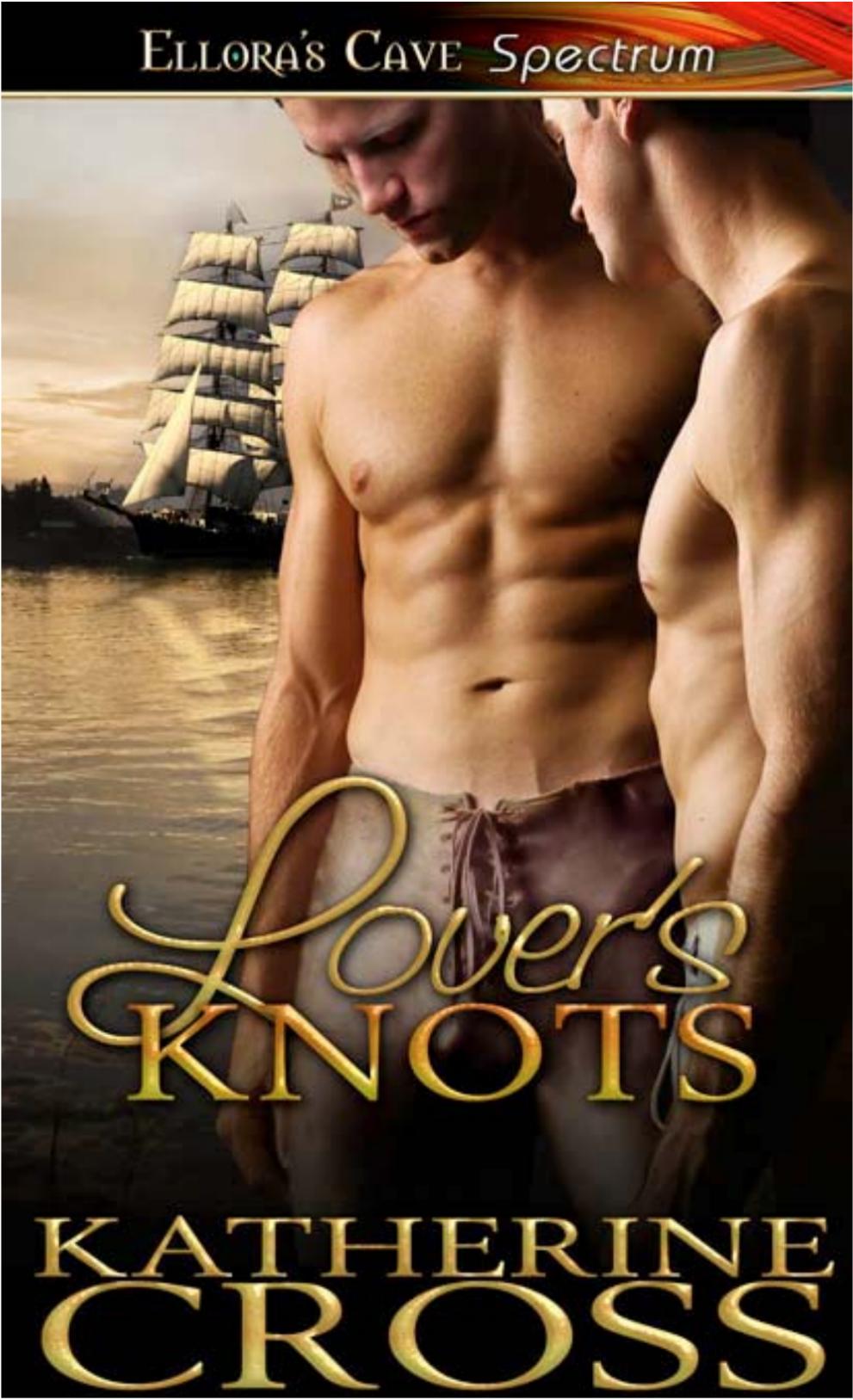


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Lover's
KNOTS

KATHERINE
CROSS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Lover's Knots

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LOVER'S KNOTS

Katherine Cross

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wonderful friend and critique partner Jennifer for all the hard work she does. And for Raelene Gorlinsky and Mary Moran, for being amazing in every way.

Author's Note

The first HMS *Charon* was built around 1778 and was destroyed in the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. Two years later, another HMS *Charon* was commissioned. She fought during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and was broken up in 1805. Since then, there have been four other *Charons* in service. The HMS *Charon* in *Lover's Knots* is a creation of the author and is not related in any way to an actual historical vessel.

Chapter One

"Careful there, lads. We don't want the whole thing to come apart before we hoist it to the mainmast, do we?"

First Lieutenant Jonathan Hayes stood on the quarterdeck and watched with a critical eye as a score of nervous midshipmen wrestled with the heavy evergreen garland. They cast him occasional glances as they wove the boughs together, muffling curses as branches snapped out of place. The bosun stood by, dark scowl barely visible above the armful of wide ribbon he was holding. The traditional supplies had cost the officers coin usually spent on improving the wardroom mess, but it was worth it.

It wasn't every day the captain got married.

"The wreath will look fine in this wind," Andrew said as he came to stand beside his superior. A light breeze blew, bringing with it the smell of fish and newly carved wood—they were rapidly closing in on Spithead and Portsmouth harbor.

"That she will," the older man agreed. He clasped his hands behind his back, gray-streaked red curls fluttering about his weathered face. Below, the men were fighting to wrap the wedding garland in ribbon and Hayes glanced at Andrew with a conspiratorial smile. "And she'll keep the officer of the guard at bay while the captain enjoys his leave."

Andrew returned the grin before turning his attention to the scuttering midshipmen. The garland, he remembered, acted as a signal to the port office to belay inspections. Once it was hoisted, the men would be given nearly a week to relax. Most of them wouldn't be allowed to set foot on land for fear of desertion and disease, but a break from the hard tedium of holding the French blockade would be welcome.

He lifted his gaze and squinted against the early morning sun, watching the frenzied activity of the busy harbor. Dozens of ships were visible along Spithead anchorage, moving with the swell of the sea. A merchantman fleet was anchored to the southeast, the Isle of Wight visible across their bows. Several ships of the line made their way to St. Helen's to await a favorable wind while small schooners braved the Needles Passage to the west. Storage vessels with masts nearly stripped bobbed awkwardly some distance away. They looked like nothing more than bits of cork on a current, Andrew thought, or perhaps wingless birds. It was strange to think that at some point they had been proud frigates in His Majesty's Navy.

Andrew ran his palm over the railing that bordered the quarterdeck, absently reassuring himself that his own ship was safe and whole. The smooth wood was warm to the touch and faintly damp, as was almost everything aboard the *Charon*. She was a two-decker, carrying seventy-four guns, and had the character of a real lady of the *ton*. There was no better ship in the fleet—Andrew was certain of that.

He shifted with the steady pitch of the ship, silently scanning the open harbor mouth before turning his attention back to the seamen scaling the thick central mast. The men moved with renewed energy, as if already refreshed by the distant sounds of Portsmouth. They'd been stationed along Brest so long that Andrew had almost forgotten what English soil looked like. It was good to be back.

"Mr. Clayton." Hayes' voice cut through his thoughts and Andrew immediately straightened to attention. "I sent Mr. Barret to the hold some time ago and he's yet to return. Fetch him up for me. I want all officers on deck when we reach port."

"Aye-aye Sir," Andrew said, turning on his heel and striding away. Hayes was a kind man, but he wasn't a patient one. When he gave orders, Andrew had learned early on, it was best to see them done quickly and efficiently.

Hayes bellowed to the seamen, shortening sail, and Andrew hurried his pace. He couldn't help but feel a shiver of pleasure at the errand. It was a short-yet-vast distance between fresh air and the belly of the ship, all the way down to the deepest quiet of the hold where Daniel Barret was no doubt alone.

Where they would be alone together.

The thought made his stomach twist in knots.

Andrew pulled off his bicorn and tucked it under his arm as he headed down the creaking steps. He moved gracefully through the cramped quarters, sidestepping off-duty sailors who knuckled their foreheads as he passed. Today of all days, every man minded his manners. Once the captain and the lead officers were on dry land, however, Andrew was sure it would be another matter.

Something for the junior officers to worry about.

He headed down another series of stairs and into the growing dark. Here, levels below the uppermost deck, the sunshine couldn't push through cracks in the wood the way it did above. It was almost like another world below, hushed and distant. Andrew stood at the bottom of the last set of stairs and drew a deep breath, orienting himself before moving through the dim.

It was easy to feel lost in the cramped darkness of the ship's hold. The air was stale and smelled strongly of old wood and salted fish. The unfamiliar sensation of being alone made his skin prickle. The ship pitched, but Andrew barely noticed, body swaying naturally. He stepped through an open doorway and absently scanned faded lettering on crates as he passed. Empty barrels were stacked one upon the other, each tightly lashed to keep them from shifting. After the officers' short liberty, refitting would begin. Wide barges filled with fresh leaguers of water and hogsheads of biscuit would make their way to the anchored vessel so they could stock up for another long run at sea.

Perhaps they would finally see action.

Andrew smiled at the thought then shook it away as he moved on. There was a lantern suspended ahead, casting a dim golden glow over the mountains of crates. He moved slowly toward the oasis of light and his heart began to pound faster when he

skirted a sturdy bulkhead and spotted the gold-streaked brown queue and broad shoulders of his close friend and direct superior, Daniel Barret.

He paused a moment and watched as Daniel sorted through a canvas sack. From where he was standing, Andrew could easily see the play of muscles beneath his blue uniform jacket. Daniel was larger than the other lieutenants—larger even than the captain, who was no small man—and had a raw sort of power that was difficult to ignore.

Hidden in the shadows, Andrew watched as the other man moved, admiring the strength in his hands and the barely visible square of his jaw. He was crouched, head down, and his thigh muscles strained against the tight material of his breeches. The tails of Daniel's jacket hung low, caressing the curve of his trim backside.

Andrew drew a breath at the sight, heat spreading across his cheeks. He forced himself to look away from the other man's body, eyes casting briefly toward the low ceiling. *Now isn't the time for this*, he told himself firmly, gaze drawn irrevocably back to the other man. Daniel sat back on his heels, large, capable hands twisting a length of thin rope, knotting it expertly. Watching Daniel's fingers move dexterously over the coarse fibers was... God, he barely had words for the deep, heated throb low in his stomach.

Andrew cleared his throat. "Mr. Barret," he said, making a wry face at how strained his voice sounded. Daniel continued to thread rope through his fingers, ignoring him. Concerned, Andrew moved fully into the halo of light. "Mr. Barret," he tried again. Then, when there was no response, "Daniel."

Daniel half turned, still in a crouch. He looked up at Andrew through dark, thick lashes, eyes curiously bright. "Andrew," he said. Andrew felt his cheeks heating again at the warm look and silently cursed his fair complexion. His pale skin, only somewhat browned by long hours exposed to the sun, gave away every secret if he let it.

And there were secrets that he had to keep.

He shifted awkwardly, trying to coax out a typical lopsided smile. Daniel didn't stand, his eyes fixed on Andrew's face even as his hands continued to work, looping and knotting the rope into a double hitch with graceful twists of his fingers.

"What are you doing, Mr. Barret?" Andrew asked, setting aside his bicorn on a convenient crate. The light shifted around them as the ship moved, lantern swaying on one of many rough-hewn wooden posts. The rope had been twisted into a series of two loops, he saw, one connected to the other by a straight, knot-enforced strand.

"Making ready for you."

Andrew barely had time to register movement. With no warning, almost too fast to be believed, Daniel straightened and pushed forward. He drove Andrew back a full three steps, larger body pressing tight against his. Andrew hit a beam with a startled yell, sound cut off by the sudden press of Daniel's hot, insistent mouth. Andrew struggled against the muscled chest, shoving ineffectually as he was penned in.

Trapped as Daniel's mouth glided over his again and again.

Body rapidly heating, Andrew lifted his face to the shockingly intimate kiss and gradually ceased fighting. He moaned, lips parting, and melted back against worn wood when Daniel's tongue stroked into his mouth, hot and slick and curious.

I should push him away, Andrew thought even as he instinctively parted his lips. His hands lifted, cupping the other man's elbows before sliding up his arms to his broad, muscled shoulders. Andrew squeezed his fingers into blue wool convulsively, head tilted back as Daniel teased and tested and explored his mouth with quick, darting licks of his agile tongue. *Oh, oh God.*

Body humming with growing arousal, blood rushing dizzily beneath the skin, Andrew gave in and arched into the measured assault. Daniel's body fit perfectly against his, wide chest hemming him in, hips moving against his own. He jerked at the first hot thrust of Daniel's erection and twisted blindly, rubbing against him with a low, needy moan.

This is madness, he thought, hands sliding up into Daniel's hair. Then, *I hadn't even realized he wanted me too.* He unwound the leather cord binding back Daniel's queue and twisted his fingers in thick golden-brown strands. It was softer than he had always imagined, loose curls twining about his fingers as he tried to pull Daniel closer. He fed off Daniel's mouth hungrily, lips wrapping around his thrusting tongue. Emboldened, Andrew sucked hard, swallowing the low hiss and answering with one of his own as strong hands gripped his hips.

Andrew shuddered, arousal pounding through him in sharp, throbbing bursts. His cock ached, straining against the fabric of his breeches. Andrew shifted his hips and both men moaned when their erections ground together through layers of cloth.

"Daniel," Andrew whispered, breaking the kiss. His head dropped back against the post and his chest rose and fell with each rapid breath. "This is insane. If we were to be found out—"

Daniel lifted a hand and pressed two fingers to Andrew's mouth. He leaned in, breath hot, and kissed his temple. "Shh," he murmured as he tongued a path below Andrew's ear then down to the stiff collar of his jacket. Andrew dropped his hands, palms rubbing over Daniel's chest in reluctant encouragement.

Calloused fingers hooked, pressing past Andrew's parted lips and sliding deep. Andrew could taste salt—the ever-present sea. He shuddered and opened himself up to Daniel, licking the pads of his fingers as Daniel gently fucked them into his mouth.

Daniel's voice was low and deep when he whispered into Andrew's skin, "We won't be found out. There's no one here to witness this." Teeth raked over the curve of Andrew's jaw and he groaned, sound muffled by Daniel's fingers. "I have wanted you," the other man murmured. "I couldn't wait anymore."

Yes, he wanted to say, tugging at the closures of Daniel's jacket. Andrew flicked his tongue out, teasing the crease between fingers as he rocked their erections together. The feel of Daniel's hard cock against his was like nothing he had ever imagined. He wanted more—he wanted skin to skin. Andrew made a low, pleading sound in the back of his

throat as Daniel slipped his fingers from Andrew's mouth. He arched his neck, biting at the pad of Daniel's thumb as he moved his hips in an unpracticed circle. He was slick from pre-come. Sweat dotted his forehead and trickled between his shoulder blades as they moved together in the ship's oppressive hold.

"I want you," Andrew began, licking his lips. Daniel reached down, movements hidden, but Andrew didn't care what he was doing so long as he didn't *leave*. "I want you," he said again, reaching up to cup Daniel's jaw. The light stubble scraped his palms like frayed rope. He wondered how it would feel against his body and his cock jerked hard at the thought. Andrew bit his lower lip, eyes locked with Daniel's. He knew those eyes. He knew this man. They'd been stationed together aboard the *Charon* for more than four years.

Fifty-one months. It's a long time to love from afar.

Andrew's fingers curled around the square of Daniel's jaw, forcing the other man to focus on him. The creak of wood, the crash of the sea, the distant voices calling far above them—none of it touched them. Not even thought of the Articles of War and what would happen should they be caught distracted Andrew from his study of those beautiful, familiar eyes. "I want you to—" he began, but Daniel cut him off with a sudden, whisper-soft kiss.

"Yes," he murmured against Andrew's lips, tongue snaking out to tease the crease of his mouth. Andrew opened wide for him, encouraging. Heat flared low in his belly, licking through his body in waves, but Daniel kept the kiss light. He caught Andrew's bottom lip between his teeth and tugged gently. He reached up, tongue curling and slipping inside Andrew's mouth for brief, maddening licks as he wrapped his fingers around Andrew's wrists. Slowly he brought their hands down, deepening the kiss by degrees.

Andrew tangled their tongues together with a gasp. He closed his eyes as Daniel stroked along the underside of his tongue before sucking it into his mouth. The sharp sting of teeth traveled straight to his cock and he jerked, allowing Daniel to urge his arms down and back. His toes curled and his erection throbbed. Everything was focused on Daniel's lips, Daniel's teeth, Daniel's tongue, Daniel's thigh sliding between his legs and rocking against his jerking cock.

Which is why Andrew didn't realize his hands had been tied until Daniel stepped away from him, lips swollen and eyes dancing.

"What—" Andrew began, trying to reach for him. His hands caught, the sudden pressure of rope making its way through his fogged senses. He frowned in confusion, twisting his neck to see around the support beam he was pressed against. The rope Daniel had been twining into a pair of attached loops had been fastened around his wrists, fitted snugly.

Andrew looked up at Daniel, confused and briefly alarmed. "What are you doing?" he asked, the question almost lost as the ship pitched and waves crashed outside the curved wooden walls.

Daniel leaned in to kiss him, one hand pressed over Andrew's heart as he nibbled on his lower lip. "I want you to trust me," he murmured, fingers shifting as if feeling out the racing beats. His other hand slid down, palm resting against the outline of Andrew's erection.

"*Daniel!*" he hissed, eyes going wide. He flexed his fingers, struggling against the rope, and rocked his hips up. When Daniel pressed down his palm, rubbing against the hard line of his cock, Andrew dropped his head back and moaned, heat washing through him in a nearly painful wave.

"The thought of you open like this," Daniel said as he scratched his nails over the heavy bulge and began to unbutton Andrew's jacket with the other hand, "has stayed with me a long time. Every soul aboard this ship has seen your smile. I'm the only one who will see this."

Daniel popped buttons through their holes, opposite hand squeezing then relaxing. He watched Andrew with steady, serious eyes, lashes flickering as his gaze dropped from Andrew's mouth to his bobbing Adam's apple. Daniel's lips parted, slick and kiss-reddened, and Andrew arched his neck, straining to catch his mouth.

"Daniel," he said, trying to put the weight of his longing into that one word. His entire body was on fire, arousal licking through his limbs. Andrew twisted against the heavy post, nipples tightening when Daniel finally pulled open his jacket and pushed up his shirt. Daniel paused, fixated by Andrew's body, thumbs moving over the golden curls trailing down his stomach. He curved his fingers and raked a light path up to coral-pink nipples before leaning in to brush the tip of his tongue over one.

Andrew's head fell back, eyes closing. The first tentative brush of Daniel's tongue was followed by another then another. Teeth lightly scored the nub, causing Andrew to cry out louder than intended. One of Daniel's hands slid up reflexively, two fingers pushing past Andrew's swollen mouth once more to brush against his tongue as his other hand began to unfasten painfully tight breeches. Andrew sucked hard on Daniel's fingers, teeth raking over the pads as he twisted against him. Daniel's mouth moved hungrily to the other flat nipple.

A path connected between his chest and balls, a trade wind sweeping Andrew helplessly along. He murmured Daniel's name around his thrusting fingers and his breath came in quick, hard pants as Daniel unfastened the last of his buttons. Slick fingers slid from his mouth and Daniel crouched before him, reaching to grasp the hem of Andrew's breeches and tug them over his slim hips.

Warm air gusted over the slick, bobbing head of his erection. Andrew twisted against the rough rope cuffs. His fingers ached to curl in soft brown hair.

"God, *Andrew,*" Daniel said, voice low and choked.

"Please," Andrew murmured. Daniel looked up, dazed, and Andrew bit his lower lip hard. "Touch me. I need you to touch me, Daniel."

The dark head nodded and Daniel leaned in, one hand lifting. He cupped Andrew's balls and brushed his lips over the hot length of his shaft, tongue flickering out to tease

the soft skin. Andrew hissed, rising up on the balls of his feet as if to escape the heat of him, but he pushed forward moments later with a stifled, begging noise. Daniel turned his cheek, stubbled jaw lightly brushing over him before he opened his mouth wide and guided Andrew's cock past his lips with the help of his agile tongue.

The moment Daniel's mouth closed around him, Andrew moaned, noise loud in the hushed hold. Daniel echoed the moan, lips stretching around him as he pressed in. He swallowed Andrew's cock in a slow, measured glide, thumb of one hand teasing along the undercrease of his balls as the other moved up farther. He nudged Andrew's legs apart, hand gliding to cup the curve of his ass before one spit-slick finger pushed between his ass cheeks and brushed lightly over the puckered skin of his opening.

The flash of shock and need were so intense Andrew nearly yanked away. He stared down at Daniel, breath coming in rapid pants, body tensing. He jerked again when Daniel traced a nail over his entrance and sobbed in a breath when a slick finger lightly pushed past the initial resistance, sliding into his body to the first knuckle.

"What are you doing?" Andrew gasped, voice strangled. Daniel hummed around his throbbing cock, head bobbing as he swallowed more. His throat muscles worked around Andrew's erection, making him jerk and thrust his hips once, moving away from the shocking invasion of his finger before pressing back again. Daniel pushed farther, finger moving in a small circle as if loosening the tight clench of his body. His lashes flickered in the dim as he looked up, eyes locking with Andrew's.

Trust me, they seemed to say.

Andrew froze then nodded, biting at his mouth as Daniel slid more of his finger inside. To the second knuckle, the third. His palm was curved against Andrew's perineum, wrist pressing against his balls as his long, thick finger rested inside Andrew's body. Andrew shifted against it, more aware of that one finger than he had ever been of anything in his life. Only the soft, meditative sucks on his flushed cock drew his mind away from the not-quite pain.

"Daniel," he whimpered as he slowly began to relax. He rocked his hips forward then back, shifting between Daniel's mouth and finger. He moved with the pitch of the ship, using the swells of the waves to glide between the two. Rope tightened around his wrists, rubbing them raw, but Andrew didn't care—all that mattered was the gradually building orgasm cresting through his body and coming faster, harder. He moaned and rocked his hips with the increased tempo, whispering guttural thanks as Daniel followed suit. The dark head bobbed over his cock, taking him deeper, lips stretching wide. His finger thrust up into Andrew's body, slick with spit and teasing him with the sensation of being filled. Andrew drew in a ragged breath, eyes closing as his head fell back, breath catching in sharp little sputters.

Suddenly Daniel curved his finger, hooking into Andrew's body and brushing something deep inside him. Andrew shouted as white heat exploded through his jerking limbs, rushing at the head of his orgasm as he shuddered on the painful brink.

"Mr. Clayton!"

The voice snapped Andrew awake. He struggled up, biting back a moan as he swayed in his suspended cot. His cock was aching, balls drawn tight against his heavily sweating body. He blinked, reaching blindly to bundle his covers over his tenting erection.

"M-Mr. Upton," he said, voice noticeably deeper than usual. He cleared his throat and tried to focus on the earnest-faced lieutenant who stood next to his cot. "Yes, how may I help you?"

The young man offered him a wry smile. "Sorry to disturb your sleep. I know it isn't quite five bells, but begging your pardon, Mr. Hayes said he'd like all officers on deck."

Andrew rubbed his face, trying to calm his racing heart. "All officers on deck," he repeated dully. He'd had the exhausting midwatch the night before. With any luck, Upton would attribute his odd mannerisms to lack of sleep.

"Aye, on account of the captain. I called your name from outside your cabin, but you were sound in."

"How far out from Portsmouth are we?" Andrew asked, throwing a leg over the edge of the cot and standing easily. He kept the blanket in his hands, however, shielding himself from the lieutenant's curious gaze.

Upton hesitated, a frown growing between his brows. "We haven't yet left Brest, Mr. Clayton," he said, eyeing Andrew with some concern. "Mr. Hayes wants all souls on deck for the signal from the flagship permitting us to leave."

So the journey had been part of his dream as well.

Andrew offered a slight smile. "I must still be sleep-muddled. Tell Mr. Hayes I will be up presently." He nodded dismissal and turned back to his cot, carefully folding the blanket and listening as Upton made his way into the wardroom, relaxing only when he was alone.

Then he ran trembling hands over his face as he drew steady, even breaths. The sharp ache of arousal was slowly fading, chased away by the sound of voices above.

"Dangerous dreams," Andrew said beneath his breath, shaking himself out of the lingering thrall and beginning to dress. He pulled his golden hair back into a neat queue and grabbed his bicorn, checking briefly to make certain he was presentable. Then, unable to control the impulse, Andrew reached up to touch his mouth, feeling phantom kisses, and closed his eyes tight against the sudden onslaught of images.

Daniel's eyes, Daniel's lips surrounding him, Daniel's glistening finger sliding into the tight clench of his body...

"No," he said, dropping his fingers as if burned. In all the years they'd spent together, Daniel had never once even hinted that he might want Andrew the way Andrew wanted him.

If he did... God, if he did, Andrew would stop at nothing until they were together. Damn the Navy, damn the Articles of War and damn the consequences. He'd face them all in order to have Daniel. He'd face anything.

Andrew turned and caught sight of his reflection in his old, dark mirror. His lips twisted into a wry smile as he met the steady brown gaze. It didn't matter, anyway. Despite what his dreams kept telling him, he knew that Daniel didn't want him.

"You are pathetic," he told his reflection, his light, educated upper-class accent rounding out each vowel. "Completely pathetic."

Chapter Two

A sharp wind met Andrew as he stepped out onto the main deck. Seamen were moving quickly about the worn wooden planks, ascending and descending the thick central mast as the double-looped garland was firmly fixed in place. Andrew stood, shading his eyes to watch as it was lashed high on the mainmast with careful knots. White ribbon fluttered in the breeze, twining like a living thing.

"Good work, men!" Mr. Hayes called out, bellow heard over the snap of sails. "Nice and tight, nice and tight. Ah, Mr. Clayton," he added in a lower voice, offering Andrew a welcoming nod. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Sir," Andrew said, smiling as he moved up the steps to join the older man on the quarterdeck. "The garland looks quite fine."

Hayes' chest puffed out. "Indeed it does. A credit to the *Charon* and the captain. I was certain we wouldn't get her finished, but Mr. Barret has proven himself a delicate touch with knotwork." He nodded aft with a proud smile.

Andrew followed the direction of his gaze, feeling his cheeks heat when he spotted Daniel. He was standing with one of the midshipmen—Henry Willoughby, sextant in hand—and appeared to be explaining something about the nearby curve of French coast. Daniel hesitated a moment, as if sensing Andrew's gaze, and glanced up.

Gray eyes the color of a coming storm met his. Andrew's fingers tensed around the wooden railing as he dipped his chin, trying to force a friendly smile. Daniel nodded briefly and turned back to the boy. The broad expanse of his body nearly hid the young midshipman.

"He's been helping some of the lads," Hayes continued, oblivious to the exchange. "He has an uncommon talent for playing to men's strengths. I've noted it to the captain, of course, and he has seen fit to mention it in his reports, but so far there have been no advances in that quarter."

Andrew made a soft, attentive noise even as he watched Daniel. A lock of hair fell across the second lieutenant's swarthy brow, shielding his eyes. Daniel reached up to brush it back absently, gesturing with his other hand to the rising sun. The way he moved showcased the muscles bunching and relaxing within his uniform.

"It's unfortunate he doesn't have your connections," Hayes continued. "As I said, he has a way about him that the men respond to. But it's not the men who choose a captain, is it?"

Neither the men nor their present commanders. That honor rested firmly in the hands of a distant Admiralty. "No Sir," Andrew said, discreetly admiring the line of Daniel's thigh in his white breeches. The uniforms left little to the imagination, but

Andrew found his thoughts racing all the same. Bronzed skin covered in a light dusting of dark curls. A birthmark, perhaps, near his knee. A thick, heavy erection bobbing between Daniel's spread thighs, shaft flushed and head glistening with pre-come. "And that is unfortunate," he added, forcing his thoughts away from the image of Daniel naked and beckoning to him.

Hayes turned to study him, alert blue eyes measuring. "Perhaps, perhaps," he said. He hesitated a moment as if weighing his words then added, "But I believe young Barret will make a way for himself yet—if he were to have the backing of those who wield the proper influence."

