis who

quickly brought his eyes up. He could see to the side of him that Prudence was struggling to tie her skirt in place and she had slipped her arms into her bodice, although it was still open as most of the lace holes were torn. They had flown off when Nathan had roughly dragged it from the peg.

Nathan looked coldly at the Frenchman who was rigid in his grasp. "Tell Prudence the truth, Louis. Tell her that you don't know anything about her bloody fiancé. And that you lied to her to get her up here."

"Well," started Louis. Nathan tightened his grip.

"The truth."

Louis gulped and Nathan squeezed again. He wanted to kill him, he really did, but held himself back. He couldn't totally blame Louis for the situation they now found themselves in.

"No," Louis croaked as lights exploded in his head.

"Louder, if you please, you lecherous scum, I don't think Prudence heard you."

"No. I know nothing, nothing," Louis said as Nathan let him go and turned to Prudence.

Nathan noticed that she still had not tied the bodice across. He saw the full rounds of her breasts and remembered how they had looked a few moments earlier. His anger rose again. How could she do this and for a man who had treated her so badly?

Unfortunately for Louis at that moment he opened his mouth and spoke. "Really, Frazer, I expect more from a gentleman. Prudence came here of her own accord. I don't see that it is anything to you."

Nathan's control snapped. He shook Louis, pulled back his arm and punched him with all his might, squarely on the chin. He felt his knuckles crack and grunted with satisfaction as Louis flew backwards.

The artist crashed through the canvas on the easel and upset the table beside it. Paint and oil splattered across white wall and ran in untidy ribbons downwards. He sprawled in the mess and lay inert on the floor.

Nathan turned back to Prudence and looked at her fiercely.

For a split second after Nathan had appeared in the window, time stood still for Prudence. Because she had been thinking about him only moments before, Prudence thought she had conjured him out of her imagination. After all, the expression on his face of desire and passion was exactly as she had dreamed it would be on a number of occasions.

She could see the raw need in his dark brown eyes as they bore into her very soul. She felt a shiver of anticipation run through her. Strangely, she had no inclination to cover herself. Her stomach fluttered as she saw his undisguised admiration.

They had stood motionless staring at each other until the knock on the door brought them back to reality. The next thing that Prudence knew was the sight of Nathan as he erupted around the room.

She was concerned that Nathan would do Louis serious injury and, by the look on his face, Louis had the same worry. However she knew that it wasn't just because Nathan was blocking off his air that Louis had confessed that he had no new information to give her. It was because it was true. He had used the ruse of information to succeed in getting get her up here naked in his studio.

Her face flushed hot with embarrassment.

You fool. Mary said it, don't trust any of them, and she was right. Prudence glanced up at Nathan.

He was standing glaring at Louis on the floor and breathing hard. She could see that he was struggling to control his temper and resist the urge to assault the unconscious artist further. His shoulders relaxed a little as Louis remained still. He turned back to Prudence with an unreadable expression on his face. His eyes went to her shoulders and she put her hand up to where his gaze rested.

Where Nathan had pulled her clothes from the hook in the wall, he had ripped through the shoulder seam of the bodice and torn the neckline of the chemise so the drawstring no longer tightened around her shoulders.

Although she had secured her clothes as best she could one shoulder was bare, the bodice only half did up and the chemise was falling away from her upper body.

She heard Nathan growl as he moved towards her. She took a step back as she looked full into his face. She saw need in his eyes for a second, then anger returned and she was painfully aware that she must resemble one of Mary's girls just returned from "working a ship." Prudence tried to pull up her clothing, but with no success.

Nathan stepped closer and looked down with hooded eyes. His hands went up and she thought he was about to take hold of her again but he stopped mid-movement.

"I can't walk through the streets with you like that. I have my reputation to think of even if you have no regard for yours," he spat out.

Prudence felt the sting, but swallowed hard. "Then I'll walk by myself. I don't need your protection, Mr. Frazer."

He put his head back and gave a hard laugh. "Ever since you set foot in Port Royal you have needed protection from your own hot-headed, stubborn ways, madam."

The humiliation of the last half hour swept over Prudence and she became angry. She was angry with Louis for his lies and deceit. She was angry with herself for being so easily duped. But mostly she was angry with Nathan for standing there so sure of himself and so right.

He was right. It was her own stubbornness that had led her to come to Louis this morning. It was her stubbornness that made her pursue Edward. It was her stubbornness that made her stay in Port Royal when the sensible thing to have done was to sail home. And now it was her stubbornness that had led to her posing naked for Louis and being caught by the one man on earth she was trying to prove wrong.

The furrow appeared across her brow. Prudence went to push past Nathan before the tears that were stinging the back of her eyes started to fall.

He took hold of her arm. "Where are you going?"

"It is no business of yours," she said, trying to pull out of his grasp. He didn't let her go but held her fast, his fingers vice-like on her flesh.

"I am making it my business." Still holding her, he looked around the room. "This will do."

He marched her over to the window and, with his free hand, pulled the curtain down with one tug.

"Wrap this around you."

Prudence held the dusty fabric away from her and started to argue. "I don't—"

Nathan pulled her to him and put his face so close to hers that Prudence could smell the fresh rum on his skin and see the white fans around his eyes. She could feel his hard body against her and, despite all that was happening, she had the urge to kiss him.

"I am not asking you, I am telling you," he said, wrapping the curtain around her. "Now come."

It was too much. Who did he think he was ordering her around like this? She didn't belong to him.

She stepped back and pulled herself from Nathan's grasp and went to discard the curtain.

"I thank you not to—"

Nathan did no more. He stepped forward, re-bundled her in the curtain, lifted her off her feet and threw her over his shoulder. He kicked open the studio door and started down the stairs.

"Miss Stone, allow me the privilege of escorting you back to your lodgings," he said to Prudence's rump as he stepped out into Lime Street.

Chapter Eleven

The half hour walk back to *The Two Puddings* was the longest in Prudence's entire life. Although she couldn't see properly, she heard the laughter and catcalls to Nathan as they passed. He answered none of them, marching swiftly along, his boots slamming onto the cobbles beneath her head.

At first she thought to scream but discarded this idea as it would attract even more attention and she doubted that any would come to her rescue. She had tried to raise herself up by pushing against Nathan's back, feeling the strong muscles ripple under his jacket as she did and shouting at him. But if he heard her at all, he ignored her completely, not breaking his stride but continuing with the same dogged steps through the center of the town. So in the end she just slumped against him and was thankful that no one could see her scarlet face.

Finally, just as Prudence was beginning to feel sick with her unnatural position across Nathan's shoulders, she realized that they had reached *The Two Puddings* because he turned her upright and set her on the floor.

As she refocused, she saw Mary and several of her girls, looking at her open mouthed with astonishment. She went to move away from Nathan, but he held her fast to him.

"Prudence, are you all right?" Mary asked looking at the girl's disheveled appearance.

"Of course she is," answered Nathan with a dangerous smile on his face. "Why shouldn't she be? After all, what harm could possibly come to a young woman naked—" he turned and looked at Prudence through narrowed eyes, "—I'm sorry, *nude*, in Louis's studio?"

"No!" Mary and the girls said in unison.

Nathan pulled her to him and answered Mary while continued to look at Prudence. "No, you might say, Mary. I wish Prudence had said the same to the lecherous bastard."

Prudence sent him a withering look. She could see that he was still boiling. All eyes were on her. Even Mary's girls looked shocked and that was no mean achievement.

The complete foolishness of what she had done swept over her. She looked up into Nathan's eyes and felt ashamed. Whatever would he think of her now? Why did he have to find her like that? Her anger towards Edward and her desire to get over her infatuation for Nathan meant that she had set aside her better judgment. She had believed Louis's lie because she wanted to.

She looked back at Mary and the girls, who were frozen to the spot, wrenched out of Nathan's grip and fled towards the stairs.

Nathan moved instantly after her, but she managed to make it up to the landing before he caught her. He grabbed for her at the top of the stair, but caught only the curtain.

He cursed and reached the stairs as she disappeared into one of the rooms.

She had to get away. She knew that Nathan was trying to catch her, but, with tears streaming down her face, she didn't want to see him. She just wanted to escape.

Nathan saw Prudence go to shut the door against him and he got his foot in the

frame before she could do so, bursting it back with his shoulder.

As he entered he found her standing with her back to the wall facing him. Before they left Louis' studio she had managed to tie most of her hair back, but in the ensuing ride across his shoulders and her flight up the stairs, it had fallen loose and now streamed down around her.

Her eyes were shining bright with tears and her chest was rising and falling rapidly as she recovered her breath. One shoulder was now completely bare. The last threads of the ripped chemise fabric were hanging down limply exposing a great deal of flesh. Pain seared through him.

He had come here this morning to tell Prudence that he loved her and to ask her to marry him only to find her naked in Louis's studio. His tall frame slumped.

"Why did you do it?" he asked taking a step forward.

"I thought Louis was trying to help me," she said and dropped her eyes momentarily.

Nathan took another step forward. He wanted to pull her against him again and feel the softness of her in his arms.

"My dear Prudence, he was. He was trying to help you to open your legs," he said in a low menacing voice.

Prudence blanched at his words, but she squared her shoulders and stood with as much dignity as she could.

"I thought he knew where Edward had gone. You don't understand. I have to find him."

Pain flitted across Nathan's face. He grabbed hold of her arms and looked down at her.

"Do you love Edward so much that you have to debase yourself to Louis to find him?" He pulled her closer. "How can you love him after all he's done? How can you, Prudence? How can you still want to marry him?" Nathan said, tearing the word from his throat.

Since he had come upon her in Louis's studio, an empty void had opened in front of him.

Prudence gazed up at Nathan with a look of utter astonishment on her face. "I may have been foolish enough to — to visit Louis, but I am not foolish enough to still love Edward. Do you think that I would still love him after he spent all my inheritance on women and drink and then run off pretending to be dead? What kind of fool do you think I am? I don't love him at all."

Nathan moved his arm around her. "Then why, in God's name, do you need to find him? Why can't you just thank the Almighty that you are free of him?"

Prudence looked away for a second, then back up at Nathan.

"Because, Nathan, I will not let him get away with his abominable treatment of his parents, my uncle and me," Prudence said between clenched teeth.

She didn't love this Edward. She just had to have the last word. He felt a lightness in his heart and his hope returned as he held her at arm's length and laughed at her.

"Is that what this is all about? You just want to have the last word? I thought you were stubborn, but to stir up a whole tempest of trouble, put yourself in unimaginable danger and strip naked just to stamp your foot, wag your finger and tell Edward he's been a naughty boy —" Nathan said, as the corners of his mouth started to curl upwards.

Prudence bristled. "How dare you laugh at the bishop and his wife, the godliest souls this side of heaven, and at Uncle Ezra? My uncle treated Edward like a son. He even

gave him his last penny to let him come to Jamaica."

Nathan tried to force his face, sober but a laugh spluttered out nonetheless. He saw Prudence start to shake and two splashes of pink appeared on her cheeks.

"And how dare you laugh at me for trusting Edward? You think I'm foolish no doubt, letting myself be duped by Edward." She continued to shake and the pink on her cheeks spread. "I don't expect you to understand things like honor and honesty," she snatched herself from Nathan. "How could I expect such qualities from a man who spends his time drinking, gambling, bedding every woman on the island and hasn't the decency to act like a gentleman and not use all the lessons he learned in a brothel on an innocent, unchaperoned female?"

Nathan looked incredulously at her. She was standing back from him with her clenched fists on her hips and a tight, angry expression on her face. The gown's only anchor on her on her upper body was a tattered shoulder strap and the other shoulder was bare with the torn clothing flapping down, showing most of her breast. It crossed Nathan's mind that Prudence would only have to raise her arm and the beautiful object would be free of its mooring.

She was furious. Every inch of her said so. He thought she looked like one of the Greek warrior women he had read about at Cambridge. She was no longer Prudence, the Puritan Miss from Lincoln; she was Prudence, the Amazon warrior, ready to do battle with anyone. Nathan let his eyes roam slowly up and down to impress the sight of her on his mind.

How I love this woman, Nathan thought, as his body registered all her contours and remembered how good they felt against his. His cock came alive, but he told it, no, not yet. Love or no, he wouldn't let that pass. He gave Prudence a considered look, put one finger to his mouth and lifted his eyes skyward as if trying to remember something. His expression opened and he looked straight at her.

"I thought you said something last night about casting the first stone?"

"But that's diff—different, totally different," Prudence said with a lift of her chin.

"Not at all. It wasn't me acting like a trollop by standing as naked as the day I was born, in Louis's studio this morning, it was you. So I don't think, Prudence, that you're in any position to lecture me about moral laxity, do you?"

Prudence opened her mouth in astonishment.

"What right have you got to call me names?" She pulled her brows together and jabbed her finger at him. "What if I did? What has that to do with you? And what trouble have I caused? What danger?" she blasted back at him.

"You have been making too many enquiries about Diablo Ted and, as I told you the first time we met, that can be deadly dangerous."

He took a step nearer and his face lost its anger and a sensual smile crossed his lips. He took another step forward which brought him right in front of Prudence, so close that she had to look up to see his face. Her mouth parted a fraction as she gazed up at the strong angles of his face.

The movement of her head backwards dislodged a lock of hair and it fell across her face. She lifted her hand up and brushed it away from her eyes. Nathan glanced down and saw the crescent edge of her dark areola peaking out from above the tattered chemise.

"What is it to me? I'll tell you what it is to me, Prudence." Nathan moved his arm forward and slid his hand around her waist pulling sharply to him. He felt her hands go up and press against his chest. He moved his feet apart slightly and the other arm went around and held her head.

"I'll tell you what it is to me, Prudence. Everything you do matters very much to me." The arm around her waist tightened. "Because although it is very inconvenient and not at all what I had planned, I find that I love you."

Before Prudence could utter a word, Nathan lowered his mouth on hers and kissed her hard.

Prudence was taken aback with his altered of mood. As his lips made contact with her and pressed down passionately, her mind could not quite keep up with the sudden change.

She had expected him to turn away and storm from the room, unable to look at her any more. Then, suddenly, without realizing properly what was happening, she had found herself held against him and listening to him tell her that he loved her. A dam burst inside Prudence.

She kissed him, back throwing her arms around his neck as she did so. She felt him clasp her tighter and change his stance. She could feel the strong legs supporting both of them as he worked his mouth on hers, his other hand holding her head fixed while he did so. She ran her hand through his hair and felt the clean springiness of it as it slipped through her fingers.

Her hands then ran down to Nathan's wide shoulders and across. She had never felt a man so strong. Not that she had felt that many, but instinct told her that there were not many men with a physique to rival Nathan's. She gave in to her body and let it tell her what it wanted.

It wanted to feel Nathan's skin's so Prudence slipped her hands under his shirt and downwards, pushing it off as far as she could. She ran her fingers through the mass of chest hair and up and under the thin linen, feeling the steel-hard muscles of his shoulder and upper arm without the hindrance of the fabric.

She heard him groan as her hands explored further. The arm around her waist roamed down and Nathan's large hand clasped her bottom and held it against his groin. She felt the hardness against her and the warm throbbing began in earnest. She understood what it was she wanted and now she knew that only Nathan could satisfy that want completely.

He released her mouth with a gasp and kissed across her face. "God, I love you, Prue." he said between kisses, finding and kissing around her ear. "I have never felt like this before, never."

Nathan's words fired Prudence as much as his kisses and she strained around to kiss his face too. He was now making his way down her neck and across the delicate collarbone. The hand at the back of her head came around and moved up to her shoulder, kneading and caressing it with dexterous fingers.

Prudence rolled her head out of the way to allow Nathan free rein on her neck and shoulder. The thought that she shouldn't let Nathan make love to her like this popped into her head.

There are a great many things I shouldn't have done since I left Boston, but making love to Nathan isn't one of them, she decided. Being in his arms was the one thing that felt totally right.

Should I have a page break here?

His hand moved down from her shoulders and ripped the fabric away from her

breast. Lifting his head and he looked down at the breast that he cupped lovingly in his hand.

Prudence's mouth fell open as Nathan took his time and looked his fill.

As he grazed his thumb over the dark, taut tip, Prudence moaned and her head fell back. Nathan continued to explore. His finger and thumb came around the extended tip and he squeezed. She moaned again. He then rolled and fondled the whole breast as he lowered his lips back onto hers. She kissed him hungrily. Releasing her mouth, he kissed down over the swell of her breast and down towards the upturned peak, as he had the night before.

He stopped just before reaching his objective and gazed lovingly at the nipple inches from him, seeing all the gathered tightness and blush color. Then he shut his eyes, flicked the nub twice with his tongue and latched on hard. Her hand went up to the back of his head.

He had braced her across his thigh with her legs astride and her pubic bone against the knotted muscle of his leg. As his mouth covered the dusky tip of her breast and drew it in, lights exploded in her head. Wave after wave of pulsating lights seemed to shower through her body. She flexed her hips and pressed against Nathan's leg and it took him by surprise. But now she was kissing him as demandingly as he was kissing her, her hands running all over his back and chest. Again he had only meant to kiss her and then to ask her to marry him. He hadn't intended this, but once again his own emotion and strong need to possess her had allowed his body to take over and stop his mind thinking properly.

His mind struggled to tell him that he should stop as he was in very great danger of consummating his marriage before asking the bride for her hand. He tried to hold himself back and slow down.

He wanted to do it properly.

He reluctantly released Prudence's breast, stood up and forced himself to look into her face and not down at the wonderful sight now open to his view. Her eyes were half-closed and she was breathing heavily. Her lips parted slightly as if to invite him back to them.

Nathan gritted his teeth, as her eyes fluttered up and looked at him.

Prudence gave him a half smile, then put her hands to the front of his shirt and ripped it apart. Her eyes slid down across the broad shoulders and bare chest. Placing the palms of her hands on Nathan's flesh, she stroked across and back.

Nathan groaned and let his head fall backwards. The soft kisses were firing through to his very bones and his cock strained and twitched at her touch. He tried to keep in control of his need, it was important.

He had to ask her. Now!

He forced his head down to look at her. As he did, she ran her hands up and over his shoulders, taking the shirt right off. Then her small hands continued their progress along his shoulders and down each arm to his hands. Taking both of them in hers Prudence pulled Nathan's hands around her, pressing against him as she did. Nathan obliged and held her tight. She then ran her hands up and around his neck straining, on tiptoes to reach him.

She parted her lips and her eyes were half-closed, but not before Nathan saw the latent need raging within.

"Kiss me, Nathan, kiss me again, but this time don't stop."

Nathan did as she asked and let his body take over his thinking processes completely.

He crushed her to him and worked his mouth on hers while his hand slipped the other shoulder of her gown down and away. Releasing the last couple of buttons and ties swiftly, he let it fall to the floor, then held Prudence against him feeling her soft breasts with their erect peaks against his bare skin. He gasped as they traced a light pattern through his chest hair and causing his balls to tighten in response.

After untying her clothes and letting them fall away, Nathan lifted her off the floor and carried her over the bed. He continued to kiss her as he laid her in the center of the bed and climbed on next to her.

He gathered her into his arms and started to caress her shoulders and neck again but this time moving down to her stomach and hips.

Prudence groaned as Nathan's hands moved deftly over her sending shudders of delight through her. She too ran her hands over his chest and stomach feeling the taut muscles beneath.

Nathan slid his arm under her head, lifted himself up and looked Prudence in the eyes.

"I love you, Prue." he said and lowered his mouth on hers again, tenderly at first, then harder, more demanding.

Her senses reveled in the words. He loved her, Nathan loved her and she loved him. She wanted to say it, but couldn't as his lips were stopping hers with his kisses.

So she kissed him back with equal passion, hoping he would know. Her hand roamed freely over his upper body, letting her instinct teach her what to do. She kissed whatever part of him was nearest to her lips and was rewarded with Nathan groaning and arching into her. Nathan opened her legs with his and pinned her while she, without realizing it, was rocking herself rhythmically against him.

She was enjoying exploring every bit of Nathan she could reach and now wanted to explore the bits that were still covered. She could feel his male hardness against her. She wondered what it would feel like as he entered her. She knew the first time would hurt, but with Nathan she didn't fear it.

He lowered his mouth and kissed down to her breast again, drawing in the tip. His tongue flicked and licked, sucked and nibbled, until Prudence thought that she would go mad with the pleasure of it.

As his hand moved down Prudence moved her legs apart. His hand brushed over her private curls and on until he found what it was looking for, the swollen bud of her pleasure waiting for him. Gently with the same rhythm Prudence had been using on his leg, he started to rub over it, looking at her face all the while his fingers slid back and forth.

Her eyes widened at the new and incredibly wonderful sensation that started to spread and build inside her. In response her hips moved in unison with Nathan's hand. A dam had burst in her head and she could hear her own voice calling Nathan's name, but with a different sound. He held her tenderly while she shuddered through her climax.

He stood up and his hand went to the fastening of his breeches while she lay waiting to see him fully revealed.

Suddenly from just outside the door a scream tore through the air. Nathan looked behind him as the door to the bedroom crashed back and reverberated against the wall and they realized they were no longer alone.

Chapter Twelve

As Nathan turned, they saw the doorway filled by two large, belligerent-looking men. The first man was bare from the waist up and wore dirty breeches with remnants of fine braid still attached. His lower legs were bare above the rolled down stockings and scuffed buckled shoes. The man behind him was shorter with greasy, black hair and the same ill-kempt look about him, but with the addition of a tatty red bandanna around his neck and a waistcoat over his upper body. Both showed tobacco-stained teeth as they grinned.

The first looked at Prudence on the bed and licked his lips. Without taking his eyes off her, he addressed Nathan.

"Your pardon, Mr. Frazer, for interrupting you at such an awkward moment, but Captain Ted of *The Fallen Angel* wants a word."

Nathan went for the pistol in his jacket, but the shorter man got there before him, snatching it away. He then grabbed Nathan roughly, pinning his arms back.

The larger pirate stepped forward, spat on the floor, then punched Nathan squarely in the face.

Prudence's scream echoed around the room as Nathan felt a small trickle of blood on his mouth.

Outside a great deal of shrieking and shouting accompanied as the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs.

"Now, now, no need for that, Mr. Frazer."

Nathan gave him a cold look and stole a glance at Prudence who was still lying on the bed. Another scruffy individual appeared through the door.

"Got 'im then, Briggs?" he said, addressing the pirate who had punched Nathan and who still regarded Prudence thoughtfully.

"Aye."

"Better luck than me then. That nosy Miss Stone not in her room. Ted won't be too pleased if we come back wivout 'er. "Ave to search the dock for her now, we will." The man in the door followed Briggs's eyes and saw Prudence on the bed. A lecherous grin spread across his face. "See you found yourself a little pigeon Briggsey."

Nathan felt his blood turn to ice. These rogues were looking for Prue as well as him. He started to struggle, which caught the pirate's attention. Briggs stepped forward and faced Nathan.

"Leave Rosie alone," Nathan said looking at Prudence hard, as if willing her not to speak. Thankfully, she didn't.

"I'm thinking I don't want to leave Rosie alone and you're not in any position, Frazer, to tell me otherwise," the other man answered landing Nathan another blow as Prudence screamed.

Nathan shook his head and forced himself to remain conscious.

Briggs walked over to the bed and stood with his back to Nathan and his huge calloused hands resting on either hip. He lunged forward and whipped the cover away, leaving Prudence naked on the bed.

She brought her legs up and covered herself as best she could. Briggs turned back to Nathan.

"I have to admire your taste, Frazer," he said to Nathan with an amused smile on

his face. "'Tis a pity I haven't the time right now to finish what you've started."

He turned and signaled for the other two men to take Nathan and go, which they did. Briggs strode after them.

Prudence sat stunned for a moment after the pirate dragged Nathan away, then she leaped up, wrapped the cover around her and raced onto the landing.

Below the scene was one of utter devastation. Much of the wooden furniture was smashed to splinters and lay strewn across the floor. Moses was lying in a corner with blood trickling from a wound on his head. Pearl, Sissie and Mary were huddled in a corner white-faced and shaking while a gang of about fifteen men regrouped and headed for the door to the street, dragging Nathan behind them.

Just before Briggs reached the door, he turned, pulled two pistols out of his belt and shot them into the ceiling, causing plaster to fall in a shower. He stamped over to Mary and loomed menacingly over her.

"Remember to send your girls over to *The Fallen Angel* at sunset, Mary. The boys have been at sea a long time and need a great deal of female company." He spotted Prudence above him hanging over the banister. "And make sure Rosie's with them." He turned, kicked a table out of his way and left.

No one moved, frozen by the suddenness of the attack. It remained quiet for a moment or two then Mary lifted her fist and smashed it down on the table next to her and let out a mighty scream. Everybody jumped and looked at her.

"Bastard," she said as she raced over to Moses, who was still lying unconscious on the floor.

She took a pitcher of water with her from the counter and started to mop his brow. To Prudence's utter relief the black man's eyes flicked open. She gathered the cover tighter around herself and made her way down the stairs.

She came alongside Mary. "This is my fault," Prudence said, stepping between the shards of wood. "Everyone warned me about Diablo Ted. They told me how dangerous he was but I didn't listen."

She gazed around and then at the still flapping street door and the full enormity of her actions came over her. Tears stung the back of her eyes.

"They've taken Nathan." A tear ran down her cheek and Prudence let it. Mary came towards her with a sorrowful expression on her face.

"He loved me, Mary and he had tried to protect me, and now he had been taken to *The Fallen Angel*. God only knows what will happen to him when Diablo Ted gets his hands on him."

She felt herself tremble. Only moments ago she was lying in Nathan's arms while he told her of his love. And now he was taken. Her head was pounding and she clenched her fists together so tightly that she could feel her nails digging in.

"I have to do something, Mary."

"I agree. We have to go to Captain Bennett right away."

"He won't help. He hates Nathan. I don't expect he will lift a finger to help him, not now that Diablo Ted has the Governor's marque. We have to do something ourselves."

"I don't see what we can do," Mary said, righting a table and waving for one of the servants to fetch a broom.

Prudence took hold of Mary's arm. "Diablo Ted's not on the ship. He is with the

Governor. If I could get on *The Fallen Angel* and find Nathan, then —”

“Stop right there, Prudence. If you’re suggesting what I think you’re suggesting, you must be out of your mind. It’s much too dangerous.”

“Not if I go with you when the girls row out to ‘work the ship’.”

Mary looked at her with total incredulity. “It would be sheer madness. You, on the ship with my girls? You wouldn’t last a minute.”

“But if you were there with me, Mary, to protect me.” Mary went to move away, but Prudence stopped her. “I only need to find him and release him. I’m sure that he could get away himself, while I just rejoined you and came back to the shore.”

“But, Prue —” Mary started to say. Prudence set her mouth in a straight line and furrowed her brow.

“I have to free Nathan, Mary. I love him. It’s because I’ve stirred up so much trouble that Nathan has been dragged aboard *The Fallen Angel*. It’s my fault, all my fault.”

Tears started to well up in Prudence’s eyes and her lower lip trembled.

“But, Prudence —”

“What else can I do? I can’t just leave him there. Diablo Ted will kill him and I can’t let that happen.”

“But Prue —”

Prudence’s brow furrowed deeper, her chin went up and her face took on a steely determined look. “I love, Nathan, Mary, and I am going to rescue him, even if I have to row out to the ship alone. And that’s an end to it.”

Mary tried another tack. “What do you think that Nathan would say, if he knew what you were contemplating doing?”

It was wasted.

“I’m going, Mary,” Prudence said, pulling the cover around her tightly and turning towards the stairs. “Will you help me or not?”

Mary looked heavenward with an exasperated expression and blew out loudly through her nose before looking back at the beautiful, willful, young women standing across the room from her.

“I will. But God and all his saints help me to keep you safe.”

Two hours later, just as the sun was beginning to touch the horizon, Mary and the girls from *The Two Puddings* sat in the longboat, bobbing across the harbor, with Prudence in the midst of them. Mary watched the approaching ship chewing her lip nervously.

Prudence was dressed in Nell’s deep-blue silk gown with a tight bodice that thrust her breasts up, sitting upright with her mouth tight and her eyes fixed on the ship anchored in the harbor. Underneath the gown an almost transparent silk undershirt, her shoulders were bare.

Pearl and Nell had dressed her hair up like the girls of *The Two Puddings* and a curl snaked its way down her neck across her shoulders and towards her chest.

“I must be going soft in the head to let you talk me into this madness, Prue.” Mary said, shaking her head.

Prudence summoned an unconcerned expression to her face. “I’ll be safe enough. You sent around to *The Mermaid* and got some of their girls. As you said, there’s safety in numbers.”

“Gawd, I hope so, *The Fallen Angel*’s a small sloop and buccaneers often crewed to

the minimum, so there's more share of the loot for each. I reckon that means fifty men at most." Mary studied the approaching ship for a second. "If you allow for those who prefer each other in the hammock and those who were dead drunk all the time, that would leave forty or so to be entertained. With us fifteen and The Mermaid's twelve, there's just about enough to keep all the crew occupied." Mary chewed her lip unhappily again. "Prue, I haven't been much of a one for praying, but please God you're away from that ship before ever Diablo Ted returns."

Prudence lapsed into silence, reliving Nathan telling her of his love for her. She now knew now, with absolute certainty, that what she felt for him was no infatuation or girlish crush. It was love.

As the ship came closer and the shouts and catcalls became louder, Prudence swallowed hard. Moses had given her the rough layout of the ship and where Nathan was likely to be imprisoned, hopefully not in iron shackles. In this expectation, Prudence had secreted a small knife in her skirts.

Her initial confidence that she would be able to free Nathan once she was on board was now evaporating as *The Fallen Angel* loomed ever nearer.

Suddenly there was a roar from the ship. Prudence blinked out of her daydream and refocused.

"All right, girls, you know what to do," Mary shouted. "Get on, get their money and then get off like the devil's chasing you."

A rope ladder snaked its way down towards them. Several of the girls were pulling their bodices down and hitching up their skirts. Pearl caught the astonished look on Prudence's face.

"Saves a deal of time," she explained as she took hold of the rope ladder.

"Prudence, stay close to me and don't say a word," Mary instructed her as she started to ascend to the deck.

Prudence didn't need to be told twice.

As she found her feet on the deck and soothed down her skirts the sight that greeted her was unbelievable. Although the girls from *The Two Puddings* and *The Mermaid* were only seconds in front of her, by the time she had reached the deck they were fully engaged with one or two men. Prudence averted her eyes, cheeks aflame, as she tried not to look at the flurry of legs and skirts across the deck. She now had a clearer idea what Sodom and Gomorrah must have looked like the night before its destruction, than any sermon could have given her.

Mary grabbed her arm. "Come with me, and for the love of the Virgin pull that wrap around you." Mary bit her lip. "I shouldn't have let Nell give you that dress. If any of 'em see you—" she trailed off and shook her head.

"Moses said that Nathan would likely to be on the lower deck. Just show me where that is, Mary."

