

The background of the cover is a romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing on a ship's deck at night. The man is shirtless and has dark hair, while the woman has blonde hair and is also shirtless. They are in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The ship's rigging and masts are visible in the background, illuminated by a warm, golden light.

# JENNIFER St. GILES

Award-winning Author of  
*Darkest Dreams*

# SILKEN SHADOWS



A danger beyond this realm. A passion beyond all...



*Praise for*  
**Darkest Dreams**

“St. Giles hones in on the classic elements of the gothic, adding her unique voice and sensuality to a chilling story. Hail to a new mistress of the genre.”

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“*Darkest Dreams*, the sequel to the magnificent *Midnight Secrets*, is a superb paranormal Victorian romantic-suspense thriller with gothic overtones. Fans of gothic and paranormal romances will want to read this beguiling tale.”

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*continued . . .*

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DARKEST DREAMS  
MIDNIGHT SECRETS  
SILKEN SHADOWS



# *Silken Shadows*



JENNIFER ST. GILES



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## **SILKEN SHADOWS**

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*I dedicate this book to the memory of a woman who not only touched my heart with her great talent for weaving unforgettable love stories with heroes and heroines that I want to treasure forever, but also for being one of the great goddesses of romance who inspired me to write and to whom I aspire to one day be nearly as talented as.*

*Kathleen Woodiwiss, you are treasured,  
loved, and will be missed.*



## Acknowledgments

I wrote this book after a particularly difficult time in my life and it was only through the steadfast support of my family (Tracy, Mom, Dad, Charles, Ashleigh, Jake, Shane), friends, critique partners (Jacquie, Wendy, Rita, Steph, Annette, Dayna, Rita, Stef, Colleen, Sandra, Ann, Pam), agent Diedre Knight, and all of the GALs who make life fun and make me laugh that I was able to bring Gemini and Deverell to life. And to all of my readers out there who love the gothic genre! All of you are the best!

Also, just a little note about my fictional character Constable Jack Poole. The infamous Jack the Ripper had to come from somewhere, right? And how was it possible for him to suddenly disappear from the pages of history without a clue? Perhaps the answer could lie in the pages of *Silken Shadows* . . .

Many thanks to everyone for helping to make my dreams come true.

Jennifer St. Giles



What lies behind us and what lies before us  
are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON



# 1



## *Dartmoor's End, England* 1880

Following the light, salty breezes over the grass-strewn dunes, I left the bustling village shops of Dartmoor's End, seeking to watch the sun's fiery dance over the waves and the birds frolicking in the wind. I hadn't been able to spend another minute of the afternoon feigning interest in the latest wares from France, no matter how rich the silk or delicate the lace. The Sea Sirens kept whispering my name, making me wish I could fly across the sea to find them.

Over the past year my solace in fashion had faded and the sea had become my friend, always welcoming me and listening to my heart, giving me hope that life wouldn't pass me by forever. Hope that one day Gemini Andrews would sail away to a future as full and blessed as the ones my sisters, Cassiopeia and Andromeda, had found here in Dartmoor's End, despite the harrowing trouble we'd lived through.

I began watching the sea the day after Captain Deverell Jansen had married Lord Alexander Killdaren to Andromeda on a ship. It had been glorious, with the sunset painting the sky a blazing swirl of reds and blues and turning the sea into a pool of liquid gold. A fresh breeze, tangy with salt and seasoned with the scents of wood and sunshine, had blown gently over my face, the whisper of a mother's kiss. And the waves had rolled the ship beneath my feet, much like a cradle's rock. It was the first time I'd ever been at sea and I'd loved the feel of it.

Sometime after the ceremony, when everyone had been merrily congratulating the happy couple, I had wandered to the far end of the ship, doing my best to position myself so not a hint of land crowded into my view. To that end, I'd climbed on a tall crate that put me comfortably above the deck where I could watch the last visages of the sunset across the horizon. I'd wanted to know what really being at sea would be like, with nothing but water surrounding me, and not being just the short distance we'd anchored from Dartmoor's End for the wedding. I'd heard the wind calling my name as it whistled through the furling sails.

*Gemini . . . Gemini . . . Can you hear me, Gemini?*

"Yes," I said softly, not hesitating to answer. "I'm listening. I'm here."

"I can see you, but who are you speaking to?" The deep voice nearly had me jumping from my skin, not necessarily from its unexpected intrusion, but because I instantly knew to whom it belonged. Captain Deverell Jansen.

I'd been hanging on his every word since boarding the ship. Though I couldn't remember every word he'd spoken to join Andrie in marriage to Alex, I recalled every nuance of feeling his voice had evoked in me. The tingling, the vibrations, the commanding lure. And the dark gravity of it as well. One that said heavy burdens rested firmly upon his broad shoulders. Burdens that might not be so cumbersome

if the two ghosts hovering over him would give him some breathing space.

I would have been drawn to him no matter the circumstances under which I'd met him, for he was the most intriguing man I'd ever seen. He didn't need the latest fashion to impress and he didn't need to expound upon any subject just to be heard. His mere presence did both long before his blue gaze stole my breath away. So, I wasn't attracted to him just because he was the first person I'd met who had his own ghostly entourage. But it did double my interest in him.

I'd seen specters many times before, sometimes in places of great sorrow, such as a battlefield, but mostly in houses. I'd spent nearly all of my life ignoring them until last year when I'd become overwhelmed by one. I shuddered as the memory of Flora McGowan's ghostly screams and horrible death tried to steal back into my mind, and I pushed it aside, clinging to the knowledge that I'd helped her spirit make peace with those she loved.

Some ghosts were like faded stained glass—beautiful, with hints of colors they used to be—and other ghosts were like dirty glass; either way I could see through them, but they always skewed the appearance of what lay behind them.

Over the years, I'd perfected the skill of looking at ghosts without letting them know that I saw them. I glanced at the two old sea salts bouncing up and down behind Captain Jansen. They were rubbing their hands together with glee, like two old pirates who had found a treasure chest. One was as thin as a broomstick, and the other as round as a teakettle; and they were talking.

"Blimey, Pierre, the cap'n likes her don't he?" the broomstick said.

"A beauty, *mon ami*. But she's a bit too young and proper to give *Le Capitaine Diable* his due." The kettle spewed a riotous burst of laughter.

*Captain Devil?*

“What due?” the broomstick asked, his ghostly brows drawn.

The kettle reached out and whacked the broomstick’s wiry hair. “What he needs tonight, knothed. *Faire l’amour*.”

Heavens, they were frank. My cheeks flushed, as I imagined Captain Jansen kissing me much as I’d spied Sean kissing Cassie when they thought no one about. Then my thoughts went further, to what a night of *faire l’amour* with the captain might be like.

Captain Jansen chose that exact moment to move closer to me. Sitting as I was on the crate put my knees on level with his chest and his face even with my bosom. He laid his hand on the crate next to my knee, accidentally brushing it as he narrowed his eyes in concern. “Miss Andrews? Are you all right?”

I tried to speak but couldn’t. Though the touch was but a brief second, the heat of his hand shot right through my skirts and raced up my leg, making my insides flip so hard that I forgot how to breathe.

“Miss Andrews?” His voice deepened, and this time he caught my elbow in his grip.

More heat. Hot, scorching heat. Heat that I’d never experienced before.

“Yes. I’m here.” I gasped in a deep breath of much-needed air and inhaled his scent, a hint of leather and sea and something so enticingly different from anything I’d smelled before that I had to resist the urge to bury my nose in it. I drew in another deep breath.

This time his gaze leveled at my bosom and widened. He seemed frozen for a moment, then he blinked and shook his head before he raised his gaze to mine. “I can clearly see that you are, uh, here,” he said. “But that wasn’t my question. Either of them, actually. I’d asked to whom were you speaking and if you were all right.”

“Forgive me, Captain Jansen,” I said, forcing my mind

and body from the sensual path down which the ghosts' remarks and Captain Jansen's scent and touch had taken it. "I am fine, and if you must know, I was speaking to the wind."

His mouth twitched a little, turning up at the corners slightly in amusement, but stiffly so, as if he were unused to the gesture. "Do you often speak to the wind?"

"I never have before," I said, then glanced out over the darkening sea, yearning for things I couldn't even name. "But then it has never called my name before either."

He didn't immediately reply, which brought my curious gaze back to him quickly. I found him studying me, his blue eyes suddenly keen. He had one brow raised in such a way that the nebulous yearning inside me sharpened . . . and ached, centering itself on him and the way he made me feel.

"The Sea Sirens," he said, softly, as if he were naming people he'd met. "I suggest you stick beeswax in your ears and ignore that you heard them."

"You sound as if you believe the ill-fated daughters of Achelous are real, Captain Jansen."

He didn't deny my statement. The humor that had moments ago pulled at the corners of his full but firmly set mouth disappeared, leaving no trace in his dark gaze as he spoke. "Many people travel the sea. Some hear the luring song of the sirens, but few ever hear their name. It's said that if you heed their call, it will lead to a bad end."