"Sir?"

"A man may find many roads open to him should he make the right friends. You have many highly placed sponsors, thanks to your father's position in Society. Mr. Barret, however, has very few friends and therefore very few roads." He pinned Andrew with a significant look. "With care though, perhaps a talented man can move past a humble birth and make something of himself. If he *finds* the right friends to lend him their political influence. Say via letter to their well-connected fathers while on leave in Portsmouth?"

"The right friends. Yes Sir," Andrew echoed, mind working furiously. The lieutenant's timing was clearly well calculated—war called for men like Daniel to be promoted up the line and given their own commands. Daniel would eventually be given a position as first lieutenant on some lesser vessel due to seniority, but the leap from lieutenant to captain was a notoriously difficult one. If Bellings had plans for Daniel, he would need to exert every bit of influence he could manage.

Hayes seemed set to say more but was interrupted when young Willoughby hurried past, wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his brow. Andrew glanced aside as Daniel moved to join them. "I had better see to my duties," Hayes said, barely acknowledging Daniel. He nodded to them and briskly stepped away, striding with characteristic focused energy.

Daniel leaned against the railing, muscled arm brushing Andrew's. "Mr. Clayton," he said, voice low and still faintly port-street rough. Andrew could barely repress the shiver that ran down his spine.

"Mr. Barret."

"Why do I have the feeling that the two of you were discussing me?" Daniel looked at Andrew with faintly raised brows. He had a dark, tanned face, a few pale freckles barely visible against his bronzed skin. His nose had been broken once and the bemused twist of his mouth drew Andrew's gaze.

"Most likely," Andrew said, forcing himself to keep from focusing on Daniel's lower lip, "that is because we were." He offered what he hoped was a relaxed, friendly grin. Standing so close, he could smell Daniel—musky, warm and faintly spicy. Andrew's nostrils flared and he inched closer.

Daniel watched him with guarded curiosity, a steady fire banking in his eyes. "Is it a conversation you'll share?" he asked, voice pitched low.

It's odd, Andrew thought. We can be surrounded by scores of men and yet when he leans in to speak to me, I feel as if we are completely alone.

"He wants my father to sponsor your career."

Immediately, Daniel clenched his jaw and straightened. Andrew was surprised to see *anger* flash across his face before Daniel struggled for control, expression smoothing into a chillingly polite mask. "It is kind of the two of you to think of me," Daniel said, voice unusually formal. He could have been speaking to a stranger, and the brittle cold in his tone made Andrew's stomach clench. "I am honored you would consider speaking to the viscount on my behalf. However, as aware as I am of the honor you do me —"

"Daniel." Andrew impulsively laid a hand on Daniel's wrist. Warmth. His thumb moved of its own volition, sliding across the soft skin in a lover's caress he would never have dared had he not been thrown so completely off his guard by Daniel's uncharacteristic anger. He could feel the pulse leap. He could see the blood pound at the base of Daniel's throat as the cold mask rapidly melted into something far more open. "Mr. Barret," Andrew corrected himself, moving his hand away. He tried to offer a lopsided grin. "There's no need to give a pretty speech as if I had just asked for your hand in marriage. Mr. Hayes was merely reminding me of our friendship and what it could mean to you."

"Our friendship." Daniel's voice was huskier than Andrew would have thought possible. The low, gravelly sound made his toes curl and his breath catch. A spear of heat pierced his body, the quick stab of arousal maddening. He leaned in, shoulder touching Daniel's even as his mental voice began crying, *Stop, no, no, danger. Danger. You're only making this worse for yourself.*

"Our friendship," Andrew echoed, his own voice roughened. He could have been back in his dream again. Part was him was convinced he *was*. He'd never seen Daniel so off balance before, emotions raw and so easy to read. Daniel was always so controlled. Now for some reason, that control was splintering.

Daniel looked down, muscle along his jaw working. "Our friendship means a great deal to me," he said slowly, deep voice rumbling over Andrew and making him shiver. Andrew shifted, embarrassed by the hot press of his erection.

"It means a great deal to me too," he said quickly. "Which is why, if you'll let me, I would be honored to try to assist with your promotion."

"Mr. Clayton —"

"You deserve it. No man makes it far in the service without some assistance, and you have made it a great deal farther than many already, all on your own."

"Mr. Clayton —"

Andrew barreled on. "I have every connection in the world. My father has friends all through the House of Lords and many more in the Admiralty. He can only do so

much for me—I'm a born follower. I am a good lieutenant, but I would never make a competent captain."

"Mr. Clayton—"

He turned fully to face Daniel, ignoring his protests. "But you, Mr. Barret—Mr. Hayes is right about you. You were meant to lead, and with care and with help, you can. Will. I am ashamed he had to remind me of it. As your friend, I should have been pressing your interests long before now. As your *friend*, I should have—"

"Andrew."

The use of his Christian name pulled Andrew up short. Daniel leaned in, eyes locked with his. His voice was very low when he spoke—so soft that it was almost stolen by the breeze. "Please. That is not what I want from you."

"What do you want, then?" The question was impulsive, reckless, but he didn't take it back. It was so *much* like his dreams that Andrew was half convinced Daniel would reach for him, strong body pressing him against the wooden railing as he bit hungrily at his mouth. Andrew found himself holding his breath as Daniel studied him, unspeaking. Unmoving. He could feel the heat between their bodies climbing steadily.

Please. Oh please. Oh please.

He whispered it over and over in his mind, though he couldn't quite say what he wanted. He knew what he would get. Daniel would smile and deflect the tension. He would move away. He would give away nothing, as always. This strange sense of possibility between them would die and later, alone in his cot, Andrew would dream of everything Daniel would *never* say or do.

But then, shockingly, Daniel's eyes dropped to Andrew's mouth. "I want..." The words hung there, damning, before he pulled away abruptly. "The captain will be— We will be setting sail shortly. Mr. Clayton," Daniel nodded, glancing toward the busy deck before striding down the steps toward the bustling men.

Retreating.

Andrew stood frozen, breath held in shock. His thoughts were caught in a dizzy whirl, emotions rapidly surging and dying away. Had Daniel just...? Did he mean...? He couldn't *possibly* have been implying...

Slowly, Andrew let out a long breath, shoulders relaxing. He rested his arms against the railing and dropped his head before forcing himself to straighten again, aware of curious eyes on him.

He was imagining things. He was only seeing what he wanted to see. He had to get control of himself.

"Don't be a fool, Andrew," he murmured, fisting his hands and forcing a faint smile to twist his lips. He turned his face to the low-hanging sun and the fleet of British ships bobbing in the distance, not seeing anything.

This wouldn't get the best of him.

* * * * *

He was a goddamned fool and he well knew it.

Daniel's shoulders tightened as he skirted past a knot of men busily scrubbing the deck. It was a wasted effort, of course—there was no keeping anything clean out at sea—but it gave the men continuous employment. It was all about distraction and discipline, Daniel knew. The two great constants of the service.

And he was failing miserably at them both.

Damn it. Damn it. God damn it.

He kept his features impassive as he let himself get lost in the bustle of the upper deck. Men acknowledged him as he passed, knuckling their brows with wizened hands before returning to their work. There were countless others milling about, coming from below decks in waves as the hue and cry was raised across the ship. Midshipmen elbowed each other and laughed behind their hands, a few of the older boys already lining their men up for muster. The air was filled with the buzz of excitement and even the sails seemed to snap and drag with barely contained anticipation.

They were going home. They were breaking the blockade and going home to Britain. It was supposed to be a time of celebration.

Daniel glanced over his shoulder, catching sight of Andrew half the ship's length away. He was still standing alone on the quarterdeck, elegant hands gripping the wood as he stared up at the sky. It could have been a painting—*Lieutenant at Dawn*, Andrew looking every inch the proper British officer. Daniel could imagine how well the *ton* would receive that honor. One of their own immortalized, proud and aching handsome. It was something the Clayton family wouldn't hesitate to throw money at, no doubt.

And he was being uncharacteristically bitter.

Daniel gracefully wove through the throngs of men, keeping an eye out for his own even as he withdrew from the thick of the excited activity. His thoughts were tumbling one over the other, emotions firing like sparks from a musket. Concerns about the weather—there would be a storm soon; he could feel it—the demands of his duties, anger, frustrated longing, disgust. He reached out to press a palm against a tightly lashed longboat, struggling for order and control. It was usually so simple for him, but today nothing seemed simple.

No. Not just today.

He had come *so close* to saying something he knew he shouldn't. Daniel was always on guard against his emotions, keeping them locked away when he was on duty and tightly reined in at all other times. But something about Andrew's earnest expression and heartfelt desire to help him had set him off like nothing else could. Andrew wanted to use his family's position to back him. Andrew wanted to find him a sponsor.

It would come to nothing, even if he allowed Andrew and Hayes—and probably the captain as well—to continue with their schemes to secure his promotion to captain.

The idea that Andrew could somehow be able to press his father into extending the Clayton political influence to the illegitimate son of a seaman and a tavern girl was laughable. The world didn't work like that, and Daniel was nothing if not a realist. It had been luck that had gotten Daniel his first assignment as a volunteer first class, and even more luck plus determination that promoted him to midshipman. The lieutenant's examination came after years of hard work aboard two separate vessels, and from then on it had been a simple matter of seniority that had promoted him up the line.

He knew it could go no further than second lieutenant on board the *Charon*. Even when the first lieutenant was finally promoted up to captain of his own ship—if the first lieutenant was promoted up to captain—Daniel knew he'd never be able to do the same. It was too political, and he was well aware of his humble background. At best, he could look forward to being made the first lieutenant of a frigate until the war ended and all hope of distinguishing himself in battle was lost.

He was lucky to have made it as far as he had on a ship of the line as remarkable as the *Charon*. He was *proud* to have made it as far as he had, and he wasn't going to be the dog begging for scraps at his betters' table. Even if that better man was Andrew.

Maybe especially if it was Andrew.

Daniel swallowed back a frustrated noise and moved around to the end of the longboats, refusing to try to catch sight of the other man again. The obsession with his closest friend had come slowly, filtering its way into his waking hours. The sound of Andrew's laugh, the peculiar twist of his smile, the faint hint of mint and lavender that never seemed to fade from his clothing no matter how long they were at sea. The warm press of his hand and the scalding awareness of his presence that grew with every day, making it more and more difficult to ignore the fantasies that came at night.

Daniel wanted Andrew with a depth of desperation that frightened him sometimes. It couldn't be normal to need another person as badly as he needed Andrew, and yet no amount of time or emotional control had managed to push away the persistent desire. It was a constant ache in his chest, a hunger that was fed hourly by warm smiles and almost-touches.

He supposed it was a wonder his control hadn't snapped long before today.

Daniel frowned, hand fisting against the wooden hull, but he quickly controlled his expression when another officer moved to join him. Phillip Upton was the youngest of the five lieutenants and the newest on board. He had a sort of awkward earnestness that was appealing, even if he did try too hard to be taken seriously by the men and his peers alike. It would take years before he fell into the easy camaraderie that Daniel and Andrew shared and months more, at least, before the men stopped calling him a young pup beneath their breaths.

"Mr. Upton," Daniel said, straightening and clasping his hands behind his back. The buzz on deck had swollen to a fever pitch as the sun climbed over the horizon. It wouldn't be long before the captain appeared and they would make sail for Portsmouth.

"Good morning, Mr. Barret," Upton said with a sunny smile, looking around them eagerly. "I saw you about earlier but didn't get a chance to say anything—on watch, you know. I wasn't expecting you to be about until muster."

"I had a light sleep." His tone was more brusque than usual. He'd been jolted awake several times during the night, body flushed and cock aching. The dreams were getting progressively graphic. Pressing Andrew against the foremast and kissing his upturned mouth. Catching him about the waist in the wardroom and pulling him back against his heavy erection. Tongue trailing into soft blond curls as his rough hand slid past the waist of his breeches.

He claimed Andrew a thousand different ways a thousand different times, and each time he woke before he could come, hungrier than ever.

"Fitful sleep?"

Daniel glanced at the other man, struggling to read his expression, but all he saw was friendly curiosity. Living so close to one another, packed together like animals in a stable, it was only a matter of time before they discovered one another's secrets. Another reason he could never let down his guard.

Daniel opened his mouth to reply when another voice cut into the conversation.

"Is Mr. Barret having trouble finding sleep?"

Lieutenant Edmund Sinclair's voice was smooth and educated, accent lacking all the street burr that sometimes invaded Daniel's words despite his best efforts. Edmund wasn't as genteel as Andrew—nor quite as handsome with his black hair and queerly bright green eyes—but he carried himself with a snobbish prejudice that never failed to get Daniel's back up.

"It's nothing to concern yourself over," Daniel said, turning to include the other man in their conversation. Those eyes were steady on him, and Daniel felt a quick flash of panic. Sinclair was no idiot, and as much as Daniel wished he could dismiss him, he could never quite shake the feeling that he was...waiting for something. Studying him and looking for just the right fault to bring Daniel crashing down. "Just fitful dreams."

Sinclair arched a brow, thin lips curved up at the corners. "Does something trouble your conscience, Mr. Barret?" he asked smoothly. "Confession does wonders for the soul."

Daniel met his gaze steadily, letting nothing show on his face. He'd known the other man resented him from the moment Sinclair had stepped aboard the *Charon*. The men respected Daniel. He had worked tirelessly to make certain they respected him. And even though Daniel was born in the gutter and Sinclair was raised in a gentleman's study, they looked to Daniel when the wind turned sour.

"I confess to being near-starved," Upton interrupted, looking between them with rapidly blinking eyes. It was Upton and Andrew who kept them apart, serving as a buffer in an endless campaign to keep a wardroom feud from brewing. There was a part of Daniel that was glad—he didn't need the constant needling—but there was a

stronger, more basic part that wanted the excuse to shrug off his jacket, roll up his sleeves and show Edmund Sinclair what a real street boy was capable of.

None of them had a chance to say more. A whistle blew, piercing through the hum of voices, and all three of them scattered immediately to see to their divisions. Daniel's men were already gathered, well trained and willing to please. They fell into line and straightened to the man, turning respectfully toward where the captain stood on the quarterdeck, Hayes by his side. Daniel moved to attention, sparing one glance down the line. Upton was struggling to get his men in order, but Sinclair and Andrew were already in place, men just as well drilled as Daniel's. A few of the midshipmen snickered amongst themselves, but a single look from the bosun had them shutting up and holding steady.

The deck went silent.

"I want to thank you," Captain Bellings said, looking across the crowd of dirty faces. His eyes lifted to the wedding garland, ribbon snapping cheerfully in the breeze, and his expression went uncharacteristically soft. "All of you. The only constant in life is change. My father told me that when I was a boy, and as the years have passed, I've come to realize what he meant. We're in a time of change now. We're in a time of war, a time of wonders where our ship could be the one thing that stands between Britain and utter defeat. It is a great and terrible burden to place on any man, but you have borne it well."

He shifted, arms clasped behind his back in a relaxed pose that was at odds with his words. "In but a few days' time, we will be rewarded for that strength in the face of unrelenting change when we arrive to the home we are protecting. In but a few days' time, you will look out across the water and see the British Isles spread out before you—and when you do, you will know with all certainty that you deserve every possible word of praise for keeping her safe and whole."

A cheer went up from somewhere amongst the men, caught and carried until it broke over the *Charon* in a swell of voices. It was thunderously loud, echoing across the cold Channel. Some distance away, the flagship began to signal, giving them permission to break ranks and go home.

Daniel glanced over, instinctively catching Andrew's eyes. His broad, faintly crooked smile made Daniel's stomach clench and he couldn't help but grin back.

The uncomplicated joy of that moment carried them all throughout the day and into the evening where, safe in his tiny, cloth-walled cabin, Daniel stared up at the ceiling and listened to the fitful sounds of Andrew caught in another erotic dream.

Chapter Three

"That is not what I want from you."

Daniel's voice was low, gravel-rough and close. Almost too close, hot breath stirring the fine hairs at his temple. Andrew shivered and closed his eyes, awareness snaking through him like a rapidly moving tide. He could smell Daniel, so near—spicy, male, almost overwhelming good. He could feel the heat radiating from his muscular body. Andrew had to curve his fingers about the quarterdeck railing and hold on tight to keep from reaching back blindly.

He wanted him. Oh God, he wanted him.

"What do you want then?" Andrew asked. His own voice was low and quavering. It was almost lost amidst the loud bustle and cry of the upper deck, and Andrew swallowed, fighting to keep his hips from tipping forward. He was aching hard, just from having Daniel so near. If he let go of the railing, he wasn't sure he could keep his footing.

Andrew startled when broad, gentle hands moved to his hips, grip tightening. He looked over his shoulder and nearly moaned aloud at the expression on Daniel's face. Stark hunger was there, darkening his eyes and making him look almost primitive. Almost...dangerous.

"You," Daniel murmured, tugging Andrew a half step back, ass fitting snugly against Daniel's pelvis. Daniel was hard, erection pressed against his backside in a scalding brand, and Andrew sucked in an unsteady breath as he fought to control the instinctual movement of his hips. His stomach muscles tightened when Daniel's hands slid down his thighs and then up again, angling inward to push up his uniform jacket and shirt. The first brush of his calloused fingertips made him jerk in surprise, ass rocking back. Daniel growled low in his throat and pressed his face into the crook of Andrew's neck. "God, Andrew. I've wanted you from the moment I first saw you." His breath was hot against Andrew's skin. "There was...sunlight in your hair. Your cheeks and nose ruddy with burn. Do you remember that?" Blunt, square-tipped nails teased along Andrew's lower belly and slid through the sparse golden curls. "Do you remember the day we first met?"

Andrew let his head drop back, face lifting to the sun even as he arched into the touch. His cock throbbed, trapped beneath layers of fabric and a neat row of buttons, already slick with anticipation. "I remember," he murmured. His lips felt swollen and ready to be kissed. "I was afraid of you. I had never met anyone like you before."

He opened his eyes again, tilting his chin so he could see Daniel's face. The hunger was still there, stark and beautiful, but it was tempered by a warmth that made his blood hum. "I've never met anyone like you since. You are... Well," Andrew added

wryly, brushing his lips over the stubble-rough jaw, "I'm not sure there are words that adequately describe you."

Daniel made a low noise of approval, dropping his chin until their mouths brushed together. He tasted like the sea, a faint tang of salt lightly dusting his full lips. Andrew darted out his tongue to taste, following the bottom curve all the way to the corner of Daniel's mouth before slipping past his lips. He stroked his tongue inside, slicking deep and twining lazily when Daniel's tongue moved to meet his.

It was a warm, liquid glide—tongues stroking together, twisting, teasing. Andrew parted his lips and let Daniel fuck his mouth with a steadily increasing rhythm, giving himself over to the sensations. There was something else he should have been focusing on. There was something *important* he needed to consider, but everything was washed away by the stark need raging through him.

Please, he thought, turning into the kiss. His arms slid around Daniel's broad shoulders, fingers sliding into his hair as he anchored his lover against him. From the first moment he saw Lieutenant Barret standing there, tall and imposing and just a little rough around the edges, he'd been aware of an attraction for him. It had taken time to grow and mature, but from the very beginning Andrew had felt the warmth low in his belly and the instinctive urge to tilt back his chin and bare his throat in surrender.

Andrew bit into the kiss, nipping sharply at Daniel's tongue, and he greedily swallowed the low growl that reverberated through the other man. Daniel pushed forward, driving Andrew back against the quarterdeck railing, and it was all Andrew could do to hold on. His world tipped crazily, wood pressed hard against his thighs, and if Daniel let him go...

Daniel wouldn't let him go. He wouldn't let him fall.

He made a sound in the back of his throat, echoing Daniel's, and pushed back against his overpowering body. Andrew rubbed up against him, hips moving in short, jerky hitches that sent flashes of fire through his blood. The feel of Daniel's erection against his own, so hot even through layers of cloth, was maddening. The swipe of his tongue, the heat of his mouth, the contours of his muscles... Everything, God, everything was working together to drive Andrew insane.

Andrew finally was forced to break the kiss, gasping in lungfuls of air. He was surprised to realize he was trembling. Actually *trembling* he wanted this so badly. "Daniel," he murmured, pressing his forehead against fine blue wool. He drew a deep breath, dizzy with the mingled smells of Daniel and the surrounding sea. "Daniel, I..."

A noise from below stopped him, and Andrew lifted his head, looking around him for the first time in long minutes. He was startled to realize where he was—standing aboard the quarterdeck in full sight of the crew, wrapped tight in Daniel's embrace. "Oh God," he said, eyes going wide. He tried to pull back, heart rate soaring, but Daniel refused to break his grip. Those big arms tightened around him, iron strong, and Andrew fought for a panicked minute before stilling again. Letting Daniel turn him.

The crew was there, climbing the masts. Working rope. Scrubbing the deck.

No one spared Andrew a glance.

"It's all right, Andrew," Daniel murmured into the shell of his ear. His tongue darted out, the tip tracing along the outer curve before he drew the lobe into his mouth, biting gently. Andrew whimpered, letting himself fall back against Daniel's body once more as panic faded and desire began to climb again. He needed... God, he needed...

Broad hands moved to his waist, palms rubbing against the sharp jut of his hipbones before sliding down. Daniel worked quickly on the line of buttons securing Andrew's fly, nimbly spreading open the cloth. Andrew sucked in a sharp breath at the first gust of wind against his naked cock, eyes squeezing shut tight before he forced himself to open them again. It was surreal, the slow removal of his uniform before the uncaring eyes of the crew. A part of him shied away from the intimacy of it and a part of him responded fiercely. There was no hiding. There were no secrets. All they had to do was look up and they would see everything.

"Daniel, touch me," Andrew gasped, hips rocking forward. His breeches fell about his ankles, wind caressing his naked thighs. Daniel's skillful hands were on him but not where he needed them the most. They skated across his hips, his stomach, up beneath his still-fastened jacket and then down his quivering thighs. Andrew whined low in the back of his throat and twisted his hips, trying to urge Daniel's hands toward his erection. He was so hard it was beginning to hurt, cock jerking and heavy between his legs, tip glistening with pre-come. "Daniel. *Daniel*. Please touch me."

Sharp teeth raked a fiery path up his neck and Andrew moaned helplessly. He tried to reach down and grab for Daniel's hands—tried to *force* them to go where he needed them—but Daniel caught his wrists easily and pulled them back.

"Impatient," Daniel teased, biting Andrew's still-clothed shoulder.

"Yes."

"It will be good if you wait." The promise in that low voice made him shudder and moan, hips jerking forward wildly. The ship pitched against a sharp wave, throwing him back, and the hot brand of Daniel's cock ground unforgivably into his backside. "It will be better."

"Please. Please. Daniel, please." It was too much—the tease of his mouth, his hands, the awareness of people surrounding them, the naked vulnerability, the anticipation. It was too much for Andrew, his body straining and his breath coming in jerky pants. If Daniel didn't touch him soon—

"Please."

"As you wish."

He grabbed Andrew's hips and yanked him around, shoving him back against the smooth wood. Daniel's mouth was on him in seconds, swallowing his cries and his tongue as one big hand pushed between them to wrap around Andrew's steadily leaking cock.

He jolted up, nearly climbing the bigger man. Andrew's hips shoved back into the ungentle grip as he scrabbled at Daniel's shoulders, fighting to hold on, to get more, to

ride the fast-and-hard strokes of Daniel's hand. Each pull rocked through his entire body, drawing out broken, barely muffled noises. Andrew panted hard into Daniel's mouth, nails digging into the blue of his uniform jacket as he jerked and surged and fought to come, bent double over the quaking quarterdeck railing, suspended above the scores of men as they went about their daily duties.

When he came, it was so violent that Andrew almost blacked out. Incredible heat washed over him, blinding him, making ambient noise sharply drop away. Everything narrowed down into specific sensations.

The rasp of Daniel's stubble against his chin.

The sharp dig of brass buttons.

The calluses on his hand.

The thundering of his heart.

Andrew hung there for what felt like hours, riding the edge of orgasm, waiting for it to crest. And then it all came crashing down again, exploding through him with the strength of a cannon's blast. He came in long, aching spurts, shuddering with each wave and completely lost to the sensation. Andrew broke the kiss to draw in a helpless breath, clinging to Daniel as the last shocks jolted through him, growing weaker and weaker as he finally began to relax.

Andrew turned his face, pressing it into Daniel's broad shoulder, and slowly began to put himself back together again. He'd never experienced anything like that. He'd never even been aware it was possible.

"That was..." Andrew began, but there weren't adequate words to express it. He tried anyway, looking up at Daniel with a growing smile, feeling tendrils of heat snake through his belly again at the pure *want* in Daniel's eyes. "God, Daniel, that was..."

Daniel caught his mouth for a slow, deep, claiming kiss. His tongue swept past Andrew's bruised lips and speared deep. Deeper. His hands slid up to brace Andrew's weight, keeping their bodies fused together. Andrew could feel the length of Daniel's erection against his thigh and could smell the musky salt of his own come.

His spent cock twitched.

When Daniel pulled back again, Andrew was swaying helplessly. He caught at Daniel's arms, wanting to draw him in again. "Daniel," he murmured.

"I'm going to turn you around and kick apart your thighs," Daniel said into his ear, breath hot. "I'm going to bend you over the quarterdeck railing, in full sight of all our men, and I'm going to fuck you, Andrew."

Andrew jolted awake with a surge of arousal so strong he very nearly cried out. He bit his tongue hard to muffle the sound, staring up at the ceiling of his cabin with confused half awareness as he gradually began to come fully awake.

That was... That had been...

He squeezed his eyes shut and slid a hand down his body and under the waist of his breeches. His fingers stroked through trails of sticky come.

That was wish fulfillment at its finest, clearly. Andrew made a low, frustrated noise and threw a leg over the edge of his hanging cot, standing. His legs trembled and he stumbled before finding his balance, feet planted wide to move with the rocking of the Channel. The motion was choppy than before, waves coming hard and fast. The wind gusted about the *Charon*, catching her sails and sending her crashing into the crest of the next wave.

Andrew forced himself to focus on the weather as he slipped out of his breeches and scrubbed himself clean. He had another pair ready, thank God, neatly folded in his trunk amidst sachets of dried herbs and flowers his sisters sent him every few months. He kept them all, folded carefully amongst his things, the fresh scent filling his small cabin.

The storm would cause problems for the fleet, no doubt. That was one of the biggest disadvantages of a close blockade. What the fleet saved on crew mutiny and unrest it paid in damages from the weather, but Andrew couldn't imagine bobbing about for weeks on end near a British harbor, unable to go ashore, unable to go to sea, waiting for news to reach the *Charon* via signal flags that a French ship was making a break for it and hoping they caught a fair wind that led them to intercept in time.

The risk was worth it. At least the close blockade gave them something to focus their minds on. If his dreams plagued him now, Andrew mused darkly as he tied back his hair and stomped on his shoes, he could only imagine how much worse they would be if there was nothing before him but long hours of navel-gazing like any common Channel grouper.

Dressed, he checked his reflection in the cloudy mirror before pushing back the flap of thick canvas that served as the door to his cabin. Only the first lieutenant had a proper wood-walled cabin. The rest of the officers made do with what they could. But, Andrew mused as he stepped into the wardroom, it was better than sharing an open berth as when he was a midshipman. A great deal could be said for privacy, no matter how cheap.

The wardroom was dark at this time of morning, of course, little in the way of light making its way through the wide rear window. Andrew made his way aft, moving carefully in the dark, one hand brushing the line of dinner chairs as he passed. Night gathered in dark pockets of shadow, the moon low in the sky, stars faded to pale flecks of silver. The dim fingers of light stretched across the floor had a bluish cast, as if it were pushing its way through a heavy veil. He paused at the window and reached out to touch the pitted glass, fingertips stroking the cold panes absently. Below, the waves moved with frenetic energy, black as pitch and topped with silver-blue foam.

"Mr. Clayton."

The low voice startled him, it was so close. Andrew turned quickly, fingers instinctively gripping the window ledge. Daniel was there. Standing just a few feet

away, out of the moonlight. He'd probably been there all along, Andrew realized, sitting in typical silence and cloaked by the shadows. Daniel shifted and Andrew's eyes adjusted enough to the darkness to make out the broad shape of him before Daniel moved closer.