Mary signaled and the two women made their way to the steps leading below deck. With a quick look over her shoulder Mary ushered Prudence through the low door and into the dark of the gangway and then onto the narrow stairs that led below.

"And where are you off to then, me beauty?" said a voice from behind. Prudence froze. She recognized it as being the pirate who was with Briggs earlier.

Mary stopped for a moment and then turned to face the man behind them. She indicated to Prudence with a nod of her head.

"You 'eard Briggs tell me to bring Rosie and that's just what I have done," Mary said as she casually put her hands on her hips and stood in front of Prudence.

"Oh yes. I recognize 'er now, the little pigeon that Mr. Frazer 'ad a fancy for."

Mary gave a crooked grin. "Well, he's otherwise engaged now, so she's here to keep Briggs company."

"Well, that's a shame, 'cause he's ashore with the captain." He took a step forward. "Maybe I'll keep 'er company 'till he gets back."

He licked his lips and Prudence saw his eyes drift down to her breasts.

"I don't think that's a good idea do you, Seth? The first mate being the sort of man who cuts your tongue out for walking too close to him. I wouldn't want to make a man like that angry by tuppung his fancy," Mary said looking the pirate square in the eye.

Seth's face took on a considered look. "Uh, reckon I'll wait 'till Briggs finished wiv the pigeon."

He stood aside to allow them by. Mary and Prudence shot past him. He grabbed Mary as she went by.

"I sees you've got no company, Mary," he said, as he put his hand down the front of her chemise and squeezed.

"You know I don't see customers any more, Seth."

"Come on, Mary, just for me, as a favor while the little pigeon waits." He looked meaningfully at Prudence.

Prudence saw Mary flinch, and then put on a fixed smile. "Just for you then, Seth, now show me where Briggs' cabin is."

Seth grinned and indicated towards a door at the end of the dark corridor. Prudence walked over, went in and shut it until only a crack remained through which she peered.

Prudence waited until Mary disappeared with Seth into another room and then she slid back out and into the gangway. Keeping close to the wall, she crept alone and back towards the steps leading down into the bowels of the ship. Her heart pounded in her chest and her mouth was as dry as tinder. Swallowing again, she stepped onto the first step.

Please God, let Nathan be where Moses said he might be, she prayed as she descended into the gloom of the lower deck.

She stood for a second while her eyes adjusted to the dim light. There was an oil lamp hanging from a beam which Prudence eased off its bracket and held above her as she crept quietly to the far end and through the small door.

As she entered, Prudence cast her eyes over the coiled ropes, barrels and bottles, then she looked over to the far end to where she could see a figure slumped.

Nathan!

Even at this distance she could see his broad shoulders and his arms pulled back and his hands tied behind him and to the beam he leaned against. One bare leg was stretched out to the side.

She sent up another prayer of thanks as she saw that he was tied with rope. She felt for the knife in her bodice. Then Prudence stepped carefully forward to avoid stumbling on the clutter on the floor. She raised the lamp up.

"Nathan."

Nathan's head moved and a thick brown swirl of hair fell out of the tie that held it.

"Nathan," she said again, reaching out for him and shaking his shoulder.

Nathan raised his head and turned it towards her. Prudence watched anxiously as he regained consciousness. His eyes opened and he blinked into the light of the lamp as his eyes focused on the person calling his name. He blinked again.

"Prudence?"

"Yes, Nathan, it's me."

Nathan a looked at Prudence with disbelief, then his face became transfixed with black fury.

"What, in the name of God, are you doing here?"

Chapter Thirteen

When Nathan had been unceremoniously dragged from *The Two Puddings* he had tried to make his progress through the town as noticeable as possible. He had two reasons for this. Firstly, as he and Henry had kept up the façade that they despised each other, Nathan doubted that Prudence would think to go to him for help. Nathan reckoned the only chance he had of alerting his friend was to make as much trouble as he could in the hope that someone would bring it to Henry's attention. Secondly, seeing Briggs' interest in Prudence, Nathan wanted to keep the four men escorting him back to *The Fallen Angel* as busy as possible, so there was no chance that Briggs would go back for her.

His tactics worked but unfortunately, Nathan's actions also meant that he was subjected to a number of punches and blows as they progressed through the town. So when Nathan arrived on *The Fallen Angel* he was practically unconscious. His last thought before blackness took him was to thank God the rogues hadn't realized who Prudence was. She would be safe in *The Two Puddings* when Diablo Ted and his crew sailed on the tide.

He was therefore totally disorientated when he came back to reality with Prudence's distinct voice whispering his name urgently. For a split second, he thought he must have been dreaming and that they were still in *The Two Puddings*.

He blinked and tried to focus. He was confused again. It was Prudence next to him, but she looked quite unlike he had ever seen her before. She was wearing a gaudy blue dress that was cut much too low, but what was really different was her hair. It was swirled up and tied in a very becoming manner with a curl snaking provocatively down over her shoulders. He felt his cock rise and remembered that he was dragged from *The Two Puddings* before he had the full satisfaction of Prudence. Then his mind put the pieces together.

"Of all the—" He lowered his voice. "What, in the name of God, are you doing here?" he said through gritted teeth.

"I've come to rescue you."

"I knew that you were stubborn, woman, but I didn't know you were totally bloody stupid as well."

Prudence looked offended at his outburst. "I did think that you might be a little more grateful than that."

"Grateful! For God's sake! I did my best not to let Briggs and his bully boys know who you were and now you have come aboard the ship, right into their hands," Nathan said as he pressed his lips together hard, looked up and closed his eyes.

Above them the sound of male and female laughter could be heard. Nathan opened his eyes and looked at Prudence. He felt pain and fear cut through him. For the sake of his sanity he dared not think what would happen to her if Diablo Ted came back and found her aboard.

"For the love of God, Prue, leave me and get off the ship. Now!"

Prudence's face took on a determined look. "No. It's my fault that you were taken. If I had done what everybody said and forgotten about Edward, none of this would have happened."

"I tell you, Prue, Diablo Ted's interest in me has nothing whatsoever to do with you," he said as she came closer to him and took out the knife from the side of her bodice.

She leaned over him and towards the rope holding him. He felt her soft breast press

against his chest again and looked at her downcast eyes as she concentrated on sawing through the rope. He watched her averted face, loving every curve of it.

"Please, Prue, get off the ship. For my sake, do what I say," he said again, softer this time.

She didn't answer, but continued to work on the rope. Nathan felt it come a little loose. He flexed his arms. He was still secured, but there was some movement. Prudence felt it as well. There was a great deal of clumping around on the deck above them and the sound of footsteps up and down the stairs outside.

"That will do, Prue," he said again pulling against the bindings. "Now, for my sake, get off the ship."

"In a moment, I'll just cut it a little more."

Nathan could hear a man's voice outside.

He had to get her off the ship.

"Please, Prue."

"Just a —"

The door opened and the hold was illuminated by a swinging light. Both he and Prudence squinted into its beam as they heard the raucous voice of Briggs.

"Now, now what 'ave we here then? Our little Rosie. You must have made quite an impression on her, Frazer, or is it that you didn't pay her for her services before you left?"

Nathan said nothing, so Briggs looked at Prudence and continued. "Seeing that you are so taken with Frazer 'ere why don't I let you keep 'im company 'till the captain returns?"

Prudence stood up, swung her hip out to the side and gave Briggs an innocent smile. "I got lost. I was looking for the stairs and found Nathan here by chance."

She went to walk past. But Briggs blocked her way and went towards her.

Nathan knew he was clutching at straws, but he had to try. "I don't want Rosie here." He tried to look at Prudence in a bored manner.

"Now, that's a mite ungallant of you I'd say, Mr. Frazer, and your breeches looked keen enough when I interrupted you a while back. So I think I'll keep 'er close till Cap'n Ted comes back, then let him deal with Rosie."

Again Nathan said nothing. He couldn't. His worst fear had become a reality. Prudence was now a prisoner on *The Fallen Angel*.

Prudence stood up and leaned on the barrel behind her as if to steady herself.

Briggs signaled to the two ruffians behind him who with grins on their faces, took hold of Prudence roughly and tied her in a similar manner to Nathan. Nathan held his breath, expecting them to find the knife she had, but they didn't. Prudence was shoved against the beam behind him and tied.

Briggs signaled again and the two men gave another grin and left. Nathan could hear them climb back up to the deck.

"Don't you make a lovely couple? Like a couple of turtle doves." Nathan shot him a look of hatred. "Captain will be back in an hour and we sail then. So make yourselves comfortable till he has time to receive you both formally."

He blew Prudence an exaggerated kiss and slammed the door, leaving them in the dark.

They sat in the dark for several seconds, then Nathan exploded. "I hope you're bloody well satisfied now?"

"I think that's a little unfai —"

"Unfair? You think I'm being unfair?"

"I just—" he could hear a waver in her voice.

"I, and everyone else, warned you over and over again. But would you listen?"

"But, Nat—"

Nathan ignored her interruption. His head was pounding and even in the dark he could see the red fog in his mind.

"You listen? Ha!" Nathan gave a short laugh. "When did you ever listen to anyone, Prue?"

"But, Nat—"

Again, he ignored her. His rage was subsiding and his logical mind was re-establishing itself. He was beginning to think of the different options, limited though they were, open to him. He also could feel Prudence against him and his love for her demanded that he get her to safety, somehow, anyhow, even if it meant his own life.

"Why did you do it, Prue?" he asked in a more even tone.

"Because I love you, Nathan," she said simply. He let his shoulders slump.

"If you truly loved me, then you never would have come."

"But I do love you, Nathan," Prudence said with a sniff. "Oh, Nathan—"

Nathan tensed again. "It's too late for that. Sobbing won't get us out of here."

Nathan felt her pull her shoulders up at his words.

"I'm not crying," she said. "What do you suggest?"

Nathan heard the determination in her voice and smiled to himself. He couldn't see her face, just the shape of her next to him, but he knew that her brows must be furrowed in the now familiar concentrated frown.

"As Briggs didn't find the knife you had, I guess you must have dropped it somewhere. Let's see if we can find it."

As he felt her start to stretch out towards the barrels Nathan thought that if he had to be captured and tied in a pirate hold there could be no one better than Prudence, who was brave strong and ingenious, to help him escape.

Then the reality of their situation struck him and he sobered as his fear for Prudence returned. He felt pain cut through his chest and clutch at his heart.

You fool.

In truth, although it meant that he might never see her again, he wished fervently that she were anywhere on earth but beside him now.

After half an hour of twisting and turning Prudence managed to get the knife she had dropped between the barrels. She had kicked one of the barrels over but with all the commotion above then the noise wasn't investigated. She had got cramp twice and bit her lip with the pain, but finally she had painstakingly inched it over to them.

With a great deal of difficulty she got it up to the ties holding Nathan but was at completely the wrong angle to cut effectively so he had to move his hands back and for over the blade as she held it. It was slow, but they were making some progress. Then something rattled against the side of the ship.

"Is that the anchor?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm afraid it is, which means that we will be sailing as soon as the sheets are hoisted." Nathan said and he strained against the bindings. "I hope you like water, Prue, because we might have to jump ship and swim ashore."

Prudence realized that Mary would have left the ship by now without her. She

didn't blame her for going, but she fervently hoped that Mary would tell Captain Bennett and that he would come to her rescue even if he didn't care about Nathan's fate.

She continued to hold the blade firmly. Just as she thought that the binding were loosening the door to the hold smashed back and a lamp shone onto them again. She felt Nathan snatch the blade from her.

"Ere they are, the lovebirds," Briggs said as he squeezed through the door followed by two others. "Captain's aboard and we're setting sail. The captain 'as asked to have words wiv you both, if you're not too busy that is," he said with mock civility.

Prudence felt them heave Nathan to his feet and drag him towards the door. Then rough hands grabbed hold of her and she too was hauled to her feet and propelled along. She stumbled up the stairs and onto deck. In contrast to the stifling air in the hold, the cool evening breeze was fresh and brought the fragrance of blossoms to the ship. It was a lovely night.

She and Nathan were thrust toward the stern where a man in a large tricorn hat, a fancy jacket and high boots stood with his back to them. It didn't need anyone to tell them that it was Diablo Ted who was giving the orders.

"For the love of God, Prue, let me do the talking," he whispered urgently as he fell against her. She glanced up at his anxious face and she gave him a brave smile and small nod. Her mouth was now devoid of any moisture and she was rigid with fear. She doubted she could utter a word if her life depended on it.

"Quiet," Briggs growled as he shoved Nathan.

Nathan said nothing, but gave him a murderous look. They both stood and waited for Diablo Ted to turn to them.

The light was growing dim and although there was a full moon and there were several lamps in the main deck area, it was difficult to see Diablo Ted clearly as he was still a little way in front of them. Prudence screwed up her eyes and took a closer look at the pirate as he turned sideways. She wondered if she had ever seen him in the port as his stance seemed familiar.

Suddenly he waved the sailor away and swung around to face them. His eyes glanced over Nathan and alighted on her. His face took on an expression of total incredulity as he stared at her his mouth falling open as he did so.

Prudence felt the earth shift beneath her feet and her head swim as she looked at Diablo Ted square in the face for the first time. The pirate dug his fists into his hips and his mouth started to turn up at one corner. The other corner joined in and soon he was smiling from ear to ear with a flash of white teeth and a malevolence expression.

"Well, on my life, if it isn't the persistent Miss Prudence Stone."

Prudence heard the voice and then her mind registered what she was seeing. As she stood lost in time and space looking at the pirate captain, she realized why he looked familiar.

"Edward!"

Chapter Fourteen

Nathan heard Prudence's voice take on a disbelieving tone and he looked sharply at her. She was as white as the snapping sailcloth above her. He thought for a moment that she would faint, but thankfully she didn't. He watched the delicate planes of her face turn from disbelief to utter fury as she contemplated Edward, her errant fiancé. He would have defied anyone to believe the man standing before him was an ordained member of the Church of England.

He couldn't for the life of him imagine the flamboyantly dressed man in front of him in a curate's black cassock; especially with the large gold earrings he now sported. Nathan looked back to his face and had the distinct impression that he had seen Edward somewhere. It was his eyes that in some way drew Nathan's attention. There was something about them. Then he remembered. Enrique had said something about the spy having distinct eyes in some way. He looked more closely at Edward's, but could see nothing obvious.

Nathan's thoughts were cut through as Edward stomped down the couple of steps off the upper deck towards them. He took a step closer to Prudence as Edward came level with them. Edward addressed Briggs over his shoulder.

"I see that my meddlesome fiancée has saved us a return trip to Port Royal to find her," he said as he looked her up and down with hooded eyes.

Beside him, Nathan felt Prudence bridle under Edward's frank scrutiny. "I am *not* your fiancée Edward."

Edward slapped his hand on his chest dramatically and set his face to sorrow.

"Are you calling off our engagement, my love?"

Ignoring his eyes on her, Prudence answered, "You broke the engagement when you failed to return." She shook her head and looked with incredulity at the man before wearing his black tricorne hat with copious blood-red ostrich feathers. "And how are *you* Diablo Ted?"

"Diablo Ted the Second you might say, after slitting the throat of the original Diablo Ted, the drunken fool." He took a step nearer and glanced at the crew assembled around them. "I did consider calling myself something else like Edward the Second or the Pirate King but considering my previous calling, I thought Diablo Ted was quite appropriate, don't you think?" He leaned over Prudence and his face took on a hard look. "I also thought, incorrectly it would seem, that it would stop anyone trying to find me. Why didn't you just go home?"

"When your possessions were returned without your precious silver pendant, I began to wonder if you were really dead." Prudence looked him up and down hotly. Edward's face took on a lustful expression and his eyes roamed over the exposed swell of Prudence's breasts.

"I tell you, Prudence, had you been dressed like that when you waved me goodbye on the dockside, I might have thought twice about staying in the Indies. Knowing all this," his gaze turned downwards again, "was waiting for me."

He lifted his hand up and stroked the side of Prudence's cheek lightly with one finger. She turned her head away, so he grabbed her jaw between his finger and thumb and forced her to face him.

Nathan's body tensed and Edward saw it. "But I see, my love, that in my absence

others have been keeping you — .company.” He indicated Nathan with a jab of his head.

“I am not ‘your love,’ ” Prudence managed through gritted teeth.

Dragging his eyes from Prudence and looked slowly at Nathan. “No. You’re not *my* love any more. You’re Nathan Frazer’s love now, are you not?”

Prudence gave Edward a withering look.

Edward’s face took on a malevolent expression as he turned his eyes on Nathan.

“Or should I say Commander Frazer of their Majesties’ Navy?”

Nathan regarded him levelly.

“Or maybe I should I call you the Honorable Nathan Alfonso Frazer, son of the Earl of Montgarry.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Prudence’s astonished expression at this revelation.

He should have kept his wits about him at *The Two Puddings* and told her his true identity then. He pushed the unhelpful thoughts aside and looked hard at Edward. Despite the risk attached to angering Edward, Nathan wanted to take his attention from Prudence before Edward’s hands followed his eyes.

“Commander will do. I’m only the younger son so the Honorable is only in formal correspondence, Mr. Matthews.”

Edward’s face grew flushed and, to his relief, he let go of Prudence’s face.

“Mr.!” he spat, “Mr.! It might well be Mr. to you and the world, Frazer, but I am from a noble line too, probably more noble even than yours.” His hand went to the silver pendant on his chest.

“Look at this.” He thrust it towards Nathan. “Left by my poor mother, when she was forced to abandon me in England. It is from the House of Valois. That’s a French Royal House, Frazer, that’s who I’m descended from.” He tilted his head back and adopted what Nathan thought to be a somewhat theatrical pose.

“Pray tell me, Mr. Matthews, how a cheap punched pendant left in your crib indicates that you are descended from French Royal blood?” Nathan asked with a raised eyebrow.

Edward adjusted his stance and cleared his throat. “No doubt Prudence has told you of my unfortunate upbringing. And that that this pendant was left with me,” Nathan nodded. Edward blew through his nose in disgust. “Don’t pretend you don’t understand, Frazer.”

Nathan looked blankly at him. Edward stamped his foot on the deck.

“It’s obvious isn’t it? My mother was a member of the Valois family and she was raped and abandoned by some scurvy Englishman which is why she was in England when I was born. Because of her royal blood, she couldn’t bring disgrace to her noble family, so she was forced to abandon me, her beloved son. How she must have wept.” Edward looked as if he might weep himself, then he resumed his tale. “I suspect that she left me on the Bishop’s doorstep because there was no one of a higher rank available in such a godforsaken backwater as Lincolnshire.”

“You understand all of that from one silver pendant?” Nathan asked after it was clear that Edward had finished his fairy story.

“I thought you of all people, Frazer, would see the truth of matter. Being a fellow aristocrat,” Edward said, jutting out his lower lip.

Nathan could have pointed out that his direct ancestor was Robert the Bruce, but he thought it wise not to mention it. However, he did clearly see the truth of the matter.

The truth was that Edward, whatever his lineage, was completely mad. His fears for

Prudence suddenly multiplied.

"Is that why you betrayed naval secrets to England's enemies?" he asked.

"England's enemies are my allies," Edward spat at him. "What has England ever done for me that I should be loyal to her?"

He took a threatening step towards Nathan and gave him a caustic look. "I tell you what the stinking little island has done for me. It was some bastard Englishman who abandoned my mother in her hour of need, forcing her to leave me on the doorstep of that sanctimonious old fool of a bishop and his po-faced wife. Whose only thought about any type of pleasure was to condemn it." Edward put his head back and gave a mirthless laugh. "Ha, if they caught me scratching my cods, I was sent to bed without supper after a sound thrashing for playing with myself."

Many of the crew had finished their tasks and were lounging on the deck around them listening.

"If that wasn't bad enough, I was expected to be forever grateful to those two dreariest of old sods. Then what to do with the boy? What were my options in life? How was I to make my way in the world?" He looked at Nathan who remained still then Edward swung around and faced Prudence.

"I'll tell you what they were. Not Cambridge or court like you, Frazer, as would have befitted my rank in life. Not moving in the best circles with money in my purse and a beautiful woman on my arm. But to Durham." Edward placed a hand on his chest and fashioned his face into a look of sorrow. "Have you ever been to Durham, Frazer?"

"I have, and found it most pleasant."

"Pleasant," Edward sneered. "How can it be pleasant? It's north for a start, the locals speak in guttural grunts, it rains constantly and every woman I met had more hair growing on her upper lip than I."

Nathan thought that was a little hard on northern womankind but again let the matter pass.

"I could have shone at Cambridge," Edward said forlornly to Briggs.

Nathan doubted the first mate had ever heard of Cambridge or how Edward could have shone.

"No, I had to go to Durham to study *theology*." He swung at Nathan again and said in an embittered tone, "Not Law, Philosophy or Natural Sciences like you, but pissing *theology*. All, so I could follow the dear bishop into the church."

Edward sauntered close to Prudence and let his eyes roam down over her.

"Of course when the Bishop of Boredom, rot his soul, suggested that I become curate to his old friend, the unhinged old fool, the rector of St Ethalwald's, I could have cut his throat above his ecclesiastical collar." Edward drew his finger across Prudence's throat to illustrate his words. "But then I saw his delectable niece." He turned to Nathan. "She is quite delectable, is she not?"

Edward stroked down Prudence's cheek and Nathan's jaw tightened.

Edward leaned towards Prudence and kissed her shoulder lightly, not taking his eyes from Nathan.

Nathan strained against the two men holding him. He forced himself to remain in control. He had to stall Edward for as long as he could to better their chances of escape. Also the more he watched Edward talk and move, the more Nathan could have sworn that he knew him from somewhere, but for the life of him couldn't think where.

Nathan strove to catch Prudence's eyes to reassure her. She saw him looking at her and, despite her obvious terror, gave him the smallest of brave smiles.

God, he loved her. Most women would have fainted away long ago or thrown themselves screaming over the side. But not Prudence, she's made of sterner stuff.

"What fun we could have had, sweet Prue," Edward said with sigh, as he ran his finger across the top of her chemise, touching her soft skin lightly, "if you hadn't turned out to be a frigid little, Bible-quoting Miss."

Frigid? Nathan remembered Prudence's passion in *The Two Puddings*.

Pleasant though those thoughts were there would be no further such experiences unless he could get them out of the grasp of this madman. A blind man could see the thoughts going through Edward's mind as his gaze roamed over Prudence's curves.

"You seem to be very well informed about me," Nathan said loudly and struggling forcefully. Edward turned from Prudence to face him.

"I have ways of getting information," he said as he looked up to the yardarm behind them, where Enrique swung lifeless and bloody from the topsail gallant.

Edward grinned at Nathan's disgusted face as he turned back.

"It's surprising what a man will tell you if you're cutting his fingers off slowly. Your man told me a great deal about you, Frazer. Told me about your enquiries into the clergyman who had been seen in Portobello and Havana. He told me about your commission in the Navy and your father, the Earl of Montgarry, and your mother, the Spanish countess." He stepped back next to Prudence and twirled a lock of her hair in his fingers. "He told me about your women on Jamaica and elsewhere."

Nathan saw Prudence tremble as Edward took hold of her hand and lifted it to his lips. "I must say I admire your stamina Frazer, running a spy network of over a hundred men," Nathan strained forward. "Yes, I have all their names. Don Juan de Castile Governor of Havana, will be very interested, I'm sure. Not content with that you seem to be satisfying half the women of the Caribbean in your spare time. As I say, you must have some stamina. But just a word of warning. Don't try your charms on this one." Edward moved his hand down towards Prudence's breast. "Because she's won't be interested at all."

It had taken Prudence a little time to recover from the shock of seeing Edward again and she, like Nathan was astounded by the tale he had told them. She couldn't believe that the possession of a cheap silver token could have led Edward to believe he was royal. It was pitiable.

But she was even more astonished by the revelation that Nathan was not a plantation owner at all, but the younger son of an earl and a commander in Their Majesties' Royal Navy. She would never have dreamed that he had been running a network of informants in the Caribbean for the Crown. Edward's reference to Nathan's women was no more than she had found out herself, but she still didn't like Edward knowing it.

She had taken all of this in her stride and knew that Nathan needed her to remain calm and not antagonize Edward. But when Edward's hand started to move toward her breast, it was too much. As she felt his hand contact the fabric of her chemise, she could take no more. She snapped her head towards him and narrowed her eyes.

"Take your hands away from me, you despicable excuse of a man."

Edward stopped and clasped his hands to his chest, raising his eyebrows to his greasy hairline.

"See what I mean, Frazer? Frigid. You'll never get your hands on those tits, let me tell you."

"How dare you stand there and abuse the Bishop and his wife and insult my dear uncle and throw all they did for you back in their faces?"

Edward took hold of her upper arm. She tried to shake him off, but he held on to her tightly and his expression changed to one of amusement.

"All you did for me? What did you do for me, Prudence? Not what I wanted, that's for sure."

He came close again, grabbed the other arm and forced her to face him. Prudence felt his stale breath on her face.

His voice dropped to a lower tone. "You know what I wanted you to do for me." He looked down to her cleavage. "You said that you loved, me, Prudence, but still you wouldn't let me touch you."

And very glad she was of it. She tasted bile in the back of her throat.

"Miss Stone didn't seem to have the same worries when I found her naked on the bed with Frazer," Prudence heard Briggs say.

The veins stood out on Edward's temples, his brows became one and his teeth ground together. His eyes went blank for a second or two, then he blinked and an unnerving smile spread across his face.

"I'm glad to hear it, Prudence. It means you'll be less trouble to Señor Geraldo, owner of the Hacienda of Delights in Havana."

Prudence had never heard of the Hacienda of Delights, but she had a good idea what it was. She struggled, but Edward held her firm.

"Now, now, my dear, dressed as you are, I can see that you have at least two natural gifts for the whore's life," he said twisting Prudence around to face the crew and shaking her so that her breasts swayed and bounced. Her cheeks flamed as she heard the catcalls and raucous laughter from the men surrounding them.

Behind Edward the land was fast disappearing and they would soon be out to sea, with the unspeakable horror of the Hacienda of Delights looming ever nearer. She could see Nathan's face was full of rage and she feared that at any moment he would do something rash.

"Let go of me, Edward," she shouted, tears of rage forming in her eyes. "Let me go!"

"I think not, my dear. Besides I thought I might help you with your chosen profession. It's the least I could do as an old *friend*." He threw her at Briggs who grabbed her by the upper arms and faced her to Edward. "For example, you might have noticed that many of Mary's girls were bare-breasted when they climbed aboard." Edward advanced and Prudence shrank back. "Now, if you would allow me, you'll see the effect it will have, if you do the same."

Edward put his hand to the front of the flimsy chemise and yanked it down. A great cry went up from the crew.

Prudence stood, arms held back, her full breasts exposed to every member of the crew. She felt her cheeks flame with shame, but although she longed to she dared not shut her eyes for fear of what Edward might do next. She stole a look at Nathan who had an unreadable expression on his face.

Edward stood back admiring his handiwork. "There, that's better. You'll get swifter trade, if you can let a man get on with it." He moved closer to Prudence and took hold of one breast, holding it up to see it better.

"I must say, Prudence, I always thought that you had lovely tits, but I never dreamed how very lovely they really were." Edward turned to Nathan. The two men pinning his arms back were now having a deal of trouble holding him.

"Don't you think so, Frazer? Have you ever seen any so lovely?" Edward squeezed Prudence's breast hard, while he looked with raised eyebrows at Nathan.

"'E 'as. He's seen 'er two puddings at *The Two Puddings*," Briggs said, laughing at his own joke.

The blankness flitted through Edward's eyes again. Then it was gone.

Nathan's face transfused with fury. "I'll kill you Briggs." Prudence saw his lips draw back and his eyes fixed on Edward. "After I've killed you of course."

Edward turned back to Prudence. "I had better see if the rest of your apparel is correct," he said jauntily.

Prudence gasped as Edward grabbed the bottom of her skirt. He lifted it up as the other hand explored underneath.

"I'm working in the dark here, Briggs Lift her up." Briggs obliged and hoisted Prudence off her feet, fondling one breast as he did so. She struggled in Briggs' iron grip as she felt Edward's finger poke into her.

"I hate you, Edward," she spat at him and she tried to kick him. He dodged out of the way of her foot.

"That attitude won't get you much trade in Havana," Edward said.

He looked across at Nathan and a smile spread across his face. "I see you've not had the pleasure yet, Frazer."

She tried not to look at Edward as she felt his hands on her most private area. Her head was swimming with the humiliation of the whole scene, but also because she feared greatly what Edward would do next.

She had drawn the same conclusion as Nathan that Edward was completely mad. The circumstance of his birth, finding himself in a situation where there were no rules of man or God, and his own black nature had finally combined to make him the deranged and dangerous Edward who now had their lives in his hands.

She glanced across at Nathan. His torso and arms strained at he tried to free himself from the men holding him and the hair on his chest and down his stomach was damp with sweat.

"God curse you, Edward," she said.

"I wonder when he would come into the conversation. He normally does, when I start to touch you," he said, but dropped her skirt back down.

Nathan's voice boomed across the deck. "You have me, Edward. Let Prudence go. She has nothing to do with this. Don't damn your soul further."

Edward bared his teeth in a cadaverous grin. "I don't need you, Frazer. I got all I needed to know from Enrique. Your only value to me is the price on your head." Nathan swore vehemently and Edward sent him an airy smile. "Governor Morris was most forthcoming about what the British Navy plans."

Edward snapped his head around and stared at Prudence. "And quite the contrary, Frazer, Prudence has everything to do with this. It was her poking about that has caused too many people to ask about me, notice what I'm about and watch my comings and goings. People started looking for me because of her."

He grabbed her hair and yanked back her head, snarling at her upturned face.

"I nearly got captured by the militia two weeks ago in Tortuga, because she had circulated my description amongst the islands." Edward yanked her hair again and Prudence winced. Edward turned back to Nathan. "It has everything to do with her, Frazer, and she's going to pay."

Prudence gasped at the hate in his face.

"She's going to pay for nosing after me and my business. She's going to pay for her and her uncle's condescension towards me all these years. And," his lips drew back in a sickly smile, "she's going to pay for not letting me have her."

Edward's hand went back to her breast again. "You see, Frazer, I'm going to take now what she should have given to me a long time ago."

Time stood still for Prudence as the full horror of what Edward planned to do to her sank into her mind.

"I can't believe that even you could sink that low, Edward!" She felt panic rise in her. "Have you forgotten, Exodus, chapter twenty verses one to seventeen, the Ten Commandments?" she babbled.

"Ha! Forgotten them? Oh no, my dear, I'm working my way steadily through them. I've also made a good start on The Seven Deadly Sins as well."

Prudence looked down. Despite being stripped half-naked she stood straight and looked squarely at Edward.

She saw a small muscle at the corner of his eye twitched as he stood under her icy gaze. She caught a fleeting glimpse of the little boy she had first met at the Bishop's house years ago. She had pitied him then. She didn't now.