"A sailor's death upon rocks hidden just beneath the surface of the sea?" I asked, recalling the many tales I'd heard.

"There are worse fates than death, Miss Andrews."

Whether it was from the sudden gust of a cold wind that crept down my spine, or from the chill in his voice, I shivered nevertheless in places that no fire could ever warm. The captain was haunted by more than the ghosts over his shoulders.

"Have the Sea Sirens ever called your name?" I asked.

"All the time," he replied, backing away from me. Someone shouted for him, and with a long last look at me, he rejoined the wedding celebration. I stayed upon my perch awhile longer, listening for my name again, but all I could hear was his voice, rumbling behind me. So I drifted back into the loving folds of my family and watched the captain from beneath my lashes, wondering more and more about the man and his ghosts.

He'd sailed away that night after dropping everyone on shore but the crew of the *Black Dragon*. And he didn't return until Christmas; by then the Sea Sirens had called my name many times. It was a Christmas I would never forget, for his kiss still burned upon my lips. That had been nine months ago.

I sighed as I crested the last dune on the beach, and pressed my fingers to my mouth, seeking to ease the ache that had only grown with the passing of the months. I went to close my eyes, to give myself over to the heated memory of that kiss, but I caught sight of a ship newly docked, one with a black dragon gracing its bow.

Captain Jansen had returned. My breath caught and my pulse leapt. I wanted to rush back to the village and the docks to catch a glimpse of him, but I forced myself toward Killdaren's Castle. I had very little time to convince Cassie to have an impromptu dinner party that evening and dispatch the invitations. I swirled around twice just so I could drink in the sun from every direction and then, rather than going back to the road as any proper young lady would, I ran headlong down the dunes to the shore. I slipped off my boots and sped barefoot through the damp sand. The foamy surf grabbed at the ruffled hem of my lilac dress and rushed cool water over my toes, making my heart sing with anticipation.

He was back! And this time, more than one kiss would

be mine. I'd have to find a way to either get rid of or ignore the ghosts, though. Their bawdy comments during our first kiss had left me just as addled as the hard press of his body against mine and the sweep of his tongue across my lips, then farther . . .

Upon reaching the castle, I hurried up the terrace steps to the French doors leading to the study. They stood open, letting the fresh air and sunshine invade dark recesses of Killdaren's Castle. Thanks to a special pair of spectacles that dimmed the bright edge of sunlight, Sean Killdaren, Cassie's husband, could now tolerate longer periods of daylight without suffering the debilitating headaches that had plagued the last eight years of his life. He no longer slept away the day and stayed up all night studying the stars unless there was a particular astronomical event he relished seeing. It was a joy to all that Darragh and Jarrett Killdaren, my three-month-old twin nephews, would have a father who could now share the warmth and adventures of the day as well as the secrets of the stars at night.

My bare feet made hardly a sound as I crossed the sun-warm stone of the terrace, so despite the lap of the waves upon the shore, I immediately heard the somber voices coming from inside the study and a chill rushed over my skin. The shadows and pain from my cousin Mary's murder, Flora McGowan's murder, and the murders of the other women from Dartmoor's End had just begun to fade. Sir Warwick had paid with his life, and over the past year it had been concluded that Constable Jack Poole had, too. His chances of surviving the treacherous cliffs of Dragon's Cove as injured as he was would have been slim to none. I paused, gathering myself, and listened from my spot outside the study.

"Mr. Killdaren, I apologize for pressing this matter upon you and your wife, but the cruel murder of a young woman from our village and the disappearance of another necessitates that drastic measures be taken. The moment I heard

from Dev what happened here at Dartmoor's End, I had to come. The constabulary is desperate and thought perhaps you could lend your expertise on the matter."

Dear God, my heart cried as the chill sweeping over me reached my blood. It couldn't be.

"Of course you had to come, Mr. Lincoln," Cassie said. Without even seeing her face, I knew from my sister's shaken voice that she was frightened to the core.

"I'll do anything I can," Sean Killdaren said. "You can count on that." The sharp edge to his tone left no doubt that he would, even if it meant killing with his bare hands to protect his family. "Jack Poole used the Druid stones on Killdaren land as one of the places to murder his victims. He also carved symbols on the women—my wife's cousin was one. What you describe happened in Northrope sounds different from what he did here. But there are enough similarities to cause grave concern."

There wasn't any doubt in my mind that if Jack Poole were alive, everyone I loved would be in serious jeopardy. He'd find his way back to Dartmoor's End to make us pay, especially Cassie and Andromeda, the two people largely responsible for exposing and stopping the murdering constable. With Cassie a new mother and Andromeda about to give birth any day now, the sisters who had protected me all of my life were more vulnerable than ever before. I fisted my hands, digging my nails into the soft leather of the white kid boots I held. I had to do something.

Given my ability to communicate with ghosts, I was quite possibly the only one who really could help. But the thought of communicating with another of Jack Poole's victims, hearing her screams and feeling her pain, filled me with dread. I hadn't told anyone just how bad my experience last year had been. When I heard Flora McGowan's screams and had opened my mind to her ghost, I had physically felt the woman's pain as if Jack Poole had tied *me* and

was killing me with the medieval torture device. The doctor's assessment that I'd suffered a trauma so severe that my mind had closed itself off from the rest of the world and had put me in a comatose state had been more than accurate.

My stomach heaved, and I shuddered so violently at the memory that I nearly fell to my knees upon the stones. Forcing deep breaths into my lungs, I focused on what needed to be done. I would have to go to where the woman had been killed, for from the pain and need of Flora McGowan's spirit, I had a good idea that there was no rest and no passing to the peace beyond this world when one died under such circumstances. Not without help. The spirit of the latest victim would be there, waiting for someone to help.

"That's what we were afraid of," said the stranger Cassie had referred to as Mr. Lincoln.

Bracing myself for what I was about to do, I stepped through the open French doors, blinking blindly into the dimness as I left the bright sunlight.

"As soon as I docked in Northrope—" said a fourth person, who spoke for the first time, from just beside me. His deep voice vibrated my every nerve to life. I stumbled in surprise.

"Careful," Captain Jansen said, catching my arm in a firm, hot grip as he pulled me upright. Only he did so too quickly, making one of my boots clatter to the floor from nerveless fingers. I bit my lip in consternation, sure it wouldn't have fallen if I'd been left alone. His assistance, his very touch, rattled me, giving me the appearance and the grace of a flopping fish.

"Are you all right, Miss Andrews?" he asked, coolly formal.

"Quite," I assured him, but when I shifted to regain my balance, the hard jut of his knuckles brushed against my breast. I sucked in air at the fire shooting to my center and beyond. My toes curled, digging into the soft wool of the

Whittall rug. He smelled deliciously of sun and sea and exotic spice.

He released me like he would a hot poker. This wasn't the first time my breasts had come in contact with a part of him. There had been an accidental brush before. Then the kiss at Christmas last. That had ended with me pressed between him and a stone wall so firmly I'd never forget the imprint of both. Still, it amazed me how suddenly sensitive my breasts became when he was near. How enlivened every part of me became, really. Including parts I'd never known existed before he woke them.

"Gemmi, wherever have you been?" asked Cassie. "I thought you were in the village examining the new shipment of material from France."

"I was, but the day was too bright to stay inside and I had to take a walk along the shore." As my eyes adjusted to the light, I swept the room with a glance, seeing my sister seated in a petite gilded wing chair by the hearth. Sean stood nearby, appearing as if he'd paused in midpace, a habit without which he never faced a problem. Considering the number of problems my sisters and I had caused since coming to Dartmoor's End, it was a wonder he hadn't paced a rut into the floor. The stranger stood in a corner of the room that was too dark for me to see him yet, and Captain Jansen's ghosts were smiling at me from the ceiling with gap-toothed grins.

Cassie stood. "Come help me ready some tea and sandwiches. Having just come from the ship, I am sure Captain Jansen and Mr. Lincoln must be starved."

Captain Jansen pressed the boot he'd retrieved from the floor into my hand and I quickly grabbed it, all too aware of how juvenile my barefoot rush into the room must have appeared. I knew very well that Mrs. Murphy, the lovingly plump cook who made Killdaren's meals the envy of the region, most likely already had a tea cart prepared with all manner of delicacies. Cassie was trying to get me out of the

room and away from the current conversation. It rankled as well as touched my heart. I knew she only wanted to protect me, but it still hurt in some way.

"I think it more important for the conversation to continue and to let Martha attend to the tea," I said, standing my ground. Cassie blinked in surprise. Perhaps I was being unconscionably rude since this was her home, but everyone had to realize that I was no longer a child. "My apologies," I said to the room at large. "But I couldn't help overhearing what was said." Heat swept over my cheeks at having to admit that I'd eavesdropped. "Before my rude interruption, I believe you were saying something, Captain Jansen?"