"D-Daniel," Andrew murmured, swallowing hard. He wasn't ready to face him just yet, he realized, which seemed ridiculous – this was *Daniel*; this was his *friend* – but still ultimately true. The dream had left an odd taste on his tongue and a buzzing through his limbs. He could still hear Daniel's voice in his head, husky and hot and undeniable. "*That isn't what I want from you.*"

"Mr. Barret," he corrected himself, turning back to the window. His shoulders were stiff and his knuckles, he realized when he glanced down, were white where he gripped the ledge. He loosened his stranglehold and quickly dropped his hands, letting them hang uselessly at his sides.

Daniel moved to stand next to him, shoulder-to-shoulder, scanning the distant horizon. Their arms brushed together as they moved with the swells of the sea, hands bumping casually. Andrew held his breath and focused on the fleeting sensation of skin against skin – the accidental caresses. He couldn't bring himself to look at Daniel and he couldn't think of anything to say, but that didn't seem to matter. Daniel merely stood there, a warm, solid presence as they watched the moon dip lower toward the water and the first touch of lavender light the sky.

Andrew was so focused on the disappearing stars that he couldn't put his finger on when the atmosphere in the room changed. It must have been gradual, he realized, fighting to keep his fingers from twitching. There couldn't have been some flashy moment of revelation or he *would* have noticed Daniel leaning closer against him. He *would* have noticed that the brush of their arms and hands were no longer quite so occasional nor so accidental.

He glanced down, careful to keep his chin from dipping, and watched as Daniel's thumb stroked across his knuckles in a careful slide of calloused skin. Daniel's breath was coming faster than normal, and Andrew listened to the faint hitches as he fought the sudden blast of heat that radiated through him.

Such a small brush of skin to say so much.

He lifted his eyes, staring blankly forward, and tried to sort out the tangled knot of feelings, each fighting for dominance. It had to be accidental – it couldn't be accidental. Perhaps Daniel was unaware of what he was doing? But no, the rapid breath gave him away. Now that Andrew was *paying attention*, everything gave him away. The silence in the room was heavy and thick, the air filled with tension. *Sexual* tension. He could feel it make the hair on his arms prick and his cock stir to life.

It was such a small, almost insignificant thing, and it opened Andrew's eyes to a world of possibilities. *He wants me. He wants me too. Daniel wants me.*

Andrew drew in a shuddery breath, giddy with the new knowledge, and turned his head to meet Daniel's eyes. Andrew read the question in his gaze and watched as his

eyes widened, alarm growing in them as he discovered he'd been found out. Daniel pulled his hand back but Andrew followed impulsively, catching it in his own and holding on tight. He squeezed Daniel's fingers, trying to put a wealth of words into the simple contact, then deliberately laced his own fingers with Daniel's. The brush of bare skin was intimate and hot. Andrew had to bite his bottom lip to keep from making noise; he almost groaned anyway when Daniel's eyes dropped to his mouth as if pulled by a lodestone. His trapped cock twitched and throbbed.

Andrew opened his mouth to say something—he wasn't sure what, didn't *care* what so long as Daniel got the message—when the scrape of wood against wood broke the moment. Daniel yanked his hand away and took a step back, trying to put distance between them as someone stepped into the wardroom from the main deck.

Andrew drew a sharp, unsteady breath and stared blankly at the sky again, listening to the low footfall, followed by silence. He forced himself to turn with a carefully curious expression, hating the fact his cheeks were flushed guiltily.

Standing in the doorway, looking between them with coolly critical eyes was Edmund Sinclair.

"Mr. Sinclair," Andrew said when he realized Daniel had no intention of speaking. He offered what he hoped was a steady smile and received a faint quirk of the other man's lips in return. "Good day."

"Good day, Mr. Clayton. I hadn't expected to find such a cozy tête-à-tête waiting for me." He stepped fully into the room, shutting the door behind him. "Tell me, was there a gathering of officers that somehow slipped my mind?"

Andrew forced a laugh, relieved at how natural it sounded. "If so, it slipped mine as well. I was just telling Mr. Barret of a bad storm that once left a tree on my father's property split down the center. I used to climb it as a boy, and ever after my tutor liked to say that God Himself split the trunk as a reminder to me." He made his way toward Sinclair casually, not looking back toward Daniel even though he was dying to read the expression on his face. "A reminder of what, I have no idea."

"Mm, indeed." Sinclair wasn't looking at him. Andrew allowed himself one brief, fleeting glance back at Daniel, but the other man was almost lost again in shadows, even in the gradually brightening room.

"I had best be above deck," Andrew said after a moment. He hesitated, waiting to see if Daniel would follow him. Leaving Sinclair and Daniel alone was rarely a good idea—in fact, Andrew could almost always count on it going very badly—but it seemed more important to put distance between them at the moment. Staying wasn't an option, but neither was asking Daniel to join him.

Daniel stayed where he was, against the far wall, and Andrew finally had to grab his bicorn from his cabin and head out the door, trusting Daniel to ward off the suspicious harping of Third Lieutenant Sinclair and already wondering when and how he could manage to be alone with him again.

Chapter Four

"Mr. Barret," Sinclair said evenly, eyes never leaving the other man's face. He barely bothered to acknowledge Andrew's withdrawal.

Daniel dipped his chin in answer before turning away to stare out the window again. Sinclair followed his gaze, scanning the horizon before returning his attention to the broad, stiff shoulders.

He moved forward slowly, shucking off his greatcoat and hanging it on a peg before tossing his bicorn onto the table. There was a fresh basin in the corner and Sinclair was deliberately noisy as he strode over, swirling his fingers in the cold water before plunging them in. He cupped his hands and splashed his face, taking pleasure in the shock of wakeful clarity it brought.

Still, Daniel said nothing.

"The men are looking forward to time at port," Sinclair observed, shaking his hands dry before grabbing the square of linen that hung near the basin. It was refreshed twice a day, though things were rarely *clean* aboard the *Charon*. No amount of scrubbing could do away with the salt grime that covered everything. "Some of them have families living squashed together in the town proper. Talloway was telling me about it just yesterday. Six to eight cramped in tiny rooms, competing for space with the fleas and lice."

He kicked a chair back and slid onto it, lacing his fingers over his stomach. The gesture was deliberately laconic, and he arched a brow faintly as he watched Daniel's still form. Light was rising in the wide window, casting the broad body in stark relief.

He was a handsome-enough man, Sinclair supposed, and cunning in an animal sort of way. But there was no denying that he was common. Born and bred, stinking of the city streets no matter how many years he put between himself and his low birth. The Navy was filled with the poor and the uneducated and the unworthy, but they all had the decency to remain in their place, as God intended them—below the gentleman. Daniel Barret had defied nature and divinity and had shoved his way up the ranks and into a position that by *right* belonged to Andrew Clayton.

Or, if he wanted to be truly honest, to himself.

"I can only imagine what it must be like to live in such desperate filth," Sinclair said, tapping his fingers against his stomach. His lips twitched a bit when Daniel shifted, but he smoothed his expression expertly as the other man turned to look at him. The broken nose and swarthy skin were clear signs of his inferiority. No doubt he brawled like a common thug in the Plymouth gutters, knuckles bursting like ripe melons at each eager blow.

Sinclair had seen his share of fights before. He knew how they did things in the world below.

He watched as Daniel moved about the table, taking a seat on the other side. He felt the first excited prickle of confrontation, as if Daniel were an enemy ship just sighted on the horizon. A ship, he amended to himself, that he had been chasing for months now. "Living on top of each other, parents rutting in corners like animals, building rotting above their heads. It's fascinating to think how those people survive. Tell me, Daniel—how did *you* survive?"

The insult was deliberate. Usually Sinclair preferred to bait Daniel cautiously, as if toying with a wounded bear. Usually he was content enough to keep the barbs subtle and his intentions veiled, biding his time. Eventually, surely, the captain would wake up from his idealistic haze and realize he'd let the man clamber over his betters. Eventually *someone*—some midshipman perhaps, from a good family, or even a warrant officer born in the merchant class—would begin to protest.

So far, Sinclair seemed to be the only one who realized how degrading it was to be taking orders from a street rat. That was going to change soon, even if he had to force it with his bare hands and mercilessly sharp tongue.

Daniel studied his face silently, jaw ticking. The blow had found its mark, just as Sinclair had anticipated.

Come on, Mr. Barret, he thought, leaning forward a little. *Even you can't let that rest.*

"Through my wits, Mr. Sinclair," Daniel finally said. His voice was a low rumble, sharp and cold. The tone sent a shock of awareness through Sinclair, anxiety and excitement and fury winding together like a living thing as Daniel visibly relaxed, falling into what had to be a deliberately offensive sprawl. "Like any other man, I imagine. Though I do wonder—not knowing much about London life, you see—how *you* got on. Your father was a surgeon, was he not?"

Sheer force of will kept him from leaping across the table and grabbing Daniel by the throat. "Physician," Sinclair gritted through his clenched teeth. The difference between the two was like the difference between the king and the king's officer of the privy.

Daniel, of course, knew that well enough.

"My father was a *physician* in London," Sinclair added. "He tended to all the great houses."

"Ah, of course." Sinclair had seen flint or steel a softer gray than Daniel's eyes, though he'd never before seen Daniel look at him this way. Usually the other man shook off his insults and remained silent. His taciturn nature was a joke aboard the vessel—at least amongst the men Sinclair could convince to laugh along. Everyone else seemed content enough to let themselves fall under Daniel's spell.

He couldn't remember the last time Daniel had been riled enough to trade more than a few offhand barbs with him. He couldn't help but wonder what was different about today, and his mind cast back to the color in Andrew's cheeks.

That bore thinking about.

But now Daniel was continuing. "I never could keep surgeons and physicians straight in my head," he said idly, drumming his fingers against the scarred wooden table. The noise was irritating. Almost offensively so. "They both spend their days elbow-deep in a man's insides for coin. Unless I am mistaken?"

"You are mistaken," Sinclair spat. He wondered if the heavily veiled insult were enough to call Daniel out on. He was a steady shot—one of the best on board—where Daniel was more suited to fighting with his fists and blade.

But no. No. It wasn't enough of an insult to demand satisfaction, and no one would smile upon a duel anyway. Especially so near the captain's wedding. Especially with Daniel Barret, who had bewitched the crew into unflinching loyalty.

Daniel seemed to read all this on his face.

"Am I?" He seemed willing to accept that, but Sinclair knew this was all part of the battle. Daniel was outflanking him simply because Daniel had the unnatural ability to swallow down his emotions and remain cool in the face of aggression. There were ways he could ruffle Daniel, Sinclair was sure. There were insults he wouldn't be able to ignore.

He simply hadn't found them yet.

"Indeed, yes." Sinclair stood, agitated still, and walked to the window. He stared out of it blindly, ignoring the golden burst of light, the red-rose sky spreading above the rising sun, heavy with clouds. Wood scraped against wood as Daniel stood as well, and Sinclair tensed, waiting as Daniel moved to join him.

Their shoulders brushed as the ship pitched. A pulse of heat knocked through his body.

Sinclair turned his head to look at Daniel, eyes narrowed suspiciously. The other man wasn't looking at him, eyes on the horizon. His profile was so strong, so *proud*. That made him angrier than anything.

Their shoulders brushed again, though Daniel seemed to be trying to avoid it, body tensing against the motion of the ship and jaw tight. If this attempt at camaraderie was his idea of a peace offering, he was far stupider than Sinclair had assumed.

He remembered the cozy scene he'd stumbled across and bitterness rose in his throat.

"Tell me, Mr. Barret," Sinclair said, gaze fixed on Daniel's face. "How long have you and Mr. Clayton been close?"

It was a shot in the dark, but it found its mark. Daniel tensed, jaw clenching briefly, nostrils flaring. Any other man would have missed the signals, no doubt—but Sinclair wasn't any other man. He took in every change in Daniel's demeanor, looking for signs of guilt, of defiance, of weakness. *You have to have a weakness, Daniel Barret. Every man has a weakness.*

Daniel's expression had smoothed by the time he turned to look at Sinclair, but the damage had already been done. *There is something you're hiding*, Sinclair crowed to himself, fighting to control the rush of visceral pleasure.

Daniel had finally made his mistake. The closeness of their bodies had been too intimate, too easy to connect to what Sinclair had seen when he'd first entered the wardroom—Daniel and Andrew standing by the window, Andrew flushed red, Daniel a statue.

Guilt, as clear as anything.

"We have served together some years now." Daniel pulled back, putting space between them, but already Sinclair's mind was working furiously. "You could say that we have become friends over that time."

"It's only natural, of course." Sinclair couldn't quite keep himself from emphasizing the word *natural*. Daniel didn't react, but he didn't have to—Sinclair had a new weapon in his arsenal, and in time he would know how best to use it. "That friendships should form between men who work so close together for so long. Tell me, Mr. Barret—is it your opinion that we will become friends over time?"

He almost laughed at the faint quirk of Daniel's brow, waiting for the polite dismissal. Maybe it was more than disdain for Daniel's low birth that led him to always bait the man, Sinclair mused. Maybe there was something about Daniel himself that made him...uneasy.

Daniel pulled back another step and Sinclair realized with a start that he had been inching forward until they were dangerously close. "We could be," Daniel said frankly. The steel was gone from his eyes and his expression had...not softened, but at least wasn't quite so guarded. *He's being honest, damn him*. Daniel was taking the question seriously instead of reading the veiled threat. "If you were willing to allow it, I do believe we could be."

Something inside him was warning that he should retreat, quickly, *now*. Sinclair moved around the end of the table, putting plenty of space between them, hairs along the back of his neck standing up. Good God, his entire body was filled with some kind of electrical charge, as if Daniel were giving off energy he was eagerly soaking in. "Of course," he said curtly, trying to end the conversation. Somehow Daniel had won—this time. "I am needed above deck."

Daniel nodded, watching him. "Mr. Sinclair," he said evenly.

"Mr. Barret." He hesitated, hating to turn tail and run, hating to lose. Then he turned and strode out of the wardroom, barely pausing long enough to grab his bicorn and greatcoat. Sinclair practically ran up the steps to the upper deck, slamming into a midshipman on his way down. "Watch yourself!" he snarled, shoving past. He felt eyes on him, heavy with curiosity, and Sinclair turned to meet Andrew's frank gaze across the busy deck.

The wave of bitterness was unexpected, but he rode it out, nodding distant greeting even as he narrowed his eyes against the other man, forcing his chaotic thoughts into one sure purpose.

There was something going on between Andrew and Daniel. He would find out what it was and he would use it any way he could to force Daniel back where he belonged—in the gutter and out of his thoughts for good.

* * * * *

Another day like this and he would go mad.

Daniel drew a steadying breath and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He was taking a moment for himself in the empty wardroom, too aware of the currents of tension snaking around him above deck. The *Charon* pitched and swayed, fighting against the battering wind but still making decent time. The steady movement of the ship should have been calming, the frenzied activity familiar, but Daniel couldn't seem to find his balance anymore.

"Damnation," he breathed, dropping his hands and throwing himself into a heavy wooden chair. The wardroom was brighter now, sunlight streaming through the wide back window. Breakfast had been cleared away, but the smell lingered, making him vaguely ill. All through the hurried meal he'd been aware of Andrew watching him, gaze darting toward him again and again. He'd been just as aware of Sinclair *not* watching him, even cooler and more distant than usual. Daniel had kept his eyes deliberately averted from them both, attention on the ebbs and flows of conversations he did not participate in. Not that any of the officers expected him to anymore—they'd sailed with him long enough to know Daniel was a man of few words.

He just wished he'd maintained his reticence earlier in the day.

Daniel shifted and dropped his head, cradling it against his fist. What had he been thinking? Ignoring the ill-advised pissing contest with Sinclair, he'd made a mess of things with Andrew. He'd made it obvious that he was infatuated with him. He'd made it clear enough, at least, that Andrew would have a difficult time pretending he misunderstood.

And he would have to pretend. They would both have to pretend there was nothing between them, that their friendship stopped at simple companionship.

That was, simply, the way things had to be.

I wasn't thinking, Daniel mused darkly. I haven't had a clear thought in my head ever since Andrew admitted he wished to speak to his father on my behalf.

And that was another problem. The idea that Andrew would somehow be able to press his father into extending his political influence over the illegitimate son of a seaman was laughable. It wouldn't happen. It couldn't happen, Daniel knew, but the realization that Andrew would be willing to press his interests made his stomach clench in an unsettling mixture of embarrassment and pleasure.

"That's not what I want," Daniel muttered, standing again and pacing. It was a painful bind. On the one hand, he could never be promoted up the line without extensive support. On the other, he couldn't stand the thought of the others taking pity on him. Of *Andrew* taking pity on him.

He turned, frustrated, feeling like a caged animal. The room was small but long, two cramped aisles flanking the central table. The cabins seemed to lean in toward him as if they were threatening to topple over at the next wave. He'd never felt so restless, so agitated, but if he left the wardroom, he would have to face a score of curious eyes. He would have to face Andrew, and he wasn't ready for that again. Not yet.

God, maybe not ever. Not after the ass he'd made of himself.

Daniel cursed beneath his breath and moved down the left wall with quick, powerful strides, pausing to stand by the window. Brest had long since faded as they sailed toward Portsmouth on the strong, stormy wind. They'd make anchorage soon and would finally, after long, hard months, be released on British soil.

And then the captain would be married.

He relaxed against the ledge and watched the choppy water. Marriage—it was a strange thought. Women had so little to do with life at sea. Every moment was surrounded by men. An officer relied on his men and his fellows. He took dinner with other officers, slept by them, fought by them, died by them. Daniel tried to imagine what it would be like to take a wife. She would have a home at port, most likely. Someplace simple, supported by meager officer's wages. Perhaps there would be enough for a maid of all work and a cook. Perhaps her mother would come to stay with her on his long absences.

There would be children he'd rarely see. Her face would grow worn with worry. The house would become a prison for him despite her bravest efforts, for every day spent on land would be chased by dreams of the sea.

Daniel shook his head, eyes sliding shut. His father had died at sea—he knew the realities of service, whether to a merchantman or a ship of the line. He would never take a wife.

Especially not when all he wanted was far, far nearer at hand.

He expelled a breath and dropped his head forward, hands clenching at his sides. It would be so easy, if he let himself give in. He knew the habits of the other officers, could time to the minute when they slept, when they walked the deck, when they retired to the wardroom. He knew the dark corners where no one went.

If he dared risk it, it would be a simple thing to make Andrew his.

He didn't dare. He wouldn't dare. He would be stronger than this.

Daniel tensed when the wardroom door opened. He recognized the slight hesitation before the soft footfall. His nostrils flared as he lifted his head, catching the faint breath of lavender and mint.

"Mr. Barret," Andrew murmured.

"Mr. Clayton." He worked to school his features before turning, but he couldn't control the sharp intake of breath or the way his heart clenched at the sight of Andrew. Sunlight streaming through the wide window caught in his blond hair, revealing warm highlights and lowlights of gold and caramel. His brown eyes were open and so very easy to read, lashes flickering as his gaze tracked over Daniel.

They stared at each other for a long, awkward minute. Daniel thought of a thousand things he wanted to say, but none of them seemed appropriate.

Finally, he took a step forward. "The captain will be wanting me on deck," he said, hesitating before striding toward Andrew and the door beyond him.

Andrew shifted then moved to intercept him. He lifted one hand and Daniel stopped in his tracks, inches away from his outstretched fingers. "Daniel," Andrew murmured, eyes dropping down before meeting his again. There was renewed resolve in his expression. "We should discuss what happened earlier."

"That isn't necessary," Daniel said immediately, moving to step around Andrew. He stopped again when a firm hand pressed against his chest, fingers resting over his rapidly beating heart. His breath was erratic, he realized. No doubt Andrew could read it as easily as *he* could read Andrew's eyes.

As if in response to his thoughts, Andrew slid his palm up until it was pressed fully over his heart. "It's necessary, Daniel." He hesitated, as if waiting for Daniel to argue, before continuing. "Yesterday, when you said you wanted more than friendship – what did you mean?"

"That is not what I said." It wasn't quite a lie, though it was close. Daniel worked to keep his expression impassive, knowing he had only this moment to convince Andrew of his disinterest.

You could let him read between your words, an insidious voice whispered. It would be a simple matter to let him draw the right conclusions.

"You implied... The implication was there..." Andrew's voice wasn't as firm as before and doubt colored his features. "You said friendship wasn't what you wanted from me."

Daniel wanted to reach out and cup the oh-so familiar, fair-skinned face. He wanted to kiss the small crease between his brows. Andrew's hand dropped, fingers clenching and loosening with obvious nerves.

"Andrew," Daniel said, voice gentle. Too gentle he realized as hope flared briefly in Andrew's eyes. "I do not want your pity. That is what I was trying to tell you. I am in no need of charity." He forced himself to go on, shoulders straightening. "I do not appreciate you or the captain believing I would become a willing lapdog for your father or any other man. My connections or lack thereof are my business alone – you have no place inserting yourself so blatantly into my affairs."

The stricken silence was enough. Andrew's quiet overture had been beaten off at the pass and he had spared them both.

So why did he feel so sick about it?

"The captain will be wanting me," Daniel said again, gaze slightly to the left. He couldn't meet those open, hurt brown eyes. Not and remain strong against the overwhelming temptation Andrew presented. "Mr. Clayton." He stepped around Andrew and reached for the door.

"Wait."

Andrew's voice made him freeze, fingers curved around the handle. His body tensed.

"Turn around, Daniel."

"Andrew..."

A firm, warm hand fell to his shoulder and Daniel allowed himself to be turned. He'd never seen Andrew look so fierce, so desperately resolved. His eyes were so dark they were nearly black, pupils blown wide. His soft mouth was set in a firm line.

"Tell me you do not want me."

Blood rushed through Daniel's veins. He could hear his heart pounding, far too fast, and he struggled to control his breathing. This wasn't supposed to happen. This thing between them was never supposed to get this far out of hand. *I could lie. I could lie and tell him I don't want him.* He licked his lips then forced himself to perfect stillness. *It would be safer to tell him that. Nothing can come of wanting each other.*

"Mr. Clayton," Daniel said slowly, firmly. "This is highly inappropriate."

"Tell me you do not want me, Daniel," Andrew said fiercely, stepping closer. There was barely a breath between them and Daniel could feel the incredible heat of his body from chest to thigh. His stomach clenched with a tight coil of arousal and he fought to cool his racing thoughts, muscles tightening. Andrew's unique scent flowed around him, clouding everything.

"Because I want you." Andrew's voice was very soft. Nearly a whisper.

Lie. Lie to him. Do it now.

"I do not—" Daniel began, but he couldn't force himself to say it. He wet his lips and tried again. "Mr. Clayton, I do not— That is, I—"

He felt the uncanny sense of falling from a great height. There was a roaring in his ears like the rush of wind. He knew he was making the situation worse, knew he was complicating matters between them, but he couldn't lie. Not to Andrew.

"I cannot want you, Andrew," Daniel said. "You know that."

The flare of surprise and hope was overwhelming. "But you do anyway. Don't you?" Andrew murmured, gaze dropping to Daniel's mouth.

Daniel was silent for a long minute, lips parted, chest heaving. He was aroused, Daniel realized dimly. His cock pressed against the snug fit of his breeches, aching in hot pulses. His fingers itched to reach down and release it. He wanted to slide his hands past the waist of Andrew's breeches to see if he was hard too.

Daniel cleared his throat and turned his face away. "The captain will need me," he said, voice husky. "Mr. Clayton. Andrew," he added, glancing back briefly. Their eyes

met and caught, and Daniel nearly gave in to the hot rush of blood. He nearly leaned down to catch Andrew's soft mouth in a biting, bruising kiss. He wanted to know if Andrew tasted like he always imagined.

He couldn't. They couldn't.

"Daniel," Andrew murmured, swaying toward him.

"Mr. Clayton," he said again, stepping deliberately away. He turned back to the door and threw it open, relieved at the sudden gust of cool, wet air. Daniel didn't look back as he shut the door behind him and strode away, escaping to the organized chaos of the upper decks.

Chapter Five

Dinner that night was unbearably tense.

Andrew sat back in his chair, remains of his meal piled high on the plate in front of him. He'd been too nervous to eat, stomach roiling uncomfortably as he picked at the beef and hard biscuit. Daniel had been characteristically silent during dinner, and the captain had appeared lost in his own thoughts. Even Hayes was quiet, offering the occasional comment on the hard rains that had begun sometime during the first dog watch and which were still beating at the single wardroom window.

He reached for his glass of wine, sipping it as he forced himself not to look at Daniel. It had been a struggle all day to keep himself in check—to not track his friend down and force another confrontation. Part of him was still reeling from the things he had learned.

It was second nature by now to be aware of Daniel. To desire him. To seek out his company. Andrew had known for a very long time that he was attracted to males over females. It had been one of the things that had driven him toward the service—with long months at sea, he would be less likely to be encouraged to marry. He couldn't imagine taking a wife and always wanting someone else. It didn't seem fair, no matter the fact it was the norm amongst the peerage.

He hadn't expected to find anyone. There had been men he'd found attractive, had felt a physical pull toward, but he'd never even thought of giving in to the temptation until he'd met Daniel. Daniel was different from anyone he'd ever known. He was lower-class but not common. Quiet but compelling. Strong but almost shockingly gentle. He not only saw the good in people, he brought it out of them.

Andrew hadn't been able to keep himself away. Over four years ago, when they'd first been stationed on the *Charon* together, he'd admired the quiet leadership and undeniable strength of the other man. As time passed and he learned more, witnessed more and grew daily closer and closer, he'd fallen in love.

It had been hell.

Andrew closed his eyes, remembering the first bitter shock when he realized what had happened. They'd been standing watch together, gazing silently at the dark horizon. The occasional brush of Daniel's shoulder had been a comfort. The whine of a fiddle drifted from below decks, underscored by the stomp of heavy feet and Daniel's laugh had been sudden, a dimple flashing on his darkly tanned face.

When Andrew looked up in question and met storm-cloud eyes, his heart had stuttered to a halt.

"Irish song," Daniel murmured, lips twitching at the corners. The desire to press their mouths together, to slide into his strong arms was overwhelming. He had trembled with it. "The captain wouldn't like it if he knew the lyrics."

He hadn't been able to answer — had only been able to smile weakly and look away. The awareness that had grown slowly bubbled up and over, and from then on Andrew could no longer ignore how he felt. The fight to repress his feelings had been a long, painful struggle. And now to learn that Daniel wanted him too...

Daniel *wanted* him.

He expelled a shaky breath then started when he realized the other officers were standing. The captain and Fells, the ship's surgeon, walked to the door together, voices low. Hayes was draining the last of his wine, head tilted back. Upton retired to his cabin as Sinclair hurried to relieve the midshipman who'd taken over his watch for dinner.

And Daniel was studying him with dark, unreadable eyes.

Andrew's breath caught and his stomach clenched as he stood, chair scraping the wooden floorboards. He fought the impulse to say something, knowing his voice would be strained if he tried, but he didn't look away from Daniel's eyes.

I want to talk to you, he tried to communicate.

Daniel deliberately turned away.

"Mr. Hayes," Daniel said smoothly. "You make your home in Portsmouth if I'm not mistaken."

The first lieutenant lowered his glass to the table, looking at Daniel curiously. "I do, yes."

"I was wondering if you could sketch a general likeness of the area surrounding the docks. It's been some time since I've gone past the front streets."

He didn't need a map, Andrew knew. He was stalling.

"Of course," Hayes said, visibly surprised. "Come, I have my desk open." He stepped toward the one wood-walled cabin at the back of the wardroom, gesturing for Daniel to follow.

Daniel glanced at Andrew briefly and fell behind Hayes without a word.

Within moments, Andrew was alone.

He fell back into his chair again, both annoyed and amused. *He's trying to protect me*, Andrew thought wryly, lifting his glass and taking a final sip of wine. It tasted of Spanish flowers. *He's doing the intelligent thing and is trying to keep us from starting something we both know we can't have.*

He smiled grimly.

He doesn't realize it won't work.