"I hate you, Edward," she said in a voice so cold that he flinched and took a step back as if he had been struck and again, the corner of his eye started to twitch.

"Go on, capt'n, lift 'er skirts up and let us all 'ave a look at 'er treasures," shouted a voice from the rigging.

Edward stood back and resumed his exaggerated stance. "You can see as much as you want later, lads, when I've finished with her."

A cheer went up again along with a number of explicit illustrations of what Prudence could look forward to.

Nathan's head was pounding now. It was five day sail to Havana, possibly more, and he had two major problems. Firstly, how to get Prudence out of Edward's hands and fast. And secondly, getting hold of the naval plans that Edward intended to sell to the Spanish.

Nathan thought his head would explode, if he were forced to see Edward abuse Prudence further.

He felt the knife in his waistband and in a moment of madness decided to break free and kill Edward where he stood, no matter what.

Stop! Stop! His mind shouted. Thankfully, Nathan headed its warning. If he was killed attacking Edward and where would that leave Prudence? His mind won, just, and Nathan remained where he was, grinding his teeth.

He looked across at Prudence.

How he loved her.

Edward had gone back over to Prudence and Nathan realized that the evening's entertainment was about to begin.

He had to do something. Then an idea sprung into his mind.

"So, Edward, I see you take after your English father. He raped your unmarried mother and abandoned her to her fate. Which is exactly what you plan to do to Prudence, is it not? So for all your protestations of honor and nobility, you are no better than your English father, are you?"

Edward spun around, drew his sword and rushed at Nathan. For a split second Nathan thought the madman would cut him through where he stood, but Edward stopped, sword quivering above his head.

"No. You will die, but only after a great deal of pain."

"No!" Prudence screamed, but both men stood stock-still glaring at each other with hate filled eyes. Then Edward relaxed a little and a sadistic smile spread across his face. He addressed Briggs above Prudence's head.

"Fair warms your heart, doesn't it, Briggs, to see two people so in love."

"It brings tears to me eyes," replied Briggs, who wouldn't have shed a tear, if he'd been nailed to the mast.

Edward swept back to face Nathan. "To answer your insult, Frazer, I'm not like my father and therefore I will marry Prudence—"

"I wouldn't marry you, Edward, if my life depended on it." Prudence screamed.

Edward gave her a sweet smile. "You misunderstand me, my dear. I will marry you—to Frazer. I am after all still an ordained member of the Church of England and as such I am licensed to perform marriages and burials for that matter." He looked pointedly at Nathan. "And it's not your life that depends on it, Prudence, it's his."

"You're making a mockery of marriage, Edward," Nathan said severely, never really having given marriage and its meaning any serious thought himself until three days ago.

He wanted Prudence to be his wife, but not like this, not forced on pain of death, on a pirate ship with her deranged ex-fiancé clergyman presiding over their sacred vows.

"She won't do it and neither will I," he said.

"I can understand your reluctance, Frazer. Believe me, I quite understand it. Why should you marry Prudence Stone, whose family is inferior to yours? I had the same misgivings. Beautiful though she is, it didn't make up for her lack of family. Of course at that time I thought she was an heiress with a fortune, so I was able to overlook her inferior breeding. You've probably set your sights higher than a parson's penniless niece. Some titled lady at court, no doubt. But at present, as you see," he swept his hand around the now assembled crew, "you are not in a position to argue."

Nathan saw two splashes of red appear on Prudence's cheeks. He wanted to tell Edward that Prudence, whatever her background, was the only woman he would ever love and consider marrying, but he wouldn't give Edward the satisfaction of knowing his inner feelings.

Edward walked over to him, taking the pistol from his cummerbund as he went. He cocked it and held the barrel to Nathan's temple.

"What do you say, Prudence? Will you consent to marry Commander Nathan Alfonso Frazer?" He poked Nathan's head with the cold metal of the gun, "I am waiting for your answer, Prudence."

Giving Nathan a terrified look Prudence whispered, "Yes."

Edward turned to him. "You know I'll just blow your brains out if you don't agree and have her anyway. At least this way if you ever get out of Colonel Romaine's hell-hole of a prison alive, you can rescue your wife from the Hacienda of Delights. What do you say?"

Nathan ground his teeth and with forces answered, "Yes."

Edward uncocked the pistol and strolled back over to Prudence, gazing at her breasts again.

"Now, can we get on with the ceremony? I haven't got all night as I want to give Mrs. Frazer a few more lessons to help her in her new life in Havana."

There was a roar of approval from the crew. He and Prudence were shoved together and made to stand beside one other, each being held firm by Edward's ruffians.

Edward cleared his throat and began, "Dearly beloved —"

He continued to recite the marriage service without faltering.

Nathan barely heard Edward's words, so conscious was he of Prudence standing beside him.

He heard Edward say, "Wilt thou Nathan Alfonso Frazer, take this woman to be thy wedded wife, to have and to hold, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony?"

Prudence lifted her eyes to him.

"Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor her and keep her in sickness and health, and forsaking all others —"

Edward looked expectantly at Nathan while reaching again for his pistol.

Nathan turned to Prudence and gazed down at her upturned face, "I will."

"Good," said Edward and then asked the same of Prudence.

"I will," she said, while still looking at Nathan.

"Excellent," beamed Edward, then went on to make them repeat their vows to each other. He dispensed with the exchange of rings as this would have required Nathan to be untied and Edward was not fool enough to chance that.

He rattled through the rest of the service.

So, on the deck of *The Fallen Angel*, with the pirate crew as witnesses, Miss Prudence Stone, with her clothes torn from her and Captain Nathan Frazer, second son of the Earl of Montgarry, dressed only his breeches, were married. They stood side by side as Edward, curate of St Etheldwald's, known throughout the Caribbean as Diablo Ted, concluded the ceremony and pronounced them husband and wife.

As soon as Edward finished he took rough hold of Prudence while Briggs took charge of Nathan, signaling the two men holding him to move him towards the stairway to the hold.

"Nathan, I love you." Prudence shouted after him.

Nathan fought against his captor and strained to see her.

"I'll come for you, Prue, I promise. No matter what I'll come for you." He pulled against Briggs' hold again, but was held secure. He looked back to where she stood with Edward holding her. "I love you, Prue, remember that. I love you."

"Shall I torture him, Captain?" Briggs asked as he punched Nathan in the mouth.

"Yes—No!" Edward followed Nathan's tormented gaze as it rested on Prudence. "I'll torture him myself first. You can torture a man, Briggs, without laying a finger on him." He grinned at Nathan. "You can torture a man's mind. Tie Frazer in the storeroom beneath my cabin, so he can hear 'his love' scream, when I take her."

Chapter Fifteen

Prudence fought Edward tooth and nail as he dragged her towards his cabin. Nathan had disappeared below and Briggs had returned on deck as Edward still struggled with her.

"Do you want a hand, Captain?" Prudence heard Briggs ask jovially over the roar of the crew.

"No, I'm enjoying myself, Briggs. Beside I'll have to tame her, as I don't want the rest of the crew injured when they become better acquainted with Nathan Frazer's wife later."

Prudence knew that she was putting on a pretty good show, legs and skirts flying everywhere, but she didn't care. All she cared about was putting off the moment when she would be alone with Edward. So, she continued to struggle with Edward with all her might. Unfortunately Edward was winning.

He had a grim look on his face. Finally, he all but lifted her off her feet, compelling her towards his cabin at the stern of the ship. He kicked open the door and shoved her inside, throwing her across the room.

He discarded his hat on the floor, followed by his shirt, then took his sword belt off and placed it on a hook on the door behind him. He came towards her, his eyes on her bare flesh. The outline of his swollen cock stood out in his breeches. Prudence shuddered.

She tried to get past him, but he grabbed her and pulled her to him. She could feel his hot breath on her and his hard muscles held her firmly against him. He grabbed her hair and forced her to face him.

"I know that a well brought up bride should show a little modesty on her wedding night, Prudence, but don't overplay it." He kissed her roughly on the mouth.

Bitter gale burn the back of her throat as she felt his hot wet lips on hers and she struggled to free herself, but he held her firm and forced her back onto the large oak table by the windows. He laid his body on hers, crushing her onto the hard wood. He thrust himself between her legs and started to rub his crotch into her. He finally released her lips and pressed her back onto the table, fixing her flat on it.

It was dark outside now but the cabin was illuminated by two oil lamps that swung on brackets from the beams above, casting fluid shadows. As she looked up at the man leering above her Prudence thought the Devil must look very much as Edward did at that moment.

He lowered his head and started to lick across her shoulders with a broad tongue, leaving a trail of saliva as he progressed. She felt his mouth on her skin, working its way down to her nipple while his hand moved up her inner thigh to the area between her legs and started probing inside her. He stamped his foot on the floor.

"I've got her on the table, Frazer, with her legs open. She feels sweet," he shouted downwards to the floor. "I expect you can remember how sweet." He slammed his foot again. "Do you want to hear your dear wife scream?"

He grabbed her breast in his hand and squeezed hard, his none-too-clean nails cutting into her soft flesh. She winced with the pain, but bit her lip. He squeezed harder, but Prudence refused to cry out, although tears were forming in her eyes.

Edward grunted and fastened his teeth to the sensitive tip and bit. Prudence screamed and sobbed, praying that Nathan below them could hear nothing.

"That's better, my dear," Edward said as he stopped and looked at her. He turned towards the floor again. "Did you hear that, Frazer? You wait, I've only just started. Scream again, my dear. Let Frazer hear you."

"No!" she managed as the pain in her breast subsided.

"Scream," Edward demanded hatefully as he pinched the bruised flesh with his finger and thumb.

She screamed again. Edward looked satisfied and continued to slaver all over the swell of her breasts, then licking down to the area that he had just injured, while thrusting at her with his hips.

"Lovely, Frazer, truly lovely," he said turning again to the floor.

Prudence felt Edward's hold on her slacken as he twisted downwards. She suppressed her fears, breathed in hard and forced her mind to work. Edward was still shouting obscenities at Nathan through the floor, whilst holding her and balancing on one leg.

Prudence shoved at Edward. He crashed on the floor beside the table and she sprang up and grabbed for the sword hanging on the peg.

She tore it from its scabbard and gripped it firmly in both hands. She had never held such a weapon before and was surprised how heavy it was.

Edward stood up and started towards her cursing and spitting. Prudence adjusted the hilt in her grip and pointed the blade at Edward's throat. "Keep away from me."

"I'm going to have you, Prudence. And that bastard Frazer's going to hear it. He's going to hear me take you. Every last thrust and scream of it," Edward told her, the fleck of saliva appearing at the corner of his mouth again. He took a step forward and Prudence swung the sword at him. "Then I'm going to tie him against the mast, so he can watch you on deck as you work your passage to Havana."

Edward feinted to one side hoping to wrong foot Prudence, but she saw his trick and slashed across with the razor sharp blade catching him on the forearm as it swiped past. She saw blood seep from the wound.

"You bitch," Edward said, closing his hand over the wound. He picked up a tankard on the table and threw the contents of it sharply towards her. A red stream of wine splashed onto her face, making her jump. Edward strode across and wrenched the sword out of her hands, throwing it with a clatter onto the floor.

He wound his hands on her hair and dragged her onto the table again slamming her on it. Prudence was panting. Her breath was torn from her lungs and pain shot through her back.

Edward was wild now, shouting almost incoherently while his hands were under her skirts and he was forcing her legs apart with his body. He ripped the flounces of her petticoats up and she felt him fumble with the opening of his breeches.

Prudence could feel panic rising. She lifted her leg back and managed to hook her foot onto Edward's hip. She pushed furiously against him to get his body away. He took a step backwards, then braced himself and stepped towards her again. He yanked her up from the table and turned her around then shoved her back, but this time face down.

Now Prudence could not move. She could feel Edward's large hand spread between her shoulder blades, fixing her to the hard surface of the table. The fabric her skirt scraped against her legs as Edward wrenched it up over her hips exposing her bottom and private area.

She thought she would vomit when Edward's finger started to explore her, unhindered. Then he stopped and she felt him again fumble with the fastenings of his

breeches. He leaned over her pressing her to the hard surface.

"I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am to feel that Frazer, your dear husband, didn't manage to tup you first, Prudence."

She felt him swivel on her and shout to the floor again, "I'm going take her now Frazer. Can you hear all right?"

Just as Prudence braced herself for the pain she was sure would soon cut through her, she heard a familiar low rumble from behind.

"There's no need to shout, Edward. I'm right behind you."

When Briggs had thrown Nathan to the floor in the storeroom below Edward's cabin, he almost felt kindly towards the brute. So eager to return to the drinking and carousing on deck that the first mate didn't tie Nathan further. Also the storeroom Nathan was thrown in was an unused cabin above the waterline with two small windows facing out to the stern of the ship.

As soon as Briggs shut the door and stomped away back up on deck, Nathan retrieved the knife in his waistband. He could still hear the noise from the deck, but nothing from immediately above him, so he guessed that Prudence was still on deck with Edward. He had to work fast.

Nathan ignored the pain of Briggs's beating and flexed his muscles, straining against the binding around his hands. They gave a little. He flexed again and this time Nathan felt the space between his hands increase. He flipped the knife inwards and held it between his hands and sawed it as best he could.

Prudence must have sawed most of the way through before we were disturbed.

Prudence!

Nathan resumed his efforts with the knife, tugging and straining against the ropes securing him. He heard the door smash open above him and footsteps on the floor planks. He strained again and the bindings gave, falling away. Nathan sprang up and looked around. He could see very little to help him in the storeroom other than a couple of old ropes. He coiled them around him and went to the window.

Edward was stamping above him and shouting. He couldn't quite hear what was being said, but there was a great deal of scuffling and scraping almost directly above him. Then he heard Prudence scream.

Please God, no, Nathan's mind shouted as he tried to open the catch of the window.

He didn't care what Edward did. It wouldn't matter. Nothing mattered except that Prudence should live. Nathan gritted his teeth and tried to free the catch. It was stuck fast. He heard Prudence scream again. Nathan looked frantically around for something that would help him free the window frame; he saw a pile of small shot for a swivel gun, grabbed hold of one and, despite not wanting to attract attention, smashed it against the catch, praying the noise would not be heard above. It wasn't and the window flew open.

Nathan lifted himself up to the window, but his broad torso would not allow him to pass through the opening. He cursed roundly and discarded the shot turning back into the storeroom. He tore a discarded pile of rotting rope aside and saw a broken boarding axe lying on the floor. The usual three foot of handle was broken leaving only half its original length, but Nathan knew that it would be enough to hack out the opening.

He heard movements above as he returned to the windows. He smashed through the wood surround of the window and judged that he could probably now squeeze

through it. Securing the knife between his teeth, Nathan heaved himself up and through the window. He felt the splintered wood scrape his flesh as he passed through it and out into the cool night air.

Twenty feet below him the sea churned at the stern of the ship. Nathan glanced down at the jollyboat, bobbing on its mooring rope as it was dragged behind the ship. Above he could hear the sounds from the deck. There was a fiddle being scraped and a merry sea shanty was being sung boisterously.

Nathan dug the boarding axe into the wood above him and, using it for purchase, hauled himself to a standing position on the broken window ledge. He peered into the window of Edward's cabin, dreading what he might see. Then he smiled.

Prudence stood, practically naked with a furious expression on her face, at the far side of the room from Edward. The familiar frown that he loved so much was clearly visible even through the distorted glass of stern window. She was holding a sword and threatening Edward. He had his back to Nathan and by the way he was holding his arm, first blood had gone to Prudence.

Nathan's face sobered. His first instinct was to spring on Edward before he could get hold of Prudence, but if he appeared now, Edward would raise the alarm and all would be lost. He gritted his teeth and waited for Edward to become occupied with Prudence again.

He took a firmer hold of the window with one hand while taking the knife in the other. He then eased it between the windowpane and the frame to lift the catch from the outside. This window had more frequent use than the one below and thankfully it was larger. With grim determination on his face, Nathan opened the window and silently hooked his arm inside. Replacing the knife between his teeth, he eased himself up and through, his eyes fixed on Edward as he did so.

He heard Prudence gasp as Edward threw wine over her and then saw him push her back on the table. She was struggling, which was keeping Edward's concentration on her. As Edward turned her around and slammed her on the table Nathan was within arm's reach of him. Taking the knife firmly in his hand, he moved silently forward.

Barefooted, Nathan stepped aside as Edward turned to address the floor again, "I'm going take her now, Frazer. Can you hear all right?" Edward said. Nathan stretched out his hand towards Edward's hair.

He snapped Edward's head sharply back and heard him gasp as the point of the blade dug into the hollow behind his ear. "There's no need to shout, Edward. I'm right behind you."

"I have never killed an unarmed man before, but I am more than willing to make an exception in your case, so don't tempt me." Prudence heard Nathan say in a low rumble.

She wanted to scream with sheer relief and fling herself into Nathan's arms, but she stopped. She righted herself and turned to him, eager to do whatever he asked. She didn't have to wait long.

"Tear me a strip of rag, put a large knot in it and shove it in his mouth," Nathan said in a whisper still holding Edward firm. Edward started to struggle and Nathan jabbed the knife further into the other man's neck breaking the skin. Edward stood still.

Prudence did as he asked.

"Good. Now take these ropes," Nathan indicated the coil of rope at his hips, "and

tie his hands tight, behind him."

She did. Then Nathan threw Edward face down on the floor, putting his knee in between his shoulder blades, to anchor him.

"Hold this." He nodded to the knife. "And if he moves, for the love of God, Prue, forget the Sixth Commandment and kill him."

She took the knife, placed it hard against her ex-fiancé's neck and looked up at Nathan with grim determination on her face.

"I will," she said, finding she had half a mind to kill Edward anyway.

Nathan gave a half-smile and went to the gag and the ties. He tightened them both, putting another to secure Edward's elbows, then tied his feet together, extending the rope backwards and securing it to his hands, arching Edward back and, making it impossible for him to move.

Nathan stood back and looked at the furious Edward who lay inert on the floor trussed up like a sucking pig with hatred bursting from his eyes. The veins on his temples stood up in relief and his face was livid and flushed.

"With a bit of luck he'll have a seizure." Nathan surveyed his handiwork then kicked Edward hard. "You bastard," he spat between rigid teeth. "Provoke me, Edward. I am a quill's width away from killing you, so please struggle again."

Edward lay still, eyes spilling murder.

Nathan turned and started to search the room as quietly as he could, picking up a bottle and some of the maps on the table. He shoved two pistols into his belt along with Edward's cutlass and the boarding axe, then went towards Edward's clothes hanging on a peg. He snatched a couple of shirts and turned to Prudence.

"Put these on," he said as he passed her on his way to a large sea chest he had spotted chained to the upright ceiling support.

She caught the garments as Nathan handed them to her, but could not move. She felt her legs start to shake and could not stop them. She had been so sure that Edward would rape her and now Nathan had come. Her mind was trying to work, but her emotions were still screaming around and stopping it.

Nathan was busily rummaging through the items in the room. She wanted to rush at him and say sorry for all the trouble she had caused him and tell him that she loved him. She opened her mouth to speak, but not a word came out, just a squeak.

Although she never had a hysterical fit in her life, Prudence knew she was very near to breaking point.

"Nath—"

Nathan heard her and his head shot around.

He left the chest and its iron lock and strode towards her. Gathering her into his arms, he kissed her on the head.

Feeling the strong arms around her, her fears slowly began to subside. All would be well, Nathan was here. She drew strength from his body. Breathing in his male muskiness she felt her senses reawaken. Then as quickly as it began the embrace was over, as Nathan held her away from him at arm's length.

"Prue, we are still in danger. We have to get away. Don't go to pieces on me."

The determined frown returned and Prudence's mouth pulled straight as she took control of herself and gave him a small nod. She was rewarded with a smile as she put on Edward's shirt and tied it over her.

Nathan pointed to the table. "Now wrap those things in that tablecloth and tie them around me."

Prudence did as he bade and wound the compass, maps and leather bottle in the fringed cloth, securing it across Nathan's body.

"Good. Can you carry this?" He handed her another bottle which Prudence took and secured inside her shirt. "Now climb out of the window."

"What?"

"The window, Prue, I don't have time to debate the issue. Climb out the window Prue," Nathan said in a level tone. "Briggs could come in and find us at any moment and I still have to try to get the plans in the sea chest."

Prudence swallowed and went over to the open window. The wind caught her hair and she looked down and felt her head spin as she caught sight of the waves churning beneath her. Feeling Nathan behind her, she turned and started to speak.

"Climb out," he said before she could give voice to her fears.

She took a deep breath. A little while ago she would have gladly jumped into the sea to get away from Edward, so why was she worried now with Nathan next to her? She grabbed hold of the frame firmly and clambered out. Nathan was immediately behind her.

"That's my girl," he said by way of encouragement.

"Are we going to jump in the sea?"

"No we are going to get into the jollyboat." He indicated with his head to where the little boat, used to ferry the crew back and forward to shore, skipped along behind the ship.

"How are we going to get to it? It's at least fifty feet below us."

"Down that rope," Nathan swung across her. "Now, Prudence, my love, follow me."

As they inched along holding tight onto the carving at the stern of the ship they could hear the sound of men arguing and singing above. Prudence hung next to Nathan, terrified of the plunge below her, but more terrified of the deck above. She prayed silently that none of the crew would look over and see them dangling there.

Finally, after an eternity of aching arms and joints, Prudence reached the rope and Nathan grabbed her. She was relieved to find that there was more of a foothold here and, having made it this far and again feeling Nathan's body pressed against hers, Prudence's fear subsided. It returned with Nathan's next words.

"Now, take firm hold of the rope and carefully lower yourself down into the boat. Don't just slide as you'll burn your hands," he said as if he were asking her to pour him a port, not swing into thin air and down to a raging sea.

"Aren't you coming?" She heard her voice quaver and the wind whipped her hair in a frenzy around them.

"I have to get the plans of the naval defenses and sabotage this ship. Edward, or should I say Diablo Ted, is responsible for atrocities up and down the Americas and it's my intention that he should be brought to justice," Nathan said as the wind started to get up and ruffle his hair. "I would come down with you, Prue, but, quite frankly, after the drubbing Briggs gave me, I don't think I could climb forty feet back up a rope just at the moment."

Prudence felt ashamed as she looked over the bruises that covered Nathan's muscular body.

"I'm sorry for being so thoughtless, Nathan." She gave him an apologetic smile and reached for the rope.

Nathan held it for her, and smiled wearily back. "Now slide down and into the boat. I'll join you soon, I promise."

Prudence shut her eyes for a second, then launched herself off the stern, swinging

wildly out into empty space. She tasted bile in her throat, but swallowed it down and started to ease her way down the rope, remembering not to slide. She could feel Nathan steadying the rope above, but the boat seemed to be swinging and bobbing uncontrollably below her.

She could have wept when her feet felt the wooden edge of the small craft. She dropped into the bottom and found that her weight helped to steady the vessel, although the sea thundered past her at a frightening speed.

She looked up at Nathan, now barely distinguishable above her, waved and hid herself under the sailcloth to wait.

Having satisfied himself that Prudence had reached the boat safely, Nathan made his way back along the stern to Edward's cabin. After looking to ensure that Edward was still alone, Nathan swung back into the dark room, raced over to the sea chest and started to try to loosen the lock. It would not budge. He glanced at Edward who was still where he had left him five minutes ago and looking death and hate at him.

As the lamp swung about and illuminated the man on the floor Nathan again had the impression that they had met at some time. He had been in the Indies for a year and before that in the Carolinas and New York. He hadn't been to England for over three years. According to Prudence, Edward only came from England a year ago, so Nathan was baffled as to why the man seemed familiar.

His thoughts were cut through by sounds outside the room. Edward started to thrash about, trying to make himself heard by those outside.

He dared not linger. The chest where Nathan was convinced the naval secrets were stored was chained shut and lashed to the upright beam of the ship by another stout chain. Edward didn't have the key to the chest on him when Nathan had searched him earlier and there was no time to search the room for it. He would have to leave it.

Edward was sawing at the gag and trying to bang the floor with his heels, Nathan went to him, stooping to pick up a bottle that had fallen on the floor as he did so and crouched menacingly over him.

"I am going to see you hang from the highest gallows. I promise you."

Edward struggled again and Nathan lifted the bottle above his head. The lamp swung as the ship rolled, and the light shone full in Edward's face. In an instant Nathan knew why he thought he had seen Edward before. Just before he smashed the bottle against the side of the ex-curate of St Ethaldwald's head, Edward looked up at him with pure evil blazing out of one blue eye and one green eye.

After what seemed to be hours rather than minutes Prudence felt the rope of the jolly boat grow taut and looked up to see Nathan swinging down towards her. The shallow draft craft rocked dangerously as he found his footing and stood astride it, cutting the rope to set the small boat free of *The Fallen Angel*. He slumped in the stern for a couple of moments as the large sloop skimmed gracefully onwards and away from them.

She took out the bottle from her shirt and offered it to Nathan. He drank deeply. He let his head fall back, then brought it forward and looked intensely at Prudence in the bow of the boat.

"Thank God," he said simply and she covered the distance between them and was in his arms.

She held him tight, not ever wanting to let go. "Nathan, I'm so sorry. You were right. It's all my fault. I'm so—soo—rr—.oory," she sobbed, as she buried her head in his chest.

"It's all right, Prue."

"No, it's not all right. I have been so stupid."

"Prue," he said, stroking her hair and smelling the sea around them.

The tension of the past hours washed over her and she started to sob uncontrollably in his arms. Nathan let her, holding her tenderly as her emotions unraveled. Finally, her tears subsided enough to allow her to speak.

"Because of me Edw—" she stopped not even wanting to say the hateful name. The thought of him on top of her with his hands on her made panic rise in her even though he was trussed up in the ship that was now tacking north away from them. "It was my fault that y—you were very nearly killed. I could never have forgiven myself if that had happened to you, Nathan."

"It's not your fault, Prue. As you now know I am not a plantation manager but a commander in their Majesties' Navy. My mission was to prevent further incursions by the Spanish into crown lands. I have been after the man selling secrets to the Spanish for over six months. It just happens that the spy I was seeking is Edward, your ex- fiancé."

Prudence considered for a moment. "That's true, but if you hadn't had to rescue me, you wouldn't have had to let Edw—him go and you would have been able to stop him sailing away with the naval plans in *The Fallen Angel*."

Nathan pulled her against him and held her close. He slid his hand gently up to her cheek, and then tilted her face up to him. "I don't know, Prue. All I know is, I love you and I got you away from Edward before he hurt you. The rest I will have to deal with later and," Nathan held up the bottle, "I have to find land before this water is gone."

He pulled her to him again and lowered his lips on hers for a brief kiss. Then, with the last of his remaining strength, Nathan dragged himself to the center of the boat and hoisted the mast, set the sails and started to tack east.

All the next day Nathan tacked them east towards the main shipping lanes where he said they had the best chance of being found by a merchant ship.

By midday it was clear that Edward must have sailed *The Fallen Angel* further east when she left Port Royal to avoid coastal patrols. So, adrift in their small craft, Nathan and Prudence were well outside the normal shipping routes and further into the Caribbean Sea than Nathan had first thought. But they continued to sail east knowing that was their best hope of being rescued.

By the end of the first day, with no land in sight and their first bottle of water gone, Prudence was glad to see the sun set. She was hungry and had heard Nathan's stomach growl a couple of times, although he had not complained. They had managed to keep the sun off them, but the heat was drying nonetheless and Nathan lips looked cracked.

As the last rays of the sun set, she could see that Nathan was suffering. He had drunk sparingly from their meager supply of water, giving her the greater part and she could tell that he was still sore from the beating he received from Briggs. Dark purple and green bruises could be seen on his ribs and shoulders. A pang of guilt surged in her again.

They had hardly spoken as the heat was exhausting and both were becoming weak with lack of food. She got up and made her way to the stern of the boat where Nathan sat, as he had most of the day, hand on rudder. She reached for the remaining water bottle.

"Have a drink, Nathan," she said offering him the leather container.

"Later."

"Now," she insisted, unstopping the top and forcing it into his hand.

He gave her a crooked smile, but drank then looked back at her from sunken, dark-rimmed eyes.

"I can hold our course. Why don't you get some sleep?"

He looked as if he was about to argue, but stopped.

"I love you Prue," he said as he handed over the rudder to her.

"I love you too, Nathan. Now get some rest." She smiled as he made his way to the bow and wrapped himself in the tablecloth. "After all, when we reach land tomorrow, I can't haul this boat up a beach. I'm relying on you to do that."

Nathan settled down in the bow and fell instantly asleep. Prudence gripped the rudder and watched the fading light in the sky behind them.

She had played about on the river when she was a child and Uncle Jack had taken her sailing on the sea when he visited five years ago. She loved it, but they were never out of sight of land.

Uncle Jack. In the darkness, Prudence smiled, thinking about the crusty uncle whom she only met once. It was his naming her as his heir that had caused Edward to travel to the Indies in the first place.

Prudence's face darkened as she thought about Edward and, although the night was balmy, a shudder ran through her. How could she have misjudged him so badly? Although she had seen it with her own eyes, she could still scarce believe that Edward was the notorious Diablo Ted. The thought she had nearly married a man who could cut off noses, ears and other appendages for fun was too terrifying. Edward was truly lost to the devil for all time.

She couldn't remember what she thought about Edward back in England. It all seemed so far away and as if she, too, was a different person now.

The Prudence Stone from Boston, Lincolnshire would not have contemplated staying in *The Two Puddings*. Prudence Stone from Boston, Lincolnshire wouldn't be seen dead dressed as a whore and climbing up onto ship and Prudence Stone from Boston, Lincolnshire would never have allowed herself to be found naked on a bed.

It was because of Uncle Jack and her squandered inheritance that she was now bobbing about in the Caribbean Sea with Nathan Frazer, not a ne'er-do-well, philandering plantation owner, but the younger son of a Scottish earl and an English commander on a covert mission to uncover treachery against the Crown.

As if he knew that she was thinking of him Nathan flung an arm outwards, rolled over and lay on his back.

In the fading light Prudence could see the muscular torso, still hard, though at rest. She gave herself the pleasure of feasting her eyes on him. She followed the lines of the shoulders and the stomach muscles visible under the tanned skin. She remembered the feeling of being held against that chest and how it felt as it pressed down on her in *The Two Puddings*, the springy dark hair brushing her breasts and nipples.

Her eyes traveled along the outstretched arm to where the hand lay down-turned and relaxed, the strong fingers at rest.

So much had happened since the room in *The Two Puddings*. Was it only yesterday

they lay together on the bed and made love? Prudence felt cross.

Well, they hadn't actually made love. Briggs' untimely interruption had put paid to that, but as Prudence watched Nathan sleep those thrilling feelings started again.