A tense silence followed my brazen admission, and amazingly all the men were looking at Cassie as if needing her permission before proceeding. I met my sister's gaze with determination and a silent plea. My sisters and I had had a number of conversations over the past year about Captain Jansen's insistence that he'd made a grave mistake in kissing me, that I was too young. He made nineteen years of age sound as if it was barely a step above nappies. My sisters' advice had been to prove Captain Jansen wrong and Cassie needed to see that it had to begin here. "Please," I said to her. "You have to understand that after what I went through, I am just as much a part of this as you and Andrie. If Jack Poole is alive then I, too, must know, for we are all in danger."

Cassie sighed. "Mr. Lincoln, this is my sister Gemini Andrews."

"Miss Andrews," he said, drawing my gaze as he crossed the room to take my hand. I'm not sure what I expected, but it wasn't the ruggedly handsome man that I saw. He was almost as tall and broad as my brother-in-law and the captain, but where their hair was dark as the night, his was as golden as the sun. I had to adjust my boots to one hand before accepting his greeting and I thought I saw a bit of amusement

spark in his gold eyes, but he didn't seem to be laughing at me, so I took heart and grasped his hand firmly. With his skin darkened by the sun, the man was a picture of shades of gold from head to toe.

"Mr. Lincoln," I said, giving the slight curtsy the situation called for. I released his hand and stepped back, moving closer to my sister. "I am sorry such grave circumstances bring you to our door. Jack Poole must be stopped. You said a second woman has disappeared?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure everyone has already asked, but what are the similarities between the two women? The women who died here all had blond hair and all sang like angels."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Well," he said hesitantly. "We hadn't necessarily considered that there were any similarities. The first woman was . . . well, she worked in a tavern near the docks." His tone clearly conveyed that her reputation was far less than sterling. "Sarah, the second woman, is the daughter of the vicar and teaches music. But now that you ask, the only similarity I can immediately state is that they both have black hair and are petite, about your size."

"Which is different from Helen, Mary, and Flora, the previous victims," I said.

"Is it possible that it isn't Jack Poole?" Cassie asked.

"That's what I've been wondering," said Captain Jansen. "As soon as I docked in Northrope and heard what had happened, I told the authorities about the murders here and gave them Jack Poole's description. A thorough search of the area didn't reveal any stranger or newcomer that matched his description. So, he has either been hiding undetected for the last year—a somewhat unlikely scenario—or he has disguised himself, or we are facing a different killer altogether."

"That's one reason I came for your help, Mr. Killdaren," said Mr. Lincoln. "If you could come to Northrope, there's

a chance that you may notice some mannerism Jack Poole had that would expose his disguise.”

“You understand that I’ll need to secure my family and their safety before coming. I’m not exactly sure what I could recall about Jack Poole,” Sean said. “He was almost half a foot shorter than me, had black hair and black eyes set a bit too close together, and was a pompous ass.”

I shut my eyes and recalled what I could of Jack Poole. “He was particularly proud of his mustache that flapped every time a whiff of air passed by him,” I said. “He was always pinching and twirling the waxed ends of it between his fingers. And he had this funny little hitch to his walk. Strutted like he was a peacock, but one whose spread feathers kept getting pushed back, so his upper body was angled uncomfortably. And he’d have scars. From the way Andrie described . . .”

“Ahem,” Cassie interrupted, warning me that it would not be prudent to discuss how Poole had been stabbed in the crotch by a medieval spike used for torture. Not in front of the men. My sisters and I hoped it had pierced his manhood and said so more than once. “Gemmi’s description is perfect.”

“Which is exactly why I need to go to Northrope with Mr. Lincoln,” I said firmly. “I can be ready almost immediately. And once Sean has enough guards to protect everyone at Kildaren’s Castle and at Dragon’s Cove, he can come as well.”

Everyone in the room exploded in objection.

## 2



Cassie's and Sean's horrified "no"s to my suggestion were expected, as was Mr. Lincoln's surprised "No. It's an unnecessary risk." For why would any young person choose to involve herself in such a gruesome situation? Much less a woman. So it was Captain Jansen's thunderous "Absolutely not!" that caught my curiosity and pique. He'd yelled louder than Sean, which to me meant that he felt very strongly about the matter . . . and thus me, perhaps? Yet who was he to dictate what I should do?

Anger flushed my cheeks. Narrowing my eyes, I turned his way, but before I could speak to him, Cassie grabbed my arm. "Excuse us, gentlemen. We shall see what is keeping the tea," she said, firmly urging me from the room. Though I completely understood my sister's concern for my welfare, it still rankled, for she likely fed Captain Jansen's erroneous opinion that I was too young. At least I had enough

sense not to dig in my heels. So I held my head high and calmly followed her out.

Three steps into the corridor, I said, "Cassie, you know I'm the only one who—"

"Shh! Not yet. Someone might hear you."

She ducked into a room that held a fascinating collection of eclectic sculptures—men better endowed than Michelangelo's *David*, but just as shamelessly undressed, and women more lush than Aphrodite ever dreamed of being.

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Heaven knows how I'm going to explain to Darragh and Jarrett their grandmother's fascination with certain art forms. One or two nudes in any art collection are expected, but hundreds . . ."

"You've a few years before they start getting curious," I said.

"As lustily as they nurse, I doubt it." The laughing warmth in her eyes suddenly turned serious. "I know what you're going to say, Gemmi, and I can't let you do it. We almost lost you last year."

Sucking in a deep breath, I not only bolstered myself against Cassie's protective love, but also against the fear gnawing inside of me. Was I strong enough now to face what lay ahead? As long as I lived, I would never forget the pain, the anguish, and the horror of what I went through when I came in contact with Flora McGowan's ghost. "Cassie, the possibility that I could save another woman from having to die won't leave me alone. How can I turn my back on that?"

"We're not turning our back on it. We'll give them all of the information that we can to help stop Jack Poole." Her voice dropped lower and she paled. "Sean will go for however long it takes. But I'll not let you throw yourself over a cliff."

"What happened before won't happen again. I'm older now and . . . and better prepared for it."

"You were comatose. Your psyche almost didn't recover

from the pain. And you don't know that it won't happen again," she said, boring her concern deeply into my heart with the stark pain in her gaze. "Do you?"

"No," I whispered, forced to agree with her harsh honesty. "But I won't know anything until I try. I can't hide from the world forever. What happened last year could have happened anywhere so terrible a tragedy had occurred and the ghost was in such turmoil. The depth of Flora's pain overwhelmed me. Her need for peace consumed me." My voice strained as tightly as my nerves.

Cassie moved closer and wrapped her arm around me. "Dear Lord, I'm not criticizing you. You just have to avoid places like that."

"I can't live my life fearful of what is lurking around every corner." I shook my head, my fists clenching with the frustration that had been building inside me ever since I woke from the possession of Flora's spirit. Everyone's lives had moved merrily along except for mine. I was trapped.

Releasing her hold on my shoulders, she paced away, agitated. "Don't look at it that way. All you're avoiding is being fed to a pack of wolves. Sean agrees with me. Nobody can find out about our gifts—especially yours, Gemmi. Andrie and I can hide what happens to us, but you can't. Should I have a dream or should Andrie touch someone and read their thoughts, nobody knows it. But you couldn't stop poor Flora's spirit from overtaking you. You couldn't stop . . . hearing and responding to her screams. There are many ignorant people in the world who can't understand how something like that can happen and would want to harm you because of it. You would be in as much danger from the authorities or others as you would from Jack Poole. Now let's invite Captain Jansen and Mr. Lincoln for dinner and to stay the night should they wish. And I don't want to hear another word about going to Northrope." She crossed her arms, tightly. Her way of saying *that's final*.

The sound of Mrs. Murphy and the tea cart coming down the corridor forced me to choke back my words and nod my agreement. I wanted to argue more. I wanted to know why I wasn't part of the discussion. This was my life, but everyone else seemed to be making the decisions. But I bit back my hot words. I would only be wasting my time and energy in trying to convince my sister that I was no longer a child. I would have to find a way to show her, to show everyone. Also, the more we argued now, the less time I had to spend with Captain Jansen.

Exiting the room, we encountered Mrs. Murphy bustling our way, her tea cart laden with fresh scones, fruit, and perfectly cut sandwiches. The cook's contented smile faltered. "Something wrong, my lady?"

By the same token that Sean held the name "The Killdaren" because it seemed incongruous to refer to so dynamic a man as just simply "Mister," the staff—much to Cassie's consternation—refused to call her Mrs. Killdaren. She was their lady whether there was an official title attached to her position or not.

"No, not at all," Cassie said, a reassuring smile accompanying the warmth in her gaze. "Tea looks perfect. Gemini was parched from her outing, so we came to help you, but we should have known you'd have it ready so quickly." She sent a pointed glance at my bare feet and legs, which, given the layered cut of my day dress, were exposed to well above my ankle. I'd been so involved in the situation that I'd forgotten. "I'll serve the men," she said to me, "while you run up and put on stockings and a pair of slippers before coming back."