The servant entered the wardroom on silent feet and began to clear away the dishes. Andrew set his glass aside and stood, going to his small cabin. His head felt heavy and stuffy and his cheeks were hot. Andrew paused before grabbing his sleek

greatcoat from its hook, sliding it on and buttoning it quickly. A brief turn on deck would help him find clarity and form a much-needed plan.

The wind was cold as he stepped outside, fat drops of rain hitting his face before he quickly ducked his head. Andrew pulled down his bicorn and made his way to the forecastle. The ship pitched erratically, moving with the strong waves, and the shortened sails snapped loudly overhead. Andrew glanced up, watching as the men gracefully worked the ropes. He'd been trained with heights as well, climbing the tall masts and crossing the beams as a midshipman, but he would never have the grace of the old seadogs, cheerfully defying death as they labored high above the raging sea.

He stepped aside as a young boy hurried past, one hand braced against the rail. A wave crashed over the lip of the ship, hitting him across the back, and Andrew stumbled forward before catching himself again.

Perhaps a stroll above deck wasn't such a brilliant plan, Andrew thought wryly. Distraction could be costly at any time, but the danger was tripled in a storm. He moved toward the forecastle, more focused on his balance and the rhythm of waves this time. The cold wind was refreshing, clearing his head. The rain chilled him down to the bone.

When he reached the forecastle, he stationed himself out of the way, hands gripping slick wood. Activity commenced around him, warrant officers shouting orders as the men remained on point. He allowed all that to fade away, facing out toward the open sea. He wouldn't be able to see the blockading ships even if the sea was becalmed and the sky clear. They'd made such good time that even the storm wouldn't interrupt their progress. All around was a dangerous, dark swell of water, rippling and roiling with white tips like bony fingers.

Lightning flashed in the distance, brightening the horizon like cannon fire. Heads turned toward the light then away again when the unmistakable roll of thunder echoed. Andrew scanned the horizon, watching the distant forks of light as the wind buffeted the *Charon* and the sea salt stung his eyes.

This, he remembered, was why he stayed at sea. This wild sense of victory on the edge of disaster was what made it all worthwhile.

Finally, shivering from the cold, Andrew made his way back to the wardroom. He shucked off his greatcoat just inside the main door, shaking water from it before slinging it over his arm and stepping into the rectangular room. He glanced toward the cabin at the far end, noting with some pleasure that there was no light coming from beneath Hayes' door. He could hear the faint snores drifting from the cabin, signaling that the older man was fast asleep.

Andrew went to hang his greatcoat over a fixed pan to catch the drips before setting aside his soaked hat. He brushed his fingers through the front of his hair, smoothing it before chuckling to himself. Daniel had seen him covered in soot and bleeding. He'd seen him just awakened, standing in his nightclothes and staring stupidly. He'd seen him falling-down drunk. He'd witnessed Andrew in every compromising situation

possible—now was not the time to begin worrying over how he looked, as if he were at a town ball.

He moved to the canvas door of Daniel's cabin and lightly rasped his knuckles against the cloth. Light spilled from the heavy weave, making it glow. Andrew waited, breath held in the long silence that followed, and relaxed when he finally heard Daniel moving. The footsteps were quiet, nearly lost beneath the noise of the ship. The canvas shifted as Daniel came to stand on the other side of the makeshift door, but the cloth remained firmly between them.

"Daniel," Andrew whispered, reaching up to touch the canvas. "Let me in."

Andrew could hear the deep, shuddery breath. His mouth felt swollen and his heart ached in his chest. It hurt to breathe. *I need to touch you. I need to kiss you. Let me in.*

"I—Andrew, no."

"You want me." He winced at the petulance in his tone.

The cloth moved as, on the other side, Daniel placed his hand against Andrew's, palm to palm. "Yes. But it is too dangerous."

"I don't care," Andrew whispered fiercely, pressing closer. Energy ran through him like a rushing current. He fought the urge to push the simple cloth flap aside and force himself into Daniel's arms. "I don't care what happens to me."

"But I *do*. I care very much." There was a brief hesitation before Daniel's hand dropped. "Too much. Go to sleep, Andrew. You have another night watch soon."

He sucked in a breath. "Daniel—"

"Go to sleep." The soft tread of his feet was nearly deafening. There was a low noise and suddenly the golden glow was gone, light extinguished. Andrew stood at the door to Daniel's cabin, listening as he slid into the hanging wooden cot. The rustle of cloth seemed impossibly loud before it stilled and there was nothing but silence.

Andrew was left with the cold, angry feeling that everything had been decided without him.

He wants to protect me. He wants to keep me from the hangman's noose.

Wise of him. Commendable even, when it became increasingly obvious his desire flared as strongly as Andrew's. Likely the best course of action.

And it was infuriating.

He cannot be serious, Andrew thought, turning and striding into his own cabin. He shucked off his uniform jacket, damp cloth dropping over the back of his chair. His movements were choppy, erratic, and Andrew didn't doubt that Daniel could hear every one. *Even if we do nothing about it, it will still be there. The desire will be there, the distraction and longing—only it will be worse because there is no relief.* His fingers flew over the buttons of his shirt as he glared at the heavy cloth wall that separated their beds. It seemed so simple to Andrew. They wanted each other. They needed each other. Even if they never acted on it, the threat of being found out was still present. An unguarded

look could give away as much as an embrace, and His Majesty's Navy wasn't known for its tolerance.

And then they'd take the punishment under the Articles of War without ever having anything to show for it.

I would rather have my neck stretched or my career ruined for something I'd done than for something I merely wanted to do. He was semi-aroused, nipples tightening in the cool air. Andrew reached out to brace his hand against the wall for balance as he removed his shoes and stockings, blond waves falling across his forehead.

A stuttering breath on the other side of the canvas gave him pause.

Andrew looked up slowly. He could hear Daniel breathing, low and just a little too fast. His blankets rustled as he shifted in his cot.

Andrew straightened. The first lieutenant's cabin was at the far end of the wardroom. Upton was a heavy sleeper and Sinclair was on watch. He and Daniel were as alone as they could be.

And there was more than one way to defeat Daniel's better angels.

Not allowing himself time to think it through, Andrew hooked his thumbs into the waist of his breeches and slid them down his hips. They dropped to the ground in a soft *whoosh* of fabric and he shifted to kick them aside. His cock was firming slowly, twitching against the cool air and the excitement humming through his blood as Andrew deliberately leaned against the canvas wall and took his erection in hand.

He gripped the shaft and stroked from tip to base, teasing the underside with his fingertips. Heat coiled low in his belly, spreading out in languorous waves. He drew a breath and squeezed his fingers, hips rocking forward, thrusting into the tight circle of his hand.

Noise. He needed to make noise.

"Oh," Andrew gasped, dropping his head forward. His hand slid down the shaft again, friction making his body shift and jerk.

Dead silence met his soft gasp, followed by the rustle of cloth. Daniel was sitting up, he thought. He closed his eyes, imagining the other man. Daniel's chest would be bare, broad shoulders bronzed with sun. There was a smattering of freckles along his upper back, fading away as they trailed down his spine. His skin was smooth and sculpted, like an ancient statue. His hair would be loosened from its queue, varying shades of amber and molasses framing the hard, handsome face.

Andrew made another low noise and rubbed his palm along the head of his cock, spreading pre-come over his hand. He was fully hard now, erection straining as he shifted and leaned more fully on the wall, stroking down the length again. "Oh God," he breathed.

"Andrew?"

The voice was low, whispered through the wall. Andrew's lips curved into a smile as he teased his fingernails along his sac, stroking the soft skin.

"Mm?" He pressed his face against the canvas, listening to each shift and breath Daniel made. Andrew reached up with his free hand and gently pinched his left nipple, twisting the coral bud before moving to the other.

"What are you –?" Daniel's voice broke. "Andrew –"

He gripped his cock and tugged roughly, not bothering to mask the helpless whimper. "I-I'm touching myself, Daniel." He licked his thumb and forefinger and reached down to pinch his nipples again, nails lightly scoring the puckered flesh. His other hand found a slow, easy rhythm, stroking up and down his jerking erection. A steady stream of pre-come made it easier – slick. "I'm thinking of you."

"Oh God."

"Yes," Andrew moaned in agreement, fighting to keep his helpless sounds quiet. He hurried his thrusts, copying the quick gusts of Daniel's breaths. This was easier than he'd imagined. He wondered if Daniel was touching himself. "I want you to do this to me, Daniel," Andrew admitted, squeezing the base of his cock before sliding up the thick length. His balls ached, the pressure building rapidly inside him. Always before, when he'd touched himself under the cover of night, he'd felt a tiny sliver of shame. This time, however, there was no shame – only a deep, aching need that simmered beneath his skin, growing with each stroke of his fingers until fire licked along his flesh.

He was flushed and breathing hard. His mouth trembled on each breath and he strained to quiet himself, wanting to hear Daniel. Needing to know if, on the other side of the now-hated material, Daniel was standing and touching himself. Stroking himself.

The image of Daniel's naked, aroused body nearly made him lose control. "Daniel," Andrew whimpered, eyes squeezed shut.

"We can't do this, Andrew." Daniel's voice didn't sound as self-assured as usual.

"I have to. I have to now." He couldn't stop even if the call came to beat to quarters. Andrew bit at his mouth to keep from crying out, hand jerking across his swollen flesh. His cock was thick and flushed. His limbs shook uncontrollably as he gasped and rocked up onto the balls of his feet. "Daniel, I want you."

"Andrew..."

"I don't care. I don't care. I want you. Daniel!" He arched as he came, sobbing in a shocked breath. Tremors raced through his body, making him jerk and shudder as the release rocked through him.

"Shh. Shh." Daniel's whisper carried him through the aftershocks. Andrew opened his eyes and saw the outline of Daniel's palm as it moved across the heavy cloth. "It's all right, Andrew."

Andrew shivered, hand sliding from his softening cock. In the hollow aftermath of orgasm, a heaviness settled through his limbs, like the first ache of loneliness. *I wish*, he thought, but he didn't finish it.

"Andrew?" Daniel's hand moved in a comforting circle, almost as if he were caressing skin. With a low noise, Andrew pressed against it, feeling the touch through the weave of fabric. "It will be all right."

He rested his cheek against the wall and sighed. "I want you," Andrew whispered.

Daniel hesitated a beat. "I know," he finally said, voice thick. "I want you too. It isn't as simple as that."

"It should be." He squeezed his eyes shut tight, denying the hot prickle at the back of his eyes. He was a grown man. He was a lieutenant in His Majesty's Navy. He would not cry from frustration or disappointment or even love. Especially not love.

"I know," Daniel said, voice a low, soothing murmur. Through the canvas wall that separated them he stroked Andrew's shoulder. "It should be."

Chapter Six

He'd barely slept.

Daniel stood on the deck of the *Charon* and tried not to look as exhausted as he felt. The storm had died during his watch and a strong wind had brought them to British shores. All around him were the smells and sounds of Portsmouth. He glanced to the left, spotting the ships anchoring at Spithead. There weren't many taking shelter – most of the available vessels were already deployed.

"I wonder how the blockade fleet is faring."

Andrew's voice made him start and flush, and he struggled to control his expression before turning to look at his friend. Andrew looked as tired as he felt, pale lavender shadows painted beneath his bright eyes, and Daniel flushed harder as he remembered why they had been so restless the night before.

He would never have imagined Andrew would... Perform was the only word he could think of that adequately described what had happened, though that seemed far too impersonal. He remembered the soft sounds and the way Andrew breathed his name. He remembered the faint, barely captured smell of him and the heat he could almost feel radiating through the weave of fabric. His cock had ached, trapped within his tight breeches and straining against the buttoned flap. His fingers had itched to reach inside and tug himself free. He'd been dying to slip into Andrew's cabin and kneel before him, urging Andrew's length down his eager throat.

Daniel swallowed, lips tingling, and glanced away as Andrew's cheeks pinked. He could only imagine what the other man had read in his eyes.

Which was *exactly* why this was such a bad idea.

"We will hear news of it if there is trouble," Daniel said, focusing on the shoreline. He could see the bustle of the harbor, men and women moving along the docks. The sound of wood being hammered drifted from the shipyard. "Come, the boat's arrived for the captain."

He stepped forward, aware of Andrew behind him. His entire body thrummed with eagerness as he thought about the short shore leave in the wake of the captain's wedding. He and Andrew would be sharing rooms, as always, to cut down on cost. Would Andrew try to force the issue again?

A large part of him wished he would.

Hypocrite, Daniel told himself fiercely, but he couldn't suppress the low simmer of desire or the quiet hope that Andrew would press his case. If he did, Daniel wasn't entirely sure he could say no. Not again. He wanted Andrew too much and for too long to be continually strong.

Daniel moved into position when the captain's door opened. The rest of the lieutenants stood in formation as well, and the red-coated Marines lifted their muskets to their shoulders.

Captain Bellings moved down his line of officers, looking over their shoulders to the seamen gathered respectfully along the deck. Many captains gave speeches when they left their ships. Bellings remained silent, looking up at the wreath still hanging on the mast. It had been pulled down for the storm and reattached as they reached port. White ribbon twisted in the breeze.

He nodded once to Hayes and moved to the rope ladder, flipping out the tails of his coat and climbing down promptly. The trill of the whistle carried across the water as Bellings and Hayes settled themselves into the small boat. The rowers' oars descended together, like a perfectly choreographed dance, and dipped into the water.

The men relaxed and Daniel turned, briefly in charge.

"Mr. Sinclair," he said, facing the junior lieutenant. "Inform me when the second longboat has reached us. I'll be in the wardroom." He and Andrew had to change to their dress uniforms before they went to shore for the captain's wedding.

"Aye-aye Sir," Sinclair said, green eyes glittering sharply.

Daniel nodded once to the others and moved away.

He tried not to be overly conscious of Andrew at his heels.

* * * * *

Sinclair couldn't help but feel bitter at how things had worked out.

The *Charon* saw British shore rarely. It was one of the larger ships in the fleet—though by no means the largest—and had a reputation for speed, discipline and courage in battle. Captain Bellings worked his men hard to ensure that reputation, but there was usually a reward for all the painstaking labor they put into serving him. There was, in plain language, usually something to show for it.

Standing aboard the *Charon* watching Daniel Barret, Andrew Clayton and the ship's surgeon, Fells, be rowed away, Sinclair was increasingly aware that in this instance he had absolutely nothing to show for his hard work and loyalty.

"It hardly seems fair," Upton sighed next to him, shading his eyes to watch the dwindling longboat. Only the most senior officers had been granted shore leave this time. The *Charon* was to report back to blockade duty after the week was up and the captain was understandably wary of desertion should he allow any of the men to step on dry land. Wives and sweethearts would be rowed out to visit, but for men like Sinclair who *had* no sweetheart, the injustice was a bitter brew to swallow. "The midshipmen could keep an eye on the men, surely. There wouldn't be any mischief about if we were granted leave."

Sinclair made a low noise of agreement, eyes never leaving the distant figures. Daniel—that had to be Daniel, broader and taller than either of the other two—was

climbing out of the longboat and turning to assist what must be Fells. There were men at the dock to greet them. Small packages were passed over and the trio gathered, consulting each other before heading west. They'd be heading out of town, Sinclair figured, to the chapel. It was still early morning, so they had a few hours yet.

"Ah well." Upton straightened, flipping back his light brown hair and clearly trying to find the silver lining. "At least we have run of the ship for the next week, eh, Mr. Sinclair?"

He turned to smile up at Sinclair, round, still-far-too-young face friendly and pathetically eager.

"Call me if there's trouble," Sinclair said, turning from the young man and striding across the deck. Seamen who had knuckled their foreheads and bobbed their heads eagerly hours before now barely acknowledged him. For one week, there would be no order aboard the vessel. The men would drink hard spirits they purchased off the longboats that rowed by and sing and cast dice and carouse with whores pretending to be long-forgotten lovers. While Daniel Barret and Andrew Clayton sipped wine and broke bread, *he* would be breaking up fights and punishing men whose spirits soared too high.

It hardly seemed fair. It *wasn't* fair. That should be *him* out there. He longed to set foot on British soil again, eat good food and sleep in a real bed. He longed to feel like his own man if only for a few hours.

But unless news came from the blockade fleet calling the *Charon* back to duty before the captain's leave was through, that wouldn't happen.

Growling beneath his breath, Sinclair strode into the wardroom and slammed the door closed behind him, shutting himself away from the men with their high spirits and ever-escalating cries of good cheer.

* * * * *

The wedding was a small affair attended by select members of the bride's family. Daniel, Andrew, Fells and Lieutenant Hayes gathered with the rest of the wedding party at the vicar's home where a breakfast had been arranged.

Andrew cast a quick glance toward Daniel before moving to the window. The small home was pleasantly decorated in a simple yet elegant style. It reminded him of his sister's snug home to the north—wealthy without being snobbishly so. Fresh flowers stood in classic vases and the smells that occasionally wafted from the back of the building were mouthwatering.

He wished he could concentrate on the simple pleasure of enjoying them.

Andrew clasped his hands behind his back and shot Daniel another glance. He was sitting in a solitary corner, head bowed as he studied the floor. Courtesy dictated that they exchange pleasant conversation with their new acquaintances, but Andrew knew Daniel had never been one for polite society. As the son of a tavern girl and a merchant

seaman, he'd never had much need for polish. As an officer in His Majesty's Navy, he had more than enough need and yet nothing in the way of training.

It was one of the more annoying ironies of service.

Daniel glanced up as if sensing his regard and Andrew flushed as their gazes met. One of Daniel's dark brows was arched slightly, sooty black lashes framing his deep gray eyes. They darkened with his mood, Andrew knew, moving through shades the color of a foggy morning. Right now they were watching him with cool intensity, so dark they appeared almost black.

Andrew licked his lips and tore his gaze away, too aware of the heat boiling inside him. His skin prickled at the near-caress of Daniel's steady gaze, blood thrumming in his veins. He watched the bobbing flowers outside the window and struggled to control his heartbeat as he listened with half an ear to the animated conversation flowing around him.

Awareness of Daniel was a constant distraction. The memory of what had happened between them combined with the conviction that he had to press for more was keeping him continually on edge.

When the bride and groom finally appeared around the bend, accompanied by the vicar, the parish clerk and the small wedding party, Andrew nearly cheered. He moved with the others to greet them warmly, allowing the hubbub to distract him. Captain Bellings was stern-faced even now, but his eyes were a bright hazel, broadcasting everything he didn't allow his expression to show. His young bride seemed content to smile for him, round face glowing with happiness as she led the procession in to breakfast.

It was a simple and somewhat rushed affair. The captain had only a week's liberty, permission to sleep on land granted by the Port Admiral. There was no way of telling when they would set foot on shore again, and there were families to see, shopping to be done and drinks to be had. Andrew stood with the rest of the party at the end of the meal, following the newlyweds out to the waiting carriage. Outside, they were bombarded by the smells and sounds of Portsmouth—the construction at the docks, the ebb and flow of the sea, the cry of gulls. A young boy passed amongst them, clothes smelling strongly of fish, and slipped soft-soled slippers into their hands. As Bellings and his bride moved into the carriage, Hayes gave a high yip and threw the cloth shoe at his superior officer.

The rain of shoes was brief but hard, and even Bellings was laughing as he ducked his head and hurried into the carriage. Andrew grinned and lobbed his slipper at the back window as the driver clucked once and the horses began to move.

With that, the wedding party was over and they were free to do as they pleased.

"A fine affair," Hayes said, moving to stand near Andrew. Daniel was at his elbow, brows drawn into a slight frown as he stared after the carriage. Fells, Andrew noted, had already slipped away.

"Indeed," Andrew agreed readily. The three of them fell into step, moving away from the vicar's home. It was set back from the town, a brisk walk from the tangle of people, shops and taverns. Other upscale houses dotted the land, growing closer together as they made their way back into Portsmouth proper. "Will you share a toast to the captain?" Andrew offered after several minutes of silence. He looked across Hayes' steady frame to Daniel, who appeared to be lost in thought.

Hayes stopped, forcing them to pause and turn toward him. "No, I think not," he said, peering up at the sun to gauge the hour. "Another time, perhaps. I have a home of my own waiting for me, and a wife who would be ill-pleased should she learn I didn't make my way to her directly." A warm smile creased his weathered face. "Nothing like marriage, Mr. Clayton. If I were a gambling man, I'd put money on you being next."

He had to fight not to look at Daniel. "Forgive me, Sir, but I doubt it," Andrew said quickly. "I have no mind to marry."

The older man laughed. "There is many a young man who claims that and many a man proven wrong once he's reached the right age. Mark my words, Mr. Clayton—you'll grow tired of the company of men soon enough." He nodded to both of them, adjusting his hat. "Our ways part here," he said. "Barring the unforeseen, I'll be meeting you up in a week's time."

Andrew and Daniel murmured their goodbyes, pulling away.

"Oh, and Mr. Clayton," Hayes called after him. Andrew turned and moved to join him again, leaving Daniel several paces behind.

"Yes, Mr. Hayes?" he said evenly.

The other man glanced toward Daniel before leaning in, expression intent. "Remember what I said to you before," he murmured, voice pitched low. "About your father and Mr. Barret."

"I'll remember," Andrew said, catching the glint in the lieutenant's eyes when he looked at Daniel. Affection was there, and pride. It was the look a father gave his favored son.

The older man nodded gruffly. "See that you do," Hayes said, pulling back. "And see that you keep Mr. Clayton out of trouble," he added to Daniel in a louder voice, smiling ruefully before turning away and trudging up a snaking lane.

Andrew watched him go for a long moment before turning back to Daniel. The weight of his gaze made his stomach coil in intricate knots. "And will you, Mr. Barret?" he said, moving toward Daniel slowly. They began walking together.

"Keep you out of trouble? Is that possible?" Daniel's voice was deceptively soft. Controlled. Everything about him was always so controlled.

Andrew dropped his hand casually, fingers brushing the inside of Daniel's wrist. "Perhaps," he murmured, trying to load a wealth of meaning into his tone. His heart was pounding too fast in his chest. "If I wish to be schooled."

The sharply drawn breath was loud between them and Andrew shivered, fingers dropping away as they moved along the shoreline. Ships were visible out in the harbor, flags billowing in the light breeze. The white caps of waves brushed against heavy wood, breaking around proud hulls.

"Mr. Clayton—" Daniel said with renewed formality at the same moment Andrew said, "Daniel." They both sputtered to a stop, each gesturing for the other to continue.

Finally, Andrew laughed, ducking his head against the brilliant sun. "This is foolish," he said as firmly as he could. "It's a sad day for His Majesty's Navy when two of his officers begin acting like powder monkeys, skirting about this way and that."

"And your solution?" Daniel asked, wry humor coloring his low voice.

Andrew grinned up at the familiar face. The urge to kiss his parted, slightly chapped lips was overwhelming. "My solution," he said slowly, as if considering his options carefully, "is that you give way and accede to all of my desires."

Daniel's laugh was rare enough to bring a flash of visceral pleasure to Andrew every time he heard it. "I should accede to your desires?" he said, shaking his head with a chuckle. "And what are those today, Mr. Clayton?" He was in a good mood, Andrew sensed. A teasing, cheerful mood despite the tension between them. Maybe *because* of it. Now that everything was out in the open, it had to be a great relief.

Andrew couldn't bring himself not to take advantage of that.

"One." He held up a long finger, swaying slightly into Daniel's heat. Their shoulders brushed intimately. "You call me by my Christian name whenever appropriate, as you did before."

Daniel's smile faded. "Mr. Clayton..."

"Unless I am incredibly dense, that is not my Christian name, Daniel." Andrew wagged his finger playfully before lifting the second. "Two. You will allow me to contact my father in regards to your career." He barreled on before Daniel could protest. "I know you are proud of who you are and where you come from, and I am not seeking to take that pride from you. I also know that you are three times the man I am when it comes to leadership. You are everything a captain should be."

Daniel frowned darkly. "The men love you, Andrew," he said, turning on him. They stopped, facing off at the mouth of a broken bit of pier, far enough away from the press of humanity that their conversation could not be overheard. "Everyone loves you."

Andrew smiled sadly. "I know they do," he said, "but the men *respect* you, and that is more important than love. Let me do this, Daniel. We have been friends for a long time, and I would like to give you this. I want to try, at least."

Daniel hesitated, studying his face almost warily. Finally, however, he nodded.

Andrew's shoulders relaxed. One major obstacle overcome. "Thank you," he said quietly, adding before sense could return, "Three. I want you, and I know you want me. I care for you and... And this is ridiculous, Daniel."

Daniel shook his head, but Andrew barreled on. "No, listen to me. It is ridiculous that we both feel this way and yet have done nothing—will continue to do nothing. I don't understand how you cannot see how much worse it is to know what we *could* have if we were willing to take it."

"Andrew," he interrupted softly. Daniel drew a heavy breath and his fingers curled into fists, as if he were fighting the desire to reach out and embrace him.

Andrew knew the feeling.

"I am sorry. I should never have begun this." Daniel drew another breath and looked away, eyes scanning the passersby that moved up and down the distant street. "We both know it isn't as simple as that."

Andrew wanted to scream, but he bit back the quick retort. *He's only trying to protect you*, he told himself. *You have to convince him you're in no need of his protection.*

"On board the *Charon*, perhaps it is not that simple," he agreed. "It is too easy to get caught if we were unwary." Daniel would never allow them to be unwary. Andrew was certain they could carry on their affair at sea, but he didn't want to force that issue yet. Instead, he added, "But we're not on board the *Charon* now, Daniel. We are free to do whatever we want without anyone interfering—without anyone even taking note of us. We are free to have this, if only for a little while...and I have waited a very long time for you."

Their eyes met and held. Andrew put everything he was into his plea, trying to communicate all the longing, the desire, the need he felt. "Please," he murmured.

The torn, brooding look Daniel gave him made Andrew's breath leave him in a heavy whoosh, as if he'd been hit in the gut. He wet his lips and bit the inside of his mouth until he tasted blood, trying not to press his point. Trying not to beg further. Years of living and working alongside Daniel, thinking the attraction was one-sided, had been blown away. All Andrew could do was hold his breath and hope Daniel was willing to follow through.

Slowly, as if against his better judgment, Daniel nodded. "Seven days," he agreed, studying Andrew's face. "While we are safe on shore."

"Seven days," Andrew echoed. He could scarcely believe Daniel had agreed. His entire body thrummed with electric excitement, underscored by nerves. Seven days was not a very long time at all.

He would make the best of it.

Chapter Seven

Andrew led the way toward the town proper, nervous excitement making his entire body throb. The pound of their heels echoed the unsteady beat of his heart and he absently rubbed his hands against his breeches, trying to chase away the clammy cold.

They were doing this. They were really doing this.

Please do not let this be a mistake, Andrew prayed fervently. He ducked into the lodging house where they took rooms while on rare leave, certain that the mingled fear and hope was clear on his face. *Please*.

He let Daniel do the talking, too nervous to do anything more than smile tightly. Andrew glanced at him then scrambled to pull off his bicorn, flushing. It was difficult to think about manners and proprieties with Daniel nearby. *He maddens me*, he thought, chased by a wry, *Thank God we're not at sea*.

"This way, gen'lmen," the plain-faced girl said, moving past them to a steep, creaking stairwell. Andrew waited for Daniel to precede him, starting forward when Daniel gestured for him and then stopping quickly when they both moved at the same time. They hesitated at the foot of the stairs for a moment, shifting awkwardly as they started, stopped and got in one another's way. Finally, laughing, Andrew grabbed Daniel's elbow and guided him forward, falling behind. *Don't be so nervous*, he told himself wryly. *It's only Daniel*.

"Thank you," Daniel said when they reached the upstairs room. It was the smallest and cheapest offered, one moderate-sized bed along the wall, grimy window above it letting in very little light. A chipped basin stood on a rickety wooden table, empty of water. A hard cot took up the far wall. Their belongings had been sent ahead, wrapped in thick, waxy cloth to protect them from the water's spray.

"Will you be needing anything else?" the girl asked, barely looking at either of them. The sight of poor officers sharing rooms to cut expenses was nothing new to her.

"No, thank you." Daniel's voice was steady, if somewhat clipped. "This will do."

She moved back toward the door. "There's a tavern just down the way what serves good food. Water'll be up early, around seven. If you're needing anything, just ask around. Me or my mum'll take care of you."