It wasn't just the heat of the moment that had led her to welcome Nathan's embraces so readily. It was more than that, much more. As she thought that he was just trying to seduce her like Louis she had tried to fight her feelings. But when Nathan declared his love for her, the dam of her emotions burst and Prudence allowed her love to gush out and wash over them both.

She was certain Nathan was about to ask her to marry him in *The Two Puddings*.

Marry! Prudence glanced back at the oblivious Nathan.

Nathan stirred in his sleep, and then rested again. Prudence gazed around at the empty sea. As darkness finally fell, Prudence prayed that they would find land in the morning.

The sun rose early the next day on an empty sea and, glancing across at Nathan chewing his lip and straining his eyes towards the empty horizon, she was decidedly worried. He didn't need to tell her that unless they found land by the end of the day they would be in serious trouble.

The water that remained would see them for today, just that and no more. The sun was even hotter today and Prudence had seen Nathan put his hand on his forehead a couple of times, so guessed that even he was feeling its effects. She felt dry and by the cracks already oozing blood on Nathan's lips, he was too. They hadn't eaten for three days and that also was making them both weak and disorientated.

Prudence handed him the water bottle which, desperate though he was, he refused.

"Please, just a sip."

"I'm all right."

"You're a liar, Nathan Frazer. Now drink or I'll pour it over the side and we'll both die of thirst."

"God, you're stubborn, woman," he said putting the flask to his lips. "Now you."

Prudence put the bottle to her lips and drank two mouthfuls. She glanced back at Nathan who had his hand over his eyes again. On seeing her looking at him he shook his head and took hold of the rudder.

"Prudence, stay under cover, or you'll burn."

"What about you?"

He rubbed his hand over his arm. "Don't worry about me. I'm half Spanish. I can spend days in the sun without feeling it."

Prudence was unconvinced, but didn't argue. She went and sat in the bow with the shirt over her head and shoulders.

"Have another drink, Prue, and then you can sleep," Nathan said blinking his eyes hard as she settled herself down.

She swallowed another mouthful and then, after a night awake, drifted off to sleep with the rocking of the boat.

She awoke with the sail above her flapping wildly. She looked across at Nathan. He was slumped over the rudder.

She shot forward catching the flying rope of the yardarm as she went.

"Nathan!"

She shook him and he fell backwards onto the floor of the boat, unconscious. She shook him again and he murmured, but no more.

She pulled in the sail and secured the rope, wedging the rudder with the cutlass. The sun was beating down on Nathan with full fury.

She had to cover him. She shrugged off the shirt she was wearing, but it was too small.

Petticoats.

She lifted up her skirt, ripped the two petticoats down and swung them over Nathan, then reached out and found the water bottle. It was almost empty. She uncorked it and forced the fluid through his teeth.

He spluttered, but then lay still again.

Oh, my God. What was she to do?

In the core of her stomach panic rising. She was in the middle of the sea with no water and Nathan would die unless they could make land.

Above her a flock of screeching birds whooping around them.

Birds!

Prudence jumped up, shaded her eyes and scanned the horizon. There was an island about a mile away. That was where the birds had come from. Prudence nearly wept with relief, but stopped. She had to get there yet.

She hauled and strained as the sail took the wind and sped them forward. As the boat approached, Prudence could see a small beach. Her shoulders screamed with pain as she pulled the boat around towards the stretch of golden sand.

With her arms almost wrenched out of their sockets, but slowly the small craft turned and headed for the shoreline. Prudence heard the bottom scrape on the sand beneath them as she piloted the boat onto the small beach.

The craft bobbed forward, but threatened to be dragged back with the ebbing waves. Prudence splashed out into the waves, braced her back into the stern, and pushed with all her might with the next wave beaching it above the high tide line marked out by marooned seaweed.

She slumped forward, hands on knees, to regain her breath, then remembered Nathan. She shook him and tried to rouse him, but he lay still.

"Nathan!"

Still no response. She had to get him out of the boat, under the shade and find water.

She tried to roll him out, but the boat was too heavy for her. She reached for the bottle with the last remaining drop of water in and forced it into his mouth.

"Nathan!" she screamed and shook him vigorously. He stirred, but did not open his eyes.

"Nathan," she screamed again.

This time he tried to get up. "Take me to the loch," he said through cracked, bleeding lips.

Loch? Prudence was puzzled. Loch? Nathan was Scottish, maybe he was brought up by a loch.

"Yes, let's go to the loch, Nathan, come with me." He stumbled up and fell over the edge of the boat onto the sand, looking as if he was going to lapse into unconsciousness again.

"Come on, Nathan, the loch's not far. We can have a drink there," Prudence said, shouldering him, and he leaned on her.

He zigzagged up the beach like a drunk and fell under a palm tree at the top of the beach, not moving.

Prudence collapsed beside him sobbing. She shook him and tried to move him again, but this time he didn't respond. She could see the pulse in the side of his neck galloping on.

"Nathan, I love you. Don't you die. I need you, Nathan." Prudence looked at his handsome face and felt his strong body under her. She ran her hands up his arms, feeling the soft hair beneath her fingers.

"Prudence Stone, stop crying like a fool. If you love the man, find him some water and get it down him," she said severely to herself as she sat back on her heels. She wiped her face with the palms of her hands, smoothed her now tattered skirt and picked up the water bottle.

She scanned the beach and up to the higher ground. The birds were still circling above her and fishing in the sea just off shore. The beach they were on was small and behind it a high central mountain rose sharply. There must be water on the island. She saw what she thought could be a sliver of moisture running across the sand. She strode over and found a small stream winding its way down from the hillside and shimmering across the beach into the sea.

Prudence tracked it back from the beach and found that it became deeper. She plunged the leather bottle into the cool mountain water and filled it to the brim. She raced back down the beach to Nathan, who hadn't moved.

Scooping Nathan's head up, Prudence gently eased the fresh water into his mouth. To start with a great deal trickled out of the other side, but slowly the cold water started to disappear and Prudence could hear Nathan gulping it down. She continued to pour slowly while Nathan drank his fill.

His eyes flicked open, but were still unfocused. Prudence offered him the water again. He swallowed some more, then shut his eyes. She raced back to the boat taking out the things they had scavenged from *The Fallen Angel* and placed them nearby. She tied a length of rope around the palm behind Nathan and secured it to the other end of the fallen branch, then hung the petticoat over it to shield Nathan from the glare of the sun. The shadows were lengthening now as the fiery orb set in the western sky, but its heat could still be felt.

Prudence took a deep draft of the water and then looked back at Nathan. The pulse was still visible, but steadier now. Tears sprang into her eyes as she watched him sleep peacefully against the trunk of the palm.

A burst of love welled up and flooded over her. As she looked on the near dead man that she loved with every ounce of her being, Prudence silently renewed the vows forced out of her the day before.

Calm descended on her. Maybe on paper or in law she wasn't married to Nathan, but she was married to him in her heart. She had made her promise to God and she would hold to that for the rest of her life. She hoped that he felt the same. But it didn't matter.

She smiled tenderly down at him and moved a strand of hair out from his eyes. He moved under her touch and an echo of a smile crossed his face and then was gone.

The immediate danger was over, but they were still marooned without food on a very small island so she had better find them something to eat.

Standing up and taking another mouthful of water from the flask, she picked up the boarding axe and, with a determined frown across her forehead, she made way back down to the beach.

Nathan woke up with a start and was totally disorientated. By the look of the sun in the sky it was three or four hours after dawn. The last thing he remembered was seeing the small island in the distance and trying to steer towards it and now he was lying in the shade of a bowed palm tree with a small fire a few yards away with what looked to be a bird roasting on it. There was a variety of fruit lying on a large green palm leaf, some berries on another and the two water bottles from *The Fallen Angel* were sitting at a jaunty angle in the soft sand. There was a pleasing domestic calm about the scene, but the most pleasing thing for Nathan was that he was bursting to pass water.

He had known that he was becoming dry by noon the second day but thought that as he was used to adverse conditions on board ship, he would let Prudence have most of the water. Also, should they not find land, the longer she lived the more chance she would be found by a passing ship. However, as he stood up and went behind the bushes to relieve himself, he realized that he must have underestimated how dry he had become.

He smiled to himself as his aching bladder was relieved. The return of normal functions meant that his body hadn't suffered permanent damage. He kicked the sand over and returned to the encampment, looking around.

The fact that he was here meant that Prudence must have woken up and managed to steer the ship ashore. He glanced to the beach and saw that the small craft was lying on its side up above the tide line. His stomach growled, so Nathan snatched the fowl off the spit and made short work of it, then sank his teeth into a large mango, demolishing that within a few seconds before finally taking a deep draft of the water which was sweet and fresh.

Beautiful, and resourceful, he thought, as he scooped up a handful of berries. But where was she?

After finding that he was not dead and that he and Prudence were safe from Edward and his band of cutthroats at last, he wanted to find her. His belly was full and thoughts of Prudence were stirring his other appetites.

He decided to wait, she couldn't have gone far.

He felt his face and the three-day growth of beard. He reached for the knife lying next to him and began to hone its blade on a stone.

He felt a surge of love and relief. He had saved Prudence from Edward and his mad intentions. True, he hadn't managed to get the plans off the ship and they were still sailing towards Havana, but a lot slower.

He reached for the water bottle, wet his face, and rubbed mango over it in lieu of soap and began to scrape carefully at his whiskers. He stopped after one stroke and gave a satisfied smirk. He moved the blade to the other cheek.

As he scraped at his cheek he thought with smug satisfaction about how he had managed to cut most of the rigging on the port side of *The Fallen Angel* before he slipped away. It took two full days to re-rig a ship and that with experienced, sober sailors.

The Fallen Angel would be short of shot too, as he had rolled as many cannon balls as he could into the sea and put water in the powder and powder in the water before he rejoined Prudence in the boat. He had every reason to feel smug.

If they are rescued by the navy, there is a real chance that Edward could be caught before he reaches Havana.

I'll see him hang, that I will, he thought, cleaning the blade across his chin. Anger rose in Nathan's chest

Hanging's too good for him, he deserves pain, lots of pain. A strange emotion washed

over Nathan as he contemplated the best revenge he could have on Edward.

Then he remembered the silver pendant around the madman's neck and his odd colored eyes. Nathan smiled an uncharacteristically cruel smile, knowing that his revenge on Edward would indeed be sweet. He wiped his face again with the remains of the water in the bottle.

He forgot about Edward as he spotted Prudence's petticoat flapping in the gentle breeze. He glanced up the beach again, but no Prudence.

He would have to go and find her.

Strolling up towards the far end of the stretch of sand, he followed a small line of footprints that she had made half an hour before. He hoped she would emerge from the vegetation as he walked along, but she didn't.

He reached the small stream and tracked it back. It was cool and refreshing in the shade and Nathan continued. The stream widened and deepened as he moved further inland.

There was the sound of running water ahead, so he followed it. Pushing aside large, lush leaves, he found himself on the edge of a clearing with a pool and a waterfall gushing into it. He stopped dead.

There in the center of the pool was Prudence. The water came up just above her knees and she was naked. Nathan stood open mouthed and watched as she washed under the flowing water with a carefree smile on her face, running her hands over herself. Her long, golden-brown hair shimmered in the dappled sunlight as it hung down her back.

Her curvaceous figure had water trickling down in small rivulets. They traced a path along the slim arms with their delicate fingers and down into the pool at her feet, over her slender legs.

Nathan stood and looked his fill at the woman who held his heart and soul and would forever. He let his whole body enjoy the full, round breasts, the strong, flat stomach that curved out below the navel where he hoped one day she would nurture their children in her body, onto the neat triangle of springy curls that adorned the apex of her legs.

Nathan rose to the sight, hard and ready.

Louis was right. Prudence *was* Eve, the first woman, beautiful and innocent in Paradise. She was the first woman and the only woman that he would ever love.

He had wanted to ask her to marry him and hear her say "yes" to his question. He had wanted to marry Prudence properly, before a minister, but Edward had forced her to agree to be his wife by threatening to blow his head off.

He doubted that their mock marriage ceremony presided over by a mad, renegade curate was even legal. Nathan had meant those vows when he said them and, in a moment of divine revelation, realized that he was married to Prudence. He was married to her in the only way it really mattered, in his heart.

They should have been consummating their marriage in an old four-poster bed in Montgarry castle or in the vicarage in Boston after a happy church wedding with family and friends in attendance and a full wedding breakfast, but it was not to be.

He felt guilty that Prudence had been cheated of the day she must have dreamed about all her life, but he couldn't change what had happened. All he could do was love Prudence and that was exactly what he intended to do.

His gaze ran over her again as she splashed and frolicked in the water and a sensual smile started to spread across his face. He pushed the vegetation aside and walked slowly forward.

Yes, she was Eve and he was going to be Adam.

Chapter Sixteen

After dragging Nathan ashore and settling him in the shade, Prudence had searched the island for food. Thankfully, she didn't have to look far. So, before the light had gone from the sky, she had managed to collect sufficient mangoes, oranges and coconuts to pound into what would pass for a fruit potage. She had also stumbled on some nesting gulls as she reconnoitered the beach and took their eggs. She had managed to make her stolen supplies into a coddled consistency that Nathan swallowed with ease. She supplemented the whole lot with another two bottles of water.

Prudence returned to the small camp just as the sun set and satisfied herself that Nathan was recovering and sleeping peacefully. She gave him another drink and wrapping them both as best she could in the tablecloth, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, waking refreshed nine hours later.

Leaving Nathan asleep, she had taken her petticoat with her to the far end of the beach where the gulls were nesting and to her utter delight and amazement had caught one by using the large calico garment as a type of net.

Flushed with her success, she had gutted it with Nathan's knife and set it to roast on the small fire. Sitting on her heels, Prudence suddenly felt grimy. The blood, guts and feathers from the bird were splashed over her as well as the residue of sticky wine thrown by Edward. Prudence was feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

She glanced at Nathan, who was still asleep, breathing easily and comfortably in the shade, then down at herself.

She looked like a pirate. She started to giggle and Nathan stirred.

Much as she wanted to wake him to assure herself that he was well again, she thought it better to leave him for a while longer, to wake naturally.

Having found the waterfall, she decided that as Nathan still slept she would go and clean up. She could rinse out the shirt and skirt as well. She wrinkled her nose at the two grubby garments. Leaving him slumbering, she made her way through to the pool she had discovered the night before.

She made quick work of washing her clothes and then lying them to dry on the rocks.

She sank into the cool clear water and floated on her back. She felt her breasts bob on the surface and the water swirl around her legs and bottom. Her thoughts turned to Nathan and the familiar inner throb started as she lay relaxed. Although she had been focused on keeping him alive over the past day, she couldn't help but be aware of his body as she tended and cared for it. The feel of his head in her hands as she helped him drink and the hard body next to hers as she slept, made it seem as if Nathan's body was made to be there.

Without warning *The Song of Solomon*, one of the books in the Old Testament, popped into her head. She didn't know it very well and it was never one of the books that Ezra used in his verse chase game to help her remember quotes from the Scriptures. In fact, when she had discovered it her early teens and asked her uncle Ezra if he was most embarrassed. She recalled how he told her that the book was poetic language about God's love. She hadn't questioned him further and had forgotten about it until now lying in the clear crystal water thinking of Nathan. The opening words came into her head.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth –

Prudence touched her mouth gently with her fingertips and remembered the feel of Nathan's kisses. Then the inner pulsing started to intensify as she remembered that they had done a great deal more than just kiss in the room at *The Two Puddings*. Nathan's expressive hands had touched her intimately in her private area and given her a pleasure she never knew existed. But she knew that this was only a prelude to something more and now she wanted it. She wanted Nathan.

She stood up under the falling water, washing it through her hair then continuing the stroke down and caressing her body as she did so.

A sound from behind caused her to spin around and find Nathan standing at the edge of the pool looking at her. She drew her breath in and stood quite still reveling in his unrestrained admiration and feeling her body respond to the call of his eyes.

They stood looking at each other for a second or two, then Nathan went as if to move forward, but stopped. He put his hand to the fastening of his breeches and undid them.

Wide-eyed and fascinated, Prudence watched as he removed his lower garments and stood, as naked as she, on the edge of the pool.

She had never seen a man naked before, and certainly not one so fully engorged and ready to please her. She thought she might have been shocked or even shy, but she was neither. In fact it seemed totally natural and right to be standing amongst the beauty of the island by a crystal pool with Nathan. It was as it should be.

He stood while she let her eyes run over him. He was wonderful, with his sculptured body, hard and honed muscles, relaxed but visible under the tanned skin, the mass of chest hair across his upper body tracking down to his navel and then fanning out again and covering his groin area from which sprang his large attendant male organ with its two delicate appendages beneath.

Prudence was surprised that his erect member was in proportion to himself and for a second she felt some misgivings. Then concern gave way to desire. She wanted nothing more than to take Nathan fully and to feel his life force deep within her.

He waited under her gaze, ready for her to look her fill. And she did. Then as her mind took in the sight of him, her eyes went back to his face and she smiled at him.

At her gaze traveling over him Nathan stood still. He was used to female admiration and pleasure at his form, but now it was Prudence's approval and pleasure he wanted and no other. He felt her innocent eyes roam over him and saw her face show a moment of hesitation as she saw him fully erect, but then changed to an undisguised need.

Her eyes came back to his and they locked souls. He moved forward and into the water stopping just in front of her, their bodies not quite touching.

He sensed Prudence's body lean forward to him, but, just for a moment, he controlled the urge to throw his arms around her and crush her to him. He reached up and took hold of her face gently between his strong hands and held her while he lowered his face towards her, looking deep into her eyes.

He could see the little pulse in Prudence's neck racing and sense her breathless anticipation. Just before their lips met, Nathan stopped.

"I love you," he said simply, and then lowered his lips on hers.

Their emotions collided as his lips touch hers with tenderness and love. Her eyelashes fluttered down as she melted into him. She strained forward and Nathan felt the

tips of her breasts lightly on his chest. It was exquisite torture.

He was holding his bursting need in check, knowing that once he held Prudence close all restraint would be gone and want and need would have to be satisfied. But he wanted her to know it was her heart not just her body that he wanted.

Prudence's hands drifted up and lightly touched his hips. He felt the feathery touch and it ignited him. The feel of her hands on his body stripped away all control. He encircled her with his arms and pulled her to him.

Sliding one hand up her back, he took hold of her head while the other hand moved down to clasp her round bottom and fixed her to his hips. His kiss deepened, his tongue pressing into her mouth and flicking her lips. He felt Prudence kiss him back, tentatively at first, then, as her desire asserted itself, matching him, her tongue tentatively mimicking his.

With Prudence in his arms and under his lips Nathan was awash with totally new sensations. Her mouth escaped his and she gasped for breath as wave after wave of pleasure flooded over her. .

He caressed her shoulder with one hand, then moved down. She arched away and watched him take hold of the full breast in his large hand, kneading the soft flesh with his dexterous fingers.

The hazel eyes flew open in disbelief and found Nathan holding her gaze while he continued to play with the hard, jutting nipple with his finger and thumb.

Her mouth was slightly open and her eyes were enormous as he lowered his mouth and lightly kissed down the swell of her breast. As he drew the sensitive tip into his mouth Prudence threw her head back with a low cry and grabbed his hair with her hand, holding him to her.

"Nathan, that's wonderful, you're wonderful, I love you so much," she shouted as his tongue pressed the captured nipple to the roof of his mouth and he sucked hard.

He released her breast and pulled her closer sweeping her up into his arms and taking her to the lush ground cover at the side of the pool.

Laying her gently down, Nathan lowered himself next to her, putting his arm under her head. His other arm went around her waist, pulling her to him. Sliding a leg up over her he pressed his demanding hardness against her, kissing her deeply again with his whole body while the hand at her waist reached up and cupped her breast.

He released her mouth again and kissed down to one breast licking and sucking one taut nipple, than progressing over to the other. His hand was on her breast again and his fingers were rubbing and pinching the sensitive nipple, causing her to cry out. He recaptured her lips as his hand left her breast and caressed across her flat stomach and then lower.

Prudence bucked and arched towards his hand as it progressed downwards and she saw a small smile crossed his face as his leg parted her legs. His body demanded that he give her all his love and seed, but he forced himself to be patient.

Prudence's innocent, yet instinctive responses were firing him. He had waited so long for this, almost from the first moment he had laid eyes on her. Now, being so near to taking her was causing him to react like a raw lad. He had learned the art of control early but now his emotions were part of his love, giving it a new and more intense dimension than he had ever had to account for before. It was his heart as well as his body that was making love to Prudence and that was untried.

Nathan brushed his hand over her private curls and gently slid between her soft folds, parting them as his fingers progressed forwards and inward. She dug her nails into his shoulder as his experienced fingers found her throbbing bud and firmly caressed back

and forth. He heard her groan in a low voice as his fingers built the sensation in her. Her breathing was shallow as his fingers slid back and forth.

He could feel her building to her climax, but this time he wanted his manhood, not his fingers, to have the pleasure, so just as he judged the wave in Prudence was about to burst Nathan stopped and withdrew his fingers. Prudence tried to follow his hand with her hips. He smiled at her, kissed her, and then rolled on her, parting her legs with his.

He kissed her again and nudged forward, resting between her folds. He felt her flex against him and adjust under him to support his weight. He gathered her in his arms and held her gently, kissing her all the while.

"I love you, Prudence, and always will," he said, knowing that one inside need would drive him on and coherent speech would soon be impossible.

"I love you too, Nathan."

His hand reached for her thighs to guide them upwards, but she moved without urging to resting her heels over his hips. He could wait no longer. He pressed his hips forward and gently into Prudence testing, not wanting to hurt her any more than necessary.

He could already feel Prudence's inner waves radiating as he lay against her. He felt her legs pull onto him.

Holding his bursting shaft in check, Nathan pushed forward again, harder this time and not stopping. Prudence's maidenhead did its duty, then move aside, allowing him access to the untouched passage within.

Nathan continued filling Prudence completely. He felt her part in front of him and then enfold him. The waves of her unreleased climax surged around him as he fought for control.

Prudence couldn't believe the wonderful pleasure of having Nathan inside her. She felt him stop and reposition himself over her to avoid having his whole weight on her. She watched his face above her as he slowly closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again and gazed down at her, locking her eyes on his.

She waited breathlessly for the motion of his hips to flex into her. After a second or two Nathan drew back, then pushed home again, his eyes hooded. He lowered his head but continued to look in her eyes.

Relishing the effect his thrusting was having on her, she held him close. She heard herself calling his name in a low, throaty voice. Nathan held her tighter as he continued to move, steadily and firmly.

A world she never knew existed opened up for Prudence. A world filled with Nathan. His hands and body, his lips and the words he whispered low in her ear. He told her of his love and how beautiful she was, how much he wanted her. Everything she had ever dreamed he would say and more, much more.

The inner coil of her stomach now pulsed and throbbed in response to Nathan's rocking. The sensation she had experienced in *The Two Puddings* was a pale imitation to the waves of pleasure and desire rioting through her now. Suddenly, as his insistent hips gained momentum, the wave broke and Prudence heard herself sob Nathan's name as her mind and body exploded in a crescendo of color and light.

Feeling Prudence's unrestrained responses, coupled with the new dimension of his love for her was making it increasingly difficult for Nathan to keep his need in check. He bit his lip and tried to concentrate. Prudence's nails dug into his shoulder as the wave of her climax burst over her, and she began to shudder in his arms.

He was lost and he knew it. So he gave up the fight and let his own climax crash through him. He let out a roar of possession as he thrust into Prudence, letting his body have its way. Nathan strained into her, wanting all of him in her as his seed flooded forth, giving him the most intense orgasm of his life.

They lay together stunned by the experience of their coupling. Nathan thought he had experienced physical pleasure before, but now he knew that he had been cheated all these years.

As Nathan moved his weight off her, Prudence reached up and kissed him lightly on the cheek. She felt the skin against her lips crinkle as he smiled in response.

"Nathan, that was incredible," she said running her hands over his newly shaved beard. "I never really understood how wonderful making love could be."

He turned his head and looked her in the eyes, noting the soft blush now across her cheeks. "Neither did I," he said earnestly, as he kissed her.

She shifted under him, so he hunched onto his elbows above her, holding her head tenderly and stroking the little wisps of hair away from her eyes. Then he rolled off and gathered her to him, fitting her to the contours of his body enjoying the intimacy of the moment. He felt her run her hand along his arm then downwards, rest lightly on his hand. She took it and lifted it to her lips, kissing each finger individually then rubbing it on her cheek.

"Mmm, you feel very wonderful under my hand and close to me," she said as she flexed her hips against him and kissed his hand again.

He rolled onto her and covered her mouth with his in a deep kiss. "And nice doesn't begin to describe how you feel under me, you beautiful woman."

Then he rolled onto his back.

Prudence snuggled up and rested her head on Nathan's broad shoulders and listened to the reassuring thud of his heart. She grazed her hand lightly across his chest and he captured it, kissing it and holding it against him.

She was happy that at last they had made love and it was right and natural. She belonged to Nathan, totally, forever, so welcoming his embraces and giving herself to him was what she was made for.

She saw the small smile that lit the corners of his mouth as he lay with his eyes shut and the sunlight dappled across his handsome face.

An earl's son. Suddenly Edward's word came back to her.

" – Set your sights higher than a parson's penniless niece – "

Prudence felt a stab of pain. Had he, Nathan, hoped to marry well? Her family was respectable, but not nearly as elevated as his.

Was he going to ask me to marry him? She hadn't doubted it before, but now –

But he said he loves you, she told herself. He has said it over and over. That was true, but with men sometimes love and marriage were not connected. She felt the stab of pain again.

Nathan's honorable; he'll marry me properly when we get back to Port Royal. That was less

than satisfactory.

But she didn't want him to marry her, because he was obliged to. She wanted him to marry her because he wanted to.

She frowned. And she let her eyes run over him again. He was still naked, with one arm around her shoulder and the other still holding her hand. Love swelled up in her.

What difference does it make? She could not alter the fact that she loved Nathan. She would have given herself to him in that sordid room in *The Two Puddings*, so how much better in this Garden of Eden with the smell of sweet fragrance of the wild flowers around them.

For goodness sake, Prudence Stone, you have been captured and all but raped. Yesterday you nearly died in an open boat and today you're lying in the arms of the only man you will ever love and you're still fretting. What is wrong with you?

Prudence frowned. She lifted herself up onto her elbow and looked down at him, she knew that he was aware of her movements, because his smile broadened and he tightened his arm around her.

Then, to stop any further disquieting thoughts popping into her head, Prudence leaned forward and kissed him forcibly on the mouth.

Although it had been less than a half hour since they had finished making love, Nathan felt he was ready to 'honor' Prudence again and was just languishing in a sexual haze until she indicated that she would welcome him.

Feeling the warm sun on his face and body and Prudence snug in his arms, Nathan was scoring through his mental list.

Tell Prudence he loved her, *The Two Puddings*. Find the spy, Edward. Rescue Prudence and get away from *The Fallen Angel*, escape in the jolly boat. Find an island, the rock he now lay upon. Make love to Prudence until she screamed. The satisfied smile spread wider on his face. Oh yes!

There were of course some things he still had to attend to. Getting off this island. Finding Edward, thrashing him within an inch of his life and then hanging him, for another. Getting the plans of the New England defenses back. And, most importantly, making sure that he and Prudence were legally married as soon as they touched dry land. But Nathan had won the most important thing, Prudence's love. All the rest would follow, he was sure.

He felt her shift next to him and he surged as her nipples scraped across his chest. He opened his eyes just in time to see the small frown on her face as she leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth.

He kissed her back, surprised and encouraged that she had taken the initiative, and forgot the frown as he encircled her in his arms. Then her stomach growled.

Nathan looked in mock horror at the noise. "I didn't know there were lions on this island."

Prudence laughed. "I only had some fruit this morning. But the bird should be cooked by now."

Nathan let his eyes sweep over her, noting all the curves and dips of her body, and drew his brows together trying to look very serious. "Prudence, my love, I have a confession to make."

"Confession?" Nathan saw her tense for a brief moment. Then as one corner of his

mouth started to twitch, her shoulders relaxed. Nathan tried to maintain his severe look but found it impossible. His face broke into a boyish smile.

"I've eaten the bird."

Prudence glanced down to where Nathan's manhood stood to attention. She looked at him sideways under her lashes, provocatively. "Then I suggest that you think of some way to recompense me for stealing my lunch."

Nathan felt desire jolt through him at her open invitation. He reached out his hand and ran it slowly over her hip, pulling her near.

"I think I can think of something that will take your mind off your empty stomach," Nathan said, as he rolled Prudence back onto the lush undergrowth and then under him.

After they had made love again Prudence insisted that she would have to eat. So they spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon exploring the island for food. As Nathan suspected, it was deserted and showed no signs of any recent human occupation. Apart from their beach there was one other around the headland, but the rest of the island was really just a rock thrust up from the sea.

This was good news in that there were no hostile natives to deal with, but bad because it meant that their only chance of rescue was a passing ship. As Nathan was not sure how far they were from the main shipping lanes he wondered how long it might be before a ship came their way.

He pushed this aside along with other worrying thoughts about the plans for the New England defenses and the list of names of all his contacts, which were now sailing towards Havana on *The Fallen Angel*.

As he and Prudence frolicked in the surf catching fish and collecting shellfish, those concerns seemed very far away. They continued to scavenge across the beach. Prudence gathered more fruit and caught two nesting rock doves and harvested their eggs as well.

By the middle of the afternoon they had returned to their camp and the two birds were roasting on the small open fire. After eating their fill, they lay quietly together in each other's arms kissing occasionally. Nathan and Prudence made love one more time before they finally slept, tucked together, the tablecloth again serving as a cover.

Nathan awoke with a start just as the sun was sending red streaks over the horizon and found that Prudence had left his side. He sprung up, but was relieved to see that she was just a little way off, sitting naked and hugging her knees as she watched the sun rise.

In the same bare state, he sauntered down, to join her, sitting behind her and sliding his arms around her. He kissed her cheek and she turned her head to him slightly, but continued to look towards the horizon.

"Prue?"

"I was just thinking of Genesis, chapter two, verse twenty five."

Nathan was alarmed. He had no idea what Genesis or any other book in the Bible said about anything and hoped it didn't say that they were damned to eternal hellfire or something.

Prudence turned to face him her face happy and contented. "It says, 'the man and woman were both naked and they felt no shame.'"

She reached around and caressed along Nathan's arm, then around to his neck, and looked deep into his eyes.

"Make love to me, Nathan."

Without a word he gathered her to him and, in the rays of the rising sun, did just as she asked.

Chapter Seventeen

After their early morning lovemaking on the beach Nathan and Prudence slept until the sun was well over the horizon. He left Prudence to gather their lunch and cook the fish that he had caught with a hook he had carved from a whalebone from her bodice.