Agreeing, I hurried to my room on the second floor, feeling the emptiness of the wing the moment I left the stairs behind. As I freshened up my windblown appearance and donned a clean pair of stockings, I realized how many changes had occurred. A year ago three other women had

shared this part of Kildaren Castle with me. Now I was alone. Andrie had married Alex and moved to Dragon's Cove. Bridget, a maid who had become Cassie's dearest friend, had married Sean's half brother Stuart Frye a year ago as well, and had lived in the hunting lodge near the stables with Stuart until their departure for Ireland just a month ago. Prudence had made the Earl of Dartraven, Sean's father, woo her for six months before marrying him. But now she and Rebecca, the eight-year-old daughter they shared, were living on the Dartraven estate near Hampton with the earl, and Rebecca was attending Whigdon's School for the Blind. They would return to Dartmoor's End for Christmas. As would my parents, who were returning from Greece, having discovered the temple Alexander the Great had had built for Apollo during the young king's march to rule at the age of twenty. The artifacts had been numerous and the gold sparse compared to what my father had expected, but the find had made his reputation as a top archaeologist amid Oxford's elite, if not the world itself, so my parents were happy.

All I had to look forward to between now and my twentieth birthday was exactly what I'd done for the past year—watch life and others living it pass me by. Not that I didn't love them or enjoy my time with them. But I needed more.

I went downstairs to Captain Jansen and the others, hungry for more than just tea, and determined that I wasn't going to be a prisoner of fear any longer. I had to try to help stop the attacks on the women. Surely, all I needed to do was find the right words to say at the right time to convince everyone of that.

Andrie tossed her napkin onto the table where the remains of a dinner replete with pheasant, asparagus, cod, peas, and marzipan lay, and sent a sharp look at Cassie before settling

her gaze on me. "Which one of you is going to tell me what's really going on?"

I winced and bit my lip. Within ten minutes of my joining the men for tea earlier, Sean, Mr. Lincoln, and Captain Jansen left in order to confer with Alex at Dragon's Cove before going to town and speaking to Dr. William Luden, the town's coroner. They didn't return until a few minutes prior to dinner, bringing Andrie with them. Alex had pulled Cassie and me aside upon their arrival and requested that we not mention to Andrie the reason for Mr. Lincoln's visit to Killdaren's Castle. He didn't want her worrying about anything right now. Andrie's baby was due at any moment, and he was worried about her. We were, too. Over the past few weeks, the glow that had bloomed on Andrie's face throughout her pregnancy had faded. She'd appeared pale and her features strained, most likely from the frequent headaches she'd had of late. And tonight she looked particularly fatigued.

Cassie and I agreed with Alex. Unfortunately, the events in Northrope and the question of Jack Poole's survival were uppermost in everyone's mind, and having to keep silent about it turned dinner into a tense affair, one that piqued Andrie's suspicions. Finding out that the captain and Mr. Lincoln would be returning to Northrope first thing in the morning didn't help matters any either. I had less than an hour to figure out what I was going to do to help those poor women in Northrope.

The second the men excused themselves for an after-dinner drink and smoke, Andrie spoke up. "I know something is afoot," she said. "Why is Mr. Lincoln here? And don't make the same mistake as Alex. Mr. Lincoln isn't here to buy horses. His demeanor is entirely too serious and I've just ferreted out over dessert that he doesn't have a clue as to what a Friesian is. I'll cook Alex's goose later. Right now I want answers, and from the looks on your faces tonight, you have them."

Friesians were a beautiful, nearly extinct type of horse that Alex was renowned for successfully breeding. Anyone coming to buy a horse from Alex would know what a Friesian was.

"It's nothing—" Cassie started to say.

"Not telling her will only make her worry more," I interjected. "I know because it's usually me who is being kept in the dark about something." Cassie and Andrie had the grace to look a little chagrined at that.

Cassie sighed. "Alex isn't going to be happy, but he was asking the impossible to begin with. He forgets that our minds are like open books to you."

"You'll both take note that I didn't just grab your hands to find out what I wanted to know," Andrie replied. "I asked."

A wry smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. "She's right. We can always lead Alex to believe Andrie found out about Mr. Lincoln by reading our minds, or better yet, one of the men's or even Alex's. That wouldn't set them a bit on their ear."

Andrie smiled and Cassie laughed, and it felt good. It wasn't often we found a reason for humor in our gifts. Cassie's dreams, Andrie's mind reading, and my ability to communicate with ghosts were burdens that had brought pain to all of our lives, even though they'd helped us stop a murderer and free Sean and Alex from the cloud of suspicion that had hovered over them for nearly a decade.

I cleared my throat and met Andrie's gaze directly. "What they don't want you to know is that Mr. Lincoln is here from Northrope because one woman has died and another woman is missing. They fear Jack Poole may be alive."

Andrie gasped and her hand fisted on the table, but surprisingly an odd expression of relief settled on her face. "I knew it," she said. "This explains it."

"Knew it how?" Cassie's eyes widened. "Did you have a

dream? Surely you didn't find out about Northrope from reading someone's mind here in Dartmoor's End? We just learned of it a few hours ago."

"No. Nothing like that." Andrie drew a deep breath as if a huge burden were being tugged from her shoulders. "For weeks now I've had the sense of impending doom, that all of this happiness was too good to be true, and that something was going to steal it away. I thought . . ." She gulped as tears welled in her blue eyes. "I really felt that something was going to happen to me, that I would die giving birth like Alex and Sean's mother did."

"No. That's not going to happen." I rushed from my seat over to Andrie and wrapped my arm around her shoulders as I sat next to her. I wasn't naive. I knew some women died giving birth, but I never considered my sister might.

"Why didn't you say something?" Cassie clasped Andrie's fisted hand in hers. "I felt the same thing toward the end of my pregnancy, too, you know."

"You did?" Andrie blinked several times, dashing away her tears with the back of her free hand.

Cassie nodded. "I felt it so badly that I kept crying whenever I had a few moments alone. The only thing that kept me sane was that I didn't dream of it. All of my dreams were of a lot of kids playing in the sand and running from the waves like we did when we were little. It may be that all women worry like this when their time to deliver is near."

"Maybe so," Andrie said. "But finding out about Jack Poole gives me an enemy I can do something about. We can't let him get near us." She shuddered, placing a palm on the bulge of her stomach. "I'll never forget what I saw in his mind. He's so evil that he would hurt even a babe," she whispered.

"We'll stop him. We have to," I said. Leaving them, I paced across the room, trying to flee the images of what Jack Poole had done to Flora. A cold sweat covered my whole body and it was all I could do to keep from screaming. Jack

Poole wasn't going to come anywhere near my family. I had to get to Northrope even if I had to stow away—

My heart pounded hard as the solution to my dilemma played clearly in my mind. I could hide on Captain Jansen's ship, the *Black Dragon*. I could take what food I'd need and a few simple dresses, and hide in Alex and Andrie's cabin. When they first married, Alex and Andrie had made several trips. Andrie still had a supply of her things upon the ship.

"Gemini is right," Cassie said, interrupting my wild thoughts. The note of determination in her voice was one that always seemed to bend the world to her will. "We will stop him. While we have to keep in mind the possibility that it isn't Jack Poole because of the differences between the crimes, there are a few things we can do to keep him from ever getting near us if he has resurfaced. Sean is going to go to Northrope to help as soon as he can, and I think it's time I resurrected my career."

"What?" Andrie and I cried in unison.

For a number of years before we came to Dartmoor's End, Cassie had written for *The Exemplary Ladies Journal*. Her column, Cassiopeia's Corner, gave proper advice to women on how to live an exemplary life. She resigned from her post after marrying Sean, partly because he wanted her to—he could more than provide for her and thought working demeaned her position of wealth—but mostly because after the choices she'd made as a parlor maid while investigating our cousin Mary's murder, she felt unqualified to give "proper" advice. She saw life differently now. Love was more important than propriety.

Cassie firmed her lips to a grim line. "I doubt Northrope's local paper will be able to resist publishing articles about Jack Poole. There are a number of things that I could write to help expose Jack Poole, and more that I could say to help women protect themselves."

"I don't know, Cassie," I said. "If Jack Poole reads it, he could come after you."

"Sean would—"

"He won't have to know and neither will Jack Poole. Nobody will know but us. I'll do it under a man's pen name, and I will be very careful about what I say, and make sure no one will connect the column to me."

I started to argue because I had a sick feeling in my stomach about Cassie taking such a risk, but then decided I wasn't one to talk. Not considering what I was going to do. Before the men returned to find us plotting, we hurriedly left the dining room and settled ourselves in the parlor to knit booties. It appeared as if we had nothing on our minds except babies, but I know Cassie and Andrie were whispering about Cassie's plan to expose Jack Poole, and I was racing through my options on how to sneak aboard the *Black Dragon*. I only had a few hours to accomplish this miracle, for I wanted to be well settled in Alex and Andrie's cabin before dawn. I had no doubt that Captain Jansen and Mr. Lincoln would be on the ship, ready to sail by then, and the success of my mission depended on not getting caught until we reached Northrope's shore and I could prove myself to everyone involved.