"Thank you," Andrew said, waiting anxiously for her to step out and shut the door. The room was completely silent as the two men strained to hear her steps clunking down the long stairs to the ground floor.

Andrew let out a shaky breath as Daniel moved to the door. Daniel's hand was trembling slightly. "I feel like when I was a boy," Andrew said, unsure of where to stand. What to do. He'd lived alongside Daniel for so long that it seemed

incomprehensible that he should be so ill at ease, and yet Andrew couldn't think of anything more exciting and less comfortable than what they were doing now. "Conspiring to get into some scrape or another."

The sound of the lock turning was loud. Daniel turned to press his back against the door, studying Andrew seriously. "This isn't a game, Andrew," he said quietly. "The stakes are very high."

Andrew swallowed hard and moved toward him, tossing his bicorn on the table next to Daniel's. He tried to put everything in his expression, eyes locked with the other man's as he reached up and lightly gripped the wide lapels of his uniform jacket. "I know the stakes as well as anyone," he murmured, pressing closer. Moving their bodies together until he could feel the solid muscle of Daniel's thighs against his own. He drew a deep, unsteady breath, tasting him on the air.

"The Articles of War—"

"'If any person in the fleet shall commit the unnatural and detestable sin of buggery and sodomy with man or beast, he shall be punished with death by the sentence of a court martial'," Andrew quoted.

Daniel dropped his head until their foreheads rested together. Large, warm hands moved to Andrew's hips, thumbs stroking through heavy material. "Death, Andrew. The punishment for this is death. Doesn't that frighten you?"

"I'd be a fool if it didn't," Andrew murmured, hips arching encouragingly. Daniel's breath gusted over his skin, making it heat in response. He flattened his hands over the broad, muscled chest and slowly slid them up, fingertips exploring through layers of cloth. "There is something that frightens me even more, however."

"What is that?" Daniel shivered, full lips parting.

Andrew smiled softly. "Never having the chance to do this," he whispered, tilting his chin and catching Daniel's mouth in a warm, open kiss.

It was like his dreams, only a thousand times better, the mundane details only serving to make it more real, more erotic. The dry brush of Daniel's chapped lips. The faint taste of salt and tea. The scratch of wool against Andrew's fingertips as he caressed Daniel's broad chest, exploring the play of muscles. Daniel made a low noise, mouth trembling as his palms slid along Andrew's hipbones, urging him closer.

Andrew pressed greedily into the warmth of Daniel's body, hands sliding up his chest to his shoulders then into his hair. He unwound the leather tie and moaned quietly as loose gold-and-brown curls fell forward, forming a cocoon about their faces. Daring, Andrew slipped his tongue past Daniel's parted lips, tasting the soft, wet heat of his mouth.

Daniel started at the slick invasion and grabbed fistfuls of Andrew's jacket, yanking him closer. Andrew fell against his chest, briefly unbalanced, and snarled his fingers into the silken hair. He moaned, tongue stroking further, and jerked when his lover's tongue darted to twine with his. He could feel Daniel's heart pounding against his chest, echoing the throb of his own heartbeat. He shifted his hips closer, rubbing up

unconsciously, and broke the kiss with a gasp when he felt the hard ridge of Daniel's growing erection against his thigh.

"Daniel," he murmured, cheeks flushed, and his lover licked his lips and nodded, as if reading a wealth of meaning in that one word.

"I want you out of this," Daniel said. He gripped Andrew's hips and firmly pushed him back. He moved, switching their positions easily until Andrew was pressed against the door. His lips curved into a slight smile as he leaned in, brushing Andrew's mouth with a soft kiss.

Andrew melted immediately into the kiss, hands lifting to grasp Daniel's hair. He started when strong fingers closed about his wrists, forcing his arms down. He moaned, hips twisting up as arousal shot through him. His cock ached, pressed into the tight line of his breeches and throbbing against the restrictive buttons. He tried to arch into Daniel, but the other man stepped out of his reach.

Andrew looked up at him from beneath the pale sweep of his lashes, lips parted as he drew in deep, panting breaths. He had pictured what this would be like, but no amount of imagination could have conjured the stunned, loving, awed look in the other man's eyes. Andrew felt himself flushing again, body reacting instinctively to the look of hunger Daniel shot him. "I need you to touch me," Andrew gasped, biting his bottom lip. Pressed back against the door, fully clothed, he felt as if his skin were erupting into flame.

If it is like this now, how will I feel when we are skin to skin?

Daniel nodded once and crouched, strong hands urging up one of Andrew's legs. "Brace back," he said, voice husky, and Andrew pressed his shoulder blades hard against the door, balanced on one foot as Daniel tugged off the black shoe and heavy woolen stocking.

Daniel switched feet, pulling off the second shoe and stocking, laying them aside. He lifted his face, expression serious as he reached up to run his knuckles along the heated bulge of Andrew's erection.

"Daniel!" he hissed, cock throbbing hard at the touch.

"You look beautiful like this," Daniel said, thumb tracing a maddeningly light path. His nail scraped over the heavy material, loud in the quiet room. Andrew drew in a stuttering breath, rocking up onto the balls of his feet as he pushed his hips forward with a low noise. "So beautiful." His thumbnail found the head of Andrew's cock through his breeches and he leaned forward, pressing his lips to the rapidly growing wet patch. His tongue darted out as if to taste him through the material and Andrew had to bite his lip hard to keep from crying out.

Daniel turned his face, pressing his cheek to the heavy bulge. The faint rasp of his stubble against cloth was nearly lost beneath Andrew's sobbing breaths. When he finally looked up, Daniel's eyes were more black than gray. "Remove your jacket," he said, voice so husky it was unrecognizable. "As well as your shirt. I want to see you."

Andrew nodded and swallowed hard. "Aye-aye Sir," he said, offering a weak smile even as he immediately began to unfasten buttons. He'd worn his dress uniform for the captain's wedding and he struggled against the thick material of the white lapel. It was new, barely broken in, and he cursed as he looked away from Daniel's mesmeric eyes and focused on his task.

He nearly leapt out of his skin when he felt Daniel's mouth against his cock again. "Daniel!" he hissed, freezing. He jerked hard when Daniel dragged his teeth gently along the covered bulge. "Daniel, God. *God*." He moaned at the agile tease of Daniel's tongue. The other man was unfastening his breeches with his teeth, Andrew realized, and he stared at the erotic play of teeth and tongue, utterly stunned.

"What are you — Daniel, I am —" The second button popped free and Andrew let out his breath with a strangled moan. "Daniel, you will make me come."

Daniel nuzzled against the flat plane of Andrew's stomach, looking up at him with a devilish smile. "Then you had best get undressed quickly," he murmured. "I plan on taking you into my mouth the first time."

Andrew stared, frozen, then began ripping at the fastenings of his jacket. He shoved it off almost violently, fingers tearing at his shirt. Daniel made a low, pleased noise and unfastened the last two buttons on the breeches with careful fingers, spreading the flaps before slipping his thumbs along the waistband. He tugged, sliding them down his angular hips.

"Andrew," he murmured, staring openly for a few long minutes. Andrew shucked off his shirt, throwing it aside with uncharacteristic disregard for the expensive clothing. Daniel looked up at him, amusement warring with arousal in his eyes. "You could get watch and watch for that, you realize," he said, leaning in to kiss the arch of Andrew's hipbone.

Andrew dug his fingers into Daniel's hair and pulled him up his body, catching the other man's mouth in a heated, desperate kiss. He twisted against Daniel's still-clothed chest, rubbing his jerking erection over the bulge between Daniel's thighs. "I believe, Lieutenant," Andrew gasped into his mouth, biting Daniel's lower lip and tugging sharply, "that disrespect for His Royal Majesty's uniform is very, very low on my list of sins today." He slid a hand down to cup Daniel, squeezing his cock roughly and swallowing the desperate growl he earned.

Daniel pushed forward, slamming Andrew against the door. His hand lifted at the last moment, however, cradling the back of Andrew's skull. The protective gesture made Andrew's heart twist and he whimpered against the invading tongue as he wrapped his arms around Daniel's neck. His body tensed, muscles clenching as he lifted himself, legs wrapping around Daniel's trim waist.

"I need you," Daniel whispered into his mouth. He teased along the undercrease of Andrew's tongue with the tip of his own, fingers working to tug blond hair free.

"Yes," Andrew gasped, heels locking together along the small of Daniel's back. He rutted up once, hard, grinding their erections together, and deftly swallowed Daniel's

growl. When he broke the kiss, they were both panting. "I need you too," he said, kissing and biting his way up Daniel's jawline. He stroked his tongue over the dark stubble before sliding his hands down, desperately working on Daniel's jacket buttons as he twisted in his arms. "Please, Daniel."

"Hold on to me." Daniel locked his arms around Andrew's waist and stepped away from the door. He hesitated a moment, gaining his balance, then turned and strode toward the low bed. Andrew moaned, kissing and biting at Daniel's throat, only reluctantly letting him go when he was laid across the lumpy mattress. Daniel pulled back, hands smoothing across Andrew's skin before he stepped away and began to unfasten his clothing.

"Mmm," Andrew murmured, arching his spine as he lightly ran his fingertips down his stomach to his bobbing cock. He wrapped his fingers around the base, squeezing tight as Daniel threw aside the heavy navy jacket. "I have been thinking of this for a long time," Andrew said, stroking up his erection. It was slick with pre-come and flushed an angry red. Andrew pinched the foreskin lightly before wrapping his fingers around the shaft again and pushing it back. Daniel's shoes thudded to the ground, followed by his woolen stockings. He was panting hard, tanned chest visible between gaps of fabric.

"Seeing you in the wardroom some mornings," Andrew continued, reaching down with his other hand to cup his balls. He pressed them against the base of his erection and hissed out a light breath when he ran his fingernails along the undercrease. "Still only partially dressed, face unshaven—it fed my fantasies at night. Sometimes—*oh*—I would lie in my cot and worry that you could hear me as I touched myself, thinking of you. I wondered if all the officers could hear me."

"*Andrew*," Daniel said, wrestling out of his shirt. He leaned in and caught Andrew's mouth as if to swallow the flow of words.

Andrew moaned into his mouth, lifting from the bed to deepen the kiss. His tongue stroked past Daniel's lips with steady, slick swipes and his sticky hands moved to unfasten Daniel's breeches. They trembled slightly, fingers fumbling against the buttons. When he twisted the final disk through its hole, Andrew made a triumphant noise, sound muffled by Daniel's mouth. The soft laugh that echoed between them made his toes curl in pleasure and he pushed at the breeches, sliding them down.

Daniel moved, helping Andrew divest him of this last piece of clothing. He kicked the breeches aside and the bed dipped low with his added weight. Daniel shifted, moving until he was straddling Andrew's waist, knees pressing against his hips and hemming him in. He never broke the kiss, tongue fucking into Andrew's mouth in a slow, steady rhythm.

Andrew ran his hands over Daniel's body hungrily, breath coming in quick pants. "Please," he moaned, finally breaking the kiss. His fingers slid through the light, coarse hair that matted Daniel's chest. He stroked his thumbs over tight nipples, watching Daniel's eyes grow darker when he pinched them between his thumbs and forefingers. "Please, Daniel."

"Please what, Andrew?" His low voice thrummed through Andrew's body.

Andrew shifted his hips, pressing his erection along the curve of Daniel's ass. "I wish you..." He trailed off, uncertain how to say it. What came so easily to his heated imagination didn't appear to translate into his proper aristocratic vocabulary. "I wish you to..."

He closed his eyes when Daniel reached down to cup his face. The touch was light, gentle. He drew an unsteady breath, giving himself up to the tender strokes across his cheekbones, beneath his eyes. "Tell me," Daniel said quietly, leaning in to kiss his brow. His lips were soft and damp from kisses. "I love you, Andrew. Tell me what you need and it will be yours."

Andrew's heart constricted even as he offered Daniel a small smile. He opened his eyes slowly, focusing on the other man's face so close to his. Arousal thrummed between them like midnight fires on a pagan holiday, but there was more than that. Years of depending on one another for companionship and survival. Fighting side by side. Talking through endless watches when the sea stood as calm as a looking glass.

Andrew reached up to cover Daniel's hands with his own, biting the inside of his mouth. "I need you to be inside me, Daniel," he said, forcing the words out.

There was complete silence for a moment before Daniel nodded. "Yes," he said simply, pressing his lips to Andrew's.

Andrew closed his eyes again and melted eagerly into the kiss. "Do you know...?"

"Yes," Daniel said immediately, and Andrew had to choke back a laugh. Trust Daniel Barret to be so easy and confident even about something like this.

"You're prepared, then?" Andrew teased lightly, kissing Daniel's chin before lying back. Daniel pulled away, sitting up on Andrew's hips and studying him with a serious, focused expression that made him shiver in pleasure. "Have it all mapped out easy-like?" Andrew fell into the gunner's lilting, lower-class accent.

Daniel's lips twitched. "I believe in being well prepared for any eventuality, Mr. Clayton," he teased back, sliding down Andrew's legs.

"So I should just lie back and let you do your work, then?" Andrew laced his arms behind his head and watched Daniel with a little smirk. "Take my ease?"

Daniel arched a dark brow. "Aye-aye Sir," he said before leaning down and swallowing the head of Andrew's cock.

Andrew nearly jolted them both out of the bed, eyes going huge. His arms whipped down, hands scrabbling for purchase even as his hips shot up. "Daniel!" he cried, barely muffling it against the pillow in time. Daniel made a low noise of approval, mouth opening wider as he slowly sank down onto Andrew's jerking cock. Throat muscles worked around him, massaging the shaft with tight, hot spasms that made him sob in breaths and buck wildly. He tried to force his hips still, knowing he was fucking deeper into Daniel's mouth, but he couldn't keep himself from the spasmodic, jerking hitches.

"Oh God, oh God," Andrew moaned, fingers tearing into the cheap blankets as Daniel cupped his ass and lifted him off the mattress, swallowing even more of his cock.

Everything seemed to focus in on the tight, wet, hot cavern of Daniel's mouth. Andrew's head tilted back, eyes squeezed shut tight as Daniel's tongue teased along the base of his shaft, throat muscles milking him with each swallow. He jerked and thrust forward, needing to be even deeper, needing it harder, faster, hotter. Daniel groaned in agreement and bobbed his head eagerly, letting Andrew fuck his mouth in quick, desperate glides of spit and flesh.

When he felt the first ache of orgasm, Andrew reached down in warning, fingers tangling in Daniel's loose curls. He tugged sharply, panting wordless endearments when Daniel pressed closer, cheeks hollowing as he swallowed his throbbing cock hard and deep.

The final tug of Daniel's mouth shot through Andrew like a lightning bolt. He came with a barely muffled cry, head twisting back and forth on the battered pillow. His entire body tensed into an impossibly tight bow, cock and balls aching as orgasm washed through him in a blaze of white heat. It seemed to go on for hours, shock waves rocking him, making him twist and beg and moan Daniel's name as he came with a violence he'd never experienced before.

When it was finally over, Andrew dropped back against the mattress with a hollowed-out noise. Blond hair fell in tangles over his sweaty face, sticking to his cheek and neck. His breath came in harsh pants and his entire body felt heavy and sated despite the light tremors still running through him, making his muscles quiver and jerk.

Daniel pulled back slowly, tongue tracing across Andrew's relaxing cock. Andrew whimpered deep in his throat, hands reaching blindly for him. "Daniel," he rasped, smiling against the pillow.

But Daniel wasn't finished with him.

Large hands moved to Andrew's hips, guiding them. "Turn," Daniel said, voice oddly clipped. Andrew shifted, allowing himself to be turned on his side even as he looked over his shoulder curiously. The expression in Daniel's eyes was enough to make his stomach clench, sated body tightening again. His spent cock twitched painfully.

"What—" he began, biting the inside of his mouth.

"Trust me, Andrew," the other man said, voice so strained it was almost unrecognizable. "I need you to trust me."

Andrew nodded, pressing back against Daniel's larger body. "I do," he said softly, forcing himself to relax again. The animalistic glint in Daniel's eyes made his stomach twist in nervous anticipation. Then again, more for himself than Daniel, he said, "I trust you, Daniel."

Chapter Eight

The words hung between them for a long minute before Daniel nodded, leaning in to kiss his shoulder. "Thank you," he murmured, fitting himself against the curve of Andrew's backside. He tugged Andrew against him, pulling him into his broader chest and wrapping an arm around his middle.

Andrew made a low noise when Daniel rubbed his hot, heavy cock against the curve of his ass. He moved back helpfully, hips rocking until the slick erection slipped between his ass cheeks. "Daniel," he rasped, reaching up blindly to slide his fingers along the back of Daniel's skull. He turned his head and tugged him down for a deep, wet kiss, sparks of pleasure flashing through his body.

Daniel stroked his tongue into Andrew's mouth even as he slid a hand across his belly to cup his balls. He teased them lightly, swallowing Andrew's breathy noise, and moved his fingers up the fitfully twitching cock. Andrew tried to break the kiss, shuddering, but Daniel bit into his mouth and held him there, tongue fucking deep and possessive as he wrapped strong fingers around him.

The motion of his hips pushed Andrew into his hand before letting him fall back against Daniel's throbbing erection. Andrew twisted with an unsteady moan, thighs parting as he tried to take more. His entire body was flushed, arousal sparking again despite his recent orgasm. This time, however, the center of his need had changed. He could feel the clench of muscle every time Daniel thrust against his ass. The span of skin between his balls and hole ached.

"Daniel," he finally managed to gasp when he broke the kiss, mouth swollen and wet. Daniel lifted his hand and traced Andrew's lips with come-slick fingers, dipping them past the sharp scrape of his teeth to stroke his agile tongue. Andrew moaned, tongue dipping and twining between Daniel's fingers as he eagerly sucked away his own come, tasting salt and calloused skin. He nipped at sturdy fingertips, lifting his head and arching his neck as he swallowed Daniel's fingers deeper into his mouth. To the first knuckle, the second, the third. His throat worked greedily as his tongue laved over rope-torn skin. His eyes slowly fluttered closed.

Daniel softly kissed the bit of skin beneath Andrew's ear, breath warm. "Deeper," he murmured, voice so husky it almost wasn't his own. Andrew complied quickly, wetly swallowing as much of Daniel as he could manage. His hips rutted back, following the uneven pull of his mouth. His ass and thighs were slick and hot, Daniel's pre-come slipping against his passage. "More, Andrew. I need to make it easy for you."

Andrew cried out, biting the thick knuckles and spearing his tongue between the valley of Daniel's fingers. He sucked and bit and swallowed, deliberately mimicking the act of fellation. Daniel's breath grew increasingly erratic as Andrew ground against his

erection, body hot and shuddering with need. He closed his eyes tight and focused on the way Daniel's fingers fucked into his mouth in hard, quick pulses. He focused on the scalding heat of Daniel's cock jerking against the curve of his ass.

When Daniel finally broke, moan loud in the simple room, Andrew's entire body arched in victory.

"Stop." Daniel's voice was shaken, guttural. Nearly primal. He drew ragged breaths as he tried to pull his hand away, but Andrew wouldn't let him go. He reached up to grab Daniel's wrist, hips moving desperately. "Stop," Daniel said again. He pried himself away, keeping Andrew from turning into his arms with near-brute strength. The look in his eyes was purely animal.

"Turn," he said. When Andrew hesitated, he growled.

Somehow, having this kind of power over the controlled, quiet man was more erotic than anything Andrew had ever experienced. He nodded shakily and turned onto his stomach, unable to resist the temptation to lift his ass and spread his thighs in invitation. He turned his head at Daniel's low hiss, watching as the other man rose to his knees, one hand gripping the base of his cock as if to manually force back orgasm.

I did this, Andrew thought dizzily, licking his lips. He wants me this badly.

When Daniel reached for him, his large hand was visibly trembling. He let go of his thick cock and gripped Andrew's hip firmly, the other slick hand moving down the curve of his ass.

When Daniel separated his ass cheeks, Andrew drew in a sharp breath. He closed his eyes, breathing through his mouth as he felt hot fingers move against the tight clench of his passage.

Do it, do it, he mentally chanted, thighs spreading wider. Just like in his dream, the reality of being touched far outweighed the fear of what it would be like. Please, Daniel.

He cried out, eyes shooting open when Daniel slipped his first finger into his body. It was quick and deft, sliding past the initial resistance and pausing to let him adjust. Andrew panted in unsteady breaths, shifting against the invasion. He was excruciatingly aware of Daniel's broad finger inside him. His blood was on fire from it.

Daniel's harsh breathing echoed his, and he seemed to keep his hand steady by force of will alone before slowly, delicately thrusting his finger inside. Andrew moaned, aware of the slick glide and the steady way Daniel was opening him. Ready for his cock.

He's good at this, Andrew thought. Of course he's good at this.

Daniel moved his finger in a small circle, gradually stretching Andrew's body even as he leaned in to kiss his shoulders and spine. Andrew thrust back against his finger with slow, almost tentative pushes, focusing on relaxing and taking as much as he could stand. "More, Daniel," he whispered, knees digging into the mattress as he pushed back insistently. His harsh, rapid breath echoed Daniel's. "Please."

The second large finger stretched him wider. It was just shy of painful, sensation shooting through Andrew's body in hot flashes that had him jerking helplessly. Tremors ran over his skin and sweat dripped from his brow. Everything was focused on those two fingers moving in ever-widening circles.

When Daniel crooked his fingers and stroked deep inside him, shock waves of pleasure burst through Andrew, making him shudder and sob in hoarse breaths. Andrew bit at the pillow to stifle the near-yowl, laughing a breath later at the animalistic noises Daniel was drawing from him. "'With man or beast?'" he gasped, teasingly quoting the Articles. "Seems you l-lucked out and managed b— *Daniel*." Words faded into a string of broken moans when Daniel thrust his two fingers deep inside his body and brushed the tight bundle of nerves again.

"No more talking," Daniel whispered, and Andrew nodded his head sharply, pushing his hips back. Needing more. He made broken, pleading noises as Daniel fucked his slick, strong fingers into his body, stretching them wide and relaxing him. When the third finger slid in with the first two, he felt as if he were going to come apart at the seams. His cock was bobbing beneath him, leaking pre-come against the twisted sheets as he writhed and moaned and pleaded for Daniel to take him. For Daniel to fuck him.

When Daniel pulled his hand away, fingers sliding from his body, Andrew almost screamed at the loss. "Enough," Daniel said, voice caught in that heady, barely human timbre that made Andrew's cock twitch painfully. Andrew turned his head and watched as Daniel sat back on his heels, wetting his other hand with spit. Daniel was trembling all over, large body shuddering as he desperately slicked his erection. When he looked up, meeting Andrew's eyes, it was as if they were already connected.

The captain and his bride were not the only ones joined today, Andrew thought with a breathless ache before Daniel moved behind him, gripped his hips and all thought was gone.

The first nudge of Daniel's erection made him bite his mouth and hold his breath. The head of Daniel's cock pushed past the initial resistance of his body, forcing the ring of muscle to open around him. Andrew tangled his fingers in the abused sheets, knees sinking into the lumpy mattress as he felt Daniel begin the slow, maddening slide into him.

It burned. It ached. It made him feel as if his body were being rearranged, everything focusing in on the steady invasion. He tried to cry Daniel's name, but his mouth only trembled, heat flaring in odd, consuming bursts as if he were a bellows. Daniel paused halfway in, and Andrew pressed his face into the pillow as his body rippled with helpless shudders.

"Andrew," Daniel murmured.

He needed to say something. He *wanted* to say something, but all the air in his body seemed to have been sucked away. He shifted, feeling that huge cock inside him, feeling his body throb and shake as he was held open and vulnerable by *Daniel*.

When Daniel began to slowly pull out, Andrew finally found his voice. "No!" he said, gripping his body tight. Daniel's strangled noise was hotter than anything he could have imagined, teetering along the edge of reason. As if he were fighting not to let loose and mindlessly claim him.

Andrew *wanted* Daniel to let loose and mindlessly claim him.

"Harder," Andrew managed to gasp, lips twisting into a tiny, tight smile.

There was a moment of stunned silence before Daniel thrust forward with a guttural growl. He pounded in all the way, cock filling Andrew and making him jolt forward with a muffled cry. White heat exploded inside him, throwing off sparks as Daniel slid halfway out and thrust into him again.

Andrew fought to draw a breath then pushed *back* against him, meeting his hips in a bruising grind of flesh and heat. Daniel wrapped his arms around Andrew's waist and lifted him against his sweaty chest, hips working in hard, tight thrusts as he sank deeper and deeper into his body. Andrew let his head fall back, golden hair tangling about them in wet strands as he turned his head and lifted his face blindly. Daniel's mouth found his, slick and hot and intensely claiming. Their tongues moved together, stroking and twining as Daniel dropped a hand down and began to fist Andrew's cock.

It was as if his entire body were being wrung out. Andrew moved between the grasping, calloused hand and the hard thrusts of Daniel's cock. He was open around him—letting himself be carried by waves of sensation. He no longer cared to muffle his cries, letting Daniel swallow them or not. Andrew's balls tightened against his body and his chest heaved with every labored breath.

Daniel stiffened against him then thrust harder, rutting up with desperate strokes. From within the cage of his muscled arms, Andrew could feel Daniel shaking and jerking as orgasm washed through him moments before Andrew's body was flooded with scalding heat. Andrew drew in a sobbing breath, echoed by Daniel, and arched his spine. His cock twitched, his body tensed and he only had time to take another breath before he exploded in Daniel's arms, coming with a strangled cry.

Andrew felt like a schooner tossed on a raging sea. Tremors raced through his body and, every time he thought it was over, another sparked deep inside him. He shuddered and jerked, muscles tight and skin slick with sweat and come. When Andrew finally collapsed back against the solid wall of Daniel's chest, head dropping forward, he was more exhausted than he thought possible.

Their mingled pants were the only sounds. Nothing came from below—they hadn't been overheard.

Daniel absently stroked Andrew's thighs and stomach, soothing the trembling muscles. He leaned in to kiss the side of his neck and across his cheek, and the embrace was so tender that Andrew felt tears briefly collect on his lashes.

"Thank you, Daniel," he murmured, lifting his face to draw the other man into a soft, melting kiss. He felt utterly at peace wrapped in those strong, steely arms.

When he was gently lifted off Daniel's softened cock, Andrew whimpered. He'd be sore, he knew—a good kind of sore that would whisper through him every time he moved. He'd remember the feel of Daniel for days. He turned in Daniel's arms, fingers sliding into his hair as he caught his mouth in another kiss then another. His body was racked by fine tremors. He wanted to experience this forever.

Seven days, his subconscious supplied, and Andrew tried to force away that awareness. He didn't want anything encroaching on their time together, but he couldn't quite stifle the maddening voice. *Seven days and you will have to go back to the way things were.*

"If things were different," Andrew said suddenly, head resting against Daniel's shoulder. He hesitated, sinking further into the strong arms, and Daniel made an inquiring noise. "That is, if you weren't in the service and things were...other than how they are, would you be happy being married?"

Daniel was quiet a moment before pulling back to look at him. Andrew tried to ignore the question in his eyes by offering a lopsided smile. "If there weren't handsome Mr. Clayton, that is," he joked weakly.

"There is you," Daniel said, not letting Andrew break eye contact. "Andrew," he added sharply when Andrew opened his mouth to make another deflective joke. Dark brows were drawn together into a steady frown. "Andrew, there is you. Only you, ever. Do you understand?"

He wanted to, but he couldn't see how it was possible. "Of course," he said, resting his head against Daniel's chest again. Content to close his eyes and listen to the steady beat.

For now it would have to be enough.

Chapter Nine

The first morning they woke together was almost painfully awkward. Neither had known what to say for the first few minutes and Daniel had begun to worry that this was a mistake in more ways than the obvious. Andrew was his closest friend. Andrew was dearer to him than family. If they lost some of that friendship...

He wasn't sure he could put to words how horrible that would be.

Andrew had looked at him with wide, surprised eyes, blond hair tumbling over his face. And then, cheeks flushing, he'd begun to laugh.

Things had been much easier since then.