Prudence found that she was a little short of clothes. Nathan had commandeered one petticoat to act as the flag he was going to set up at the end of the headland. So she was left with one petticoat and Edward's shirt. Prudence tied the laces across her breast and the tail of the shirt around her waist. Her skirt, like the bodice, was in tatters, so she discarded it, hanging it above their fruit and food to keep the flies and birds off. However, she was better off than Nathan, who had only his breeches to wear.

After collecting all she could, Prudence made her way back to their makeshift camp and sat under the palm tree. She watched Nathan as he carried wood along the headland for the beacon he had constructed next to the improvised flagpole.

She could see his strong body carrying the heavy logs quite effortlessly. Nathan's powerful legs strode along the outcrop of rocks to the end of the headland.

Since Nathan had found her in the pool, they had made love four times and each time was more wonderful than the time before. But as she let her body enjoy the sight of Nathan stripped to the waist moving about in front of her, other thoughts were coming into her mind.

Wonderful though it was to have Nathan touch her intimately, Prudence now wanted to do the same. She wasn't quite sure how to go about the matter but felt that once she started to make love to Nathan instinct would take over.

She untied the top two ties of the shirt, which just about met anyhow. She felt a little ripple of pleasure run through her as she anticipated Nathan's reaction.

He was coming back up the beach and grabbed hold of a brand from the fire. "I'll just light the beacon, then I'll be back. They look appetizing."

"Do they?"

Prudence's tone caught his attention and he gave her a questioning look.

"Uh, yes." He stood hesitant for a moment and she saw his eyes flick down to the front of the shirt. Then Nathan remembered what he was about. "I'll be back in a moment or two."

Prudence lay back on the trunk of the tree, undid the third tie and smiled.

Nathan came back and threw himself beside her. "Any ship should be able to see that for miles off," he said, looking at the trail of black smoke being taken up by the wind.

"Won't it attract pirates?" Prudence asked, momentarily forgetting that she was about to seduce him.

Nathan cleaned his hands on a palm leaf. "No. Pirates aren't interested in castaways or folks marooned, there's no profit. I'm confident that Mary would have gone to Captain Bennett and told him of your abduction and he—" his eyes went to the third untied lace on the front of the shirt, "—will be scouring the high seas for you now."

Prudence got to her knees, hitched up her skirt high showing her thighs and scrambled over to where Nathan sat. She stopped, knees apart, just in front of him.

"I think you've scratched yourself," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder and leaning forward.

She had seen him looking down her shirt front and knew that she was exciting him.

She liked him looking at her, seeing the desire in his eyes as they traveled over her body. But she wasn't ready to let Nathan have his way just yet; she wanted to tease him a little longer.

Nathan was mesmerized. As Prudence knelt above him, her breasts were level with his eyes and at this angle, he had a perfect view down the open shirt. His eyes were fixed on the large breasts that swayed as she moved over him.

Prudence was chattering on above him, heedless, it would seem, of the effect she was having on him. He leaned forward and reached up his hand, but, just as he was about to touch Prudence, she moved away.

Prudence stood up and walked over to the water bottles, still with her thin petticoat hitched up, and bending over presented her bottom to him as she did so.

He was speechless. His mind ripped the fabric away and visualized her without the textile barrier. He wondered if it was too early to introduce a couple of variations to their lovemaking.

She turned with the water bottles and swayed back towards him, sitting down again with the skirt high over her thighs. She gave Nathan one bottle and lifted the other slowly to her lips slowly.

Nathan uncorked his, but it stayed untouched in his hand as he watched Prudence swallow the water down, small rivulets escaping and running down her throat to sit in droplets on the shelf of her breasts. His mouth was dry. He took a gulp of water, his eyes not leaving her for a moment. Then Prudence seemed to lose hold of the bottle and a cascade of water shot down her front soaking the flimsy shirt and petticoat and rendering the wet areas transparent.

"Oh, I'm all wet."

She jumped up and shook the skirt high, Nathan saw a flash of darkness beneath as the bleached calico swirled in front of him.

"Look."

He was. Every nerve in his body was looking.

"I'll have to take it off and let it dry."

Prudence undid the remaining tie and slowly peeled the fabric back, shaking her shoulders to shrug it off.

Nathan thought he would burst the seams of his breeches as he watched her bounce and sway in front of him. She turned and hung the shirt over a branch behind her. Then she undid the fastening of her skirt and ran it down over her bottom and off.

She turned back to Nathan. "Looks like your breeches are a little wet too," she said, indicating, with her head to where a small patch of leaking seed had seeped through. A sensual smile spread across Prudence face.

For a moment or two Nathan didn't speak. Then a smile to match hers spread across his face he slowly removed his breeches.

After they had dressed in their meager clothes Prudence handed Nathan the larger of the two fish on a palm leaf, then settled beside him. The boat beached on the shore caught Nathan's eye.

"Prue, how did you ever manage to get me out of the boat?" he said, pointing with a fish bone towards the sea.

"It was easy. You were blabbering on about going to the loch so I just said I'd take

you. You still staggered up the beach like a drunk, but at least you struggled up the beach."

Nathan smiled. "Loch Garry. It's by my home, Montgarry Castle. I used to fish there when I was a boy with Robert, my elder brother. He is only two years older than me and we used to spend all day roaming the estate when we were boys. Father's tenants were always quick to provide a hunk of bread and cheese for two hungry boys covered in mud. Robert and I used to sail on the loch too and when we went to see our cousins in the isles. "He looked at her and smiled remembering his boyhood. "My uncle is the Earl of Steinmuir in the west."

"Oh," Prudence said, thinking of small sparsely furnished vicarage she grew up in.

Nathan lay back and put his hands behind his head. "I think it was then that I first realized that I wanted to join the navy. Father was against it." He shrugged a laugh. "Can you imagine what he said when I wanted to sign on as a cabin boy at ten? I can remember the look of horror on my parents' faces. He went red and she went white. "Nathan laughed again and Prudence joined in.

"I made my mother's face white a couple of times myself," she said.

"I bet you did. Was it she who called you *Prudence*?"

Prudence laughed again. "In hope rather than fact, I think."

Then her face fell.

"Has she been dead long?" asked Nathan in a tender tone.

"Five years."

"Is that when you went to live with your, uncle?"

"No, I lived with him as long as I remember. My mother moved in to keep house for him after my father was killed at sea. He was blown up."

"He died in battle?"

Prudence gave a Nathan a half-smile. "No. He was priming a swivel cannon for a salute and it blew up, killing him outright."

"Oh"

"Anyhow I was only three, so mother and I came to live with her unmarried clergyman brother, as Uncle Jack had long since departed for the Caribbean."

"I liked Jack, old rogue that he was. I think he saw through my pretense, but if he did, he never told a soul. Jack liked to talk about ships, the places he visited and his days in the army. I'm surprised, though, that he left his fortune to a religious foundation," Nathan said.

Prudence shrugged her shoulders. "No matter what he did or didn't leave me I loved him just the same. He always wrote to us at home and took a great interest in my upbringing."

"Did you only meet him the once?"

"Yes, when he came back five years ago, just after mother died. He was very kind." Prudence's brows drew together and she put her head on one side. "Thinking back, maybe Jack was becoming religious then, because he was most interested in the way Uncle Ezra taught me my Bible verses." She peeled an orange and began to eat the juicy flesh. Nathan watched her.

"You're very like Black Jack, you know, strong and stubborn."

Prudence pulled a face, trying to look annoyed. "Some might call it steadfastness." she said, discarding the orange skin.

"He would have been proud of the way you tacked that boat onto the beach and got us on the island."

"I must have a bit of salt in my veins from my father and I spent hours watching the ships come and go at Boston. So I do know a little about sailing."

She leaned back on the tree behind her. Feeling the warm sun dappling over her face Prudence shut her eyes.

After a moment or two of silence, Nathan coughed.

"Ah, um – I just want to tell you – something, Prue –"

What is he going to tell her? Prudence felt insecure again.

She saw him drop his eyes to the ground, then fixed on the small fire. "Oh – um – how did you get the fire going?"

"I used the magnifying glass from the end of the telescope to heat the dry wood and sticks until they started to burn. Edward used to do that to insects and frogs."

She stopped. Her lower lip started to tremble and tears sprang into her eyes. She looked forlornly back at Nathan. He scrabbled across and took Prudence tenderly into his arms, holding her tightly while her shoulders shook with emotion.

Edward's name was out now. Nathan said no more, just kissed her softly as she sobbed in his arms.

The fear at Nathan's capture, her abortive attempt to rescue him, her discovery that Edward was Diablo Ted, her capture, being stripped in front of the ship's crew, all came flooding back to her.

Prudence's sobs subsided and she looked up at Nathan. "Oh Nathan, it was terrible on the ship."

"I know, I know, but it is all over now," he said, kissing her again on her cheek and brushing away a fat tear teetering on her lashes.

"How could I have not seen what Edward was really like? "Nathan stroked her cheek as she talked out her emotions. "Uncle Ezra never liked him. There were rumors about him and girls in the parish. I stubbornly refused to believe."

"Steadfast," he corrected. Prudence gave him a wan smile.

"I wouldn't listen. I should have gone home when I arrived and found him gone. I had to find out what happened to Edward. What was it you said? I had to tell Edward that he had been a naughty boy." She sobbed again. "I certainly found out what happened to Edward and nearly got raped in the process. How stupid I have been."

"Prue –" Nathan interrupted, but she continued.

"Look at the trouble I've caused you, Nathan. My enquiries led to your disguise being found out, which put the country's defenses in jeopardy, not to mention nearly getting you killed."

Nathan took hold of her chin with his finger and thumb and lifted it up towards him. "Not at all, my love. You are the most courageous, intelligent woman I have ever met and, if you had left Port Royal, I would never have met you and that would have been a tragedy for me."

Prudence had stopped crying and was gazing deep into Nathan's eyes. He leaned forward and lowered his lips to hers. "It would have been a tragedy for me, because I would have had to go through my whole life without knowing what it was like to be loved by you."

Prudence smiled through her drying tears. "Oh, Nathan, I do love you."

"And I, you." He lowered his mouth on hers again and kissed her deeply. She molded herself into his body.

As she felt Nathan's strong arms encircle her Prudence began to feel the familiar hum of excitement start to build inside her. She ran her hands up and around his neck,

holding him closer.

She did love him, totally, unreservedly. She considered herself his for life, as he was hers. She felt Nathan release her mouth.

"I don't think for one moment that blasphemous service Edward performed is legal, Nathan."

"Neither do I. It doesn't matter, Prue. We will be married properly, as soon as we get back to Port Royal." He lifted the corner of his mouth. "I hope you are not questioning my honor."

Prudence went tense in his arms. Although it was a travesty of a marriage ceremony, she had meant the words she had said and up until a second ago hoped that Nathan had, too.

"I won't marry you, Nathan, just to satisfy your honor." She pushed him away and struggled out of his embrace. "Just because we have made love, don't feel obliged to marry me. "

Nathan let out an oath then pulled her up and encircled her again with his arms, making her face him.

"Prudence, I don't want to marry you for any other reason than I love you and cannot live without you." He took hold of her face with his large hands either side and looked her straight in the eyes, fixing her with his intense gaze. "Prue, you must believe what I say. I have been totally stupid not to have mentioned it before, but it was my intention to ask you the day I came to Mary's looking for you. I swear it's the truth. Please say you believe me, Prue?"

Prudence's eyes ran over the strong angles of Nathan's face. She loved every inch of it. His expression was tense and earnest and the tight muscles in his jaw taut. Nathan's eyes willed her to trust his words, and her heart melted.

Of course she believed him. He had said that he loved her over and over again. If they hadn't been interrupted by Briggs in *The Two Puddings* of course he would have asked her to marry him. It was just the emotion of remembering the nightmare on *The Fallen Angel* that had made her prickly. How could she doubt him?

She lifted her hand up and moved a stray lock of hair out of Nathan's eyes. Her expression changed, she smiled broadly at him and heard him breathe out forcibly as she felt his tension evaporate. She leaned into him and turned her face upwards. "Of course I believe you, Nathan."

She was rewarded by Nathan pressing his mouth firmly onto hers, and kissing her deeply, pulling her into a crushing embrace.

"Prue, I am so stupid. I should have said something earlier. I should have asked you properly, but I didn't want to spoil the short time we have alone on this beautiful island until we are rescued, by talking about Edward."

He was right. She didn't want to talk about Edward either, so she leaned her hips into Nathan's. She lowered her eyes and tilted her head. She heard a low rumble and felt one of his hands move down and clasp her bottom firmly against his hips, as the other ran across her shoulders and pulled her to his upper body.

Prudence placed her palms on his broad chest and with a provocative sideward glance swept her long lashes upwards and looked sensually at him.

"I hope we don't get rescued too soon."

Chapter Eighteen

Prudence felt Nathan stand up and leave her to doze under the palm tree by the fire. She smiled to herself as she watched him walk to the end of the headland to replenish the fire. He had made love to her with a passion that had left her breathless and had sworn his undying love over and over again.

Nathan stacked on damp wood on the beacon and the flame whooshed skywards, pouring out black smoke. Prudence's petticoat flag was still flapping on the improvised flagpole and she saw him strain and scanned the horizon as he had done on and off for the past two days.

She shut her eyes in the warm mid-afternoon breeze. She must have drifted off to sleep because she started awake as she heard Nathan calling her name. She sat up and saw a ship in full sail on the horizon and Nathan running back towards her. He snatched up the telescope next to her.

"There's a ship on the horizon, Prue. It's coming this way. We're being rescued "

She jumped up then looked down at herself.

"Oh no!"

"What?"

Prudence flung her arms out. "Look at me! We are about to be found and I'm wearing nothing more than Edward's old shirt and a petticoat. Is it a naval ship?" she asked pulling the edges of the shirt together.

"I'm not sure. I pray to God that it is and a fast one, so we can catch that bastard Edward before he get into Spanish waters. He has three days' start on us, but I've slowed his progress. A fast frigate and some sharp sailing could catch him and reclaim the maps before they fall into the wrong hands. Come, let's take another look." He raced back.

Prudence stopped.

Nathan turned back towards her. "Come on."

A lump rose in her throat. They couldn't stay on the island eating coconuts forever, but... she pushed the feeling away and continued to follow Nathan.

By the time she had reached him he was standing, legs apart, focusing on the horizon. Prudence followed the direction of the telescope. Even at this distance she could see there was not one, but five ships now clearly visible. Four were continuing on their course while the one Nathan had spotted was indeed coming towards their small island at a cracking pace.

"It's the Navy and, if I'm not mistaken, it's *The Valiant* coming for us," Nathan shouted as he slammed the telescope in on itself. "They must be after *The Fallen Angel*, but saw our signal."

By the time Prudence and Nathan had gathered their few belongings and returned to the beach they could see the longboat being released from *The Valiant* and sailors straining on its oars.

The seamen were wide-eyed when they caught a glimpse of Prudence in her shirt and petticoat, but a severe look from Nathan sent them about their business, eyes averted.

Nathan clambered up the rope ahead of Prudence and she heard him shout for a cloak to be brought. By the time she stood on deck Nathan had a cloak ready to cover her and she gave him a grateful smile, and then looked around.

It was, as Nathan had said, a naval ship, but there were a great number of soldiers

also on board, all in a state of readiness.

Before Prudence could make any sense of the scene before her, there was a shout from the deck above her.

"Frazer, so nice of you to join us and I hope Miss Stone is none the worse for her enforced stay with you."

Prudence and Nathan looked up to see Captain Henry Bennett coming down the stair towards them.

Nathan glanced up at the mainmast with its sails full-blown. The crew were already heaving to and turning the ship back to join the other four. "By the way you've rigged this crate you need me to show you how to sail properly. And my behavior towards Miss Stone is none of your business, Bennett."

That's not very clever, Nathan, Prudence thought as her heart sank.

She was just about to open her mouth to explain all the facts to Captain Bennett when he raced forward and clasped Nathan in a bear hug of an embrace, slapping him heartily on the back.

"You old rogue, Nathan, only you could be dragged away by the most notorious pirate on the high seas and return without having your neck stretched and with a beautiful woman in tow."

Before she could quite work out what was going on, Nathan came back over to her, gently putting his arms around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, my dear. May I introduce my oldest friend, Henry Bennett. We were at Cambridge together, and then served together on *The Dauntless*, I as midshipman and he as a lieutenant of the marines." Henry took Prudence's hand and kissed it. "He is also foolish enough to want to marry my sister Isabella, despite my warning to him."

Henry glanced up at Nathan and grinned. "I have written to your father asking to see him when I am next in England."

Nathan's raised his eyes upward in an exaggerated expression. Then he turned back to Prudence and squeezed her again gently. "And, Henry, Prudence is not 'in tow', she is my fiancée."

It was Henry's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Is she now?"

"She is," Nathan said, looking at her.

"And when is the wedding to be?" Henry asked.

Nathan expression hardened. "As soon as Edward Matthews and *The Fallen Angel* are captured and justice served."

She started to shake and Nathan gave her a worried look. "Are you unwell, Prue?"

"It's Edward you are after, is it not?"

"It is my duty to bring him to justice for how he has betrayed his county." Nathan stopped for a second and added through gritted teeth, "and for how he betrayed and manhandled you."

"Edward doesn't matter to me any more."

"He matters to me," Nathan said in a chilling voice.

Prudence grabbed hold of his upper arms and felt the tension in them. "Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord."

Nathan's eyes looked unresponsively down at her and he addressed Henry over her head.

"Could you find some clothes for Miss Stone, Harry?"

"I will try although they might not be the latest London fashion."

Prudence recovered herself and turned to address Henry. "Thank you. As long as

they cover me a little more than my present attire, I don't mind."

"If you follow my man, he will show you to my cabin."

She looked at Nathan and chewed her lower lip.

"I have much to discuss with Harry," he said.

She dropped her eyes and followed the bosun. A basin of water was brought and some of the youngest lieutenant's clothes which fitted pretty as well, given he was a lanky youth of almost six foot and she was a rounded woman of not quite five foot six.

She made herself presentable and re-emerged on the deck to find Nathan stripped and washing out of a bucket while still talking to Henry. There was a map in front of them. Henry was pointing out places on the parchment as Nathan wiped his face. He flicked the last of the suds into the tub and his face lost its somber concentration, when he saw Prudence coming towards them.

She gave him a wan smile and fanned out her hands. "It will have to do. I have turned back the cuffs of the shirt as much as I can. Thankfully, the waistcoat buttons in the front and covers a multitude of sins. And my skirt and petticoat, although ragged still cover me sufficiently."

Nathan glanced at Henry. He bowed and withdrew as Nathan led Prudence over to the side rails.

"I've spoken to Henry and it's good news. They encountered *The Fallen Angel* yesterday and engaged them," Nathan said, and then he slammed the flat of his hand on the rail. "Unfortunately, they got away and are still heading for Havana. My sabotage slowed them, it seemed, enough for us to have a good chance of catching them before they make landfall." He gripped the rail under his hand. "I will catch Edward, Prue, and make him pay for his treatment of you and his betrayal of his monarchs and his country."

She clung onto Nathan's arm. "Nathan, please don't let you anger blind you to danger. Don't let revenge lead you to act rashly or foolishly." He didn't look at her, but continued to stare east towards Havana. She pulled him around to face her. "Edward's dead to me, Nathan. You know he doesn't hold my heart any longer and that it's you I love"

She saw a hard look cross Nathan's face. "I know, but I'm afraid he won't be dead to me until I see him swinging at the end of a rope."

There was a long silence as their eyes locked together then Nathan dragged her into his arms, tilted her head back and kissed her briefly on the lips before holding her away from him. "*The Yarmouth* had its mainmast damaged in the encounter with *The Fallen Angel*. Although it is seaworthy, it won't stand up to hard sailing without proper repairs, so it is going back to Port Royal and you are going with it."

The blood pounded in her ears at Nathan's word. She swayed and felt him hold her tighter.

"I don't want to leave you like this but my honor demands that I pursue *The Fallen Angel*, its crew — and Edward. You must understand, Prue, that too many would suffer, if those defense plans fell into Spanish hands."

Prudence's mouth felt dry. "Natha —"

"It would be impossible for us to engage and fight *The Fallen Angel*, a large schooner with over twenty guns, with you on board. Who knows what would happen? Also," he paused and drew his brows together, "When I get my hands on Edward, I don't want you there."

The implacable look on Nathan's face killed the argument forming in her mind. She slumped in his rock-hard grip.

"When will you return?"

"As soon as *The Fallen Angel* is captured." His voice lost its sharp edge and his grip loosened. "They are only a day ahead, and it's two days sailing from here to Havana. I expect we will catch them tomorrow or the next day, it can be no longer. Then a week to bring them back."

A seaman brought Nathan a coat, shirt, stockings and a large pair of black shoes with silver buckles. Nathan let go of Prudence and put the offered clothes on, tying the cravat and buttoning up the braid on the front of the coat. Then he slung a sword and sash across himself.

She had never seen him in his correct apparel before. Resplendent in a naval uniform of dark blue, Nathan looked very different, every inch the Naval Commander.

"I'll have to get that tailor in New Street to make me a new uniform jacket when I get back." He tugged the front of the jacket down and ran his hands over the braid of the epaulets. "Still, fits pretty well. Bit tight across the shoulders, but thankfully Harry has big feet like me," Nathan said with a boyish smile which Prudence didn't answer.

He stepped forward and took her in his arms again. She rested her hands on the dark blue fabric.

"Prudence, I never expected to fall in love in the middle of a clandestine operation in the West Indies." He gently took hold of her chin with his forefinger and thumb and lifted her head up so he could look her in the eyes. "I might tell you it's a mite inconvenient to have to dash across the Caribbean Sea instead of celebrating our nuptials, but," Nathan's light tone changed to a more serious one, "I have to do my duty."

"Two weeks and you'll be back?"

"Two weeks," Nathan said smiling encouragingly.

Prudence tried to summon up a brave smile to leave him with and just managed it. "Are they waiting for me?"

Nathan acknowledged the man patiently standing next to them and gently led Prudence forward. "Follow the first mate, he'll see you safely over to *The Yarmouth*." She didn't move.

Prudence swept her eyes up to Nathan, tears swimming in her vision.

Without hesitation, he encircled her small waist with his hand and drew her back to him, lowering his lips on hers, gently at first, then deeper, pressing her the full length of his body so as it to sear it into his memory, into his bones.

"Two weeks, Prue," he said, as she reached the rail of the ship.

She gave him a last lingering look and then took firm hold of the rope ladder swinging over the rails and starting down into the jolly boat.

She found her balance in the boat and looked back up at Nathan above her.

"Three at the most."

Three? Prudence's head snapped up and she was about to open her mouth to ask Nathan what he meant, but as she looked up he was already shouting orders at the men in the rigging above him. By the time he looked back, it was too far for him to hear her question.

After two days of choppy sailing, Prudence finally made her way like a drunken sailor down the gangplank of *The Yarmouth* and back onto the Port Royal quayside. She was immediately surrounded by Mary and the girls from *The Two Puddings*, all crying and

trying to hug her at the same time.

Mary won the scramble and engulfed Prudence in her rounded arms, pressing her to her substantial bosom.

"Oh my love," she said between sobs and flourishing a lace handkerchief to the corner of her eye. "I haven't slept more than a wink since you were took by that Diablo Ted. Won't be a day too soon when his sorry carcass is swinging from a rope."

A sob rose in unison from Mary's girls.

"I'd like to get my hands on that Edward before 'is appointment with the hangman," Pearl said.

"There be a bit less of him to swing in the wind that's for sure," Ruby added to another chorus of approval.

Mary hugged Prudence again. "I didn't want to leave you on that ship, but what could I do? That black-hearted devil would have killed us all. Prue, my love, say you forgive me." Mary said with a coy look on her face.

She freed herself from Mary's cleavage. "Of course I forgive you, Mary."

Pearl pushed past Mary and grabbed Prudence's arm. "I hear you and Nathan Frazer were marooned on a deserted island."

Prudence felt a blush rise on her cheeks.

"I wouldn't mind being marooned with Nathan Frazer myself," Pearl said, with a saucy wink at the others.

Prudence felt her blush deepen.

"Now, now, let Prudence get home and feed before we start to ask her about her adventure with Nathan Frazer," Mary said, and gave Prudence a knowing look.

They bustled up the street and arrived in Mary's homely private parlor where a kettle of steaming water was poured into a hip bath, a screen put around and Prudence allowed to bathe. After which she was fed a large bowl of mutton stew. When she was comfortable and full, Prudence settled down and told Mary and the girls from *The Two Puddings* of her adventures.

As most of the Navy fleet was out at sea, trade in *The Two Puddings* was slow that evening, so the girls took it in turns to see to customers and Mary let Moses keep an eye on the bar. They were all enthralled by Prudence's story.

"Nathan and I are to be married in St Paul's as soon as he returns," she concluded firmly.

"That's lovely." Mary cooed, wiping a tear from her eyes. "We always did love a happy ending."

All heads nodded in agreement.

"When will that be?" Mary asked still mopping her eyes.

"Two weeks, er – maybe – th – three. You must all come to the wedding."

"We wouldn't miss it for the riches of the Indies, would we, girls?"

"And if that Reverend Truman says anything about us being in the church, I'll tell him to take his custom to *The Mermaid*," Ruby said to peals of laughter.

"You had better go and see Goodwife Trudy, to get her started on your wedding gown. I saw that she had a beautiful pink blush silk just in that would suit your color perfectly," Lucy said. "Two weeks'll go quick enough, even three, Prue. You don't want to be married in the buff."

Peals of laughter again. She gave a wan smile, remembering her attire during the mock wedding on *The Fallen Angel*.

"How's Louis?" Prudence asked, thinking to change the subject.

"Walking about like he fought a war single-handed," Mary replied. "Sporting a lovely black eye, he is, and a couple of cracked ribs by the way he winces from time to time. He's been telling the town how he gave Nathan a drubbing."

"That's ridiculous."

"Everyone knows that, Prue, but Louis had to salvage what he could of his pride," Mary said, with a wry look on her face.

"I suppose that there's a lot of gossip around the town, about Nathan's fight with Louis and me being taken on *The Fallen Angel*," Prudence said glumly.

Ruby opened her mouth to say something, but Mary shot her a hard look and answered, "Not that much, really. This is Port Royal after all."

Prudence sighed.

"Now, girls, that'll do for now," Mary said, clapping her hands. "Trade's picking up, so you had better go and earn a crust while I take care of our "soon to be married" young lady."

The girls went out into the parlor, kissing Prudence as they passed. Prudence looked across at Mary, who had taken up her knitting.

"I expect Lady Morris must have laughed until her sides split when she heard I had been taken by Diablo Ted."

Mary continued to clatter the needles across each other. "I dare say she did." she agreed airily.

"Come on, Mary, you know everything that goes on in Port Royal. Don't try to pretend that you haven't heard what she has been saying about me."

Mary rested the coil of raveled knitting wool on her lap and looked at Prudence.

"Don't you care what that bitch says. She a worse whore than any of my girls and the entire town knows it. And that's all I have to say on the matter," Mary said, indicating the subject was closed by resuming her knitting.

Prudence yawned. "Nathan and I will be married soon and that should put an end to the gossip."

"Will you stay here?" Mary asked.

"I really don't know," Prudence answered, grateful for the change of subject. She blushed again. "We didn't talk much about the future on the island."

"I don't suppose you did," Mary chuckled. "Not alone with Nathan Frazer for three days."

Prudence looked down at her hands, cheeks flaming and then yawned again.

Mary put down her knitting. "It's bed for you, my girl," she said in a motherly way, getting up and pouring hot milk and rum into a tall glass.

Ten minutes later with the rum having its desired effect, Prudence lay in the familiar room with the sounds of Port Royal drifting in through the open window.

Two weeks. It seems like a lifetime, Prudence thought, as sleep drifted over her. Only three days ago, she had slept in Nathan's arms, warm and loved, and now she was back in the room next to Mary's, alone.

He loves me and wants to marry me. He has to follow Edward. It is his duty to his country. He is that sort of man, honest and trustworthy. I will just have to wait until Nathan comes back.

Maybe then they would go back to England. Prudence smiled, thinking of introducing him to Uncle Ezra as her husband. She giggled quietly to herself in the dark. *Travel half the world to marry one man and come back married to another. How the county would talk. Let them. I'll be married and to the son of an earl.*

"Why should you, son of an earl, marry Prudence Stone – you've probably set your sights

higher than a parson's penniless niece."

Prudence pushed aside what Edward said. She concentrated on Nathan's words of love.

She ran her hands down her body remembering Nathan's magic touch. Two weeks seemed like a lifetime, but, as Lucy said, it would soon go.

I had better see Goodwife Trudy tomorrow and look at that blush silk, was Prudence last thought, before she finally gave into sleep and Nathan returned to her in her dreams.

Chapter Nineteen

Henrietta strolled listlessly along down Thames Street towards the docks.

"Get a move on, you, stop dragging your feet. I am going to the slave sale you know, Nero. I might see what I can get for you," she said with a low snarl. "I wonder what I'd get for that skinny kitchen slave, Ruth, you're so fond of."

The whites of Nero's eyes showed clear, as he gasped and looked up at his mistress.

Henrietta sniffed. "It is a pity you don't look as interested when I send for you."

Nero dropped his eyes, mumbled something and picked up his pace.

"That is better, you ungrateful African."

She stopped by the quay and acknowledged a number of merchants assembled for the sale.

Mr. Jones came waddling over to her. He sank in a low bow.

"Dear lady, you honor us with your presence today. Are you looking for anything in particular?" he asked, mopping the sweat from his brow.

"Non, *Monsieur*. I thought I would see the going price for a healthy male to work on the plantations," Henrietta said, with a smirk seeing Nero wring his hands.

"You look as beautiful as ever Lady Morris, but a little, how can I say it—"

Henrietta drew her mouth in and narrowed her eyes.

"Err—melancholy," the slave auctioneer finished, flourishing the handkerchief across his florid cheeks.

Henrietta put her hand on his arm and looked up at him.

"I tell you frankly, Port Royal is not what it used to be," she said running her fingers across her breasts and having the satisfaction of seeing Jones's eyes follow them.

She sighed and gazed wistfully out to the harbor. "The navy is out of port chasing the Spanish." She smiled at Mr. Jones and licked her lips. "Many of the daring adventurers who made the place so interesting are now swinging in the breeze on Deadman's Cay. I am afraid Port Royal is becoming, of all things, respectable."

"But, dear Lady Morris there are still fortunes be made in these waters for a fast ship and a daring captain as long as they stay inside the law." He took hold of her hand and kissed it slowly. "We merchants don't want to lose the profit we make from our sugar and tobacco to cutthroats and thieves. I hear that Sir George may be recalled to London?"

"My dear husband is sorely missed by Lord Melrose," she said with a hollow laugh. "As he has explained to the Admiralty, it is not possible to bring all the pirates to heel as easily as they would like."

Mr. Jones looked as if he was about to leave and Henrietta took hold of his arm again.