How was I going to get to the ship in the middle of the night?

Though I was more adept at horseback riding than I had been a year ago, I didn't think I possessed the skill necessary to find and saddle my own horse without alerting the groomsmen who lived near the stables. Since the villagers' unrest and near attack of Andrie last year, the men slept lightly, one ear in their dreams and the other alerted to anything that shouldn't be. And I couldn't just request a carriage to take me, because that would raise too many questions, which I had no doubt would quickly reach Cassie's ears.

That left sneaking out and either walking the dark path along the forest's edge, or stealing along the deserted beach until I neared the docks at Dartmoor's End. Both prospects raised flags of caution in my mind. I was not about to be foolhardy in my quest. There had to be a way to get on the ship without such a lonely walk in the dark.

What seemed so simple an idea was becoming as convoluted as the mess I was making out of a third bootie for the set I had made this morning. (We had to have three booties for every pair we made because Darragh and Jarrett always managed to lose one; Cassie was sure that given their appetites, the boys had to be eating the booties when she wasn't looking.) I kept dropping stitches and having to unravel my row. I'm sure my lack of attention had everything to do with planning my escape to the ship and nothing to do with the captain's imminent arrival. And the pounding in my heart had nothing to do with the approaching sounds of booted feet and men's voices.

Captain Jansen was the last to enter the room. Sean came in first, his gaze immediately settling on Cassie with sharp satisfaction. Alex came next, his brows knitted with a hint of anxiety until he'd checked Andrie from head to toe and found her well, blooming in fact.

I bit my lip wondering what exactly Alex would say about why Andrie wasn't as pale and drawn as she'd been an hour ago. He was sure to look for an explanation soon, and what would Andrie tell him? *I'm fine now that I have a reason for the doom I sense?*

Mr. Lincoln strolled in behind Alex; his gaze encompassed the room and lingered a moment on me before he nodded with an interesting smile and headed my way. But Sean asked him a question and he changed course. The captain crossed the threshold with a frown that left little doubt he'd rather be somewhere else. His gaze immediately zeroed in on me. He then glared at the French doors across the

room and his expression darkened to a fierce scowl. I knew what he was thinking. He was remembering our kiss, and not too kindly, I thought, wondering whether to be offended or amused. The captain quickly turned his attention to the fire crackling in the hearth and immediately sought its warmth. As he passed by, he didn't glance my way again, but he did leave a beckoning whiff of intriguing spice and sea in his wake; the fresh, exotic scent that I'd never forget.

The captain may have been ignoring me, but the ghosts with him didn't. They each did a neat little head-over-heels flip and jabbed each other in the ribs as they leered at me.

The two were clearly back to their "give the devil his due" train of thought—a matter that, after the kiss Captain Jansen had given me at Christmas, they no longer thought I was too proper to do. I shut my eyes so that they couldn't see my exasperated reaction.

That proved to be a mistake though, because I couldn't resist inhaling the captain's scent and my mind immediately delved into the memory of his kiss, when I'd breathed deeply of him, had tasted the spice and the sea, and had experienced the hot, sensual need hidden beneath his remote demeanor . . .

*It had happened just outside the doors across the room, out upon the balcony with the roar of the silvery sea keeping tempo with my racing pulse and the crisp edge of winter exciting the air. The moon's light, a full glow upon the shore's sand and the castle's stone, basked the moment, glimmering in his windswept ebony hair and hardening the chiseled planes of his harsh features. We were warm from the hearth and the heady lure of Killdaren's spiced wine—something I'd managed to sneak several glasses of without Cassie or Andrie noticing. The tension between me and the captain was all-consuming.*

*I'd become a tad flushed from the spirit and went outside intending to drink in some cool air to calm myself. Instead, I found myself twirling in a half circle with my hands and face lifted to the moon, yearning to have more in life than I had. I wanted to dance in the moonbeams. I wanted to race wildly in the wind. I wanted to know more of the world, to see its many wonders with my own eyes and not through the pictures and stories of books. I wanted the fulfillment that kept secret smiles on Cassie and Andrie's well-kissed lips. And I wanted Captain Jansen.*

*His dark blue eyes, as mysterious and fathomless as the deep of the sea, had followed my movements throughout the evening as closely as I'd watched him, only his gaze was entirely more intimate than mine. For surely I didn't stare at him in a way to make him ache, though the broadness of his chest and shoulders were so inspiring I had to fist my hands against the urge to touch him.*

*And I most certainly didn't strip his clothes away with a glance as he seemingly did to me.*

*And I didn't have the infuriating air of being as unreachable as the distant stars, as if he'd anchored himself in the crow's nest of a ship and stood, watching people and life pass him by as he would the waves of the sea. I instinctively knew that he'd look at me, but he'd never act upon the heat in his gaze. He'd escape on his ship before he'd do that.*

*I wanted to disrupt his world as thoroughly as he had mine.*

*I would have blamed all of my symptoms—the tingling, the burning breasts, the rising awareness of myself as a woman—on the wine, which I'd overheard had some aphrodisiac effects to it, except that I had been experiencing them before I drank the wine.*

*In fact, I'd turned to the wine to help ease my agitated*

*condition. I'd always heard that wine soothed. But instead of mellowing me, I became fevered, and felt almost decadent for some unknown reason.*

*Unknown? That wasn't exactly the truth. The last time he looked at me I purposely arched my back, stretching, reacting to the sudden need that flared in me as his gaze raked over my bosom and lingered. It had been an instinctual movement, and one I wanted to repeat, for his gaze had instantly lost any remoteness, and a body-drenching heat burned in his eyes. For a moment I thought he was going to march across the parlor and kiss me. Instead, he'd swung abruptly around, spoken to my brother-in-law, Sean, and they'd both left the parlor for some destination inside the castle. When I found myself pacing the room for their return, not even hearing the conversation of my family around me, that's when I'd decided that I needed the fresh air and stole outside.*

*"Are you reaching for the moon or the stars?" came Captain Jansen's deep voice from behind me.*

*Lowering my arms, I swung around, shivering from the timbre of his voice. He stood in the shadows, leaning against the castle's stones, smoking a cheroot. That he didn't immediately extinguish the smoke, as propriety demanded, quickened my pulse. I didn't want propriety. I stepped a little closer to see him better.*

*"Both the moon and the stars," I said as my breath caught, hitching on the devilish shadows darkening his face. They revealed a dangerous edge about him, one that I realized I'd overlooked. For in the night, in the shadows, alone, without the comforts of home and family surrounding us, I could well see this man not only leading his ship through the fiercest of storms, but also slaying any foe . . . with deadly competence.*

*"Wanting what can't be had leads a man to his downfall."*

*His gaze raked down my form with the same heat that had sizzled across the parlor. Suddenly the moon and the stars weren't in the heavens, but were on the balcony in the shape of a man just a few steps away.*

*Drawn to him, I moved even closer. Much closer than was proper. He dropped the cheroot and ground it out with the heel of his boot before bringing his gaze up to meet mine.*

*"That goes for young ladies as well," he added, letting me know that he was well aware of my interest in him and telling me it was an impossible want.*

*A bristle of irritation scrubbed at me. He made it sound as if the reason was because I was a mere school-girl, even though he didn't look at me that way. My petite size might lead many to think I was younger, but eighteen was past the schoolroom door. I lifted a challenging brow and instinctively acted on the fire in his eyes by leaving less than an inch between us. "You not only make me wonder if you speak from experience, Captain Jansen, but also have me curious as to who determines what is acceptable to have."*

*The heat radiating from his body seeped into mine. All I had to do was draw a deep breath and my bosom would likely brush against the open edges of his coat. He'd dressed for dinner, wearing a black coat over a silver vest and a crisp white shirt, but no matter how stylish his suit, the length of his unruly hair and the rugged cut of his features would always place him on the bow of a ship at sea rather than in a formal parlor. I wondered where his hovering ghosts were. It was the first time I'd seen him without them.*

*"Reason," he replied. "And fact."*

*"Whose reason and what facts?"*

*After studying my face a moment, he swore under his breath. "Do you even have a clue as to what you've been asking from me all night?"*

*I dampened my suddenly dry lips, feeling compelled to*

*swallow. Wanting him to kiss me was one thing. Having to boldly state that desire aloud was another.*

*“Of course. I’m not ignorant of such things.” It wasn’t as if I hadn’t been kissed before. Both Lord Percy and Lord Ashton had brushed my lips with theirs. And I knew there was more to it. I’d inadvertently seen Sean kissing Cassie a few times and had to back away from them before being discovered.*

*“Such things?” His words came on a snort of amusement.*

*Before I could respond, he caught my shoulders, pulling my body flush to his in a dizzying rush. Pleasure, like a line of fire, ran from my breasts to my toes, weakening my knees, and I leaned into him, clasping my hands into the material of his coat and silken vest.*