Days later, Daniel shifted on the old, creaking bed, one arm tightening around Andrew's shoulders. The other man was still drowsing, the first rays of sunlight peeking through the dirty window. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm and his lips were faintly parted. Daniel reached up with his free hand and lightly brushed his fingertips along the full lower lip. It was chapped with sleep but still oh-so soft. He could feel the faint gusts of Andrew's breaths on his fingertips, hot with the exhalation and then cool. In and out like the tide.

He leaned in and brushed his mouth along Andrew's brow, ruffling the small, fine hairs. He kissed the skin between them and closed his eyes, lips pressed there as he listened to Portsmouth coming to life outside this small, stuffy haven.

The time was passing too quickly. They stayed for the most part in their lodgings house, each claiming they didn't want to bother with the excitement of the port town. Even Andrew seemed content to avoid everyone, mailing letters to his family but failing to tell them he was on British soil. It was fear that kept them isolated, Daniel knew. Fear that the moment they passed beyond the small apartments or the rundown tavern where they took their meals, people would look at them and know. Fear that each moment spent out there was a moment lost here. Fear that the precarious balance of happiness was going to come crashing down at any moment.

Daniel drew a shaky breath and let it out slowly, turning his face to press his cheek against Andrew's shining hair. He wasn't sure which scared him the most or what he would do about it. He wasn't sure there was anything *to* do about it, and that made his stomach clench in intricate knots.

Two more days. It simply wasn't enough.

You agreed to Andrew's terms. You will accept the consequences where they fall.

He couldn't quite wish he hadn't agreed to allow their relationship to change, but he couldn't be completely glad of it either. Their friendship had never been simple—it

had been too deep for that—but now it was far deeper than Daniel knew what to do with.

The uncertainty, he decided. That was the worst part.

He drew another breath and Andrew shifted, as if sensing his unrest. Andrew made a low noise in the back of his throat, face pressing against the hollow of Daniel's shoulder. Daniel couldn't fight back the smile as he felt soft lashes brush his skin. He squeezed his arm more tightly around Andrew, muscles bunching as he drew him closer.

The fear and uncertainty faded away like wisps of smoke on a breeze.

"Mmph," Andrew muttered, waking by degrees. He yawned hugely, legs moving restlessly against the coarse blankets before he lifted his head. Blond hair fell in now-familiar comical tangles, half obscuring one eye. Daniel laughed and reached up to push it back, tucking the thick curls behind Andrew's ears.

"Good morning," Daniel murmured, lips twitching.

Andrew made a face then grinned. His mobile features twisted into another yawn. "Already?" he said, dropping his forehead against Daniel's chest again. A long-fingered elegant hand slid up Daniel's stomach and chest slowly, absently mapping out the ripples of muscle and light dusting of hair. "I was dreaming."

Daniel dropped his chin to brush a light kiss beneath Andrew's ear. "About?" he murmured.

"I don't remember. It was a good dream though."

They lay together in silence for several long minutes, soaking in the brush of skin against skin. Andrew turned his face and kissed Daniel's collarbone, one hand moving to stroke along the dark hairs across his chest. They were sparsely placed, gradually thickening into a dark path that trailed down his stomach to his cock. Daniel shifted as Andrew traced down that line, fingers swirling through curled hairs, thumb lightly raking skin.

"Andrew," he murmured, shifting again. Slow, languid coils of desire were unwinding deep in his stomach. Heat radiated from where Andrew's clever fingers stroked.

"Hmm?" The other man seemed fixed on his task. Daniel lifted his hips in silent encouragement, cock twitching and lengthening slowly.

He turned his face, nudging Andrew's chin up, and brought their mouths together in a lazy kiss. Andrew's lips parted immediately, welcoming the slick intrusion of Daniel's tongue. He was cotton-mouthed from sleep, but Daniel couldn't find it in him to care, hands sliding across golden-pale skin to roll Andrew on top of him.

The weight of him was perfect, just enough to press the breath from him, and Daniel lifted his knees to allow Andrew to slide effortlessly between his thighs. Andrew gasped into the kiss, hips jerking hard, and Daniel made a soft noise of encouragement at the first tentative rock.

He teased Andrew's tongue into his mouth, using his own as bait to draw him out before he wrapped his lips around it and suckled firmly. Daniel slid a work-roughened hand down Andrew's spine, fingertips brushing over bunched muscle before moving to rest on the curve of his ass. The shameless, eager way Andrew pressed back against his fingers made him laugh, breaking the kiss as he pressed his face into blond hair.

"Wanton," Daniel teased, fingers stroking over the small dip of spine at the very base.

"Yes Sir." Andrew arched back into the caress again, and Daniel could feel the wolfish grin against his shoulder. The heat of their cocks, trapped together between their bodies, was almost maddening. "I somehow think that you don't particularly mind."

Daniel moved his hips to press their erections more firmly together, rubbing softly. Provocatively. "I am at a loss as to how you came to that conclusion, Lieutenant. Perhaps you had best explain."

"I-I am sure that you could follow my trail of l-logic if—Dear *God*, Daniel!" Andrew moaned, fingers digging into Daniel's shoulders as Andrew's hips jerked forward hard. His cock was slick with pre-come, twitching where it was pressed alongside Daniel's. "Please, I need you to touch me."

"You are impatient," Daniel teasingly admonished, turning his face and mouthing beneath Andrew's ear. Gone were the languid morning strokes of skin against skin. Heat was building rapidly, fed by the quick, jerky shifts of Andrew's hips.

"Yes."

His tongue darted out, trailing the outer shell of Andrew's ear. "You lack discipline."

"Yes."

They were thrusting together, bodies falling into a rhythm that seemed to come so naturally to them. It was a mystery to Daniel how the two of them could know so much about each other's bodies after so short a time. He was desperate to learn more—anything he could. "You are demanding."

"Yes, yes and yes. Now for the love of king and country, Mr. Barret, *touch me*." Andrew lifted his face, brown eyes dark with arousal and amusement. He pushed his hips against Daniel's in a hard, demanding grind, hands moving to splay across his chest. Soft lips were parted, breath coming fast, and Daniel felt the sudden sensation of drowning before he growled and flipped Andrew onto his back.

Andrew *oofed* when he hit the hard mattress, eyes going wide as Daniel moved to straddle him. Andrew reached out to touch Daniel, but he grabbed Andrew's wrists and shoved his arms over his head. "No," Daniel said darkly, voice almost a growl. "You said you wished for me to touch you. I am going to touch you."

Andrew nodded shakily, fingers clenching and releasing as Daniel let him go. He slowly dropped his arms by his sides, but he didn't reach for him again. Daniel studied Andrew seriously, eyes sweeping over his disheveled blond hair, his flushed cheeks, his

freckled skin. He'd never seen anything so beautiful – not even the endless blue stretch of sea came close.

"I love you," Daniel murmured, staring down at him. "I'm going to make you mine."

"Oh God." Andrew's words were almost a whimper, lost into a drawn-out moan when Daniel dropped his mouth to the pale column of his neck. Daniel pressed his lips to Andrew's pulse, feeling his heartbeat racing. It stuttered when he flickered out his tongue to taste skin, almost stopping before pounding harder, faster. Daniel growled in response, deep in his chest, and kissed down his throat. He bit at the curve of skin between shoulder and neck, teeth sinking into warm flesh before he pulled away to tongue each groove. He pressed his lips over the bite and sucked hard on Andrew's skin, drawing the blood to the surface and marking him. Andrew's desperate cry made Daniel's entire body tighten.

"Harder," Andrew gasped. "God, Daniel more. Please, please more."

"More," he growled in response, biting across his shoulder. Daniel pressed one palm flat against Andrew's chest and let it slide down slowly. Deliberately. He swirled his fingertips against golden chest hair and dipped his index finger into Andrew's bellybutton.

The surge of his lover's hips was a surprise, but Daniel rode it out, sliding his stubbled cheek along Andrew's chest until his teeth grazed a nipple. He circled his finger around his lover's bellybutton, nail wickedly teasing sensitized skin as his tongue snaked out to wet the very tip of his nipple.

It was as if his body were being struck by lightning over and over. Andrew jerked and arched, hips pushing up in mindless demand even as he gripped his hands into fists. Daniel could feel the tension building in Andrew's body, muscles twitching beneath smooth skin.

"Please," Andrew whispered, squirming back against the bedclothes.

"Turn over."

Daniel almost didn't recognize his own voice—it was deep and harsh. Andrew stared at him with wide eyes, nodding breathlessly as Daniel lifted his hips and gave him the freedom to move. Andrew shifted and turned onto his stomach, hips pressing into the mattress once reflexively before he went completely still. The sound of his harsh breathing filled the small room.

Daniel sat back on his heels and looked down the length of his lover. The line of his spine was straight and elegant, leading into the curve of his lower back and the perfect swell of his ass. Andrew had a beautiful behind, pale gold and smoothing into delightfully hairy thighs. Daniel leaned in impulsively, hands bracing his weight against the mattress as he stroked his tongue along the bottom crease of Andrew's ass. The sharp hiss shot straight to Daniel's cock, making it twitch in sympathy. A drop of pre-come leaked from the tip and Daniel drew in a long, steadying breath before stroking his tongue over to the other ass cheek.

"You taste perfect," he murmured, biting the swell of Andrew's bottom. His hands moved to brace Andrew's hips, fingers digging into his skin and thumbs brushing over the curve of his bottom to drag his ass cheeks apart. Each ragged pant of Andrew's breath shot through Daniel like a swallow of fine whiskey, heat uncoiling and flooding his bloodstream. He held Andrew open to him, vulnerable, and blew a cool breath over the puckered skin of his opening. It was amazing how such a small bit of skin could give way to so much pleasure for the both of them.

"I'm going to lick you open now." He barely recognized his own voice, it was so ragged. "I'm going to stroke my tongue over you and push your body open with the tip. Then I'm going to use my fingers to spread you wide for me."

Andrew's low sob echoed through Daniel's body, undeniable. "Just do it," Andrew pleaded, thighs spreading wide in invitation. He gripped the mattress and tried to arch back against Daniel's mouth, twisting to rub his cock against the rough linens. "I love you, I need you, just *do it*."

Daniel nipped at his skin roughly before snaking his tongue out to stroke between his ass cheeks. He teased up the rippled opening, spit making the skin glisten, and ignored Andrew's desperate squirming, one hand moving to brace Andrew's body open while the other moved to follow the wet path of his tongue. He slipped the tip of his finger inside Andrew's body, pressing to the first knuckle before pulling back. When he pressed in again, deeper this time, the rhythmic clench about his fingertip was almost enough to make Daniel lose his mind.

Fuck, he needed Andrew. Daniel was so hard he could barely think, thoughts spiraling down into a haze of mindless want. He was minutes away from pulling back, pushing Andrew open and *taking* him. Damn preparing him, damn making it easy—he needed him so intensely none of that seemed to matter. Only it did matter. It mattered a great deal.

Daniel pulled back and spit on his fingers, getting them nice and wet. He slid his hand down again, pressing one finger up to the second knuckle in a single glide. The perfect heat of Andrew's body was almost maddening, and Daniel had to reach down to grip the base of his cock as he pushed his finger deeper into his lover's body. He squeezed his own cock ruthlessly, fighting back orgasm with everything he was.

"Not now," Daniel breathed, stroking his finger in and out. He added a second, sooner than he should, and waited out Andrew's low grunt of discomfort. "Are you all right?" Daniel asked quietly. He cleared his throat when Andrew didn't answer, frozen in place. "Andrew?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm—God, Daniel, fuck me, please, I need you to—I'm going to come, I need to come, I'm—just *fuck me* already."

Daniel let out his breath on a shaky laugh, fingers moving deep into Andrew's body. He lifted his free hand and licked across the palm, getting it as slick as he could. This would be better with an oil of some kind, something that stayed slick throughout,

but neither of them had managed to work up the courage to find it. *Next time*, Daniel thought. Then, *If there is a next time*.

He spread his fingers wide, sliding in a third slick digit. All three were fucking Andrew as deep as he could manage as he dropped his free hand and prepared his cock. It was all he could do to keep from stroking himself, stomach muscles tightening at the rushing certainty of orgasm. He crooked his fingers, seeking the soft gland in Andrew's body, and gave a feral grin with Andrew nearly *howled* with pleasure, noise cut off just in time by the pillow.

Daniel pulled his fingers aside and gripped Andrew's hips, yanking him up to a better angle. He moved to cover his lover's body, kissing his spine as he guided the head of his cock to Andrew's spasming passage, rocking against it for a moment before slowly pushing in.

Tight. Tight and hot and oh-so perfect. Daniel and Andrew drew shuddering breaths together as Daniel carefully sank into the welcoming glide of his body. His balls drew up, his cock jerked and his shoulders shook, but he pushed back the need and clung to awareness of Andrew's body.

"You feel so good," he managed to gasp, rocking in another careful inch. Andrew made a strangled noise and shifted his thighs, pushing back against the slow invasion of Daniel's large body. Then Andrew turned his face so his cheek was pressed against the pillow. Daniel lifted his head, looking down, mesmerized by the flick of dark lashes and the swollen softness of Andrew's mouth.

"More." The word was forced out of Andrew's body even as he rocked back with one hard lunge.

Control shattered. Daniel snarled and gripped Andrew hips, pulling back before slamming forward again. The thrust shot stars across his vision and made Andrew nearly yowl with pleasure. He rocked in before pulling back and thrusting again, again, following each hard thrust by another and another until they were both sobbing in breath. When Daniel came, it was with a muffled cry, teeth biting his lower lip until it stung and he tasted blood. He didn't care—all that mattered was the molten fire racing through his body and into Andrew's. Andrew jerked and shuddered, coming in hard bursts that echoed back to Daniel.

When it was finally over, Daniel collapsed on top of his lover, falling into a boneless sprawl. He drew in a ragged breath, sweat covering his twitching skin and making him slick.

"God," he gasped, hands stroking down Andrew's arms. He could feel each shuddery gasp Andrew made. Their hearts raced together, only very gradually slowing.

Awkward, sore, Daniel slid out of Andrew's body and rolled onto his back. Andrew turned with him, allowing Daniel to draw him into his arm. Soft blond hair fell across Daniel's chest as Andrew pressed a kiss over his heart. His entire body was alive with sated desire and the endless need to soak Andrew in.

I would never grow tired of this, Daniel thought, large hand soothing down Andrew's spine. He stared up at the ceiling, trying not to imagine what their lives could have been like in another time. I could hold him like this every night for the rest of our lives and I'd never grow tired.

Somehow, that thought only made it hurt all the more.

Chapter Ten

Hunger and a desire for news finally drove them to a local inn that was popular with naval officers. It was open to all ranks and offered good food, strong alcohol and tables for whist and dice. Newspapers flanked comfortable winged chairs and a series of doors led to private rooms where higher-ranking men could escape, if they wished, to share more sensitive information.

Andrew felt uncomfortably exposed when he followed Daniel through the heavy front door. Portsmouth was always busy and the bar was almost always crowded. Lieutenants sat in intimate groupings or gambled at the tables, low voices adding to the general buzz of conversation. Several pairs of eyes moved toward them as the door shut at Andrew's heels, and Andrew felt his stomach clench in worry as he waited for someone to point out what, to him, was incredibly obvious.

But the curious eyes drifted away after only a second and Andrew felt a rush of relief as he realized that he and Daniel were ordinary after all.

Daniel didn't say anything, but Andrew could read the relief in the set of his shoulders. It was strange how much being Daniel's lover increased his physical awareness of him. Before they'd left the *Charon*, Andrew would have said he and Daniel were close—as close as two men could be. He could usually read the intricate layer of emotions where no one else could. But now that he'd seen the exact color of Daniel's eyes when he came, now that he'd watched the emotions flicker over his open face, Andrew had an awareness of the other man that was almost supernatural. It would be a boon when they returned to the ship, helping them to work together even under the heat of enemy fire.

It would also be hell. An aching, painful purgatory he could confess to no man.

He followed a step behind Daniel as he led the way to a pair of chairs near a gathering of familiar and unfamiliar faces. Hayes wasn't there, Andrew noticed with relief. In fact, he could see none of the *Charon's* men. It was likely better that way, as it would be more difficult to know how to act around them. Better to test themselves against men who wouldn't be quite as sharp.

Daniel seemed to share the same opinion. He glanced at Andrew and gave a faint nod, corners of his lips quirked into a smile.

Andrew grinned back, settling into his high-backed chair with a sigh. He relaxed back, barely acknowledging the serving boy who brought him a tall mug of ale. Daniel clearly couldn't be so nonchalant. He nodded in thanks, gruffly hiding the motion when he caught Andrew's eyes and turning away from the boy as if embarrassed. Andrew opened his mouth to ask what was the matter before it dawned on him.

Daniel had been born into another class. He would never be completely used to being treated as if he were someone's better.

The thought was part endearing and part completely alien. It was certainly something to keep in mind—they were from different worlds. In some things, they would never completely understand one another despite their closeness.

Daniel reached for the latest paper, clearing his throat as he spread the pages and began to scan for news. Andrew contented himself with listening instead, taking measured sips of his ale as he caught clips of information.

The winds were poor and the seas choppy. They feared more bad storms off the coast. They wondered how the blockade forces were faring. They worried about the constantly turning tides of war.

He listened for some time, allowing the low hum of voices to wash over him. None of the news was surprising, though he did worry about the great storms everyone was discussing. It was gray and dismal in Portsmouth, weather occasionally bursting into unrelenting hales, but news said that it was even worse near France.

Finally, Andrew set aside his drink and rose. He smoothed out his jacket and sent Daniel a brief nod when he glanced up from the paper. "I require the necessary," Andrew said, moving past his lover's chair. He fought and successfully conquered the urge to brush his fingers over Daniel's shoulder, instead keeping his hands loosely fisted at his sides. He looked about the inn, trying to remember where to find the privy before moving toward the back of the room, sidestepping a small group of officers deep in their cups. "Your pardon," he murmured as he slipped past.

"That's Daniel Barret, second lieutenant of the *Charon*."

He paused at Daniel's name, focusing sharply on the huddle of men. They were lower-ranking officers—Channel groupers, the lot of them, if Andrew wasn't mistaken—from decent but not exalted homes. Lieutenant Godfrey Barnes was the son of a physician. Lieutenant Elliot Harker the son of a shopman. The third man he couldn't place, but from his easy manner, it was clear he was an officer on their ship. "His mother was a whore, if you take the stories," Barnes said, mouth twisted into a bitter grimace. "Bastard son of a whore and a bloody able seaman. And there he sits pretty as you please aboard a ship like the *Charon*."

"Senior officer too. Its juniors must be well used to licking common-born arse."

Andrew felt a curious rush of cold then hot. He was hardly aware of stepping forward, forcing himself into their small group with a violent motion. "I beg your pardon," he said, voice dropping low with fury. He was so rarely angry, Andrew barely knew how to control the rush of pure rage. "And you'll be begging Mr. Barret's if you know what's good for you."

Harker straightened to face him, looking down his long, crooked nose at Andrew. He had a sharp face, eyes small and close together. "Will we, then? And who'll be enforcing that?"

"Andrew Clayton, third lieutenant aboard the *Charon*." He stepped even closer, crowding the man back and wishing he had his pistols on him. He'd gladly shoot all three men matching sets of blowholes before the evening was out.

"Andrew Clayton," the third man parroted, giving a nasal laugh. All three Channel groupers wore dirty, faded uniforms and smelled vaguely like the pigs their ships carried. "Oh, how fine. Tell me, *Andrew Clayton*, how do you plan on enforcing this apology?"

A firm hand closed over Andrew's shoulder before he could throw back his fist. "He won't be."

Andrew started at Daniel's cold tone, half turning to look at him. His expression was grim, features set and eyes glittering darkly. There was a dangerous air about Daniel—a low, dirty, primal sort of energy that made Andrew's stomach twist pleasurably.

This was a man who'd been born in the city's cradle and not the rarified house of a peer. This was a man who'd speak with his fists when he had to and make himself be heard when everyone else was down for the count.

This was a man who could fight his own battles, if he was only willing.

"Da—Mr. Barret," Andrew began, but Daniel's grip on his shoulder tightened, cutting off what he had intended to say. The three men stood in awkward semi-defiance, eyes not meeting Daniel's as they visibly fought not to back down.

"Is there a problem here, gentlemen?"

Harker cleared his throat. "No indeed," he said, lifting his chin.

"Just speaking with the fine Mr. Clayton."

Daniel nodded and pulled back, letting go of Andrew's shoulder. "I'm afraid I require Mr. Clayton's presence," he said. "My apologies for the interruption. Gentlemen."

Andrew glanced back toward the trio of men, blood rushing hot, but he couldn't press Daniel's case if Daniel weren't willing to allow it. He turned on his heel with a sharp nod, following his lover out through the servant's exit to the rear of the building. The smell of trash was strong, undercut by the salt of the sea at each soft breeze. Another building hemmed them in, windows dark and boarded up. There was no one around to see them. "What in God's name was that all about?" Andrew demanded the moment he was certain they were alone. "Daniel, those men were *flagrantly* impugning your honor."

Daniel turned to look at him, expression infuriatingly bemused. "Yes, I gathered as much," he said, folding his hands behind his back.

"You should have done something about it. You should have let *me* do something about it!" He raked his fingers through his hair, nearly shaking with frustrated aggression. "They were being intolerable and needed to be taken down a peg or six."

"What would you have done?" Daniel asked. He reached out to lightly catch Andrew's wrist, thumb brushing over the racing pulse. "Challenged them to a duel?"

Andrew tried to tug his wrist away, giving up when Daniel refused to let go. "Yes!" He let himself be tugged in, one fist rising to press against Daniel's strong chest, fingers balled tight. "Yes, by God, I would have challenged them to a duel. Their comments were intolerable."

"And next time?" Daniel's voice dropped very low, almost gentle. It was strange how this man who stood there, so full of potential violence, so threatening just a moment before could speak to him so sweetly. "Would you fight for my honor then?"

Andrew allowed himself to fall against Daniel's chest, heartbeat slowing gradually. "Yes."

"And the next?" He reached up with his free hand to brush his thumb between Andrew's brows, as if smoothing away the scowl. "And the next? There will always be men impugning my honor. If you fight them all, there won't be but a handful of men left to guide the ships."

Andrew jerked his chin back, avoiding Daniel's caress. "You take this matter very lightly," he grumbled.

"Andrew." Daniel cupped his face, letting his wrist go to cradle his jaw between both strong hands. His expression was intent, intense. "If I took it as seriously as you, I would have no energy for anything but anger. I am the bastard son of a seaman and a tavern whore. Andrew," he continued, stopping Andrew's protest. "I *am* the bastard son of a seaman and a tavern whore. I have been extraordinarily lucky in my life. I have made it farther than I ever thought possible. And I am touched that men like you, Mr. Hayes and the captain are so willing to fight for me. But you cannot fight the whole of society no matter how much you may wish to. There comes a point when we all have to realize I'm living far above my buttons and I'm never going to get farther." His thumb brushed gently along Andrew's lower lip. "No matter how much you may wish otherwise."

Andrew let out a shaky breath, sliding his palms up and down Daniel's broad chest in a warm caress. "You're the best of us, Daniel," he murmured. "It hardly seems fair that life has given you so little."

"And here I was thinking it hardly seemed fair life had given me so much," Daniel said with a wry smile. He leaned in to brush their mouths together in a soft, melting kiss that, for one sweet moment, made the entire world fall away.

Until it came crashing back down around their ears. "An excellent sentiment, Mr. Barret."

The familiar, clipped voice sent Andrew and Daniel flying apart as if physically repelled. Andrew turned toward the door, dread sinking deep into his stomach as he stared up at Lieutenant Hayes. Sinclair stood at his shoulder, thin mouth curved in silent victory, uncanny green eyes narrowed as he took them both in.

Oh God. Oh Christ. Oh God.

The curses circled helplessly through his mind as Hayes looked between them, expression difficult to read. Daniel was very still at Andrew's side, muscles tight as if he were caught on the verge of flight, fists slowly clenching and unclenching.

Then Hayes stepped away from Sinclair, breaking the frozen tableau, his gaze intent on the two of them. It sliced through Andrew, making him feel naked and horribly exposed. *The game's up*, he thought, unable to look away from his silent superior. *We were careless and we were caught. There's nothing for it now.*

"The captain's received orders," Hayes finally said, voice almost comically even. He turned from them after a long minute, shaking his head slightly. "We're to report back to the ship within the hour. Get your things and get to the longboat."

"Mr. Hayes," Daniel said, stepping forward.

"Get your things." Hayes' voice was like a whip crack. "And get to the boat." He reached for the door, slamming it shut behind him as he stalked away.

The silence that followed was deafening. Then, with a characteristic mocking undertone, Sinclair tilted his head toward them. "If the two of you are ready," he said. There was a low, bitter quality to his tone and Andrew had to swallow back the violent surge of hatred he suddenly felt toward the other man. It wasn't Sinclair's fault that they'd been caught—he and Daniel had been too lax and they would pay the price for it.

No, Andrew realized with dawning horror, it was *his* fault. If he hadn't gotten so angry, if he hadn't been on the verge of calling those Channel groupers out, then Daniel wouldn't have had to intercede. Daniel wouldn't have had to draw him away somewhere mostly private. Daniel wouldn't have had to comfort him.

If he had been able to control his own outrage and fury, he and Daniel would have been sitting peaceably with their drinks and papers when Sinclair and Hayes came looking for them, and they would have received their orders without further mishap.

There was no one to blame but himself.

"Are you to accompany us, then?" Andrew forced himself to ask, moving forward reluctantly. Daniel had fallen into a worrying silence, eyes on the ground before him, hands fisting and unfisting. Andrew caught the look Sinclair cast him and once again had to fight to keep himself from grabbing for the man and throwing a punch. Only a thin thread of self-preservation gave him pause.

"You can hardly want to be alone *now*." His eyes cut between Andrew and Daniel quickly as the three of them walked down the alleyway toward the main street. Daniel made a sharp noise in response and Sinclair's jaw clenched, an odd expression crossing his face briefly before disappearing, like smoke on a wind.

Andrew nearly stumbled. He wanted to grab Sinclair and turn him to face him. Shake him, maybe, and demand an explanation for what he thought he had seen. For just a moment, the disdain Sinclair usually showed Daniel had sharpened into something very much like naked desire and bitter jealousy.

You're seeing things, Andrew told himself, hurrying his footsteps. He tried to banish his tumultuous thoughts and focus on the matter at hand. The quicker they gathered their things and returned to the boat, the quicker this uncomfortable situation could end.

But it wasn't going to end, Andrew realized with a start, glancing toward Daniel. Hayes had found them out. Surely he'd tell the captain. They could face a court-martial or worse, depending on the captain's wishes.

The Articles of War were strict, but their application wasn't always uniform. And even if Bellings did bring the law against them, his father wouldn't let him hang for buggery—Andrew was certain of that. But who would be there to make sure Daniel's neck wasn't stretched?

Oh God, Andrew thought dully, anger fading to a low ache. He couldn't look at Daniel again. *He* had forced the issue. *He* had started this chain of events. *He* had gotten them caught, and if the captain willed it, he might have gotten his lover killed.

* * * * *

It was almost like moving in a dream. They retrieved their belongings and paid off both the lodgings house and their tab at the tavern. They walked without speaking, without looking at one another, making their way down to the docks where the boat was waiting for them. Hayes was there, but he didn't acknowledge Daniel's presence. The cold shoulder from Hayes—Hayes, who had always been so kind to him—was like a slap in the face.

What did you expect? Daniel thought, keeping tight rein on his expression. He didn't dare glance toward Andrew or Sinclair, too aware of the dangerous undercurrents running between the four of them. The sound of oars hitting water became a steady counterpoint to his racing heart. *Did you think he would embrace you as a son? Did you think he would be happy for you?*

The water was choppy, small boat rocking as they neared the *Charon*. The sight of her waiting there, as familiar and welcoming as any home he'd ever known made his stomach twist. For one dizzying moment, Daniel thought he might be ill.

He followed the first lieutenant up the side of the *Charon*, muscles straining. The deck was already busy, men making ready to set sail. Captain Bellings waited on the quarterdeck, expression stern and eyes narrowed as he stared across the Channel where dark storms gathered in the distance.