"But I must confess it would be good to go back to London and the court, to be seen in society again, to shine, like in the old days. Ah—the Restoration Court of King Charles, the Merry Monarch. 'E is dead now and 'is brother James is wandering the Continent. More's the pity." The slave trader looked nervously in the direction of Sergeant Burton who was thankfully out of earshot. "The new King and his queen are po-faced and dull," Henrietta said with a curled lip. "By all accounts their court is anything but merry."

She leaned towards Jones who arched away from her slightly. She saw several men behind him look down her gaping neckline. It gratified her.

She had only conceived once, a long time ago, and had never fed a child, so she was

able to give the impression that she was in her late thirties, ten years shy of her real age.

"I must attend to my business, Lady Morris." Mr. Jones told her, replacing his hat and taking his leave of her.

Henrietta stood under the shade and watched as the first few slaves were brought out.

"My lady," a low voice said beside her.

Henrietta blinked, then realizing that it was a handsome junior officer speaking to her, she put on a provocative smile. "Lieutenant Fisher, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"At your service, ma'am." He doffed his hat and swept her quite an elegant bow, for a seaman.

Henrietta had noticed him before. He was in his early thirties and had that rugged workmanlike look about him that Henrietta sometimes found appealing in men. His large calloused hand took hers as he raised it to his lips.

"Might I say you're looking very well, ma'am, that color suits you perfectly," he said as his lips lingered a little longer on her hand than propriety would have thought proper.

"You may, and where, might I ask, are you off to in such a 'urry, Lieutenant Fisher?"

"I am on my way to *The Two Puddings* to see Miss Stone."

Henrietta splayed her hand on her breast. "The poor lamb. Such a shock for someone of Miss Stone's sheltered background to be abducted by the notorious Diablo Ted. I wept for 'ow thinking of the fate worse than death she must 'ave suffered on that ship with all those men. I doubt her ready recall of Bible verses 'elped 'er much, *n'est-ce-pas?* I can't tell you 'ow I felt when she arrived back three weeks ago, having been rescued by the brave Nathan Frazer."

Fisher nodded. "Not many men could get a woman off a pirate ship unmolested and halt the brigands' progress to boot."

"*Mai oui*, and 'e is a naval commander working for the Crown. I was so pleased that 'e returned 'er to us I invite the dear girl for afternoon refreshments, so she can unburden 'erself to someone who care for her like a sister."

She looked sideways under her lashes at Fisher. "I suspected that she is very taken with the 'andsome commander, although I am sure 'e behaved like a perfect gentleman."

Fisher raised one eyebrow high but said nothing.

Henrietta pressed her lips together as she felt her anger and hatred rise within her. At Nathan, for rejecting her and at Prudence for being young and beautiful.

"Reluctant though I am to leave your company, dear lady, I have to deliver a letter to Miss Stone from Commander Frazer." Fisher kissed her hand again slowly. Then my time is my own and yours, beautiful lady, to command."

Henrietta fixed a smile on her face.

A letter from Frazer to Prudence telling her of his undying love no doubt.

Henrietta thought fast. "*Mais oui*, what a coincidence, I am just on my way to call on Miss Stone to see 'ow the dear child is. I will deliver Frazer's letter."

"A happy coincidence indeed. I will accompany you." Fisher said, offering his arm.

"I don't think that is wise. Miss Stone is still shocked after 'er terrible ordeal." Henrietta said and managed a demure look. "Why don't you give me the letter and you can, 'ow you say, wet your whistle in *The Bosun's Rest*. Then take refreshments with me after noon? I would love to 'ear about you exploits on the 'igh seas and 'ow you managed to capture the notorious pirate Diablo Ted and 'is crew." She gave a delicate shiver, took hold of his arm and squeezed. "I am sure that you, Lieutenant Fisher, 'ad a big part in it."

"I'm sure you are right, Ma'am, women know about these things. I will present myself at three if that suits you."

Henrietta inclined her head, showing that would be perfect, and took the letter from Fisher.

"I look forward to your company Lieutenant," she said as she stuffed the parchment into her purse. "Oh, although Sir George has gone north for a few days, we mustn't let decorum slip. You will be dressed in your uniform, won't you?"

"I wouldn't dream of presenting myself otherwise, ma'am," he said as he kissed her hand and took his leave.

A cruel smile spread across her face as she looked towards the podium. She glanced at Nero standing with his chin on his chest next to her.

"Maybe I won't sell you just yet, Nero."

Nero looked at her with a downturned mouth and huge eyes. Then he fell to his knees at her feet. "Thank you, Missy Pretty."

She brushed him aside and stepped forward.

"Jones," she called across the space. "Strip those two boys there, and let me 'ave a good look at them."

Nathan signaled for the marines to take their positions around the large town house which they did silently. He lay flat against the whitewashed boarding by the back door and waited.

Edward had led him a merry dance. For all his madness and delusions, the ex-curate of St Ethelwald's was not stupid and his ability to blend into society served him well.

In the dark, Nathan gave a grim smile. That was until tonight. Tom Page, the landlord of *The Bell*, a house for gentlemen on the outskirts of the town, had recognized Edward from his last visit.

Tonight Nathan vowed he would have Edward in custody, or his corpse to display in the town square. While he waited for Tom's signal, he allowed himself to dwell on the past five weeks.

When it was found that Edward had slipped away from *The Fallen Angel* Nathan was too dangerous to approach for two hours and only by Henry then.

They had recovered the maps and plans for the fortification of the northern colonies along with other sensitive information, no doubt supplied by the loose-tongued Governor of Jamaica. Now he was about to capture Edward.

It was to pursue Edward that Nathan had to leave Prudence so swiftly, too swiftly, Nathan realized, after *The Yarmouth* disappeared over the horizon. He knew that in his tearing hurry to get his hands on Edward he had left Prudence without really saying all the things he had intended to. And that stupid promise of two weeks. He knew it was foolish as soon as he opened his mouth and the words came out. Which is why he had spent all evening the day after *The Fallen Angel* was captured writing her a four-page letter.

You're a bloody fool, Frazer, he told himself not for the first time, remembering that he had still not exactly asked Prudence to marry him. When he had talked to her about it he had still been thick-headed, blabbering on about his honor rather than telling her that he would die rather than live a day without her.

He grinned again. Four pages! He could never recall writing a personal letter of such length. He had written reports and the like that went on to five or six. Even his

mother only warranted the occasional two pages and then it was mostly about ships and the like.

He had never considered himself a poetic man, preferring fact to fantasy. So he was surprised by what had flowed from his pen into the letter to Prudence. He imagined that lovable furrowed brow when she read it but he swore that he would kiss those lines away within the week now that Edward was soon to be captured.

The handle of the back door started to turn and Nathan withdrew the flintlock from his belt. Tom Page's head appeared out of the opened door and he signaled for Nathan to follow him.

"He's in number four, at the front," Page said to Nathan in a barely audible whisper.

Nathan nodded and led half the men with him into the house leaving those outside to fan out around the house.

"Remember what will befall you if you let Edward Matthews escape," he whispered to them as he passed them. The men took up positions as instructed, pistols cocked and ready, while Nathan mounted the stairs to the first floor.

Standing outside number four Nathan could hear a woman's voice giggle inside, intermingled with a man's guttural grunts.

Taking hold of the brass handle, Nathan turned it and opened the door slowly.

There was a single oil lamp illuminating the room and a curtain was draped halfway across to screen the bed from direct view. There were clothes everywhere and a sword and pistol lay on an upholstered chair by the window.

Peering around the corner of the curtain, he saw Edward on top of a squealing collection of arms, legs and petticoats. As his quarry's attention was elsewhere, Nathan was able to enter the room and creep over to the bed without being heard.

He stood over the two on the bed, pistol in hand. The girl, who despite her squeals and sighs, was looking exceedingly bored, opened her eyes and saw Nathan, cocked flintlock in hand, over Edward's shoulder. Her mouth opened wide but she continued to sigh and moan despite Nathan's interruption to her work.

He gave her a wide conspiratorial smile, put his index finger to his lips, produced a gold coin out of his top pocket and put it in his mouth. She winked back.

Nathan lowered the barrel of the pistol until it touched Edward's temple. "Excuse me, Reverend Matthews, for this untimely interruption in your care of this woman's spiritual needs. But when you married me and Prudence Stone six weeks ago, you forgot to sign the register."

Edward was still inside the whore, but all thought of carnal satisfaction had now evaporated and his mind now was sharp-focused on the barrel against his forehead, inches from his brain.

Nathan yanked him back and off the girl, who adjusted her clothes quickly and got off the bed. He spat the coin onto the floor; she retrieved it and darted for the door.

Nathan grabbed Edward around the throat with his arm and hauled him to his feet, holding him fast. He felt him strain as he realized who held the pistol to his head.

"Frazer."

"Indeed."

The troops outside, alerted by the whore running from the room, burst into the room, all with flintlocks ready.

"Reverend Edward Matthews, also known as Diablo Ted, I arrest you for treason against Their Majesties, King William and Queen Mary. You are also arrested for murder and piracy on the high seas. You will stand trial before Jamestown Assizes tomorrow by

the due processes of English law."

Edward's voice took on a mocking tone. "Aren't we the upright honorable servant of the crown? Arresting me, stand trial?" Edward moved in Nathan's grip and tried to twist his head, but Nathan forced him to remain as he was. "You bloody liar, you haven't chased me these thousand miles for King and country. You followed me because of Prudence and I know you would rather blow my brains out than hand me over to the Governor."

He certainly would. Nathan tightened his grip on Edward and strove to control his rising temper.

"Prudence's very beautiful, isn't she? With surprisingly large tits, don't you think, for a parson's niece?" Nathan could feel his finger taking on a will of its own. He overruled it.

"Nice crevice too," Edward continued, seemingly oblivious of the fact that he teetered on the edge of eternity. "Nice soft curls. Although I expect you already know that now, Frazer. I'm sure you have got to know Prudence intimately while you were in that jollyboat. Tell me, man to man, does she scream or just moan when you take her?"

"You are a contemptible bastard," Nathan forced out through gritted teeth as his finger tightened on the trigger again. "If I hear her name on your lips once more, so help me, witnesses or no, I'll kill you where you stand." Edward tensed and Nathan felt it. "Please struggle, Edward, my finger is itching to squeeze this trigger. Go on, Edward. Give me the pleasure of blowing your brains across this room. Resist arrest and fight me. Save the hangman a job."

Edward relaxed and slowly adjusted his hose.

With his finger still trembling on the trigger, Nathan let out a roar and threw Edward at the sergeant.

"Take him to the fort and lock him up. I want a guard on him at all times and at his trial in the morning. And I promise you, if he escapes, I'll be stringing you and your company up at noon tomorrow."

The sergeant snapped to attention and led Edward away.

As he reached the door Edward turned to face Nathan. "I had my hands all over her. But you aren't man enough to deal with me yourself, Frazer. The blood flowing through my veins is royal. What's yours? Scottish nobility, ha! They're nothing but a ragged bunch of heathens, the lot of them. If you had any honor, you would fight me like a man. But instead you have to hide behind your duty."

Edward's face contoured as he ranted, looking back at Nathan with tiny flecks of spit on his chin. His eyes flashed pure hate at Nathan. "Your sort are martyrs to duty. Duty has cut your balls off, Frazer. If you were a man instead of a duty-bound Scottish eunuch," he taunted, as he was bundled away.

Nathan stood, unable to move. Slowly he uncocked the pistol in his hand and shoved it into his belt, hard. Then he opened the window in the room and breathed the cool night air in deeply.

He heard the escort clatter down the wooden stair and out of the house. Nathan stood for a moment until he was sure they were some way from the house, and then strode down to where Tom Page stood still by the open back door.

Tom cleared his throat and stepped in front of Nathan as he reached the bottom of the stairs, and was about to say something but the words froze on his lips as he caught sight of Nathan's black expression. He stood aside and let him pass.

Nathan walked uphill through Jamestown in the bright morning sunlight, refreshed and determined.

Edward's words had thundered around in his head as he had walked off his temper the night before. Edward was right about one thing. He hadn't followed him thousands of miles for King and country. It was about Prudence. He had been up just after first light and had already stowed his belonging on *The Valiant* ready for its departure on the late tide, after the hanging. He had also stopped off at the Governor's house and demanded an audience, which the Governor still in his night attire, granted.

Nathan had requested permission to see Edward before his hanging, explaining that it was a matter of honor. The Governor had granted the request without compunction, realizing that Nathan would be going, permission or no.

Within half an hour of leaving the Governor, Nathan was purposefully rapping on the guardroom door and he strode in past the sergeant of the watch into Jamestown Prison.

He flourished the Governor's warrant at the sergeant, smudging the still-wet ink of the document.

"Where is Edward Matthews being held?" he demanded of the sergeant.

"We've stored 'im below." He indicated the prison's lower level that was reserved for the most dangerous felons. "Are you, Commander Frazer?"

"I have permission to see the prisoner."

The sergeant nodded and led Nathan down the slimy stairs to the lower level of the prison, along the dimly-lit corridor and towards the cell at the end. He unlocked the door and swung it back, allowing Nathan to enter.

After his eyes had adjusted to the light Nathan peered across to where Edward lay on the narrow pallet fixed to the wall. He thought for a moment that Edward hadn't heard the door open because he remained still, with his eyes closed and his arms casually behind his head.

Nathan motioned for the sergeant to stand by the wall.

Edward opened his eyes. "I thought to see you on the gallows."

"You will," Nathan said levelly. "But before then I have a matter to settle with you, man to man."

Nathan started to unbutton his jacket slowly. For all his studied nonchalance, a flicker of alarm shot across Edward's face as he looked fully at Nathan towering above him.

"I am grateful to you, Edward, for reminding me of my duty last night. I must confess that I was sorely tempted to pull the trigger and discharge that bullet through the deranged mass of jelly that passes for your brain."

Nathan coolly watched Edward fidget on the pallet, noting with satisfaction the other man's mounting unease. A hard smile crossed his face. "But as you once said to me, a quick death is too good for you. It is England that should hang you as just punishment for your treason." Edward sat up, paying attention to his words now. "It would have been wrong of me to take your life purely to satisfy my own honor."

Edward's change of position on the pallet brought him in the stream of light that cut through the gloom of the cell from the small grille above. His oddly colored eyes darted to the sergeant who stood impassively by the wall.

Nathan handed his jacket to the sergeant and started to roll up his sleeves. "You were quite right when you said I am a man of duty. I am, and as such I feel I should correct you on a couple of points about which you are woefully misinformed. Firstly, unlike you, I

don't care give a damn who Prudence's family are. It is my vowed intention to make her my wife as soon as I set foot in Port Royal."

He saw Edward give him a cynical look. Nathan's face grew harder and his mouth turned back into a cold smile.

"I am not cruel by nature. I have killed men in the line of duty but I have always acted as a gentleman should, with honor. As far as possible I have observed the rules of war, but your behavior towards Prudence has put you outside decent and civilized considerations. You would have raped her and then given her to your crew without a second thought." Nathan stopped and took a step forward. "I therefore have no qualms about torturing your final hours on earth with the truth."

"Truth! What truth?" spat Edward but Nathan continued as if Edward had not spoken.

"Secondly, the token you wear around your neck denotes that your mother was a whore in the *House* of Valois not a daughter from the *Family* of Valois. That token is by way of an official license given by the whorehouse to show the woman was under their protection."

Edward's face grew red. "Liar," he spat at Nathan and went to rise, but stopped and sank back seeing Nathan standing with his legs apart, flexing his fist.

"Your mother was a notorious whore, who was not content to cuckold her protector, holding him up for public ridicule, but compounded her infamy by robbing him as well. She was outlawed and ran off with a junior army officer who later abandoned her in England. In view of her unusual eyes she was called *la Maitresse au vert et bleu*. Your mother's still a whore, although these days she does it merely to entertain herself, as she is now the Governor of Jamaica's wife. "

Edward's face took on a hateful expression and he went to stand, but again seeing Nathan take a step forward, he sank back. "It's not true."

Nathan continued, "The royal blood you believe runs through your veins is just your own insane delusion."

"No," Edward roared and shot towards Nathan, his arms flying wildly. "Liar, liar!"

Nathan punched him in the mouth and then grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, pulling him up close.

"I swear by Almighty God, whom you will be meeting in less than four hours, Reverend Matthews, I speak the truth."

He threw Edward from him and he fell like a rag doll onto the stone floor. He slid himself across the cold flagstones and slumped against the wall wrapping his arms around himself and rocking back and forth. "'Snot so, "'snot so," he whimpered.

Nathan didn't answer him; he just stood and watched him.

"Sergeant, are you married?" Nathan asked, still with his eyes on Edward.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you love your wife?"

"That I do, sir. We were childhood sweethearts. Married as soon as 'er father gave consent, we did, sir. Twelve year it is now, four handsome lads we 'ave too."

Nathan's black looked lifted a tad as he heard the sergeant's tale of matrimonial bliss.

"What would you do, sergeant, if a man was to harm your wife? Say, tried to rape her, for instance."

Edward stopped his rocking and looked up, listening intently to Nathan's questions.

"Well now, sir, I can't say that I would rest until I had brought such a man under my

fist and pistol."

Nathan looked hard at Edward. "I agree with you, sergeant, and give my regards to your wife when you see her."

He took a step towards Edward, who tried to press himself into the wall. He was still hugging himself, but now looking at Nathan with terror in his eyes.

Nathan took another step and Edward started to whimper again, pawing the token at his throat. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. His eyes were wild with terror and lunacy, the truth of his birth finally letting the madness in his mind have full rein.

"Lastly, Edward, you said that I should fight you man-to-man, and I came down here to do just that, to bloody my fists on your face, to beat satisfaction out of you for your treatment of Prudence. I intended to thrash you for lying to her, for deceiving her, for betraying her, but most of all for daring to touch her as you did. I intended to beat you to a pulp before you met the hangman, but now I can't fight you man to man because," Nathan paused and then said with clear deliberation, so Edward could not fail to understand his words, "I no longer consider you a man and I will not sully my hands or my honor with you further."

Nathan bent forward and Edward shrank away. Nathan's hand shot out and ripped the silver locket from around Edward's neck. Edward screamed and snatched for it, but Nathan had already lifted it beyond his reach. Edward whimpered again and shuffled back to the wall.

"When I tell Prudence that you're dead, I want her to be in no doubt about it this time," Nathan said, as he retrieved his coat from the sergeant and dipped his head to go under the doorframe.

He stopped and glanced back at Edward who was now lying in a ball in the darkest corner of the cell. "You were right, Edward, you *can* torture a man, without laying a finger on him."

Prudence sat in her small room dry-eyed and resolute. She doubted she had any more tears left in her to cry. It had been just over seven weeks and Nathan had not returned.

After two weeks, Prudence had reminded herself that Nathan had said three at the most. After three, she tried to tell herself that he had been delayed and would return or at least send word soon.

When *The Conqueror* had returned four weeks ago with no word of Nathan other than he had left the fleet after the capture of *The Fallen Angel* and gone north to New England, the tears started to flow.

As she waited for his return she had told herself that he had meant what he said on the island and before. She pushed down her doubts and told herself firmly that Nathan did love her and he did want to marry her. It was true that he hadn't mentioned marriage until she brought the subject up, but when she did he had been so ardent in assuring her he meant to wed her that she had believed him.

She had even suffered a visit to Lady Morris, that she couldn't with politeness refuse, and skillfully sidestepped Henrietta's probing about her and Nathan, believing that he still loved her and would soon come back.

After seven weeks with no word, those doubts were returning and she could no longer ignore them. She had another problem.

Two weeks ago, she had started to feel queasy in the morning. She thought nothing

of it, putting it, down to the smell of cooking from the kitchen below. Yesterday and the day before she had been sick again on rising that morning and although it was mid-morning her stomach was still uneasy. She was never regular, but she should have had at least one monthly flow, if not two, in the past ten weeks and she had had none, and her breasts were tender. Prudence couldn't ignore the signs that pointed to the fact that she was with child.

The woman in her was happy and fulfilled that she was carrying Nathan's child. A child conceived in their love, well, her love at least.

She laid her hands on her still flat stomach. She already loved the small life within her, but because of the child, she could stay no longer in Port Royal.

It would be hard enough in England when she returned pregnant, but at least she could pretend that she had been married and hope that no one would find out. She could present herself as a respectable widow, keep house for her uncle and care for her child without disgrace.

If she stayed in Port Royal, she could not support herself and too many would guess the truth.

Difficult though it would be Prudence vowed that she would keep Nathan's baby. If that meant inventing a fictitious husband and telling a parcel of lies, so be it. She glanced across at the beautiful wedding dress of blush silk that Goodwife Trudy had made her. Hanging on the peg, it seemed to mock her.

Prudence struggled to her feet and, as her stomach seemed to be under control, she resumed packing the travel chest. There was a light knock on the door and Mary poked her head around. She spied the open chest and came fully into the room.

"It's true then, you've booked passage on the Prince of London?"

Prudence nodded, as tears stung the backs of her eyes.

"Why, Prue?" Mary said, coming over and putting her arm around the girl.

"Because I can't stay any longer."

"If it's the money, then don't y—"

"No, no, it's not the money," Prudence said, taking Mary's hands in hers and smiling as brightly as she could. "I know you'd let me stay for nothing, but I have to go fo—for other reasons."

Mary regarded Prudence with a raised eyebrow. "I don't suppose it has anything to do with the baby you're carrying?"

"How did you know?"

Mary gave her an indulgent smile. "Let me see, eight weeks ago you spent three days alone on an island with Nathan Frazer, who loves you. It doesn't take much imagination to guess how the two of you whiled away the time, plus, for the past three mornings you've been heaving your guts up in the privy."

One big, fat tear erupted and rolled sedately down Prudence's cheek. "You're right about the baby, Mary, but wrong about Nathan."

"But you said that he loved you and you were to be married."

"I know, but what men mean by love and what women mean, I now realize, are two quite different things."

"But, Prue, didn't Nathan ask you to marry him?" Mary asked

"I assumed he was about to, when he was dragged away by Briggs, but he never actually asked me. I now wonder if he ever meant to."

"But on the island?"

"Nathan said he would marry me then but only after I brought the subject up and

that was after we had—" Prudence broke off and looked at her hands. "And then he talked about his honor first, not wanting to marry me. He swore he did and I believed him at the time, but now I doubt he truly meant it."

Mary snorted. "Prue, a man like Nathan Frazer doesn't marry just for his honor. Surely he said something more."

"He said he loved me over and over but so did Edward and look what he did."

Mary looked severely at Prudence. "I won't allow you to compare Nathan with that devil Edward, who abused girls in the town so badly that many of them still wake at night screaming." Prudence blinked with surprise at this piece of information. "I'm sorry, my pet, I hoped never to have to tell you that. But no woman ever suffered under Nathan's hands, quite the opposite—" Mary stopped and coughed. "Anyhow, I am sure Nathan will return."

"Then why has he sent me no word?"

Mary shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Mary, but you said yourself, men are only after "one thing" and not to trust any of them."

"That was different." She retook Prudence's hands again and looked her earnestly. "Don't you love Nathan?"

"I will love him to the day I die. But I will not delude myself again as I did with Edward. I am determined to face the truth no matter how painful. I don't even blame him. Why would he an earl's son, want to marry me? No doubt Nathan will be upset to find me gone when he does return but I'm sure he will find solace elsewhere. After all I didn't really know Nathan. We all thought he was a plantation owner and now we know he was really the younger son of an earl, a naval commander and working in disguise for the Crown in the Indies."

"But, Prue—"

Prudence smiled as she suddenly remembered the feel of Nathan's strong arms around her. Talking about him to Mary had conjured up his image in her mind and her body ached for him. Sorrow swept through her and tears welled in her eyes again. It was true he had been attentive and it was clear that he was attracted to her, but—

She smiled wanly. "I can't blame Nathan for being a man just like any other."

"Prue."

Prudence smiled again, as tears shone in her eyes. "As you see, Mary, I'm not bitter, just heartbroken."

"Wait a few more weeks."

Prudence put her hand on her stomach and smiled, "In a few weeks I won't be able to hide the child I carry and then gossip will be my undoing. If I arrive home a pregnant widow, none will question who the father is."

"I can't argue with that," Mary said, shrugging her shoulders.

"I gave myself in love to Nathan and now, like thousands of women before me, I will have to bear the consequences," Prudence said as she resumed packing the small chest. Mary sat in silence while she did.

"Is that old Black Jack's Bible?" Mary asked as Prudence picked up the embossed book with a brass clasp on it.

Prudence stroked her hand lovingly over the worn leather cover. "Yes. I have tried to draw some comfort in the passages Uncle Jack wrote in his letter, but I can't find the sense in them. They obviously meant something to him, because they were underscored in red, but their meaning is lost on me. There is no theme to them. They seem to be passages

at random." Prudence shut the chest.

"You've forgotten to pack the blush silk Mistress Trudy made."

"I'm not taking it. Give it to one of the girls. It will double as a ball gown. I'll never wear it," Prudence said knowing that there would now never be a wedding for her.

She stood for a long moment staring forlornly at the small chest that contained all her belongings, then, with a furrowed brow of concentration and determination, she turned to Mary. "Could you ask Moses to take my chest down to the *Prince of London*? It sails on the morning tide."

Mary pursed her lips tight together and before her own tears fell, nodded and left the young girl standing alone in the middle of the bare room.

Prudence turned her head towards the shimmering silk dress, still hanging on the peg, and then threw herself on the bed and sobbed.

Chapter Twenty

Nathan jumped ashore before the gangplank of *The Invincible* was set. He was dressed in a new naval uniform and was smartly saluted by the ranks as he raced up Lime Street toward *The Two Puddings*. It had been over eight weeks since he had held Prudence in his arms and he was eager to make up time. He burst through the door of the tavern and was confronted by Mary's hostile glare from behind the bar.

"Look what the trade winds blow in," she said slamming a glass down.

"Where's Prudence?" Nathan asked, perplexed at the landlady's hostility. He looked up towards the landing, hoping that any moment she would come through one of the doors above.

"Oh, you still remember her name, do you?" Mary said, digging her fists into her hips and renewing her glare.

Nathan was cross now. He strode over to face Mary. "What do you mean? Of course I remember her name. I've scourged the seaman of *The Invincible* day and night to get back. I've thought about her every minute of the last eight weeks. We are to be married."

"Well, 'tis a great pity she's gone then."

Nathan towered over the narrow bar, "Gone! What do you mean gone?"

Mary took an involuntary step back and swallowed hard.

"Back to England."

"Why?"

"Because she thought you had deserted her."

Nathan's face changed from red rage to total confusion.

"But I wrote to her, Mary. I wrote four pages telling her how much I loved her and that I couldn't wait until we were married."

Mary came around the bar and stood next to him. "Then she never received it. Prudence had not a word, other than you had gone to New England and there was no knowing when you were to return. Cried herself to sleep for days she did."

A ripple of pain shot through him.

"Oh, Nathan, she only sailed two days ago on the *Prince of London*."

Nathan was looked thoughtful for a second, and then asked, "Is *The Conqueror* in port?"

"Docked yesterday."

"Good. Get me a room ready, Mary, and a bath and hot meal at six."

He swung on his heel and stamped towards the door.

"Where are you off to?" Mary asked.

"I'm going to have a word with Lieutenant Fisher," Nathan replied with a grim expression and a tight mouth.

Within fifteen minutes of leaving *The Two Puddings* Nathan was on board *The Conqueror*. The crew snapped to attention and pointed him in the direction of the officers' quarters at the stern.

He burst into the small cabin to find only a young midshipman cleaning buttons.

The young man, with only the wisps of a juvenile beard, jumped up rigidly and saluted Nathan so fast he nearly took his own eye out.

Nathan acknowledged him. "Lieutenant Fisher?"

"He's at Fort Charles, sir," the midshipman said with a cultured accent and only a hint of a youthful crack in it.

He turned to leave.

"Begging your parson, Commander," Nathan turned back at being addressed, "but with you only recently been returned to port, you wouldn't have heard. Lieutenant Fisher won the lady's purse."

"The lady's purse?"

"Oh yes. Some of the officers put in a guinea each as a wager on which of them could get between Lady Morris thighs before the end of the month and Fisher won three weeks ago," the youth continued with a smile denoting hero worship of his superior officer who had played jiggy-jig with the Governor's wife.

"Did he now?" Nathan said as his brows drew together. "I must remember to congratulate him when I see him."

The midshipman opened his mouth to impart some other man-to-man details about the winning of the purse, but thought better of it when he saw the suppressed fury on his superior's face.

Nathan stormed up to the barracks and was informed that Lieutenant Fisher was in the officers' hall. He crossed the court and kicked open the door.

It was late in the afternoon and several officers were in there smoking and drinking. Nathan saw Fisher over by the far wall lounging in a large leather chair. A couple of men went to greet Nathan, but their greetings died on their lips as they saw him. All conversation stilled. Fisher looked up at Nathan's entrance and saw him look hard at him. He jumped up trying not to look nervous, but failing.

Nathan covered the space between them and waited while Fisher buttoned his coat and stood to attention.

"C-Co— Commander Frazer, it is—it's good to see you safely returned," Fisher said sounding like the galley boy. The lieutenant swallowed hard.

"Fisher, the lad on *The Conqueror* told me that you have won the 'lady's purse' and I've come to offer you my congratulation." There were beads of sweat on Fisher's forehead, but his shoulders relaxed a little. He let out a long breath.

"Well, thank you, sir." He now sagged with relief. He looked around at the company whose eyes were riveted on the two men. They, too, were more at ease.

Nathan smiled, and Fisher gave Nathan a comradely grin in return, "It was a hard job, sir, but in true naval tradition I saw it through to the end."

"Did you indeed? And did you, in true naval tradition, see the letter I gave you to deliver to Miss Stone through to the end as well?"

The beads of sweat broke out on Fisher's brow again, this time trickling down his temple.

"I-I—" he stammered as Nathan's hands shot out and grabbed him around the throat, choking off his air.

"Did you?"

Fisher gurgled. "I can't br—"

"What did you do with my letter, Fisher?"

Fisher was desperately pulling at Nathan's hands but they did not budge just continued to compress his windpipe.

"I gave it to Lady Morr – "

"Why did you do that?" Nathan exploded at him and tightened his hands again. The rest of the men in the room were frozen. None came forward to assist their choking comrade, lest Nathan turn his anger on them.

"I met her by chance on the quay and she said she was visiting Miss Stone and would deliver the letter for me," Fisher spluttered.

Nathan let his grip slacken and the lieutenant gulped in air. "The only reason why the Governor's wife would visit Miss Stone would be to stick a hatpin in her eye. And you have given *my* personal letter to Miss Stone to that trollop."

"I'm sorry, sir, she said she would give it to Miss Stone."

"But she was lying. Because while you were winning your gold by poking her with your pizzle, my letter was, more than likely, laying in ashes in Henrietta's firegrate."