*His lips claimed mine, hot and demanding. This was no Lord Percy/Lord Ashton ghost of a kiss. This was real and my pulse raced as my heart pumped with dizzying force. A sigh of pure pleasure escaped me and I pressed my breasts harder against him, wanting more of the burning sensations, wanting to feel him with every part of me.*

*He cursed under his breath and thrust his tongue between my lips, caressing inside my lower lip before delving deeper and tangling with my tongue. The intrusion surprised me, but not enough to pull away. The kiss was suddenly so much more than I imagined it could be, so demanding and intimate and exciting. I opened to him, tasting him, wanting to know more, eagerly responding to his exploration by matching the stroke and swirl of his tongue with mine.*

*He stiffened and set his hands on my shoulders, as if he were going to ease back from me, and I pulled him tighter to me, unwilling to end the excitement that was making me feel more alive than ever before.*

*He growled—there was no other word for the primal sound—deep in his throat and thrust his leg between mine.*

*He ran his hands down my back to clutch my bottom and lift me to the demand of his mouth. I wrapped my arms around his neck, threading my fingers into his silken hair. He swung around, pressing my back to the cold stone as his thick thigh made contact with my feminine flesh so thoroughly that my feet didn't even touch the ground.*

*He kissed me harder then, his tongue relentlessly thrusting against mine, sliding out just enough to make me want more before he invaded again. Between my legs his thigh jerked slightly in tiny repetitive contractions that sent hot pulses of pleasure through my most intimate places, matching the rhythm of his tongue. Tension curled inside of me, a wild, heated need that made me want to shout and weep at the same time. My breathing became ragged. I moaned deeply when his hand cupped my breast. Then, as his fingers caught the tip of my breast and squeezed, I jerked and cried out sharply from the pleasure that had me so crazy I could do nothing but demand he give me more. My legs opened wider, needing him closer. I slid my knee up and encountered the hard ridge of what I knew had to be his male sex. I'd examined the nude statues at Killdaren's Castle rather closely and I'd read everything I could, even medical journals from the library, so I knew what I was feeling, but I didn't expect for it to be so alive and on fire against me. I pressed again.*

*"Bloody hell," he said, lifting his head from mine, forcing me to release him. His chest heaved and his hands were shaking. A gust of salty chill wind blew in from the sea, cooling the air between us and rifling through his hair and mine. His ghosts were back. They were staring at me over his shoulder, their eyes bulging as wide as their jaws hung open. I ignored them. I had to, or I would have shouted at them.*

*The captain sucked in air and that was when I realized I wasn't breathing. That I was getting faint from the lack of oxygen. I drew in a bracing breath, only to drown in the*

*exotic flavor of his scent. It was nearly as potent as his touch. My legs, still clasped about his thigh, contracted.*

*He caught me up under my arms and lifted me from him, almost with the air of lifting an errant kitten out of harm's way. Then he set me on feet that I wasn't entirely sure I could stand on.*

*"Miss Andrews," he gasped. "I suggest you refrain from 'such things' until you're older and you know just what end you're headed to. I may be a murdering devil to a lot of men, but I don't despoil virgin schoolgirls, no matter how desperately they ask."*

*Murdering devil?*

*What was that supposed to mean? Surely I'd misunderstood him. "Luring devil" was more like it.*

*My head was still spinning and my senses were still burning, but I wasn't so far lost in the storm of his passion that I didn't realize he'd not only insulted me, but he'd also adeptly absolved and denied his whole part in the passionate encounter. I knew enough to realize that. And, much to my chagrin, I couldn't think of a single thing to say before he quickly turned on his heel and hurriedly left, going down the steps that led to the seaswept shore.*

*I might have followed him, but the ghosts started a fight between themselves.*

*"We missed the tête-a-tête, knothed, and it's your fault."*

*"Missed what?"*

*"The bloody kiss, mon ami! 'Pierre, let's search le castle for a female ghost or the sight of a bit of skirt and skin!' Now we've missed it all."*

*"Well, I thought there'd be more than just that old man in the parlor." He paused a moment, then his eyes widened. "I haven't seen the devil this riled in years. Ya think she ain't too proper of a lady to give the devil his due."*

*"I'm thinkin' not, mon ami."*

*With tears burning my eyes, I crossed to the other end of*

*the balcony to enter the castle through a different set of doors. Christmas had lost some of its warmth and magic.*

Nine months later he was back, and only for the night. If I hadn't come up with the idea to stow away on his ship, I think I'd be in my room shouting in frustration. He wanted to pretend that what had happened hadn't. He wanted to pretend that I was too young, but he couldn't pretend forever. I was going to make sure Captain Jansen faced the truth about me and about himself.

# 3



I decided that I could no longer just sit in the drawing room and allow Captain Jansen to ignore me. Setting my knitting aside, I stood before I was tempted to throw it in the fire he found so interesting. Though I wanted to march to his side and speak to him, just so he couldn't pretend I wasn't in the room, I didn't. Nine months had been a long time to wait for what lay next after the scorching kiss he'd given me. His behavior implied there was nothing, but I disagreed. I'd concluded that a man didn't kiss a woman like that the first time unless there was some feeling behind it.

"Andrie, shall we see who will be brave enough to wager with us tonight?" I forced my way over to the card table.

Andrie and Cassie laughed while Sean groaned.

"Did you say wager?" Mr. Lincoln turned my way, eyes widened with surprise, and the captain finally shifted his gaze from the hearth. Proper ladies didn't bet.

"Yes, for the marzipan," I said. "Thoroughly scandalous, I know, but it has become sort of a family game."

Alex snorted. "You mean a family swindle. Lord Ashton and Mr. Drayson are still lamenting the trouncing you gave them last year. I daresay Ashton hasn't made a wager since."

Sean and Alex knew the story behind my spectacular winning night at cards against Lord Ashton and Mr. Drayson. How Killdaren's parlor ghost had helped me to soundly beat the two men the night they'd taught me how to play cards. I'd been unable to turn a deaf ear to the ghost revealing their hands and capitalizing on that to win all the marzipan. Since then, I'd discovered that I really did have a talent for playing whist, which was a good thing since we no longer had a ghost at Killdaren's Castle.

Once I recovered from my experience with Flora McGowan, I'd realized that I could help ease the pain of the souls who hovered between this life and the next. After learning why the parlor ghost had remained on earth, I'd helped him gain peace and he'd moved on.

"Then Lord Ashton can thank me for saving him from future ruin," I retorted to Alex. "If a man cannot play cards any better than Ashton can, he has no business wagering a thousand pounds."

Mr. Lincoln's jaw dropped and I smiled sweetly at him. "No, I didn't relieve Lord Ashton of a thousand pounds, though I should have. He lost that somewhere in London. I've only wagered for marzipan, as I have an affinity for the sweet."

Mr. Lincoln smiled. "I have a liking for sweets, too. I'll play." His smile eased the deep creases the seriousness of his business here had furrowed in his brow, lighting up his countenance. I had to blink at his handsomeness and wondered why he didn't set my heart racing as the captain did. For, on the surface, Mr. Lincoln seemed a great deal more

pleasant than the captain, and he wasn't hounded by annoying ghosts either.

"I'll play as well," said the captain from where he stood by the fire, surprising me and setting my heart to flutter with anticipation. I had secretly wished he would play, but hadn't expected he would. He couldn't very well ignore me if he was playing cards with me. I glanced his way, mistakenly seeking to discern his thoughts from his expression. The only thing I saw was the play of firelight from the hearth flickering over his features and reflecting in his eyes, as if the devil himself stood there with the fires of hell licking over him.

We settled into a game and I went fishing for information. "So tell me, Captain, what's your favorite port?"

"The one I haven't seen yet," he said without hesitation.

Andrie frowned. "Why is that?"

"Because the best part of being at sea is just that, facing and challenging what you've yet to encounter. Ports are necessary for business."

"Do your men feel the same?"

"No. Most of them live from port to port, looking for their next rations of rum and good times."

I laughed. "So they all abandon the ship when in port?"

"Never. An unguarded ship is a stolen one. There are always a dozen men on watch."

I swallowed. A dozen. How would I sneak by a dozen men? "Even in Dartmoor's End? Who would steal a ship here? It's not like there are real pirates anymore."

Andrie, sitting on my other side, reached over and set her hand on my arm. "Gemmi!" she said with a gasp. Then she shook her head. "Uh, there may not be pirates on the seas, but there are thieves. Alex has told me a number of stories about ships that don't guard their cargo in port. They aren't pretty."

"I see," I said, and didn't ask any more questions about

the ship and guards because both Andrie and the captain were looking at me oddly. I focused on cards and shoved my dilemma about stowing away aside for the moment.

I won the first two pieces of marzipan, of which I gave one to Andrie, telling her it was for my soon-to-be-born nephew. Alex, from where he was playing chess with Sean across the room, claimed that the child would be my niece and she'd be a lady, unlike his unruly nephews. This started Sean and Alex teasing Cassie over her spoiling the babes.