Daniel strode up the steps to join him. He was unnaturally aware of Andrew stepping beside him, a touch farther away than even social courtesy dictated, and Sinclair some distance farther.

"There have been storms all along the coast." Bellings launched into an explanation immediately. "Squalls ripped in with no warning, damn it all, making a bad situation worse. At last count, we'd lost two and more have taken heavy injuries."

Distant Spithead was alive with activity. Ships set sail and bellows could be heard above the waves. A strong wind gusted, rocking the deck below Daniel's feet.

"We're on a rescue run?" he asked, shifting to maintain his balance. He felt Hayes' eyes on him, coldly weighing, and straightened self-consciously. "Sir," Daniel added, praying his cheeks weren't flooding with color. It was intolerable, how awkward he felt—strung out and swinging in the breeze as if he *had* been hung. Bellings looked at him curiously, clearly sensing the agitation running between his three most senior lieutenants but not understanding it—or, thank God, having the patience to ask questions.

"We're off to keep the Frogs in their hole," Bellings snapped, turning from the three men. "Set a course, Mr. Hayes, and leave a sharp eye out for any ships trying to make a break for it. I'll be damned if I'm going to let Boney profit from our losses."

"Aye-aye Sir. You," Hayes added, fixing Andrew with a steady glare. Andrew's face was pale, color faded away. Even his finely shaped lips were a ghastly white. "You're on watch and watch until I say otherwise."

Daniel wanted to protest, but he bit the words back. He couldn't question a superior officer. There was discipline in the fleet for a reason, and at the moment their careers and lives were literally in Hayes' hands.

Andrew nodded respectfully. "Aye-aye Sir," he said, voice strained but clear. He didn't look toward Daniel, but the omission was just as obvious as a lingering glance.

"And you." He'd never seen Hayes look so disgusted. This man had been a friend and companion. He'd been a father figure as well as a valued teacher. To have Hayes look at him like that, as if he were less than a man, was almost enough to break him. Daniel stiffened his spine, locking his knees in place, and controlled his expression. "See me after we're safely away. We will discuss this...unfortunate situation and work on a tolerable solution to it."

"Aye-aye Sir."

He waited for Hayes to turn away, bellowing his orders to the men below before calling for Sinclair, taking the other man aside with a firm look. Warning him to complete silence, no doubt, though Daniel didn't want to lay bets on how long Sinclair would keep such a promise. The creak of the anchor filled the air and men scaled the tall masts, dangling high above the deck and working with the practiced precision only a British ship of the line could boast. The prow dipped with a rolling wave and everything seemed to tilt for a minute, righted again with a spray of sea water.

"Daniel," Andrew murmured, moving closer to him. His warm eyes searched Daniel's face as if looking for something—reassurance, maybe. Comfort.

"It's all right, Andrew," he said, taking a deliberate step back. If anyone were to look at them, he would be damn sure the wrong conclusion couldn't be drawn. "If Mr. Hayes was going to tell the captain, we'd already be in chains. Just do your duty and everything will be fine."

Daniel turned as if to leave, but paused. He turned back, voice dropping very low. "We knew when we began this it couldn't last."

"I know." Andrew took a blind step back, one hand reaching for the quarterdeck railing. All around them, the ship was coming to life, sails unfurling. They snapped and rippled like a living thing, filling with wind as the *Charon* moved away from port. "I do know that, Daniel. It's just...this wasn't how it was supposed to end."

He didn't have anything to say to that. He wasn't sure there was anything *to* say to that. Daniel bit the inside of his mouth as he nodded, eyes raking over Andrew's beautiful face again. The shine of his golden hair. The lean lines of his body. He catalogued each observation, each memory and tucked them safely away before forcing himself to wall himself off – possibly for good.

"Things end, Andrew," Daniel said as coldly as he could manage. From the shocked look on the other man's face, he'd succeeded better than he thought possible. "If you'll excuse me – we have a storm to weather."

He turned sharply and strode away.

This time he didn't turn back.

Chapter Eleven

Edmund Sinclair felt ill. He stood on the upper deck refusing to watch Andrew and Daniel—refusing to watch the *lovers*—talking quietly together. His heart was pounding too fast and he could barely hear the raised voices of his men as the *Charon* sailed into open water. It all seemed so far away.

He'd won. He'd found and exploited Daniel's weakness. Never mind that it was an accident. Never mind that he'd only been acting on orders to collect Bellings' senior officers and report back for duty. He'd led Hayes straight to them and caught them in a damning embrace.

Now he knew their secret, and if he told a soul, he could ruin their lives.

"Mr. Sinclair!" Hayes' bellow startled him, but Sinclair forced his expression to remain even as he turned. "A word, if you would."

The older man moved past him, heading toward the empty wardroom, and Sinclair fell into step with him silently. He shut the door behind them and removed his bicorn, tucking it under one arm as he waited for Hayes to begin.

Hayes stalked down the line of cabins, twitching aside cloth doorways and poking his head in—checking to be certain no one could overhear them, Sinclair assumed. Then he turned to face Sinclair, looking him over with a measuring gaze. "I understand that you and Mr. Barret are not on friendly terms?"

Sinclair's jaw tightened. "No Sir."

"Ah." He began to pace in front of the wide rear window, hands laced behind his back. "Hrm. Well then. Mr. Sinclair, what we saw today..." Hayes trailed off and muttered something beneath his breath before trying again. "That is, while I fully understand the serious nature of this breach—while I cannot condone any such unnatural behavior..."

Hayes blew out a frustrated breath.

"Mr. Hayes, with all due respect," Sinclair murmured, hands fisting to hide their trembling. "This is not necessary. I will not betray what I saw to anyone."

The first officer looked up sharply, surprise clear on his face. Sinclair had to look away, eyes to the left of the other man, staring fixedly and seeing nothing.

"I know what it is to have a secret betrayed," Sinclair said, almost to himself. "And a life ruined because of it. You may—" He swallowed and forced himself to look at Hayes, fiercely pushing back the rising tide of unhappy memories. "You may rely on me, Sir. I don't have to like Daniel Barret to want to avoid being his executioner."

Hayes cleared his throat and nodded once, sharply. "Ah then, yes. We are in agreement." He studied Sinclair's face, as if trying to sift through his thoughts, but

Sinclair kept his features impassive. Finally Hayes gestured dismissal. "You may return to your duties."

"Aye-aye Sir." He turned on his heel and slipped out of the stuffy room, grateful for the cold wind that met him as he strode out onto the busy deck. He could feel anxious eyes on him, but Sinclair didn't turn to look at Andrew. Fleeting looks and nervous glances – those weren't the way to keep a secret safe. He'd learned that the hard way.

Jaw tightening, Sinclair moved to join his men, desperate to find something to occupy his thoughts.

* * * * *

Andrew couldn't remember a time when he had ever felt so helpless. Maybe as a child, struggling to catch his father's attention through high spirits and pranks. Maybe his first year at sea, as a young midshipman wet behind the ears and still fighting to comprehend how completely his life had changed. Maybe on his first real command as lieutenant when lives were literally in his hands.

It didn't seem right either way that Daniel's stony silence could make him feel so lost. *It's just until things calm down with Lieutenant Hayes*, Andrew thought for what must have been the hundredth time over the past day, keeping an eye on the sea. The wind was gusting hard, causing waves to crash over the prow even though the rain had paused for now. The French shore was very dark and sinister in the distance, froths of white ringing deadly shoals. He scanned the horizon with narrowed eyes, searching for sail. Already they'd passed one of the lost British vessels, her back broken on the rocks, her sailors already rescued or dead.

But for the grace of God and the skill of the crew, that could be them.

Andrew spared a quick glance for the first lieutenant. He stood beside Daniel, neither man talking. The chilly silence seemed to echo across the stormy waves. *We disappointed him*, Andrew thought. *Daniel disappointed him, which is worse. Daniel was supposed to be something special, and I ended it for him.*

He'd done his best not to spy on them during their long talk the day before. It had taken considerable strength of will for Andrew to keep to his post and not wander nearer, close enough to hear their low conversation. It had been tense – that much he could tell. It had also been mostly one-sided, the first lieutenant speaking with occasional angry gestures, Daniel taking it with the weathered control of a boulder.

Andrew could only imagine what Hayes had to say. The full length of the stormy Channel later and Daniel still looked as cold as ice.

Andrew looked out across the dark horizon with a frustrated breath, struggling to keep his shoulders from hunching with the cold. His greatcoat was slick with the ocean spray, drops falling from his nose and chin. Andrew shivered, swaying effortlessly with the pitch of the ship, tuning out the cries of the men as the Master shouted out the lieutenant's instructions and trying to ignore Sinclair standing some distance away. He

had no idea what Hayes had said to *him* either, but it seemed to be working—so far. Sinclair hadn't said a word since their return to the *Charon*.

Andrew sighed and squinted against a large wave, turning his chin to avoid a mouthful of ocean spray...and then froze when he spotted something ghostly and white in the distance.

"What..." Andrew began, skidding briefly along soaked boards before catching himself. He hurried along the side of the vessel, eyes scanning the darkness for the fleeting vision again. There...no...*there!* Glimmering faintly in the stormy night.

"Sail to starboard!" Andrew called, cupping his hands around his mouth in order to be heard above the endless crash of the ocean. The cry was caught and carried again and again as Daniel bolted forward, elbow brushing Andrew's as he tugged out his spyglass.

"Where?" he barked, lifting the eyepiece and expertly swinging the scope. Andrew touched his shoulder, pointing with two fingers as he oriented himself.

"Three points west by nor'west."

Daniel swiveled toward where Andrew directed even as Hayes joined them, unfolding his own lens. "There," Daniel said just as Hayes lifted the eyepiece. "I see her. West by nor'west...a seventy-six, I'd venture."

Slowly, he lowered the lens. "She's French."

"By God, you're right," Hayes said, tone admiring. "She thought she could slip past us under the storm, but we'll get her by the tail yet. Wind's in our favor." They would come in leeward, usually a disadvantage but now, due to the strong weather, a decided point in their favor. He dropped the scope, turning to his junior lieutenants. "Mr. Clayton, kindly inform the captain that we've found quarry and we're giving chase then report to your post. Mr. Barret, sound the beat to quarters. We'll be on her before she's scarce had chance to breathe."

"Aye-aye Sir," they both chorused, heading in opposite directions. Andrew hurried across the slippery deck even as Daniel's strong bellow echoed across the ship.

"*Beat to quarters, men!*"

"Look lively, Mr. Jennings!" Andrew snapped, dancing around a clumsy midshipman. He tugged off his bicorn as he ducked beneath the quarterdeck's overhang, hurrying to the captain's door. Andrew rapped on the wood firmly, waiting for the faint "Enter!" before opening the door and stepping in.

The captain's office was spacious and well laid out, small touches making up in style what it lacked in comfort. Captain Bellings looked up from his correspondence, pen poised over a letter and expression distinctly expectant. "Well, man, what is it?" he demanded gruffly.

"French sail spotted, Sir," Andrew said, a touch breathlessly. "A seventy-six. We have the leeward advantage." The captain was already on his feet, striding toward the

door as Andrew finished reporting. "Mr. Hayes has called to arms and we're giving chase."

"Good, good," Bellings muttered, roughly pulling on his heavy coat. "To your station, Clayton. Let's show the Frogs a proper British welcome."

"Yes Sir." He hurried out of the room with Bellings only a few paces behind him. The deck was organized chaos. Men hurried to and fro, the Marines assembling even as seamen hurried below deck. Others scaled the masts, struggling with the sails as the *Charon* moved at a fast clip toward the retreating French vessel.

Andrew caught a single glimpse of the ship, much nearer now, before he turned and hurried below. Sand had been scattered across the floor and men were gathering at their stations, ready for action. Across the long galley, Andrew could see Daniel pacing back and forth between his line of guns, inspecting their preparations and barking orders.

"All right, men," Andrew said, turning to his own crews. He watched as they effortlessly prepared for battle, faces grim and half in shadow. "Any moment now."

A faint cry echoed from above, Daniel's shout following. Andrew repeated the cry for Upton and Sinclair manning gun crews on the deck below. "They're turning into us!"

The ship pitched and moved like a living thing, and Andrew could almost see it in his mind's eye. The French vessel turning to face them, hoping to rake their prow. Bellings calling the order to show them the *Charon's* broadside. Soon would come the order to—

"Open the ports!"

The stuffy room grew instantly colder as the ports were opened and Andrew leaned close for a moment. He could spot the French vessel through the small square, waves slapping against her bulwark. The *Charon* had the leeward advantage, which meant their starboard cannons were above the water on both decks while the French, who had to deal with the heavy weather and high waves, could only open their upper ports for fear of being sunk.

"Make way for powder!" came the cry of a score of young boys and Andrew and Daniel began shouting instructions as their men worked. Midshipmen under their command relayed the instructions until each cannon was loaded and ready.

"Run her out!" Andrew called, and his midshipmen echoed the command as each gun was prepared. The grinding of metal and groans of the men filled the low-ceilinged room, and Andrew spared Daniel a quick glance before refocusing on his task. "Aim for the mast, men! She'll be itching to come up alongside and board." It was the only way the French vessel had a chance. "Wait for it. Wait for it." He watched his line of eager men, ready for the mark and, "Fire!"

The explosion was immense, rocking the ship as the cannons thundered back. Acrid smoke filled the air, making it difficult to breathe, but his well-trained men were already leaping into action again.

"Swabbing the barrel," voices called one after the other, and the gun crews kept a running commentary as they swabbed the cannons and reloaded. "Run her out!" Andrew called again, listening to the sounds of grating metal. "Come on, men, put your backs into it!"

The second volley was as powerful as the first. With it came the scream of cannonballs as the French returned fire, shot propelled by the heavy wind. They were coming closer, Andrew saw with a sinking dread. The *Charon's* volleys weren't strong enough to keep the French bastards from boarding.

"Reload!" Daniel's voice echoed from the other side of the room, and when Andrew met his eyes, he saw the same grim awareness in them. Soon the cannons would be abandoned for hand-to-hand.

"Reload!" Andrew called, hands clenching at his sides. His sword was strapped in place, as was his pistol. He wasn't afraid of a fight, but he was aware of the danger he was in—the danger they were all in. "Run her out!" There was one last chance to take out the mast or blow a hole between wind and sea, forcing the other ship to take water. One last chance. "Fire!"

Again, the deafening roar of cannon fire. The cannons slammed back with the discharge, smoke billowing, making him cough. He could hear wood splintering and was aware that the *Charon* was rocking perilously. Screams from above drifted down the wooden steps.

They'd taken a hit, and a bad one from the sound of it. Shouts filled the air, English and French, and the deck rocked hard, wood groaning. Then the sound of musket fire overtook the rest.

"We've been boarded!"

The cry came from above and the seamen acted immediately, drilled to react without thinking. Andrew drew his pistol, checking the priming before pulling it back to full cock. He fell into the swarms of men as they rushed topside, shouting orders where necessary to direct the flow of traffic. The sharp pop of musket fire blended with the clash of swords and the howling of men, and Andrew drew a steadying breath before rushing up the stairs and into the melee.

It was madness. The ships had been locked together by hooks and rope, Frenchmen using the makeshift bridges to cross to the *Charon's* deck. Red-coated Marines formed neat lines while midshipmen hid behind the longboats and loosed deadly shots from relative safety. Blood mixed with the ocean spray to make the deck slick, dark rivulets running toward him as Andrew looked around desperately and aimed his pistol. He jerked at the recoil, smoke climbing as the French seaman dropped to the boards with a cry.

Daniel passed near enough to touch, face already spattered with blood. He swung his blade even as he fired, cut slicing through an officer's wrist. Andrew started, eyes widening as he realized the man's pistol had been aimed at *him*.

There was no time to shout his thanks. Instead he readied his pistol and threw himself into the battle, aware of men and officers fighting furiously around him, aware of death close at his heels.

Not today, he told himself fiercely, stepping on a fallen man and hurrying across the length of the deck. A glancing blow knocked him to the side and he turned instinctively, lifting his sword and blocking the upswing. “*Not today!*” He pushed into it, lifting his pistol and firing into the man’s twisted, howling face. Blood and matter spattered across the deck and the front of his uniform.

Andrew fought with a single-minded focus as time and space slowly slipped away. The enemy just kept coming, wave after wave, and he kept his mind on taking one after the other down, always aware of his immediate surroundings. Always careful.

He had to take shelter once long enough to prepare and reload his pistol. Andrew leaned against the curved hull of a longboat, hands working quickly. He kept alert, looking around him with a critical eye. The tide was turning in the favor of the *Charon’s* crew, but there were pockets of intense battle still raging. The deck was littered with bodies, some gravely wounded and others clearly dead. Andrew blanched when he recognized a familiar face—sweet, earnest Phillip Upton, eyes staring blankly up at the sky.

He’d worry about his loss later.

A loud cry caught his attention and Andrew straightened instinctively. Sinclair was a few yards away, barely fending off two French seamen. One arm was hanging limply at his side, fingers soaked with blood as he parried with his sword, skidding back along the slippery deck as the enemy pressed their advantage. A third Frenchman was coming up behind Sinclair, sword raised.

“*Edmund!*” Andrew yelled without thinking, cocking his pistol and taking aim. Smoke filled the air, clouding his vision, but Andrew was already rushing in to help.

His aim had been true, he noticed with a visceral flash of pleasure—the third attacker was down, red pooling about his still body. Andrew dove in beside Sinclair and parried a blow, ignoring the other man’s startled look. The clash of steel on steel was all Andrew could focus on, old fencing lessons coming back to him as he drew on Sinclair’s second attacker, leaving him to handle the final one.

The Frenchman was older, grizzled, and Andrew had a flash of him as some boy’s father even as he parried and thrust, driving him through in a mostly lucky blow, fight over almost as quickly as it began. The blue eyes widened, body jerking forward, and blood bubbled from his open mouth.

Andrew pulled back, dragging his sword free and stabbed him again, this time through the heart. His breath was coming in rapid pants, he realized dimly, and he had no idea how long he had been fighting. It felt like hours but it couldn’t have been so long. Thirty minutes at most from first boarding until now.

He pulled his sword free again, watching the man fall, and turned to search for Sinclair. He was down on one knee, finishing off his attacker, and the stoop of his

shoulders clearly communicated the pain he was in. Andrew stumbled toward him, slipping once, and met his eyes over the corpse.

"All you all right?" he asked dumbly.

Sinclair nodded, green eyes blurry with pain. "I will live. Thank you, Andrew." He seemed to have some difficulty saying Andrew's name, lips twisting into a wry sort of smile. Andrew smirked back then grinned, smile breaking wide across his face. In this moment, streaked with blood and covered in death, it seemed ridiculous that they had all feuded for so long. "Have you seen Daniel?" Sinclair added, brows drawn together.

"He's about," Andrew replied, cleaning his sword and glancing around. The Master was nearby, hacking inexpertly – but with a great deal of enthusiasm – at his opponent. "Being Daniel, no doubt."

"Disgustingly competent?"

Andrew turned in surprise to meet Sinclair's eyes. They were open and vulnerable, hiding nothing, and Andrew realized with a sudden twisting feeling of pity that he had been right in drawing his impulsive conclusion after that horrible scene in Portsmouth. Sinclair hated Daniel so much because he *wanted* him so much.

"As always," Andrew murmured. He didn't know what to do with the revelation – and now wasn't the time for it, besides. He turned his attention back to the Master and went to go lend aid when, in a shower of steaming blood, the fight ended.

Andrew turned his face away, disgusted, and caught the end of another battle across the gradually thinning deck. Hayes and Bellings were fighting as a unit, dangerous as old lions and grossly outnumbered. It wouldn't be long before they were taken down.

Andrew cursed and tossed his pistol aside, taking up another from the deck and full cocking it. Daniel was already there defending them, he saw when he looked up again, fighting with a silent precision that was terrible to watch. Daniel parried, thrust, kicked and shouldered his way through the throng of Frenchmen. He used the butt of his pistol and his bloody knuckles, lifting his foot and slamming it down onto a man's calf, breaking bones, cleaving skulls.

He was like something out of the ancient past – a war lord maddened by battle frenzy as he protected his captain. When the first shot hit him, it was as if he didn't feel a thing. Daniel kept moving, swinging his sword and lopping off the man's head with one clean, impressive blow.

The second shot made him jerk and turn, and Andrew watched with horror as blood blossomed across his sodden coat.

"Daniel!"

Andrew threw himself forward, the rest of the battle momentarily forgotten. He could see Bellings cocking his pistol and firing point blank at another threatening Frenchman. Hayes caught Daniel as he staggered forward, gray-streaked queue loose about his face. "Fells!" the first lieutenant bellowed for the ship's surgeon, voice carrying over the dying cry of battle.

A seaman lunged for Andrew and he parried mindlessly, gutting him and twisting the blade before wrenching his sword free and continuing to his fallen lover. He dropped to a crouch as Hayes fell back onto the deck, cradling Daniel like a child against him.

"Hold it closed," Hayes said, hands moving across Daniel's chest, searching for the wounds. Blood was everywhere. "Until Mr. Fells gets here, just hold it closed."

"Mr. Hayes. Tend to him while I see to mopping up the rest of them." The captain's voice seemed to come from far away, and Andrew barely flicked a glance up as he hovered over Daniel's body, eyes scanning his face. Daniel's lashes were falling, lips moving as if he were whispering something.

"Daniel, what is it?" Andrew asked, leaning forward. The heat of battle was forgotten and all he could feel was the uneven bursts of Daniel's breath against his cheek.

He couldn't hear a word.

"Daniel, you'll need to speak louder. Daniel, please. I can't hear what you're trying to tell me." Each uneven breath seemed to grow fainter and fainter, and with the loss, Andrew's panic began to rise.

"Daniel. Daniel! No, please, I just need to — You need to — I can't understand what you're trying to tell me. *Daniel!*"

Chapter Twelve

Sinclair wasn't so injured that he couldn't make his own way below decks to await the surgeon, but there were plenty others who could not say the same. He stood in the heavy, foul-smelling dim, pressed against the far wall and watching nervously as men were carried down the steep steps to be lined up along the forward wall. He wanted to help—would have given a great deal to be able to—but his one arm was hanging useless at his side and he didn't have the strength left to lift with the other. He'd probably lose it, Sinclair realized with a sinking sensation. There wasn't enough time for the surgeon and his mates to be particular.

He closed his eyes, fighting back a wave of nausea at the thought. His wouldn't be the only limb taken, he knew—if he listened, he would already be able to hear the sawbone over the low, desperate cries of the injured.

"Daniel, please, *please*, Daniel."

Sinclair straightened so fast at the familiar voice he nearly toppled over, looking toward the steps with a start. Four men were carefully carrying down a still body, easing him level as if he were the king himself. Andrew trailed by their side, face streaked with blood and soot, eyes terrible in fear. "It's going to be all right. Everything will be just fine, Daniel. Just stay awake and everything will be just fine."

Sinclair was moving before he was fully aware of himself, crossing the sand-covered deck to reach the grim-faced sailors. "What happened?" Sinclair asked immediately, glancing toward Andrew before meeting one of the men's eyes. They were men under Daniel's command, he noted. No, wait—one of them was Upton's. It didn't surprise him. There wasn't a man on board who didn't see Daniel Barret as some kind of second coming of Christ for the Navy.

He didn't have the time to speculate on why he no longer felt quite so bitter about that.

"He was fighting hard, Sir," the man answered, dropping his head. Fells was making room for Daniel on the chopping block, quick and efficient, and until he finished there was nothing to do but wait. "Deep in the thick of it, all through the fight. Then the captain and the first lieutenant, they were in a bit of a bind, you see. Mr. Barret, he didn't wait for help. He charged on in, swinging like the devil himself. Took two shots to the chest. Saved the captain's life in the doing."

He looked down and Sinclair followed his gaze. Andrew had his hands on Daniel's chest, and there was blood everywhere. Too much blood, Sinclair noted critically, as if from a distance. He remembered his father sitting at the long dining table and talking him through the terrors of the sea back when Sinclair had first shown interest in

escaping the stifling propriety of the city, explaining war injuries and the many ways he could expect to die.

"Fells will do what he can," Sinclair said, but he reached out with his good hand to touch Daniel's sleeve. He looked up in time to meet Andrew's eyes, glassy with shock, holding them as they began to carry Daniel's still body to the table.

Andrew was reluctant to let go of his friend—*his lover*, Sinclair's subconscious whispered—and had to be physically drawn away. "Mr. Clayton," Sinclair said, grip tight on Andrew's arm when the other man tried to fight him, refusing to leave Daniel's side. "Mr. Clayton. You'll only impede the surgeon's progress."

That drew him away when nothing else could. Andrew stumbled and half fell against Sinclair, head bent until it butted against his shoulder. Sinclair looked up, aware of the eyes of the injured and dying on them, aware of Fells beginning to strip away Daniel's sodden shirt.

Slowly he drew his good arm around Andrew's shoulders and squeezed tight. He had never been good at comfort. He had never *known* much comfort in his cold, proper middle-class home, so how could he have any talent for it? Still, he did his best, holding Andrew against him and murmuring whatever came to mind.

"He will survive this. You'll see. Mr. Barret—Daniel... Daniel is a strong man. He's faced down worse in his life, I'm sure of it. The men say he's like the champions of old, and something as small as this wouldn't bring *them* down."

He very deliberately did not think of Achilles.

"He has to survive this, Andrew. If something were to happen to Daniel, who would I torment? Who would I needle every day?" Sinclair swallowed hard, grip tightening when Andrew would have turned to watch Fells work. "No. No, stay here. Stay here against me. I-I need help being held up. I was injured too, you see. Daniel is just being a laze-a-bed while I am forced to stand. That isn't very courteous of him, don't you think?"

And on. And on as he watched Fells fight over the too-pale body. The *Charon* was staffed with more than one surgeon's mate, thank God, and others were tended to as Fells worked. There was a part of Sinclair that was surprised at how *hard* the surgeon fought, but then, there wasn't a soul on board who didn't love Daniel Barret, it seemed.

Even *he* loved Daniel. And he must be exhausted and weak with pain if he was willing to admit that to himself.

Finally the surgeon's mate beckoned him forward, but Sinclair kept Andrew with him. So long as he could keep the other man focused on him, he couldn't be drawn back to Daniel's side. And, he admitted to himself, Andrew was keeping *him* focused as well. Away from Daniel, away from the pain, away from the awareness that he was about to become exactly what his father had always said he would be.

A half man, a cripple, broken by service to his country.

Andrew seemed to come back to himself as the surgeon's mate laid Sinclair down on the butcher's block. It was already sticky with blood and other things Sinclair didn't want to think about, smell even stronger here.

"It won't hurt but a moment," Andrew lied to him, fishing out a bit of wood, curved into a round cylinder and marked with a score of shallow depressions. Tooth marks, Sinclair realized, fighting to swallow back his fear. Andrew wiped it off as best he could before sliding it between Sinclair's teeth. He had hold of his other hand, and he only glanced back toward Fells once before squeezing tight. The eerily flat, shocked look was gone from his eyes and he was focusing again, present and alert and here with him. "Just a moment, Edmund, you'll see."

Sinclair had a moment to think, dryly, how nice it was of him to be injured so Andrew could have someone to take care of when the pain suddenly soared to a high, endless note, crashing over his thoughts and leaving him with nothing but agony.

* * * * *

Andrew was desperately needed above deck or he would have remained below, keeping vigil over Daniel and Edmund and assisting the surgeon where he could. But they were down three lieutenants and the midshipmen were struggling to keep the men orderly. He couldn't stay in the sick berth no matter how much he wanted to.

He climbed the series of steep ladders back into the sunshine, shielding his eyes against the unexpected brightness. The clouds had parted sometime during the battle and the sea had calmed, though the waves were still choppy enough to make navigating the dangerous French shoals hazardous. Bellings was on the quarterdeck barking orders, Andrew noted, and Hayes was overseeing the treatment of the dead.

"Mr. Clayton," Hayes said, straightening like a shot when he spotted Andrew. He stepped over a dead Frenchman and moved to Andrew's side, eyes scanning his face anxiously. Andrew could only imagine how terrible he looked—rundown and bedraggled, worry for Daniel making him appear pinched and older than his years.