"I am sorry." Fisher groveled.

"You will be. I should have you stripped of rank for insubordination and failure to carry out the orders of a senior officer. Not to mention having you strung up for dereliction of duty."

Fisher went white. "Sir, I –"

"Yes, I know, you're sorry. Now I'm going to tell you how you can save your career, your reputation and possibly your life." Fisher nodded like a rag doll being shaken. "You're going to go back to your ship, sober up your crew, set the sails trim and if you want to ever be received in polite society again you had better be ready to sail on the dawn tide."

"Sir," The lieutenant managed to salute, despite teetering on tiptoes.

Nathan threw Fisher from him and marched out of the room. Squinting in the bright afternoon sun, Nathan turned towards the Governor's residence at the far end of the fort.

Henrietta had just woken from her afternoon nap. She was lying naked on the bed while David and Jonathan fanned her with large feather fans. She slept without clothes in the afternoon because of the heat and it gave her pleasure to know that the two young men she had bought looked on her slumbers. Also, if she got too hot, they could sponge her down with cool rosewater.

She was mightily pleased with her two new slaves. They had taken to their duties with gusto, doing exactly as she asked, with enthusiasm. As she was fond of them both she had taken to entertaining them together.

David offered her a negligée as she rose and Jonathan stood ready, should she wish his services in any way. She smiled at them.

"You 'ave been good boys, she said pinching their cheeks. "You can amuse yourselves for an hour or two before supper."

The two young men bowed and left.

As she picked up her comb there was a knock at the door and her maid Annie came in, eyes downcast.

"Sorry to disturb you, my lady," she said.

"*Oui*," Henrietta said sharply looking down her nose.

"Commander Frazer is outside and wishes to speak to you, my lady."

Henrietta felt her stomach flutter. Frazer has come here to see her? Thank God, she hadn't dressed yet.

"Tell 'im I will be only *un moment* and show 'im up in two minutes."

Annie curtsied and shot back through the door.

Nathan Frazer here. Henrietta remembered the words he had written in his letter to Prudence and felt her face flush.

A chit of a girl couldn't hope to hold a man like Nathan Frazer. She smiled smugly and undid the top ribbon of her negligee.

Thank heavens, Miss Holier-than-thou had sailed for England before Nathan returned. She would console him and show him what he's been denying himself all this time.

There was a light tap on the door and Nathan was shown in.

Since he had left Fisher, Nathan's red hot anger had turned to ice-cold fury. It was obvious now what had happened. Henrietta had the good fortune to stumble upon Fisher, who had an over-active groin and an under-active brain. After the offer of a quick fumble and dip and the gold from the wager, Fisher had been persuaded to part with Nathan's letter.

As he walked into Henrietta's over-scented boudoir, he was ready to blast her but seeing her standing with only a thin covering of silk over her body his tactical mind asserted itself over his temper. He waited to see her reaction.

Seeing her now only yards from him, there was no mistake. The same eyes and shape of the face, even the hand gestures were the same. Until he heard about the letter, he had been undecided about whether or not to tell her of Edward's death. Although he had sworn to pay her back for humiliating Prudence on the night of the ball, he thought that telling Henrietta that her only child had just been hanged was maybe even too cruel a revenge. But not now. Seeing her with that glint of hardness in her face, Nathan doubted if she would even care. He looked her up and down slowly. She smiled seductively at him, then extended her hand for him to kiss.

"*Monsieur* Frazer. I am so pleased to see you are safe returned," she said. "Too what do I owe this very pleasant visit?"

Nathan bowed over her hand, but didn't touch it with his lips. He didn't think his stomach could take it. As he raised his eyes, he saw that Henrietta was bare beneath the silk. He met her eyes.

"I believe you might have something of mine."

He saw her eyes flash alarm, then return to their guarded coolness. She drew her brows together, showing the deep furrows on her forehead, and pretended to be confused.

"My letter to Miss Stone."

He saw her eyes flicker to her writing desk.

God, she still had it. He imagined Henrietta reading his words of love and gloating that she had prevented Prudence from reading them.

Henrietta recovered. "Ah yes, I said that I would deliver it to her, but she was out and as you may know she has sailed for England."

"I sent the letter six weeks ago. She only left the day before yesterday."

Henrietta fanned herself and ran her hands over the tops of her breasts. "After that it went clear out of my head."

In spite of his mounting anger, Nathan kept his voice as even as he could. "Can I have it back, Henrietta?"

"I don't know where it is just now, that 'as slipped my mind too," she said with a sweet smile. They both knew she was lying. "Besides Miss Stone has gone, what could you want with it now?"

Nathan lifted one side of his mouth and gave her a heart-stopping smile. He took a step nearer and picked up the ribbons holding her negligée together, turning them around in his hand.

"Your see, my dear, I am quite embarrassed by it now, as it was written in the heat of the moment so to speak." His eyes bore into her as he tried to muster a false desire into them. "I am like that you know, passionate and impetuous."

"It is safe with me," she said breathlessly. She took hold of his hands. "I suspect Miss Stone fancied 'erself in love with you. What woman would not, *monsieur*," she said with a flutter of eyelashes. "Miss Stone was innocent and wouldn't understand that you were merely being gallant."

Damn the bitch. She had read it.

"I would think for Miss Stone's sake it is better that fate 'as intervened and she did not receive your letter. She has been 'urt enough already by that fiancé of 'ers."

Nathan forced the smile to remain. "I'm sure you're right, Henrietta. But," he pulled the ribbons apart, opened the front of her negligee, and gazed down at her body, "if you give it to me, then I'll give something to you."

She glanced down at herself, then, without retying the ribbons, smiled and walked to the writing desk.

Nathan had to hand it to her, for a woman in her late forties, as she must be, since she abandoned Edward twenty-five years ago, her body was still good. Many a woman half her age would be proud of it. But it repelled Nathan. Not so much for its form, but for the twisted, evil spirit it contained. She turned back to him with his letter in her hand. He went to meet her and took it from her, stuffing it firmly into his left breast pocket over his heart.

"Now, Nathan, it is your turn."

He reached his hand inside the other breast pocket and pulled out Edward's pendant, holding it aloft. He watched her focus on it, then, as she recognized it, the blood drained momentarily from her face. She snatched at it, but Nathan pulled it away.

"Where did you get that?"

"I ripped it from Diablo Ted's neck after I captured him."

"Where did he get it?"

Nathan looked at her hard, all pretense at passion and desire ripped from his face.

"He's had it all his life. Of course he wasn't always known as Diablo Ted. You might have heard him called the Reverend Edward Matthews, Prudence's ex-fiancé who was presumed dead, but who was very much alive." Nathan paused. "That was until he was hung two weeks ago in Jamestown for piracy." He saw her blanch again, and swung the silver object into his palm, looking at it intensely. "It was left in his basket by the mother who abandoned him on the Bishop of Spalding's doorstep twenty-five years ago." He snapped his eyes back to Henrietta, and she took a step back seeing their hardness. "Or should I more correctly say, when *you* abandoned him on the Bishop of Spalding's doorstep twenty-five years ago."

She grabbed the negligee across her, holding it tight. She looked back at him, all seduction forgotten.

"That, *monsieur*, is—is—" She waved her hands and groped for words. "Preposterous. Twenty-five years ago, I was a mere girl and had never set foot in England."

"You are a liar and you were in England twenty-five years ago. Prudence told me the earl you described as meeting on your visit to Lincoln had died in a riding accident five years before you were supposed to have been entertained by him. You must have been pregnant and penniless when you arrived after fleeing the House of Valois with your lover. I presume he abandoned you when the money ran out."

"I suppose that dandy Frenchman, Louis, told you of my life in Paris?" Nathan gave a sharp nod of his head. "What if I did? You can't prove any of it."

"I don't need or want to prove it. It is of no interest to me what you did before, or the sordid life you have led since. But because of your monstrous cruelty to Prudence in stealing my letter to her and allowing her to think that I had abandoned her, I thought I would tell you that the boy you left in a basket all those years ago is now swinging in the wind from a gibbet in Jamestown. Although knowing you as much as I would ever want to, I doubt that this knowledge would have the slightest effect on you."

He gave Henrietta a cold look. She matched it.

"You seem very sure, *monsieur*, of these scandalous allegations. 'Ow could you think this Edward has any connection to me?"

"Because, Henrietta, if you remember, he had your eyes, one blue, one green."

Henrietta staggered and put her hand out to steady herself.

"Eyes?" She looked at Nathan. "It was only days old when I left. I have no idea what its eyes were like. I know I nearly died in the birthing. In fact I was about to leave it in the ditch, when the miller came along and took me to his home."

Nathan felt bile rise in his throat.

"The miller's wife washed and fed it. She even offered to take the wretched child." Henrietta pulled a superior face, forgetting that she would have left the new-born baby to the countryside predators. "But I didn't want to leave it with a couple of peasants. So I stole away at night and took the child with me to the nearby town, leaving it on the good bishop's doorstep." She looked hard at Nathan. "And I didn't leave the pendant, I lost it."

Her story should have caused him to pity her, but it didn't. Nathan had watched her face as she recounted her tale of twisted motherhood and it had showed no remorse, no concern, no pain.

Nathan shoved the small silver item back in his pocket and came up closer to Henrietta. His eyes bore down into her, as he took her face in his hand and forced her to look at him. "Your son also had the same shape face as you. But the main way I know he is of your blood is that you both have the same hell-bound, poisonous souls."

Nathan pushed her roughly away and straightened the front of his coat.

"I'll bid you good day, madam. Don't call your maid, I'll see myself out."

Chapter Twenty-One

Prudence made it up on deck just before the end of the forenoon watch. She was sharing a minute cabin with the pleasant but overly chatty wife of a sugar plantation manager, Mistress Talbot. Actually she was grateful to Mistress Talbot as, after the goodwives' enquiry into the whereabouts of Mr. Stone produced a flood of tears, the kindly body had concluded that Prudence was recently widowed and told their fellow travelers, thereby saving Prudence from having to lie outright.

Mistress Talbot had also joked about Prudence having very poor 'sea legs' which explained away the bouts of sickness that she still experienced.

The Prince of London had made heavy weather yesterday in a tropical squall and the master of the ship, whose profit depended on a swift passage, was less than his usual jovial self today, giving Prudence the barest of greetings as she passed him on the deck. Having been confined below deck in the recent bad weather most of Prudence's fellow passengers were on deck stretching their legs. They greeted her cordially as she settled herself at the bow on a neatly coiled rope.

Children ran about enjoying a game of tag while their mothers called for them to take care on the wet deck.

Despite her own heartache, Prudence smiled at them. They reminded her of the class she had left behind in Port Royal. She wondered what sex the child inside her was. It didn't matter. She loved it, girl or boy. She loved the baby because it was Nathan's.

The familiar pang of need rose in her and she pushed it aside again. She thought that it might have lessened now she was on her way home, but if anything her pain was worse. She supposed that now all chance of Nathan coming back to her was gone, and the full weight of her grief fell on her.

The now daily tears started to form and Prudence determinedly looked out to sea, hoping the stiff breeze would dry them before they fell. As she did she saw a full set of sails on the horizon.

The ship's lookout saw them too and shouted to the captain who put a spyglass to his eye. Everyone held their breath. *The Prince of London* was a large squarerigger with a full cargo hold, just the type of ship pirates looked for.

Captain Howard snapped the telescope shut and signaled for a flag of greeting to be hoisted. He addressed the gathered passengers.

"No need to fret, ladies and gentlemen, it's a navy ship. I can't be sure, but by the look of her rig, it's *The Conqueror*. They are coming up fast, so we should see properly in a while."

Prudence shaded her eyes and looked back to the horizon. Captain Howard was right. Already the ship could be seen more clearly.

Half an hour later *The Conqueror* was almost alongside. The full company of *The Prince of London* had their eyes trained on the smart navy vessel gaining on them. Captain Howard hailed the captain of *The Conqueror* and all on deck heard there was someone from *The Conqueror* wishing to board.

Prudence stood watching the exchange, as intensely as any on deck but felt her blood drain away as she recognized the tall figure swinging midair towards *The Prince of London*.

She wanted to move, but found that she had lost control of her body. So she just

stood frozen as Nathan landing lightly on the top the main deck landing only feet from her. His eyes scanned around, then found her.

Prudence feasted her eyes on him as her body awoke with the longing and need she had tried unsuccessfully to subdue for the past eight weeks. He was everything she remembered and more.

His time at sea had tanned his skin further, highlighting his expressive eyes which were now riveted on her. He was clean-shaven and his rich, dark-brown hair was caught back in a controlling bow. He was wearing his dress naval uniform, under which a crisp white shirt and cravat could be seen.

Nathan stepped forward, then spotted Captain Howard. He bowed slightly to the captain not taking his eyes off Prudence as he did.

"Captain, thank God, we caught you."

Captain Howard looked alarmed. "Is there anything amiss, sir, that the navy should be chasing us? Are we in danger?"

"No, it is just that you carry a cargo very precious to me of which I must take immediate charge."

Captain Howard looked puzzled, and Nathan gave him a quick glance before his eyes locked with Prudence's. "I refer to my fiancée, Miss Stone, captain."

"Your fiancée?"

Nathan stepped forward and stood in front of Prudence, looking down at her as he gaze searched her face.

"I thought she was a widow?" A woman's voice said from the side of him.

"Hopefully not before we have had a long and fruitful married life together," Nathan answered smiling down at Prudence.

"That's all well and good Captain er—" Captain Howard interjected.

"Commander Frazer," Nathan informed him.

"Er—hum, Commander Frazer, but this lady has booked passage on my ship and I am responsible for her safety."

Prudence shook herself and felt her anger rise. Much as she wanted to throw herself in Nathan's arms, she stopped herself. He had said he would be back and when he wasn't she had cried herself to sleep for weeks, thinking he didn't love her and had left her. In all that time, there was not one word, not one single word from him. And now he swung back and demanded that the good captain of *The Prince of London* hand her over as if she were a piece of cargo.

How dared he just turn up and tell everyone that they were engaged when he seemed to have forgotten that fact for over eight weeks? Did Nathan just think that he could breeze back and everything would be all right? Did he think that he could just take her back to Port Royal and everything would be as it was?

Prudence remembered the beautiful blush silk dress that she had left, along with her hopes and dreams, at *The Two Puddings*. Her temper boiled a little higher.

Her look of incredulity changed and a small furrow appeared on her forehead.

"I am afraid my fiancée is upset with me for leaving her without a word. I said I would return in two to three weeks and that was over two months ago. So she is rightly cross with me."

Nathan smiled lovingly at Prudence, who was utterly furious rather than merely

cross. He stretched out his arms as if to encircle her, but she moved out of reach.

"Even so, commander, we only have your word that you are who you say you are and this lady seems reluctant to accompany you back on board *The Conqueror*. I can't just go handing over young women to naval officers merely because they demand it of me. For all I know Miss Stone's father might be waiting for her in Southampton and it is I not you, Commander Frazer, who would have to account for the young woman's forcible removal from my ship. That, sir, is piracy."

Nathan's face lost its affable expression. "I want you to understand, Captain, that I will not leave this ship without my fiancée."

Captain Howard turned to Prudence. "Madam, is this man your fiancé, as he claims, and do you want to leave this ship and go with him?"

Prudence's mouth dropped open to answer the captain of *The Prince of London*. When, like a shot from a cannon, Nathan swiftly encircled her in his arms and pressed his lips on hers, kissing her hard and silencing her reply.

She hadn't known what she was going to say in answer to the captain's question but whatever half-formed answer had begun to gather in her head immediately evaporated, as Nathan clasped her to him and kissed her as she had never been kissed before.

She clung to him, her fingers gripping his arm, heedless of her bonnet that had fallen off and tumbled onto the deck. His whole body kissed her as he held her tight against him. His emotion flowed through that kiss and Prudence knew that whatever reason he had for not coming back it was not because he no longer loved or wanted her. Her arms went around on to his upper arms and she kissed him with every ounce of her emotions. As she ceased resisting and her anger vanished Nathan held her even closer, if that were possible, as if he were trying to fuse their bodies together.

To feel herself in Nathan's arms again was all Prudence knew and all she wanted to know for timeless moments. Then he released her lips.

Her eyes fluttered open and she looked up into his dark brown eyes that were smoldering with controlled need. "I am your fiancé, am I not, Prudence?"

She smiled up at him. "Yes," she said, and was rewarded with another swift kiss. A cheer went up from the passengers of *The Prince of London*, who stood enthralled by the drama playing out before them.

"Lover's tiff," Prudence heard Mistress Talbot say. She hugged Nathan again, then he released her from his embrace, but kept a proprietary arm around her.

"With your permission I will take my fiancée and leave you to continue your journey homeward."

Captain Howard beamed with relief. He didn't want to challenge Commander Frazer who, for all his civil manner, looked exceedingly dangerous.

After a stomach-churning twenty minutes in the bosun's chair swinging between the two ships, Prudence gratefully set foot on the poop deck of *The Conqueror*. Nathan was waiting for her. He took her hand and led her forward.

"May I introduce, Lieutenant Fisher," Nathan said, as he indicated the young man standing straight and respectfully before her. She saw Nathan give him a wry smile. "He has a promising future in the navy."

Fisher looked relieved. "A pleasure to welcome you, Miss Stone and may I congratulate you on your engagement to the renowned Commander Frazer."

"All right, Fisher, don't overdo it. I assume that Miss Stone can have the use of your cabin for our return trip to Port Royal."

Fisher snapped to attention. "My pleasure, if you would fo—"

"I think I can escort Miss Stone to her quarters, thank you, Fisher." He held out his arm and Prudence took it and was led below.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Prudence found herself in Nathan's arms and being kissed all over again.

"My God, Prue, I thought I would die when Mary told me you'd already sailed for England," Nathan said, as he released her mouth and ran his hands down her back.

"Oh, Nathan, I thought you didn't love me and had forgotten about me. For the love of God, why didn't you write?"

"Not love you? I will never love anyone but you for the rest of my life. And I did write, but it was stolen."

"Who stole it?"

"Henrietta, but I got it back from her." He squeezed his arm between them, reached inside his jacket and pulled out the now crumpled parchment.

"How could she be that cruel?"

"Cruelty is in her bones."

He wanted to explain everything, but holding Prudence again after eight weeks of abstinence and feeling her respond to his caresses was making him want to do more, a whole lot more, than just to talk to her. But it was his own urges that had prevented him asking her to marry him in the first place and caused most of her heartache and doubt. He put her from him slightly.

"Read it. I sent it before I departed north."

Prudence went over and sat in the light of the window and opened the four pages.

Nathan watched as she skimmed over the letter, seeing her smile of amusement at some of the opening descriptions of their dash north.

He leaned back on the small writing table and studied her face, loving every curve and delicate facet of it. Her hair that always seemed to have a will of its own had now come completely free from the bonnet and the pins holding it had long since given up their effort as futile, allowing the shimmering golden tresses to tumble down over her shoulders. The familiar small frown of concentration appeared as her eyes darted along the neatly written lines.

Nathan noted that she was dressed in the same sober dress she had been wearing when he had first seen her, but she had replaced the starched white collar with a delicate soft lace one than offset the swell of her breasts perfectly. His manhood, so long denied the joy of Prudence surrounding it, awoke in response, he ignored it. He wanted Prudence to read the letter he had written half crouched in the cabin of *The Invincible* before dashing off north in pursuit of Edward. He wanted Prudence to know what she should have known all along if he hadn't been too bone-headily stupid to tell her properly.

She moved to the second page and her expression changed. Her face took on a softer visage. Nathan knew that she was reading his words of love and he waited.

Prudence was surprised by the neat but confident flourish of Nathan's pen and the eloquence of his prose as he described how *The Invincible* chased after *The Fallen Angel*. He explained how they had found Edward gone after the capture and that he was duty bound

to pursue him before retuning to Port Royal. Then the tone changed.

— but my darling, Prue,” the letter continued, “I am not writing this so you can have a first hand account of a voyage and a bloody sea battle. I am writing this because while we are parted. I want you to know of my overwhelming and unending love for you. You are on my mind constantly both waking and asleep. Not a moment of the day passes without my longing to be with you again and take you in my arms and love you as a man loves a woman, as I did on the island.

Prudence felt her body tingle as images of them making love on the island sprang vividly into her mind. She continued to read.

I don’t know when I first loved you but by the time I held you in my arms at the Governor’s house, I was so deeply in love with you that there was no hope for me in life without you by my side. I came to The Two Puddings after the Governor’s reception resolved to ask you to marry me and I didn’t intend to let you say no. Realizing how much I loved you, there was never a question in my mind of wanting anything other than to make you my wife. I wanted you to be mine forever, and still do.

She turned onto the third page and continued to read with joy and happiness swelling within her. She started at the top of the third page,

As you now know, my reason for being in Port Royal was not what it at first appeared. But difficult though it would have been, as I walked to The Two Puddings to see you that morning, my vowed intent was to make you my wife before the week was out.

A blush start in her cheeks as she remembered where and how Nathan had found her that morning.

However, fate had another plans and we found ourselves captives of Edward who destined me for a Spanish prison and death and for you a fate that even knowing that you are safe in Port Royal, makes me shudder. Although I was furious with you for putting yourself in danger to rescue me, it was your bravery that saved us both and landed us safe on the island and I love you for it. Like the fool I have been all along, when we parted on The Invincible I let you go without telling you my feelings fully and hope that this letter in some small way makes up for my lack of sense until I can see you in person and we can be together forever. I never planned the future before meeting you but now I find myself thinking of buying an estate, maybe up north in New England, building a house and raising a family, our family, Prue.

Prudence turned to the last page.

I’m sure that you dreamed, when you were a girl, of your wedding day possibly in your uncle’s church with friends and family to throw rose petals over you and your new husband. I have to confess I had never given marriage a second thought until I met you, but if I had, I doubt very much I would have pictured it being on the deck of a pirate ship with a mad, delusional curate presiding and a pistol to my head. In law I doubt that we are married, but in truth that is not so. For when I said those vows on The Fallen Angel, I meant every word and consider you my wife in the same way as if we had been married in Westminster Abbey with the world as witness. I can only

hope that you feel the same way and that you will allow me to spend the rest of my life making it up to you for such an appalling start to our life together. I will instruct the minister to read the banns at St Paul's as soon as I return because I cannot wait a moment longer than necessary to make you my wife in law as you already are in my heart.

*All my love now and for eternity,
Nathan*

By the time she had reached Nathan's bold signature at the end of the letter Prudence's eyes were already shining with tears of joy. She looked up at him.

"When you didn't return, I concluded that you'd thought better of it and left me forever."

"That's what you were intended to think and why the letter was stolen," Nathan said. "It was sheer chance that it fell into Henrietta's hands. If my letter had been delivered as it should have been you would never have doubted me or my intentions."

"I thought you only wanted to marry me because you felt you had to after what had happened on the island."

"As I said in the letter, I was about to ask you in that shabby room, but," Nathan said with half smile, "if I remember correctly you kissed my chest and I forgot everything but my need to make love to you."

She smiled at him. "I love you, Nathan, and I too meant those marriage vows and truly consider you my husband."

He strode across the room and took Prudence in his arms. "I could never, never leave you. It would be like ripping my own heart out."

He tipped back her head and lowered his lips on hers.

She had believed that Nathan had deserted her. Now she was being held once again in his strong embrace. Prudence gave herself over to the pleasure of Nathan's mouth and hands without hesitation. As she felt his hand slide down and pull her hard against his hips and she groaned with anticipation.

She felt his grip around her tighten and, as his mouth released hers, a shiver ran through her as Nathan's lips made their way down onto her shoulder, moving the fabric away as he progressed.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Nathan," Prudence replied, sliding her hands up and down his arms, then around his neck lacing her fingers in his hair. He kissed and nibbled across her shoulders then back up her neck to the sensitive area behind her ear.

"My God, I've missed you," he said hoarsely, as his hand ripped at the laces on her bodice.

"I can tell," she said flexing into him again.

Nathan gave her a sensual look. "I love you and now I am going to show you just how much."

One hand came up and pulled the shoulder off and down. The bodice fastening finally gave way and Prudence shrugged herself out of her whalebone outer garment. The skirt of the gown quickly followed, leaving her in her chemise and petticoat. She spun away from him, smiling and looking provocatively sideways at him from under her dark lashes.

"You wanton." Nathan said and stood for a second, breathing heavily. "Take your clothes off."

Prudence looked boldly at Nathan and slowly peeled the thin straps off her shoulders. She could see his need for her in his intense gaze and this sent ripples of pleasure coursing through her.

"I lay night after night, thinking of every curve of your beautiful body, and remembering how you feel. I imagined you night after night in my cramped berth on *The Invincible*, but now I don't have to imagine any longer, because I'm here. And I wanted to look at you as I did when I found you in the pool. Take them off, Prue, I want to see you," he said in a low rumble.

Still she untied the cord of her petticoat and flung both garments aside and stood before him.

She could feel his eyes caress her looking at every part; she stood without shame and enjoyed his pleasure. Knowing that he was aroused by her made her complete and whole.

Unhurriedly she moved to him. Reaching up she started to unbutton the waistcoat and peeled it off. He dipped to help her and his mouth brushed her shoulder as she threw his jacket and waistcoat beside her gown on the floor.

She untied the cravat and then the buttons of his shirt, running the palms of her hands over his strong, muscular chest with its mass of hair beneath. Nathan let his head roll back and he gave out a low groan of pure pleasure as he felt Prudence's hands make their progress across his chest and up onto his shoulders.

Prudence had to reach up to slide the shirt back off Nathan's shoulders and, as she leaned in, her nipples brushed against him. The area between her legs pulsed again as the springy chest hair excited the taut, sensitive peaks. Nathan let out a low groan. Prudence smiled, knowing what had caused it.

Her hands went to the front buttons of his breeches and quickly undid them. She eased them and the under breeches down, releasing his erect shaft from its restricted confinements.

She bent down and slipped Nathan's stockings off as he kicked off his shoes. He, too, stood naked in the full light of the window.

Prudence splayed her hands and placed them on Nathan's chest, caressing in unison back and forth. Stepping to the side, one hand curled around him and resting on the top of his tight buttock. The other slid back and forth over the muscular hardness of his stomach and down to where Nathan's shaft jolted and bucked, sensing her hand's nearness.

He bent forward and watched as Prudence's hand made its way through the tangle of hair at his groin and took firm hold of his manhood in her delicate fingers.

Prudence too looked at the progress of her hand and watched as it ran up and down the wonderful hardness of his shaft as she toyed and caressed it. She felt it dance in her hand while her area, made to enclose it, throbbed with corresponding ripples of pleasure.

Nathan's hand reached up and he took hold of her shoulder. He forced himself to hold back, fully enjoy to the experience of Prudence playing with him. Then she slid her hand back up and came around to face him. She wound her arms under his and back, molding herself into him.

He let out a low growl, grabbed her to him and pressed his mouth on hers hard, forcing her lips apart with his tongue.

One hand went around her and down, clasping her bottom in his large outspread grip, the other hand came up and cupped her breast. His caressed the sensitive peak with his thumb, rolling and flicking it. A primitive cry of pleasure escaped from Prudence's parted lips.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he said, kissing down over

the roundness in his hand and lifting her breast up to meet his mouth as his lips captured the hard, erect nipple, drawing it in and flicking it with his tongue. Her hand flew up to the back of his head and held it against her.

"I love you doing that, Nathan."

"I know. I quite enjoy it myself," he said, as he moved over to the other breast and repeated his actions.

Prudence felt her very bones start to melt as Nathan's mouth and hands moved over her body. Still sucking her nipple, he held her firmly with one arm around her while the other smoothed and caressed down her still flat stomach and on to the moist and pulsating folds of her womanhood.

Nathan's hand slid downwards and moved her legs apart to allow him full access. Having lived with the memory of his magical caresses, now that she was actually held in his arms, she wanted him to touch her all over both outside and in.

Nathan felt her open for him and he grunted with satisfaction. His denied manhood strained to enter her, but he bade it wait. He wanted to prolong this moment for as long as possible to give her pleasure at least twice before he satisfied himself. He lifted her up and onto the small cot at the end of the room, placing her in the center, then standing at the foot of the bed while he looked at her again. She gazed up at him sensually, running her hands over her body. He didn't move, but dragged his eyes over the curves of her body.

"Nathan."

He dropped onto his knees at the end of the bed and ran his hands up the outside of her legs from her ankles to knees, and then parted them, opening her to his view. Sliding his hands up the inside of her thigh, he gently explored feeling the strong inner muscles start to roll and take hold of his fingers.

Prudence's eyes flickered down as he dropped down onto one hand, arching over her but keeping the other hand mimicking the rhythm of his lovemaking, slowly back and forth all the time, telling her of his love.

She called his name breathlessly as the waves of her climax started to crash and recede, then crashed again until as finally she was swamped with her orgasm.

Nathan's fingers received the flood of Prudence's climax, but he didn't stop their motion. As she shuddered under him, he lowered himself on to his elbow and put his mouth close to her ear.

"Again, Prue."

As the small final waves calmed, her eyes, their pupils dilated, flew open. "Again," he demanded, as his fingers continued their motion —

"Nathan," she said her mouth parted and a look of incredulity spread across her face.

He slid his arm under her head and pressed his body the length of hers. Thrusting his manhood into her hip in time with his fingers, he kissed her neck and whispered, "Again, Prue, let me pleasure you again."

After a few firm caresses Prudence's nails dug into his arm again. She clung to him as her second climax crashed through her. He could hold back no longer. He rolled over between her legs and pressed himself forward, filling her. She slid her legs up and anchored him in her, kissing any part of him that she could reach as she did so.

Nathan, teetering dangerously on the edge of losing control, stilled as he sheathed

himself fully in her. Eight weeks was an eternity without feeling her under him.

Restraint restored, Nathan thrust forward deeper, and then drew back. The strong caressing muscles surrounding him rippled and urged him on. He lowered his mouth close to her ear and whispered, "Again, Prue." He pulled back and felt her brace herself to hold him into her, "but this time with me."

She let out a small cry and held on to him as he pumped into her with increasing abandonment.

Nathan watched with hooded eyes as Prudence's climax built beneath him. He stopped his manhood from bursting forth with his pent-up seed, wanting her to be fully satisfied. He bit his lip to hold back for a few more strokes. He could feel the sweat trickle down the center of his back and her hands kneading the flesh of his arms. Prudence let out a low, primeval groan and shuddered in his arms.

Nathan held his demanding shaft back no longer. His mind exploded in a riot of colors and sensations as wave after wave of passion flooded forth from him, soaking her within, while he called her name.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Prudence sat in the shade of an awning and smelled the sea that whooshed either side of the prow. Small specks of spray fell on her from time to time but in the heat of the day, they soon evaporated. She shaded her eyes and looked to where Nathan stood with Fisher discussing the sails. Nathan slapped Fisher on the shoulder and turned towards her. He jumped down from the mid-deck and made his way over. He kissed her on the cheek and sat next to her, looking out to sea for a second or two.