Mr. Lincoln won the third hand and chose the biggest piece of marzipan for his prize. I'd had my eye on it, but had been too much of a lady to choose the choicest piece right off. It was only fair that I give others at least a chance at it. Instead of relaxing me and easing the tension that had been screaming inside me, the fun only served to increase my agitation. Maybe it was because the ghosts over the captain's shoulders were, for once, deadly serious. They studied the captain's hands as if the world rested on his every move and kept frowning as if he were making the wrong choices. Then again, having the captain seated next to me, feeling the heat of his leg near mine beneath the table, inhaling his luring scent, and shivering from the rumble of his voice didn't help matters. It was bringing back all of the sensations of his kiss, and yet he looked as if nothing had ever happened between us.

He wasn't ignoring me anymore, but neither was he snatching my clothes away with hot glances like he had at Christmas. And any look he did give me made me feel like a cornered mouse staring at a cat who wasn't pouncing as he should, but was rather toying with his victim.

The next win went to the captain, and so did the rest, until only a single piece of marzipan was left on the plate. Sean and Alex laughed up a storm, cheering Captain Jansen on, which wasn't very sporting of them. I was family, after all. It didn't matter that I'd trounced them both before.

But the last piece would be mine. I had a great hand and he wasn't going to—

“My win again,” said Captain Jansen, laying his cards on the table for everyone to see that he had indeed won. I glared at his coat sleeves, wondering if he kept any cards hidden up them. I watched in disbelief as he caught the last piece of marzipan in his fingers. My mouth watered. I'd only had one small piece of my favorite dessert. He'd had six and was getting ready to eat the seventh.

“Wait,” I said. “Uh, let's play one more hand for the last—”

He popped the treat into his mouth, looked me right in the eye, and chewed.

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't believe it! He'd deliberately eaten the marzipan before another hand could be played for the last treat. I wanted to— Oh my. I saw myself licking the sugar from his lips and kissing him again. “You, sir, are no gentleman—”

“Gemmi, I need to talk to you right now,” Andrie said, grabbing my arm and pulling me up from the chair. “Gentlemen, if you'll excuse us for a moment.” The urgency in her voice alarmed me.

“What is it? Are you all right?” I asked as I followed her lead. She headed out of the room.

“I'm fine. I just need your help for a moment.” Halfway down the hall, she turned to me. “I can't believe you're going to do that.” she whispered.

“Do what?”

“Gemmi, I read your thoughts. You can't do it!”

I frowned. “Lick the sugar from the captain's lips and kiss him? He just ate seven pieces of my favorite dessert, Andrie! I don't know what I'm going to do with him. He kisses me as if I am the only woman on earth, disappears for nine months, and then comes back for one night only and eats all of my favorite dessert.”

Andrie grabbed my shoulders and shook. "I'm not talking about that. You can't go traipsing through the night alone to sneak aboard the *Black Dragon*."

"Shhh," I said, pressing my finger to her lips and quickly looking about to assure we were still alone in the hall. "Not here."

I pulled her all the way to the marbled entryway. "Listen to me very carefully," I told her, still whispering. "I have to go to Northrope, Andrie. I have to stop what is happening there and we have to know if Jack Poole is really alive or not. I won't be able to live with myself if I don't try. Cassie and Sean will never let me go. You know that. Stowing away on the *Black Dragon* is my best option. Both you and Cassie were able to do what you knew you had to do when it was time. Cassie came to the castle and found out what happened to Mary. And you went to Alex's to discover the truth about the past. It's my turn now to do what I must do."

She shook her head. "It's too dangerous."

"Is it? Both of you were in more danger than I will be in. All I'm going to do is go speak to the ghost of the murdered woman. I don't even know if she'll be there. But I have to try. If I can save one woman from dying the way Flora McGowan died, it will be worth that risk and more. As for sneaking aboard the *Black Dragon*, Alex owns the ship. Captain Jansen isn't going to throw me overboard for staying in your cabin even if he finds me before we reach Northrope, which won't happen."

"I'm not worried about Captain Jansen. Alex trusts the man with his life, and mine, for that matter. It's just that you don't know how evil Jack Poole is, Gemmi. I saw his thoughts. I know what he is capable of doing." She shuddered.

I drew in a deep breath, realizing it was time to tell Andrie the truth. "You remember when I heard Flora's ghost screaming in the Kennedy Mansion?"

"I'm not likely to ever forget that, or the fire in which we all almost died."

"It was more than just hearing Flora, Andrie. When I lost consciousness it was because I could . . . I could feel what he did to her as if it were happening to me. I *know* what he is capable of doing."

Andrie gasped, her face pale white as she grasped my shoulders. "Gemmi! Why did you not tell us? That's . . . so . . . horrific. Oh, Gemmi, you can't put yourself through that again."

I drew a deep breath. "I have to because I can't live with what might happen to someone if I don't. Please, Andrie, you have to understand that I must do this. I'd take a passenger ship or a stagecoach, but I would have to wait several days to make those arrangements and would have to argue with both Cassie and Sean the whole time. The fastest way to get to Northrope is to stow away on the *Black Dragon*." Now that Andrie knew what I was up to, I had an idea of just how to get on Alex's ship.

Andrie pulled me into her arms for a quick hug, and when she stepped back, there were tears in her eyes. "You're all grown up now, but even still . . . you're going to be so far away from us, Gemmi." She shook her head. "I just don't know—"

"Here's what I need for you to do . . ." I explained my idea and how we could make it happen.

"Cassie is going to kill me."

"Please, Andrie."

She sighed. "I don't have a good feeling about this at all, Gemmi. Not at all."

"I can't breathe," I said, pushing on the trunk lid that had closed me into a tomblike darkness. My ingenious idea to hide in a trunk, which Andrie would have her butler deliver

to Alex's cabin on the ship tonight, wasn't going so well. Andrie had told the butler that the contents of the trunks were essentials she kept forgetting to store on the ship for when she and Alex traveled. She wanted everything to be perfect before she delivered the baby. That meant the trunks had to be in the cabin before it sailed at dawn. At this stage, nobody denied Andrie anything. The old seasoned butler all but fell over himself to do anything that Andrie asked of him.

After speaking with Andrie in the entryway earlier, I returned to the parlor and quickly excused myself for the evening, complaining of a headache. Everyone had looked at me strangely, especially the captain. They probably thought I was miffed over the marzipan, which I was, but that wasn't the reason I'd abandoned the evening.

In my room I wrote Cassie and Sean a long explanation for what I'd decided to do and asked them to respect my decision on what I thought was the right thing. Then I stuffed whatever essentials I needed that I couldn't borrow from Andrie into a bag, grabbed what money I had, and hid in the back of Alex's large carriage, pulling the fur throws over me.

Upon reaching Dragon's Cove, Alex had kissed Andrie and gone to the stables to check on his foaling mares, as Andrie knew he would, and we'd stolen inside to pack me a trunk of essentials and put me into another.

"What did you say?" Andrie opened the trunk and I barreled up, gasping for air.

"I can't breathe in there."

"For heaven's sake, Gemmi, of course you can breathe. I've only just shut the lid. There's more than a single breath of air left in the trunk."

"Then I felt like I couldn't breathe," I said, glaring, thinking that perhaps I should have just walked down the beach to the docks and swum out to the ship's anchor and crawled up the rope and . . . well, maybe not. But the beach in the moonlight would have been preferable to the

shadowed path along the forest's edge or the inside of a tomblike trunk. I shuddered.

Andrie threw her hands up in despair. "This isn't going to work, is it? What are we going to do? Brighty will be here any minute to take two trunks of my things to the cabin. We have to do it now before Alex gets back and realizes there is something amiss."

I squared my shoulders. "It'll work. I just need to cut a hole in the trunk like I wanted to do in the first place."

"But it's my favorite . . . All right. I guess you're going to need a knife."

"I'll also need to have one in the trunk with me in case I need to cut myself out of it."

"That's not going to be necessary. It won't lock completely because of the wax we stuffed into the lock."

"Still, I'll feel better in there if I know I can get out if I have to. And once I have some fresh air, I'll be all right." At least, I prayed I would. I swallowed hard.

Andrie grabbed my hand. "Alex has a whole secret room full of wicked knives. You can take your pick. Take two even. Whatever will make you feel better, but we have to hurry. You'll also need a lot of money, too."

"I have some funds," I said, following her into a room across the hallway where there was nothing but a dragon-emblazoned rug on the floor. She went to the fireplace at the end of the room, touched upon a wall panel, and a doorway opened. I hurried after her. "Your castle has secret passages and you didn't tell me?"

"Well, this is just a room. I don't know about the passages yet. I've been so busy since Alex and I married that I haven't had the chance to explore."

I peered into the room, my eyes widening in shock at the number of weapons stored there and the seriously deadly intent of them all. "Gracious heavens, whatever does he *do* with all of these?"

"Fights. He's a sword master."

"Fights who?"