"Mr. Hayes." Andrew forced himself to straighten to attention, but Hayes waved it away with a quick flap of his hand. "Mr. Sinclair and Mr. Barret are both unconscious. Mr. Fells sends his assurances that Mr. Sinclair will make a full recovery if infection doesn't set in. Mr. Barret is, however, beyond his care at this time."

Andrew swallowed hard, forcing himself to stay even-toned.

"As are several others. He humbly recommends to the captain that we make sail for Plymouth immediately if we wish to avoid further significant loss of life."

Hayes nodded slowly, gaze dropping to the deck before raising to Andrew's face again. "Ah yes, I see. Quite sound. I will advise the captain." He paused then cleared his throat. "And you, Mr. Clayton? Are you...suffering from any ill effects?"

"I am uninjured," Andrew said immediately then cleared his own throat and added, "and looking for employment. Your orders, Sir?"

Hayes turned toward where the captain was organizing the capture of the French vessel. There was no resistance that Andrew could see—most of the men had boarded the *Charon* in a desperate attempt to turn the battle in their favor. “Oversee the men in tending to the dead,” he said after a moment, tone brisk and businesslike again. “The captain wants his deck cleared as soon as possible. If you are able, you will be assigned temporary command of the *Marie-Louise* with orders to sail her safely to Plymouth.”

“And the *Charon*, Sir?”

He earned a steady look for the question. “That is the captain’s decision, Mr. Clayton. You have your orders.”

“Aye-aye Sir.”

Andrew moved away and forced himself to take stock of the damage, turning his mind from his injured friends—*loved ones*—and focusing it on the task at hand. Andrew waved down two dazed-looking midshipmen and conscripted them into the task, ordering several uninjured and unemployed seamen to gather the bodies and begin wrapping them for burial at sea. The French were tipped over the side of the vessel and into the Channel save for the officers, who would receive a proper sending off. It was war and British men killed in service to the king would receive the same treatment by the French.

Still, Andrew couldn’t help but feel a flash of pity as he watched another French sailor topple into the water. He remembered the grizzled old man he had fought and the sudden certainty that he must have been a son, a father—someone important to a faraway family. Andrew wondered when they would hear news of this battle and whether they would grieve, or if they had done their grieving long ago.

He wondered if there was anyone left on British soil to mourn Daniel.

Not now, Andrew told himself firmly, focusing on the act of wrapping the *Charon*’s dead in their hammocks and sewing the canvas shut. He didn’t have the time to grieve yet. That would come later, if necessary, lying in his cot and aware of the impenetrable silence coming from the cabin next to his.

All of that would have to come later.

* * * * *

It felt as if he had been sleeping for months, and when Daniel moved, he wished to God he were asleep still. He squeezed his eyes shut tight, trying not to moan. That would only hurt more, he knew.

He couldn’t quite swallow back every noise, sound spilling weakly from his cracked lips. The suspended cot was swinging gently, every bump shooting through his shocked system like cannon fire. Daniel blinked up at the ceiling and tried to place himself, but he couldn’t seem to remember what had happened.

No. No, wait, he did remember—dimly, but coming back to him as he swam back to full awareness. There had been French sail spotted. The beat to quarters. They’d been

boarded, he remembered, images firming in his mind, and he'd fought a score or more of men. And then the captain and Hayes —

The captain.

He struggled to get up, barely able to swallow the guttural gasps at the pain shooting through his chest every time he tried to move. Daniel scrabbled at the edge of his cot, fingers digging into the dingy material lining it as his vision swam before exploding into a shower of brilliant light like falling stars.

A hand touched his, strong fingers carefully loosening his grip and guiding his arm back to his side.

"Careful now," Fells said, easing back Daniel's covers to get a good look at the sodden linens covering his chest. Daniel could smell the mingled scents that he always associated with the sickbed but could never manage to place.

I'll have to ask, he thought dimly, blinking up at the weather-lined face hovering above him. *Someday.*

"There. Don't go moving and disturbing my fine work again—I've put a lot of effort into you, and I'd thank you not to go off and die before we get you safe to Plymouth." His full mouth was pinched into a sour frown, but Fells always looked as if he'd tasted something sharp and unpleasant, especially when he was most concerned. His hands were so very cool and gentle against Daniel as he soothed him back then patted his shoulder gently. "I know it hurts like the devil, but you're an officer in His Majesty's Navy, so—act like it!"

Fells pulled back and Daniel made a soft noise, not wanting to be alone. Showing the uncanny awareness so many *good* surgeons possessed, Fells leaned over the cot again with a fierce scowl. "Keep your mouth shut now," he said, dabbing his blunt fingertips in a bowl of water and rubbing them over Daniel's cracked mouth. It felt amazing—better than anything he could remember now; better than a mother's touch—and Daniel closed his eyes as a tiny bit of water trickled into his mouth. It was barely enough to swallow, but he accepted it greedily, aware that he was already slipping into unconsciousness again.

When he opened his eyes, the light had changed and he was surrounded by the sounds of port. He blinked groggily, better able to swallow down the pain this time, now that he knew to expect it. He had the vague sort of sense that he should by all rights be dead, memory filled with the pistol shots, the tearing agony in his chest...but no, best not to think about that now.

Daniel turned his face against the pillow and listened to the clanging of the bell and the call of voices above him. He must have drifted again, for the next thing he realized a warm hand was touching his shoulder, drawing him back from sleep.

He looked up, fighting to focus on the familiar face. There was a livid cut bisecting Hayes' left cheek and his reddish hair had seen cleaner, tamer days. He was smiling a little though, eyes bright and very fond.

"Well, Mr. Barret," Hayes said, voice a hushed bellow. Daniel winced and Hayes cleared his throat, trying to whisper. Even that was a touch too loud. "Well, it looks like you may make it after all. Fells has nothing but praise for the fellows here in Plymouth, and after some time under their watchful eyes, you should be up and about with no trouble."

He wasn't certain of that—even dazed with pain and possibly feverish, Daniel could tell that—but it was good to hear the forced gaiety in Hayes' tone. It sounded *hopeful*, and Daniel had a feeling he would need a great deal of hope if he was to recover.

"The men are coming to carry you up in a few minutes, but I wanted time to see you alone in case you— Well, before you go, in any case." The first lieutenant cleared his throat. "You'll be missed, but we won't be going far. The *Charon* is sticking around port for refitting while we get things sorted out, and by the time you're full recovered, we'll be itching to chase us some more Frogs."

He patted the side of the cot gently then nodded and moved as if to turn away. Hayes hesitated, however, and turned back, brows knitted into a faint frown. "I almost forgot," he said, reaching into his coat to pull out a small sachet. It was made of fine worsted silk and embroidered around the edges. Ribbon kept it tied tight. "Mr. Clayton was left in charge of the *Marie-Louise*," he said gruffly, tucking the sachet carefully next to Daniel's shoulder. The achingly familiar scent of mint and lavender surrounded him and he had to close his eyes against a new sort of ache in his chest. God, Andrew. He wished he were here now.

"Thought you might like something to keep him— Well. My wife often sends me trinkets that I—"

Hayes stuttered to a halt, face red and shoulders hunched over as if he expected a reprimand. "You get my point, I'm sure. Clever lad. Cleverest I ever met, by God." His expression softened, embarrassment fading away as he looked down at Daniel. "You'll get hale and hearty again and come back to outlive us all. And you'll be a fine captain some day. A fine captain and a credit to the nation. I was a bastard too, you know. Oh, my father eventually did the right thing, but I know a little what you've borne facing down the snobs and purists who seem to flood the service no matter what we do. Too many younger sons intent on letting everyone know just how high-stepping they truly are, I say—ignoring our own Mr. Clayton, of course."

He pulled back and Daniel let his eyes close, listening as Hayes continued to speak but not able to catch on to the words. At some point the men must have arrived for he was aware of being carefully lifted and carried in his cot up to the main deck. There were whispers and hisses of, "Watch yourself now!" and "Don't jostle him! Captain'll have your *hide*!" as they made their way under the wide, open sky. Daniel watched the clouds drift past beneath dropped lids, keeping back every cry of pain that threatened to pass his lips. The men were doing the best they could, he knew. He couldn't bring himself to make this harder on them.

The deck was filled with an uncanny sort of silence as Daniel was lowered down to the waiting longboat, and he felt a wave of embarrassment. As if they were all standing about doing him some kind of *honor*...

But the next bump washed all that away in a haze of incredible pain, and Daniel was barely aware of the oars lowering into the water or the small ship making its way to the docks and the waiting physicians.

He was barely aware of anything at all.

Chapter Thirteen

Three months later

The wind was strong, filling the sails and pulling the *Charon* across the choppy sea. Each crash of a wave against the prow sent a spray of water across the deck, each drop catching the sunlight as it fell. The men were in high spirits, calling out to each other as they scaled the mast, mended rope and tended to their duties.

After their successful battle along the French coast, Captain Bellings and his crew had been taken from blockade duty and ordered to go to the West Indies where they would be more likely to see action—and rake in prize money. And with repairs done to the ship, supplies stored and all wounded men returned to fighting shape, they were finally on their way.

Andrew moved up the starboard side of the deck, one hand absently touching the slick wood as he went. It had been a difficult few months. Quite a few of the men had been injured, some of them seriously. It had been almost impossible for him to focus on his duties during the first uncertain week when Daniel lay so close to death. And then later, trapped at port, he couldn't help but wonder how he was faring so far away. But there was still work for the *Charon* to do, and his days were filled with distractions.

He'd been walking in a waking dream ever since Daniel's injury. He still was, Andrew mused, grip tightening on the worn rail as he looked across the open ocean. Things had changed with Daniel's injury and very recent return to duty, some of them for the better. Hayes had dropped his disapproving antagonism months ago and had been treating Daniel and Andrew in his typically breezy manner again. Sinclair was never openly hostile despite the occasional tense look and was, on occasion, almost genial. And things between him and Daniel were...friendly. They never spoke of their days in Portsmouth. They never talked about the changes that had occurred between them. They simply acted as if time had turned back and they had never allowed themselves to fall in love.

Sometimes, Andrew thought he might have dreamed the whole thing up.

He sighed and pushed away from the railing, turning to join the other lieutenants. Sinclair was on watch, eyes scanning the deck as he spoke in a low voice to Upton's replacement, a fair-headed boy named Poole. Hayes stood some distance back, watching the waves with a near-pensive expression.

They each glanced up as Andrew joined them, Sinclair and Poole nodding briefly. Hayes turned fully, expression difficult to read. "Mr. Clayton," he said evenly by way of greeting, and Andrew moved to his side. The cool breeze felt good against his cheeks.

"Mr. Hayes." Andrew looked out across the water, gazing across the ocean toward the West Indies. They'd all been drilled in what to expect when they arrived. Heat and

sickness and exotic stretches of land. More than enough chances to add prize coin to their purses. "I've never been to the Indies before. My father owns land there, but he would only take my oldest brother when he went to look into our interests there."

"It is a beautiful place. Unlike anything you have ever seen."

Hayes was silent then, standing at Andrew's shoulder. His large hands were curled about the old wood and his mouth was drawn into a frown. Andrew waited for him to speak, anxious but doing his best to disguise the emotion. When Hayes finally did break his silence, his words couldn't have been any more unexpected.

"It is the captain's hope that we make quick work of the pirates and French privateers causing trouble there. Quick, efficient work. With any luck, we may take a worthy ship as prize." He half turned to look at Andrew. "A young man distinguishing himself in battle has more opportunity than earned by his birth. Perhaps, should we take such a vessel and exert our influence as best we can, one of our own will have a new command."

"Sir?" Andrew asked, surprised. Neither Hayes nor Bellings had so much as hinted an interest in his or Daniel's careers since Daniel had been injured. His health had been too precarious to make plans, and then silence had become habit. Hearing Hayes speak in such broad terms about the future was unexpected.

"He'll need a crew he can trust, should he be promoted," Hayes continued. "A second he can feel close to. It's difficult being the man in charge. Isolating. It would be a blessing for any man to have another he can trust in all things." He looked at Andrew levelly, bright eyes scanning him as if searching his face for understanding. Then he nodded and turned to leave. "Speculation, at present. First we must find ourselves a ship. Mr. Clayton." He took three strides toward the quarterdeck steps before turning. "I nearly forgot. I sent Mr. Barret to the hold some time ago and he's yet to return. Fetch him up for me."

The words were so like a dream he used to have. "Aye-aye Sir," Andrew said, questions twisting through his thoughts even as he hurried to follow the first lieutenant's orders. He moved through the decks quickly, sidestepping off-duty sailors and rowdy midshipmen. The noise of the upper decks filtered away slowly as Andrew headed farther and farther into the belly of the ship where the air was dark and heavy and the men unlikely to wander.

He felt strangely anxious as he passed crates and barrels. He could hear a low noise in the distance—a scraping sound, like a heavy weight being pushed across the deck. Andrew hurried his pace, bicorn tucked beneath his arm, eyes adjusting to the darkness.

There was a lantern suspended ahead, casting a dim golden glow over the mountains of crates. He moved toward the oasis of light and his heart began to pound faster when he skirted a sturdy bulkhead and spotted the gold-streaked brown queue and broad shoulders of Second Lieutenant Daniel Barret.

He was crouched before a large crate, a length of rope in his capable hands. Andrew paused to watch Daniel as he worked, carefully twining the rope into a double loop. He labored quickly, efficiently, muscles bulging against the snug outline of his jacket.

God, he looked good. The white breeches clung to strong thighs, and though the tail of his coat hid the curve of his ass, Andrew could see it in his mind's eye. He could remember every detail of Daniel's body, from the intensity of his eyes to the heavy press of his erection.

Andrew closed his eyes, biting back a low moan. Now wasn't the time to think about Daniel—not like that. *Later*, he told his heated body firmly, drawing a shaky breath. *When you can be alone and hear his low breathing and not have to look him in the eye.*

"Mr. Barret," Andrew said, clearing his throat. He forced himself to move forward, steadfastly ignoring the heat in his groin. Daniel didn't appear to hear him, hands moving quickly over the looped rope, folding it in on itself and knotting about it until it formed an intricate ring. Andrew set his bicorn aside and moved to stand behind the other man. "Mr. Barret," he said again. Nothing. Frowning slightly, concerned, Andrew reached out to touch Daniel's shoulder. "Daniel," he said, but the rest was cut off by Daniel's sudden movement. He rose quickly, turning and wrapping iron-strong arms around Andrew's middle. Two steps had Andrew pushed against a heavy wooden column, Daniel's hips pushing between his spreading thighs.

"Daniel," he gasped, eyes widening. It was as if he were trapped in his dream, each detail clicking eerily into place. Daniel's gaze dropped to his mouth, pupils dilating, and Andrew moaned and lifted up against him. The purely predatory expression on Daniel's face shot through him like cannon fire, making his cock jerk into arousal. "What are you doing?"

"What I should have a long time ago," he murmured, voice a low growl. He leaned in and brushed their mouths together, soft and warm, before deepening the kiss. Andrew wrapped his arms around Daniel's neck, nails digging into the heavy cloth of his uniform as he pressed willingly into the kiss, offering everything to him. He tangled their tongues together, stroking hot and deep, seeking more of him. Andrew's body hummed with energy, arousal unfolding deep in his stomach and, God, aching. He was aching everywhere within only a few moments, hips riding up to press against Daniel's in needy frustration.

"Andrew," Daniel growled into his mouth, tongue thrusting deep. He shifted to bring their hips into alignment, erection scalding hot as it rubbed against Andrew's. Rough hands slid up to grip Andrew's wrists, fingers circling them before pushing his arms down and back.

Around the heavy beam.

Andrew broke the kiss, panting, and tilted his head back in blatant invitation. Daniel was quick to take him up on it, clever fingers working at the buttons of his uniform, shoving the cloth down his arms before ripping up his shirt. The violence of

his motions, the sheer need in them rocketed through Andrew's body and he moaned. "God, Daniel, please," he murmured, staring up at the wooden planks overhead, opening himself to his lover as much as possible.

He wasn't surprised to feel the rough scratch of rope against his wrists or the loop fastening the two together. Andrew tugged against the rope, testing it, and bit his bottom lip as he dropped his chin to meet Daniel's eyes.

"It looks like I'm at your mercy, Mr. Barret," he murmured, loving the way hunger flared in Daniel's eyes moments before he pressed in for another biting kiss. This one was more desperate, more carnal than before, tongue fucking past his lips even as his hips drove forward and shoved Andrew back against the wooden beam. His hands dropped, working on the fastening of Andrew's breeches, and Andrew had to grip his bound hands into fists to keep from struggling to reach him. He wanted to help—wanted to reach down and rip open his breeches. His skin ached and itched, needing to feel Daniel against him.

It had been so *long*.

"Shh," Daniel whispered, nipping at Andrew's mouth before dropping to his knees. He nuzzled his stomach, tongue flickering into his bellybutton before swirling around the line of golden hair trailing from it to his half-opened breeches. Daniel pressed his mouth to the exposed skin of his hipbone and sucked on it gently, wetly. "Shh, shh."

Andrew shook his head dazedly, confused, until he realized with a start that he had been moaning all this time. Low, desperate, pleading moans pressed past his swollen mouth, filling the stale air. He bit at the insides of his cheeks to hold back the soft noises, hips moving in helpless little jerks as Daniel carefully drew off his shoes and stockings before hooking his thumbs into the waist of his breeches.

His breath caught and he stared down, strands of blond hair falling from their queue. Daniel looked up at the same moment, face half lost in shadow. He pressed a tender kiss to Andrew's skin, eyes never breaking contact. "I love you, Andrew," Daniel murmured. Andrew could feel each puff of his breath against his sensitized skin, building the heat. Making him need it more. "I love you so much."

Then he gripped the waist of Andrew's breeches and pulled them down in one firm tug.

Andrew's cock bobbed free of the restraining cloth, flushed an angry red. It jerked, purpled head slick with pre-come and dripping with need. Andrew made a strangled noise, wishing he could pull a hand free to cover his mouth and muffle the panting gasps. His toes curled against cool wood, goose flesh racing over his skin as Daniel reached up to circle the base of his cock with a single hot hand, lifting him to his waiting mouth.

"Daniel!" No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't bite back the cry. It bubbled out of him at the touch of Daniel's tongue, the hot circle of his mouth. Andrew turned his face and squeezed his eyes shut, unable to watch as Daniel opened his mouth wider and swallowed him down. More, more, throat working around him as he moved deep. One

hand lifted to cup Andrew's balls, weighing them in his palm as fingers stroked along his sensitive perineum, making his entire body quake.

He thought he might shatter apart. Each sucking pull of Daniel's mouth rocked through him, driving him wild. Andrew struggled to keep from sobbing his need, hips rocking forward mindlessly as he tried to fuck past his lover's swollen lips. "I need you, I need you, I love you," he gasped, nails digging into his palms. Those warm fingers, now slick with spit and pre-come, slid across the puckered opening to his body, teasing the tight ring of skin before slowly stretching him wide.

Stretching him open for Daniel's cock.

The thought drove him wild, nearly taking him over the edge. Andrew hissed and jerked and moaned as he fought against his own orgasm, chest rising and falling rapidly with each panting breath. He spread his thighs wide, riding out the sensations before reining them in. A string of curses echoed through his mind as Daniel sank low on his cock, swallowing him almost to the root, and pushed two slick fingers deep into him.

Andrew came with an explosive curse, body shuddering and clenching around Daniel's fingers. It was a violent expulsion, heat flaring through him until he thought he'd pass out with the sudden ebb of tension. Andrew sank back against the rough beam, drawing hissing breaths between his teeth as he went completely boneless.

He was only vaguely aware of Daniel continuing to open him, working methodically, focused. The press of his fingers was near-painful but so very good, and Andrew made breathy sighs of encouragement, rocking down onto the quick jabs.

Then Daniel's fingers were sliding from his body even as he let Andrew's limp cock fall from his mouth. Andrew stirred himself, looking down into hungry storm-gray eyes. His breath caught, cock giving a little twitch as Daniel stepped back and began to tear off his clothing.

Daniel's disrobing was quick, basic and undeniably erotic. There was something about the way Daniel pulled away each article of clothing, baring himself to Andrew's gaze. Something open and honest, as if he were sharing himself completely. Andrew licked his lips and watched with undisguised interest, tugging at the rope bindings as he clenched and unclenched his hands, wanting to run his palms over that broad, muscled chest. "I want to touch you," Andrew breathed, spreading his thighs wider. "Let me touch you, Daniel."

"Later." He swayed with the motion of the ship, letting it carry him over another swell as the last article of clothing dropped away, leaving Daniel naked before him. His cock was massive, swollen angrily between his legs, and Daniel reached down to fist it once, fingers circling the thick shaft and pumping as he moved closer.

"Lift your thighs," Daniel said, stroking up and down again, making his cock slick. Andrew tensed his body and tried to do as he was told. It was so much easier when Daniel pressed against him, heat against heat, and cupped his ass with strong fingers.

He lifted Andrew, tilting his hips until Andrew was almost folded up on himself, and slid his thumbs into his anus, spreading him wide.

"Fuck! Daniel!" Andrew hissed, not-quite-pain lancing through him. He held his breath at the sudden, wide press of Daniel's cock, the head pushing against his stretched opening before sliding slickly inside.

It was incredible. It was just like he remembered—better perhaps, because now Daniel was following the pitch and surge of the sea, letting the ship itself control the rhythm of his thrusts. Andrew moved with him, pressed between his hot body and the rough beam, stomach burning as he lifted his knees higher and took Daniel deeper, deeper. "Harder," he moaned, head falling back. He squeezed his eyes shut, biting his tongue brutally to keep from crying out as Daniel gripped his hips with strong fingers and slammed into him.

Again. And again.

Each surge of Daniel's body exploded through him, sending tremors of sensation rippling along his limbs. He whimpered and moved with the now-ragged thrusts, body squeezing tight against the insistent barrage, breath coming in heaving pants. Daniel pressed his face into the crook of Andrew's neck and held on tight, muscles straining and body jerking until he finally came with a low cry.

The shock of Daniel's orgasm pulsed through Andrew, heat flooding his body. He arched against his lover, rocking up against the intense warmth of his shuddering limbs as Daniel wrapped around him and blindly turned his face for a kiss.

The soft, wet brush of their mouths made his stomach coil and twist in pleasure. Andrew shifted, legs sliding down Daniel's body as his lover carefully pulled out of him, setting Andrew back on his feet. Moments later, those clever fingers began unwinding the rope bindings, letting his hands free.

"God, Daniel," Andrew murmured, reaching up to touch his face. He stroked back a loose strand of dark hair, reveling in the warm comfort of the afterglow. His lips parted, tongue darting out to taste Daniel's mouth before he pulled back again. Gradually, the lazy warmth began to fade, replaced by the distant cry of officers on deck and the never-ending slap of waves against the hull. "Daniel, what are we— What did you—"

He couldn't voice his thoughts, desperate to ask *What are we doing? What did you mean by this? Where do we go from here?*

"We'll be caught," he said instead, almost too low to be heard.

"We'll be careful. If we're discreet, no one will do anything to stop us. I have the first lieutenant's word." Daniel reached up to cup his chin, tilting his face for another melting kiss. His lips and tongue toyed with Andrew's, pulling him into the soft give and take of it for several long minutes. When they finally broke apart to breathe, Andrew curled his fingers against Daniel's sun-browned skin and fought not to shake. It was everything he'd wanted for so long and more. "Andrew?" Daniel murmured,

voice near his ear. Each puff of breath sent goose bumps over his skin. "Andrew, tell me you want me."

He was dizzy. Daniel was alive and well. The captain and crew were willing to look the other way and allow them to be together. The future looked unbearably bright.

Andrew's expression broke into a wide, giddy grin.

"Andrew," Daniel said, a teasing warning in his tone. "Mr. Clayton, put me out of my misery and tell me you still want me."

Andrew laughed, wrapping his arms around Daniel's neck. The rope cuff still dangled from his wrist, trailing down the firmly muscled back. "Aye-aye Sir," he said then pulled him in for a blistering kiss.

Epilogue

Edmund Sinclair stood aboard the deck of the *Charon* and watched as the longboat took Captain Daniel Barret and his first lieutenant, Andrew Clayton, to their new command. He couldn't find it in himself to be angry over the preference they had been shown, even though a large part of him was bitterly jealous. It was so difficult to be promoted up the line and just as difficult, it seemed, to find a man who could be trusted to be second-in-command – Daniel had managed both in one fell swoop.

He turned away from the sight of their new ship and moved across the deck. The *Charon* was quieter than it had been in a long time. At least it seemed that way to him. He could only imagine the empty darkness of the wardroom with its two vacant cabins and young Poole still too shy to say much of anything at all. Dinner, he knew, would be a dull affair.

But there would be new lieutenants and, in a stroke of luck, *he* had been promoted up as well. Sometimes the Admiralty simply sent replacement lieutenants—usually relatives or the sons of old friends—when there was an opening, but Captain Bellings and the crew of the *Charon* had done such strong work that special dispensation had been made.

He was a second lieutenant now. He was, Edmund realized with a wry laugh, finally rid of Daniel and firmly in his place. The place he always thought he deserved.

It was funny how life worked out sometimes.

He gave in to temptation and glanced back one final time. Daniel was climbing aboard his new ship, Edmund saw, scaling her side with a grace and power that could only be admired. He couldn't hear the trilling of the whistle or call of *Captain on deck!* across the busy harbor, but he could easily imagine the scene that would play out.

In fact, he realized, he could easily imagine the first months of Daniel's command. Daniel would be quiet and a little distant at times, but he would be a great teaching captain—a captain willing to work with his men and bring out the best in them. Andrew, by contrast, would be a highly approachable first lieutenant. He would be friendly but stern when he had to—open but always fair.

They would, in essence, be Bellings and Hayes all over again, and that realization was enough to make Edmund grin and shake his head.

"Something amusing you, Mr. Sinclair?" Hayes asked, coming to standing beside him. His chest was puffed out like a prize game hen, gray-streaked red curls flapping wildly in the light, port-scented breeze.

"Just the everyday workings of Providence, Sir," Edmund replied. He reached out instinctively to grab the railing with both hands as a sudden wave caught him off

guard, and the constant reminder of his empty left-hand sleeve caught his focus again. He wasn't sure he would ever get used to that. Every time he saw the dangling sleeve—or reached for something with an arm that was no longer there—he was violently reminded of those long, stuffy London nights. His father pulling out instrument after instrument, spreading open books filled to bursting with horror stories and recounting in his detached, disapproving voice all the reasons why Edmund was a fool to give his life over to service of his country.

You'll be half a man, if you don't get killed or hung first.

"Never put too much emphasis on Providence, myself," Hayes said. "Not that I'm an ungodly man or a heathen or such," he was quick to add. "I just always figured man was put here to be man and God was up there to be God. Things shake out as they will. Sometimes they even work out for the best."

"Aye Sir," Edmund had to agree. Just a year ago he wasn't so sure he'd manage to call Daniel promoted to captain and Andrew as his second and *lover* anything so sanguine as *working out for the best*.

But then, he supposed, things had a habit of changing.

"By the by, Mr. Hayes," Edmund asked, glancing around quickly to make sure they were alone. "Did you ever tell the captain about...?" He deliberately let his words trail off, assuming the other man would understand.

Hayes cast him a look out of the corners of his eyes and lightly touched his index finger to his nose. "Some things are meant to stay private, how I see it," he said easily. Then he straightened. "Mr. Sinclair."

"Mr. Hayes."

Hayes strode off, a bundle of focused energy, and Edmund watched him go with a wry expression. He looked back at Daniel's ship one final time, taking in the proud sails and gleaming, beautiful prow.

Then, back straightening, Second Lieutenant Edmund Sinclair turned from his study of the sea and returned to his duties aboard the *Charon*.

About the Author

A lifelong friend of fantasy and romance, Katherine Cross enjoys stories with rich world histories and characters with a touch of the exotic. She has traveled to Egypt, Morocco, Spain and Italy (among others) and is constantly inspired by different cultures and ways of life. She considers the Appalachian Mountains her home and finds the rich fall colors the perfect spark for her imagination.

Katherine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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