"We'll be in Port Royal on the morning tide."

"I will be pleased to be back, but I shall miss your undivided attention."

She expected Nathan to give her an appreciative look. But he continued to look at the sea.

"It will only be for a week, Prue, and then I swear we will be married."

"I don't doubt. I want nothing more than to be your wife, Nathan, but the three days on *The Conqueror* without your duties to distract you has made up for the weeks of desolation in *The Two Puddings*."

"Henrietta!" Nathan said and she saw his brows pull together and his nostrils flare. He opened his mouth as if to say something else, clamped his mouth shut again.

Prudence felt uneasy at his silence. She waited for Nathan to look at her but he didn't.

"When we are back in Port Royal will I become your first love again?" she asked, Nathan's head shot around with a puzzled look on his face. "There is no one who comes before you in my affections, Prue," he replied in an uncertain tone.

"Not someone, something. The sea."

Nathan's face cracked into a smile and Prudence released the breath she had been holding. "I've always loved the sea, with its moods and subtleties."

"I'm not jealous. I too love the sea."

Nathan relaxed. "After Cambridge I joined the Navy as a lieutenant in the newly introduced training scheme for officers. It was on my first command that I saved Harry's neck in an engagement with the Dutch off the Hook of Holland."

"I think I have heard enough about your escapades with Harry at Cambridge, thank you very much," Prudence said with a small laugh. Then she asked seriously. "Have you changed your mind about leaving the navy?"

"No. No. I do want to buy land to farm in Boston," he said rigorously shaking his head. "We could return to my family estates but as Robert is the heir to the earldom there would be very little for me to do. I have money of course, but, after my time in the navy, I don't think a life of hunting and fishing would suit my temperament at all."

"I would like to go back to England at some point, but I am quite happy to make our home in Boston."

Relief swept across Nathan's face. Then the scowl returned and he gazed back to sea.

"Nathan," she asked, putting her hand lightly on his arm, "what is on your mind?"

The moment had come. He released her and taking the silver token from his inside

pocket, he held it out to her. The sunlight danced on it and he saw Prudence blink twice as she saw what it was he held.

"Edward is dead, this time."

She smiled at Nathan. "I know. The news got back the day I left."

"He was hanged in Jamestown. I saw it."

An unexpected tear trickled out of the corner of her eye. She wiped it away. "I'm not crying for Edward." She put her hand on Nathan's chest, as he held her tenderly, and looked up at him. "I'm crying for his dear parents. All the love that they lavished on him, they never treated him any less than a son. I doubt his true father or mother could have loved him more."

"I can't answer for Edward's father, but you are certainly right about his mother. Do the bishop and his wife have to know?"

"Oh, yes. Of course, I couldn't lie to them. Edward lied enough to break their hearts. They deserve to know the truth."

Nathan bowed to her superior knowledge of the Bishop of Spalding and his wife.

"I am also crying for all the pain I must have caused Uncle Ezra. I can see now that he knew the type of man Edward was and tried to warn me. But I wouldn't listen. I insisted that his rude and inconsiderate behavior was not his fault. I stubbornly thought I could change him."

"Prue, I'm sure that Uncle Ezra will forgive you. Especially when you arrive back with such a splendid husband as myself." Nathan said trying to stop Prudence judging herself so harshly.

Prudence raised her eyebrow and gave him a considered look. "Pride is a sin, you know, Nathan."

He grinned at her and hugged her again. Then her face turned serious again and Nathan saw the concentrated frown appear. "What is it, Prue?"

"I was just thinking about how being abandoned by his mother twisted Edward's character so, made him mad and evil."

Nathan shifted and turned her towards him. "I think that Edward was born twisted and mad. I believe he inherited his evil soul."

"Edward never knew who his parents were, so how can you say that?"

"His father, I doubt will ever be known," Nathan said levelly.

Prudence sat open-mouthed for a second, then her eyes flashed up to Nathan's face expectantly.

"Did you never notice that Henrietta Morris had one blue and one green eye, Prue, like Edward?"

Nathan watched as Prudence's thoughts flowed across her face. "I have always thought there was something familiar about her, but I never realized it was her eyes."

"And her face is the same shape as Edward's."

Prudence nodded. "Yes, you're right. They both have the same wide jaw and pointed chin. It's less pronounced on her, but it is the same. Are Edward and Henrietta are related?"

"Henrietta Morris is the mother who abandoned Edward."

"But she is too young."

"No. If you remember, you told me about the Earl of Kettlethorpe being killed long before she was supposed to have met him. Also, Louis knew her in Paris where she was a whore in a brothel called the House of Valois, which is where this came from." Nathan swung the silver token in the air.

"But why was she in England? And why leave her baby?"

"She came to England with her lover, who abandoned her shortly before she gave birth to Edward. She only left him because it saved her the trouble of killing him."

Prudence gasped and put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Nathan. Surely no woman could give life to a child and then kill it?"

Nathan saw her place her hands on her stomach.

"He was lucky that she didn't leave him in the ditch where she birthed him, as was her first intention," Nathan said in disgust, remembering the conversation in the sickly-sweet bedroom.

"How do you know this?"

"Henrietta admitted it, when I confronted her," Nathan said. "I wasn't going to tell her of my discovery. Then I found that she had stolen your letter, so I told her about Edward."

"Was she heartbroken?"

"No"

"Wasn't she sorry that she had left her baby all those years ago?"

"No."

"Didn't Henrietta show remorse or regret of any kind?" Prudence implored. "I can't believe that even Henrietta, for all her coldness and hatred, would want to abandon her own child."

"No," Nathan said, holding her closer and turning her face towards him. "I know it is difficult for you, with your loving heart, to understand. You think of children and babies as a woman should, with love and tenderness. But I am afraid to say there are some women who seem not to have those natural instincts."

Prudence nodded then her eyes flashed at Nathan. "Did Edward know?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Nathan took a breath then answered. "I told him, in the cell on the morning he was hanged."

"Nathan."

"I'm sorry, Prue. You might judge me hard to do such a thing to a man who was about to be hanged. But I couldn't get the image of him touching you and trying to rape you out of my mind. I actually went to thrash him for daring to dishonor you, but found a more effective way of punishing him."

Nathan looked down at Prudence. Her mouth was open and her eyes wide with shock. He swiftly carried on.

"I'm not ashamed of what I did, although it's hardly beating a man in a fair fight. But in the same way as Henrietta would have abandoned her newborn baby to its fate in a ditch, Edward would have raped you, let his crew have their way, then sold you to a bordello. And, as far as I'm concerned letting him spend his final hours tortured by the truth about his origins was small punishment for the fate he had planned for you." Nathan gathered her into his arms and lifted her head back, so she had to look him full in the eye. "I love you, Prue, and I considered you my wife. No man would let the woman he loved be treated so without satisfying his honor. It may not be a shining virtue, something you read about in your Good Book, and I'm sure you have some quote about turning the other cheek and forgiveness, but you must understand I could not let it pass."

Prudence had said nothing, but Nathan could see her emotions whirling behind her eyes. She looked back up at him and a tight smile appeared on her face.

"When I arrived in Port Royal, I thought I knew all the answers and, as you say, I can quote you a pithy passage of scripture to cover almost every situation. But, since then, I have come to know life and myself a great deal better. I thought I knew about friendship, then Mary and her girls showed me what friendship really meant. I thought I could judge characters, then Edward showed me how flawed my talent for that was." She paused. "I also thought I understood evil until I met Edward and Henrietta."

Prudence reached up her hand and placed it lightly on Nathan's face. She searched it with her eyes, taking in every angle. Her fingers smoothed through his hair and moved it back from his forehead. "I thought I knew what love was, then I met you and you showed me what true love really is."

She shut her eyes as Nathan pressed his lips on hers.

Although he couldn't have done otherwise, Nathan realized that he had been holding his breath, waiting for Prudence to say that she understood, that she did not condemn him and that her love for him had not changed by seeing this other, darker side of him.

She pushed away from him slightly and replaced the palm of her hand back to his cheek. "I also know that if Edward had harmed *you* in any way I could have held a pistol to his head and pulled the trigger myself. Under the circumstances I think you were remarkably restrained, Nathan."

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Are you ready, my dear?" Mr. Pilkington asked, as he offered Prudence his hand. Prudence smiled warmly back at him as she stepped into the coach. Yes, she was ready.

"I can't believe that the past three days has passed so quickly."

"If Frazer had had his way he would have carried you from the gangplank straight to the altar. I thought he was about to run Reverend Truman through when he refused to read the banns all on one day. Still Governor Morris gave the license without a quibble."

The coach jolted and Prudence held the carriage door to steady herself. "The Governor had more weighty matters to occupy his thoughts after Henry Bennett arrived back in Port Royal on *The Invincible* with instructions from London recalling Sir George to Whitehall."

The elderly attorney's face grew grave. "After all the business with Diablo Ted, Sir George will have a number of questions to answer in London."

"Nathan was delighted that Henry arrived back in Port Royal on *The Invincible* so he could be his best man."

"You look lovely in that gown my dear," William Pilkington said, patting her hand as they turned into Church Street.

Prudence ran her hand over the blush satin.

"Didn't you want to wait until you got back to England to marry? Think of the scandal when you arrive home with a different husband to the one you went out to marry."

Not as much scandal as when their first child makes his or her appearance six months after their wedding.

"Erm — we were unsure when we would get back to England. And as we met her Port Royal seemed as good a place as any," Prudence said feeling her cheeks grow warm.

The baby she carried was now at the point of becoming noticeable to the world. Had Nathan not decided that they would be marrying as soon as possible she would have had to tell him about it already, but now she could give him that news as a wedding gift.

The coach came to a halt and Prudence took Mr. Pilkington's arm as she stepped down from the coach. Pearl and Ruby alighted from the coach behind them and fussed around her, straightening her train and handing her Uncle Jack's Bible and a posy of tropical flowers.

"You have old Jack's bible I see," William said as they started up the step to the church.

Prudence hugged the worn book to her. "It's not as delicate as the usual Bibles brides usually carry, but it was Uncle Jack's and having it in my hands is like having my family here."

She lifted the skirts of her gown and stepped into the cool interior of Port Royal's main church as the organ struck up. She looked down to the end of the church and saw Nathan dressed in his commander's uniform with gold braid. He was waiting for her in front of the altar, a look of pure adoration on his face.

Nathan and the congregation stood up as Prudence entered the church. Turning

around he looked at Prudence coming down the aisle towards him. Although he knew that she would look beautiful, as always, he was not prepared for the sight that of her that greeted him.

The delicate color of the silk wedding dress she wore made her complexion glow even in the dim interior of the church. The fragrant pink and blue flowers pinned in her hair looked as if they still had the morning dew on them and the gossamer veil framed her face like a halo. Her hazel eyes were wide and bright as they looked at him with love and the strong, full lips smiled openly at him.

He had always thought her beautiful, but over the week since they had been reunited on *The Prince of London*, she had bloomed. Her beauty was now enhanced and polished by the love bursting from within. He could feel that love flowing over him. It made him feel more of a man than he had ever felt before. And, true to his vow, Nathan would now spend the rest of his life loving her in return.

Still smiling up at him Prudence came and stood next to him. Mr. Pilkington, his duty done, gave Prudence's hand to Nathan who took it to his mouth and kissed it gently. They then turned and faced Reverend Truman, who cleared his throat and began.

"Dearly beloved —"

They stood hand in hand while the marriage ceremony continued. They responded, earnestly when required looking at each other as they took their vows.

"The ring, if you please."

Henry fished into his pocket and placed a ring on the open book in the Reverend's hands. He offered it to Nathan, who took it, lifted Prudence's hand and held it on her third finger.

Reverend Truman opened his mouth to say the vows for Nathan to repeat, but Nathan cut across him. This was the one thing that Edward had not said over them on *The Fallen Angel*.

"With this ring," Nathan said, locking his eyes on Prudence's, "I thee wed. With my body, I thee honor. And all my worldly goods with thee I share. In the name of he Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen."

Prudence felt Nathan slip the ring down her finger and she glanced down at it. In Port Royal all the diamonds, jewels and gold known to the world could be had, at a price. But the wedding ring that Nathan placed on her finger was the most beautiful that any money could have bought. It was a narrow band of bright gold with no adornments, but it was perfect, a symbol of their love, pure and unending.

She felt her eyes moisten as she looked back up at Nathan, standing so handsome and manly next to her.

"You may kiss the bride," she heard the Minister say as Nathan stepped forward and scooped her into his arms. Crushing Prudence to him, he kissed her deeply in full view of the congregation.

"Finally!" Nathan said, holding Prudence aloft in his arms as he kicked open the door to his bedroom. He walked over to the bed and placed Prudence in the middle of it. "I thought Mary and her girls were never going to relinquish you." He threw his hat on the writing bureau, stripped off his coat and cravat, and casually discarded them on the chair. He ripped his shirt off over his head.

"Nathan! It was our wedding feast," Prudence said, with an innocent expression on

her face. "Why were you so eager to leave?"

He wagged a finger at her, but could not keep a smile from tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You know very well, madam. It has been three days since we landed at the quay and I haven't been alone with you once."

He kicked off his buckled shoes and rolled off his stockings. Prudence did the same with hers and wriggled her bare toes.

"That's not true. We have been alone every day, in Mary's parlor," she said pretending not to understand his meaning or frustration.

Nathan strode over to the bed and sat on the edge. "I never thought that Mary would be such a strict chaperone, considering her profession."

"She wanted to avoid a scandal. She had a regard for my reputation, even if you didn't," Prudence said, trying to look reproving, but unable to hold the expression. A smile spread across her face. "It was just as bad for me, you know. You aren't the only one with needs and feelings."

Nathan slid his hand up her bare arm and onto her shoulder, gently stroking her flesh.

"Am I not?" he said as he changed position and moved up the bed.

"No, you're not. I've missed you too, but I wanted everyone to enjoy our wedding day as much as I have."

Nathan studied Prudence's soft complexion, which had a faint blush caused by his hand's continuing caresses.

"Then, my love, you have your wish because I don't recall ever seeing a happier or livelier wedding breakfast." Nathan said as he pulled the shoulder strap of the blush silk dress away.

Prudence reached up and loosened her headdress by taking out a few pins. She shook her head.

"That's true." She giggled. "Pearl and Ruby looked perfect bridesmaids don't you think?"

Nathan's face showed otherwise. "*Maids* is not the word that springs to mind when I think about Pearl and Ruby."

"Nonetheless, I think they looked fine," she said in defense of the two women and trying to keep a serious face. Her eyes twinkled. "Maybe their necklines were a little lower than current fashion."

"Lower? I'm surprised Isaac Truman could read the lines of the prayer book as his eyes were glued to their décolletages," he said letting his gaze rest on hers.

Prudence looked absolutely radiant, just as a bride should. But it was more than that, she had the glow of a woman who was happy and knew that she was loved.

Curls of her hair, now divested of its adornment, tumbled down and over her shoulders and chest in a golden fountain. He studied the sleek line of her neck and shoulders and the little dips above her collarbone. Where he had slide the strap away from her shoulder the rest of the boned gown had followed and now Nathan could see the full swell of her breasts.

Now they were married in the sight of man as well as God, Nathan judged it was time to start fulfilling his vow to honor Prudence with his body. He lowered his mouth on hers. The kiss, tender at first, soon deepened into a hard, demanding one, as his tongue plunged into her mouth. He released her lips and watched with satisfaction as her eyes fluttered open.

"Tell me, Prue, about these needs?"

She gave him a seductive look from under her lashes.

"I'm not sure that I should. It's not the sort of thing that a bride is asked about on her wedding night, is it? I should be reluctant and coy, surely, not bold and brazen?" she said, bending forward to reveal more of her breasts to Nathan.

She scrambled off the bed and went to sit on the small stool in front of his dressing table, looking back at him in the reflection of the large mirror. She lifted her hair away from her neck and let it fall down over her shoulder.

"Also most brides have someone to help them into their negligée but as you have given all the servants the night off, you will have to perform that task yourself." She looked over her shoulder at Nathan and gave him a deep, sensual glance, sweeping her eyes up and then letting them fall slowly.

Three days, thought Nathan. It felt more like three weeks. God, he wanted her.

He came over and stood behind her. "As I have wanted to strip you naked for the past three days, it will be my pleasure to help you out of this gown. But I think we can dispense with the negligée, don't you?"

He took hold of her shoulders in his strong hands and lowered his lips on her neck. He felt her tremble under his kiss. He lifted his head and said quietly in her ear, "I let the servants have the night off so they wouldn't be kept awake by your cries of ecstasy all night." He slipped the dress further down her shoulder. He felt her lean back into his caress. "And I'll take the bold and brazen you, as it's the one I'm used to."

From his vantage point above Nathan could see where the fabric of the bridal gown was standing forward, the two large dark crescents of Prudence's areolas and the jutting centers of her nipples.

His hands slid around and he hooked his fingers up, pulling the last inches of the fabric away. He cupped both breasts in his hands, enjoying the sensation of fullness as she spilled over his grasp, then he rubbed his thumbs over the hard tips as Prudence's head fell back against him. He could see her face taking on a needing, sensual expression in the mirror.

He watched their reflection as he continued to graze his thumbs across the tips, then, he progressed to tugging and squeezing the tight nipples with his forefinger and thumb. Prudence groaned again and pressed back into his groin.

She was about to open her mouth and protest, but Nathan's kisses were working their magic and all other thoughts were now being blotted out. She had missed Nathan and she had lain awake for hours needing his touch and love. But it was more than just his physical presence. She wanted him all of him. And now she had him forever, so she just let all the wonderful feelings wash over her. She shrugged her dress lower, helping him to free her upper body from the confines of the bodice. Nathan gave a low growl of appreciation.

Her head dropped forward as she looked down at Nathan's hands cupping her breasts and she could feel the insistent waves of satisfaction building.

Nathan stopped his exquisite playing and, holding her upper arms, stood her up. He pulled the laces of the bodice apart and slid it off. Then he untied the drawstring of her skirt and petticoat and let them fall to the floor. Then he turned her to face him. She now stood in the transparent chemise that fell to her knees. Nathan's fingers pulled the ribbons around the neck of the chemise apart and let them fall to the floor with the other parts of the gown.

Nathan's strong arms encircled her and his lips fastened onto hers with a hard and demanding kiss. One hand held her head fixed to him while the other roamed freely over

her breasts and stomach down to the tight triangle of her pubic hair.

With the palm of his hand flat on her stomach, Nathan slid his hand downwards towards the apex of her legs.

She held her breath as she felt Nathan's dexterous fingers find what they were seeking. A bolt of desire and pleasure shot through her and she slumped against him.

Nathan fingers move the soft flesh as he caressed back and forth. As Prudence swayed against he lifted her up and place her back on the bed. Then he stood back and unfastened his breeches.

She smiled as she saw him fully erect and proud then lifted her arms up towards him. She watched his gaze run over her and she waited enjoying the sensation of being looked at intimately.

Nathan got on the bed next to her, gathered her in his arms and showered her face and neck with kisses. He threw one leg across and between her. He rocked against her hips with the familiar rhythm of their coupling while his free hand ran over her body.

Releasing the breast,, his hand made its way down her leg and up the insides of her thighs and then he slid his fingers into her inner moistness.

He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Now tell me about those needs, Prue."

She let out a low sigh as the waves of her orgasm started. Almost mindless with the sensations coursing through her, she just said what was pounding in her head.

"I want you now."

He kneeled above her and parted her legs wide. She saw his eyes roam slowly over womanly area before he eased himself into her, watching himself disappear.

The feeling of stretching to accommodate Nathan completely was the final stimulation Prudence needed and the waves that had been building since his first kiss surged up and around her.

As he began to move in, she heard herself call his name over and over, as she lost herself in the erotic sensation of his thrusts.

When fully enfolded by Prudence Nathan stilled himself, fighting the urge to plunge in again and again as he savored the pleasure of Prudence's silky inner wonders. The ripples of her private muscles caressed around his throbbing manhood like gentle fingers urging him to spill his seed within her. Much as he wanted to Nathan forced himself to wait in order to satisfy her completely first.

Splaying both hands wide under her bottom Nathan drew back, then rocked forward, as Prudence flexed her hips to meet his thrust. He heard her give out a low cry and her legs lock around his waist as her head rolled from side to side. He pulled back, then thrust again, almost beyond control, gritting his teeth to stop his pent-up seed pumping forth. He was just holding back when Prudence let out a low rumble and then a cry as she shuddered under him. He was lost and he knew it, so just let go and gave his body and mind over to the full pleasure of flooding her with wave after wave of passion.

They both lay exhausted and sated for a moment, then Nathan eased his weight off her, and rolled over holding her close to his body. He looked at her with half-closed eyes.

"That's the bold and brazen I know and love." he said as he kissed her tenderly on the head.

Prudence didn't answer, she just snuggled closer, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

She ran her hands across her chest and then lower to his stomach and back again.

As the last of the day's sunlight streamed through the window, bathing the bedroom in a warm glow, Prudence looked up at Nathan who now lay next to her with his eyes shut.

Then she stretched up and kissed him on the cheek.

He smiled in acknowledgment of her attention, but didn't open his eyes. She got up onto one elbow and looked down at him. Nathan adjusted his arm, but his eyes remained shut.

She smiled.

"Nathan," she said, planting another kiss on his cheek.

"Mm."

"Are you asleep?"

"Mm."

"Can you hear me?"

"Mm," Nathan answered again but still not opening his eyes.

Prudence nudged him in the ribs. "Can I have your attention?"

He opened his eyes and glanced down at her, then moved his hand down to her bottom and squeezed it to him, shutting his eyes again. "Give me five minutes more, my love, and you can."

"No. I want to tell you something."

"After all that, you've still got energy to talk have you? I don't kn—"

Prudence cupped her hand across his mouth and his eyes flew open in surprise. "Nathan," she said, as a smile spread across her face. "I'm going to have a baby. That is, we are going to have a baby."

His eyes grew even wider and he sat up, nearly knocking her backwards with his movement. He kneeled before her and pulled her up to face him.

"You are? When? Are you sure? I mean we were only on the island three days?"

Prudence slid her hand around his neck, "Yes, I am sure and I think about Christmas or just after as far as I can tell." She lowered her eyes, then swept her long lashes up and sideways, sending Nathan a saucy look. "And we may have only been marooned for three days, but obviously you *honored* me enough with your body in that time to get me with chi—"

Before she could finish she found herself smothered in Nathan's strong embrace with his mouth pressing hard onto hers. He rolled her onto her back, sat up beside her and placed his large hand on her still flat stomach.

"Where is this baby? It is almost twelve weeks since we were on the island."

"Oh, Nathan, it is there. Believe me, you'll see me expand in a week or two. I had to let the laces out on the wedding gown this morning. So you won't have to wait many weeks before you see my waistline disappear. I take it you're pleased at the prospect of being a father?"

Nathan looked at her with an expression full of love and happiness on his face. "Pleased? Pleased? I'm not pleased, I am delighted and proud. I never thought of having children of my own, but since I realized that I loved you, I have wished for nothing more," he said, as he lay back beside her and hugged her to him. "My God, I love you, Prue."

Prudence pushed away from Nathan's embrace a little and beamed up at him. "I love you too, and, as Psalm one hundred and twenty seven, verse three puts it, 'Sons are a blessing from the Lord and children are a reward from him.'"

Nathan smiled down at Prudence.

"Of course, it might be a daughter. Would you mind?"

"Not in the slightest," he laughed. "Prudence, my dear, I have always wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"How on earth do you remember all of those bible verses?"

"Oh, that's easy." She reached across and picked up Uncle Jack's old Bible. "Since I was little Uncle Ezra taught me by making a game of it. He gave me a bible for my fifth birthday and each week I would have to find the verses and see which word in the text he had underlined." She flicked through the pages and held it to Nathan. "For example, this is Matthew thirteen, verse seventeen and if you underlined the T in truth that would be the first letter."

She turned a couple of more pages. "Then you could have —"

Of course.

"When I learned them at the end of the month they would spell out a treat. So he would underline "R" in one verse, then "I" in another and so on until it spelled ribbon. So my treat for that month would be a colored ribbon or a trip to the fair or whatever Uncle had planned for me. He is a dear old man. I can't wait until you meet him."

Nathan gave a thoughtful smile. "Is this a usual way of teaching children the bible in your church?"

"A few people who knew how Uncle Ezra, taught me and they used it with their children." Prudence laughed. "Uncle Ezra didn't know, but some of the young couples in the church used to do something similar, but using words to send love messages to each other. You know, I love you and meet me in the orchard."

Nathan smiled. "It's a code. I used something similar to send messages to London. I never thought about using it for learning something, but I suppose the same principle applies. As long as you know the system you can get the message."

Prudence nodded her head, causing her hair to shimmer around them both. "That's right." She looked thoughtful. "I must say I am surprised to find that Uncle Jack, who I never knew to have any interest in the Lord's word, must have done the same, as this Bible of his is full of underlined words."

Nathan's brain was whirling around. There was something about Uncle Jack and his Bible that was shouting in Nathan's head, but he couldn't hear it properly.

The Quaker in the Americas, what was his name?

He looked back at Prudence, who was flicking through the leaves of the ancient book. Then Jack Stone's letter fell out onto the bed. Prudence picked it up and opened it.

"This is the letter Uncle Jack left. He recommends that I read the verses marked as these will help me in the future," she sighed.

"Can I look at the letter, Prue?" Nathan asked.

Prudence handed the letter to him and Nathan opened it and looked up the first reference. Deuteronomy thirty, verse one. Nathan turned to the page, and underlined were a number of words on the line.

"What is it, Nathan?" Prudence asked wondering why Nathan was so interested in her uncle's Bible.

He smiled up at her. "I thought for a moment there might be some meaning in Black Jack's verses, a message of some sort to you, but on this line," he indicated the verse to Prudence with his finger, "there are a number of words underscored."

Prudence turned her head to the side and looked, "True, but there is only one underscored in red."

She was right. *Blessings* was the only word with red beneath it.

Nathan and Prudence looked at each other.

"Do you think —" Prudence said. Nathan didn't answer. He looked up the second verse Jack had written and found again that the word *to* was underlined in red.

Nathan got off the bed and taking Jack's letter with him, went over to the writing bureau. He moved his hat away and retrieved a quill, ink and parchment from the small drawer.

"Read the verses out to me, sweetheart," Nathan said as he sat casually on the chair.

She did and, after a few moments the of Prudence reading and Nathan scribbling, he threw the pen down and leaned back, holding the parchment in front of him and grinning boyishly at her.

"For goodness sake, what does it say Nathan?"

Nathan held the parchment high. "It says, "Blessings to you, my dear Prudence. My worldly goods and your inheritance are deposited with the lawyers, Adam and David in Philadelphia. May you and your children enjoy the fruits of my labors and, dear Prudence, pray that God will treat me kindly on Judgment Day. Love John Stone.""

Prudence sat back and looked aghast. "But Mr. Pilkington told me that he had given it to a Mr. Penn, a Quaker, given it to charity."

"Pilkington was right. Black Jack did give his fortune to Mr. Penn, who is a godly and serious Quaker, but not as charity, as an investment, an investment in a new business venture to found a colony."

Prudence jumped off the bed and shot over to Nathan. "Do you mean that..."

Nathan gave her the notes he had made, folded his arms behind his head and grinned.

Prudence reread the page and stared back at Nathan. "This means that I have an inheritance and we're now rich."

"Well, my darling, I was never poor, but it appears that wily old uncle of yours had your interests firmly in his mind when he sent his money north to the new colonies."

They were still naked, as the excitement of the discovery had put all other thoughts from their minds. Nathan looked across at Prudence standing next to him. He saw the lovable frown appear on her forehead.

"I don't care about the money other than I can help Uncle Ezra and fund the school in Port Royal."

He gave her an exaggerated kiss.

"I know you well enough, my sweet, to realize that money means nothing to you other than a necessity on which to live." He took hold of her chin with his thumb and forefinger and looked deep into her eyes.

"You judge no one by what they do or don't have. You treat all, rich or poor, with the same open-hearted generosity and that is one of the many thousand reasons why I love you."

Now she was upright and naked next to him, Nathan could see that her stomach below her navel was indeed expanding and there was a beautiful roundness there. He placed his arm around her waist and a hand on her stomach.

"Now, Prudence, my love, there is another question I must ask," Nathan said letting his eyes roam boldly over her shapely body.

"What is that?"

"I'm puzzled. I have always thought Puritans were dour and – prohibitive."

Prudence looked perplexed as Nathan moved nearer to her. "Whereas you, my love, seem to be able to enjoy yourself whatever position you find yourself in."

He pulled her to him and started to caress her stomach.

"I'll have you know, Nathan Frazer, that Puritans enjoy themselves and life just as much as everyone else and don't let any tell you different."

She ran her hands down his stomach stroking gently, then further down to where his manhood had sprung back to life at her touch.

"Unfortunately it went a bit too far when The Protector banned Christmas and other festivals," she looked up at him seductively. "We all know what the maypole represents and why lads and lasses dance around it." She let her fingers dance around Nathan's maypole.

Nathan's eyes hooded as he turned her to face him. He parted her knees with his and pulled her onto his lap astride him.

"When I first saw you walking demurely behind the Trumans I thought you a well-brought up, respectable sort of woman, but I was deceived."

Prudence opened her mouth in mock horror at his statement.

"Because you are a pirate. You are wonderful, fascinating, exasperating and beautiful Prue, but a pirate through and through."

"Nathan, I—" Prudence laughed and started to protest, but Nathan silenced her with his mouth, kissing her breathless. Then he spoke again.

"As I said, a pirate. You sail alongside with overwhelming firepower." He lowered his head and flicked his tongue across the hard peak of one breast. "You blasted me broadside." He nudged his manhood forward, stopping before he entered her. "And then you stole my heart."

He held her hips and pulled her onto him, lowering his mouth on hers and kissed her deeply.

Prudence kissed him back without reserve. She wanted him again and she wanted him now. She could feel the strong hands on her hips. The waves of pleasure were already building in anticipation of their joining.

Nathan might call her a pirate. But if she was, she was now a captured one. Captured by Nathan and she would be his prisoner forever. She didn't mind. She didn't want to escape his arms or his love. She shifted onto him.

Clasping him around the neck and leaned back, glanced up at him with a provocative smile. With slow deliberation, she picked up his naval hat with its stiff gold braid and sat it on her head at a jaunty angle.

"Well, if I'm a pirate and you still have treasures stored below," she flexed her hips onto him, "then I'd say you had better be prepared to be boarded."

Nathan laughed and pulled her further onto him.

"Have a care, Pirate Prue of the Caribbean, you're up against the navy now." He pulled her on him hard. "I mean to capture you and I will hear you shout for mercy before I give quarter," he roared as Prudence locked her feet behind the legs of the chair and rocked back and forth on Nathan's lap.

The End