"The air mainly. Alex practices twice a day. He's amazing. And before the babe became too big, he taught me how to fence. Here," she said, picking out a set of small daggers sheathed in leather. She slipped one from the case and held its lethal point expertly in the air. "These will fit the grip of your hand well. You hold them like this."

She passed the knife to me and I blinked with shock. This was my artifact cataloguing sister who had barely raised her nose from her record-keeping ledger most of her life? I held the knife as she showed me. It felt both comfortable and comforting in my hand . . . and dangerous.

"These will be small enough for you to tuck into the pocket of your dress." She looked up from the daggers. "Gemmi, promise me you'll be safe. Promise me that you'll keep these with you all the time."

"I promise," I told her, and then gave her a quick hug. In short order I was back in the trunk with a hole cut through the thick leather for fresh air, from which I thankfully was able to peep out and receive some light as well. Andrie still wasn't convinced that I was making the right choice about going to Northrope. She paced back and forth across the room and kept citing what could go wrong with my trying to locate Jack Poole or what could go wrong in general. And though she said she thought she'd put enough money in my clothes trunk, she went back and added more three times. I thought for sure she'd worry herself into labor before Brighty could arrive.

The door opened. "Andrie, what the devil is going on? Brighty is coming up for trunks that have to go aboard the *Black Dragon* tonight? What for?"

I bit my lip, my heart racing. A silly reaction because Alex wouldn't harm either of us, but I so did not want to be discovered before I could get to Northrope.

"Alex! I am so glad that you are here. I've been in such a state and so worried." Andrie sounded so upset that I almost shoved my way up out of the trunk.

"Bloody hell," Alex said. The sound of his booted steps clunked in my ears as he passed by the trunks. "What is wrong?"

"Everything. There is so much that I wanted to have done that I haven't done yet and I need to get done before the baby comes or it won't get done and then I'll be all worried about getting it done when I can't do it."

There was a long silent pause and I added "superb actress" to Andrie's growing list of new talents.

"Can you say all of that again?" Alex finally said. Even I could hear his exhaling breath and wondered if he really was clenching his jaw like he was trying to rein in a horse gone wild. He certainly sounded like it. "No, on second thought, just explain the trunks, Andrie."

"That's simple. I'm sure this baby is going to come very soon and I must have everything that I need to do attended to before then. That means I want these trunks put in our cabin on the ship tonight. I want to know that the things I have been meaning to take with us will be there and ready for when we take our next trip."

"That doesn't make sense. It'll be a long while before the babe will be ready to go aboard the *Black Dragon*," Alex said.

"I don't care if it makes sense or not. I need to have it done so that I can rest easier. And, besides, this little one will be ready to set sail sooner than you realize. The babe loves the motion of the sea. Most said it would make me ill to be with child and at sea and I swear the opposite was true. When we took our trips was when I felt the best. I wish we could set sail tomorrow."

"I wish we could, too," Alex said, his voice deepening. I heard a shuffle and then breathing and I knew he was kissing

my sister. "So did you pack a few of the figurines as well? If I remember correctly you were lamenting not having them around."

"No! I most certainly did not, Alexander Killdaren, and your memory is skewed at best. It was you who wanted to play with them."

"And with you." Alex laughed, deep and low and, oh my, he sounded very sensually aroused.

"Let's see which ones we haven't tried yet, and I'll put a few in the trunk so we have something to look forward to."

How did one try a figure? I wondered.

"I doubt there are any we haven't tried," Andrie said dryly. "And it's too late to put anything else in the trunks. Brighty will be here any minute now."

I winced, sure the game was about to be up.

"I'll hurry," Alex said. A drawer opened. "Hmm. This one here will do, don't you think? And this one as well."

"Here," Andrie said. "I'll put them in the trunk."

"But you haven't even examined them, Andrie," Alex said softly. "How do you even know that you like them?"

"You're incorrigible . . . and insatiable!"

"And you love it," Alex replied. I heard kissing again.

"No. I love you. And I don't have to examine the figures because anything with you is anything and everything that I could ever want," Andrie said with a sigh.

I thought about plugging my ears, but I couldn't. I bit my lip and felt tears sting the backs of my eyes. I so wanted to be able to love someone as deeply as my sisters did.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Too late," Andrie said.

"I'll just toss them in here," Alex said. I heard his hands slap the trunk lid and I nearly jumped from my skin.

"No!" Andrie squealed, panicked. "Let me wrap them in something so that they don't get broken.

"My handkerchief should do," Alex said.

“Here, let me,” Andrie said.

A moment later the trunk lid cracked open less than an inch.

“You sure I can’t help?” Alex said, his voice deeper.

Andrie gasped, making me wonder exactly how Alex was helping. Whatever she slipped inside the trunk hit my skirt like a hard biscuit, then she slammed the lid closed.

When the trunk was lifted, it careened to one end as if the carrier was about to drop me on my head. I knew then that I’d made the first bad decision of my journey.

# 4



Sweat beaded my brow and I ached everywhere I possibly could as I crawled and squeezed my way out the end of the trunk to lay gasping on the wooden planks of the cabin. The ship rocked and rolled to the swell of the sea and the faint sounds of men calling out to each other could be heard with the groaning noises of a ship at sail. I smelled a hint of salt and seasoned wood above the leather and my perspiration.

My stomach still wasn't sure if it was going to rebel from the panic I'd been swallowing for the past six hours. I had visions of Captain Jansen returning to Dartmoor's End weeks from now with my dead body still packed in Andrie's trunk. And it was only as I gathered the strength to sit up that I discovered why I had been unable to open the trunk as Andrie and I had planned. Brighty had stowed the trunks away beneath the cabin's large berth. There wasn't even room for me to fit my little finger between the trunk and the bed.

It was too dark to locate a mirror, but I knew I had to be covered in bruises from being transported to the ship. Just as surely as I knew dawn had to be only moments away. I'd spent the night cramped in the trunk, sucking air through my tiny hole as I cut myself out an inch at a time, painstakingly using the knife over my head. I could barely move my arms they hurt so much.

My original plan had been to use the trunk for my resting place, so that if I heard anyone entering the cabin, I could just close the lid. When I stopped shuddering at the thought of ever enclosing myself in something again, I searched about for an alternative. I ruled out beneath the bed and in the closet, which left either under the desk or the bunk. In the end, I crawled, fully dressed, into the bed, under the covers, and placed myself all the way against the wall. After that, I set several pillows propped against my legs, back, and neck, hopefully making it look as if they were resting on the wall. Anyone walking into the cabin would think the bed had just been oddly made.

I lay shivering in the dark until the first rays of dawn crept through the porthole and the noises accompanied by the change in the rock of the ship told me we'd set sail. I didn't tremble from the cold, but rather because I'd achieved what I had planned to do. I was underway to Northrope and I was out from under the sheltered protection of my family. Instead of feeling elated, I wanted to cry for some reason. Thankfully, I slept.

"Blimey, but Captain ain't a devil. He's got to be ten of 'em together for a mood as black as his."

"It was the same way the last time we left Dartmoor's docks."

I snapped my eyes open, knowing in an instant that I wasn't alone in the cabin. Men were rambling around, making all kinds of noises, and the strong smell of lye made my eyes water.

"Swab this an' that an' move o'r arses or the next port'll be the last one we travel to on the *Black Dragon*. What's 'e riled over, ya think?"

"A wench, iffen yer askin' me."

"Ain't that the truth of it. Not like the cap'n though, Smitty. Been sailin' with the devil for years and 'e ain't been this way 'cept for once."

"Whot 'appened, John?"

"Best not mention it where he can 'ear ya, but 'is mum died. His fam'ly didn't even let 'im know she was sick. The only reason he'd stop at Northrope was to see 'er, being he's estranged from the rest of 'em on account of him murderin' those men. Now he visits 'er grave."

Murdering men? I nearly bolted upright in the bunk.

"Ya think 'e did it, John?"

"I'ma thinkin' he could 'ave, iffen he had a mind to it. But I bet yer last tankard there's more to the story than we'll ever know."

"I'll be keeping my rum 'cause I know yer right." His voice sounded as if he were right next to my ear. "Hey, we swabbing under these bunks?"

"Nah, ain't nobody a'seein' 'neath there, Smitty. I'm hopin' that storm I sense brewin' comes our way. Rather be fightin' the wind than scrubbin'. Next thing he'll have us be do'n the laundry and bathin'."

"I'll walk the plank first."

They exited the room and began cleaning the next one without closing the connecting door, and I lay there sweating, desperately needing to relieve myself but not daring to move. Both Alex's and Captain Jansen's cabins were connected to a main room of the captain's quarters, and the sailors were in there cleaning now.

I strained to hear more of what they were saying, but their conversation turned to complaints over their task and they said nothing more about the captain and murdered

men. How I could have learned so much about Captain Jansen over the past year, and yet never known—

*I may be a murdering devil to a lot of men, but I don't despoil virgin schoolgirls . . .*

The captain himself had said it and I'd thought my kiss-addled mind had heard wrongly. Still, I doubted that it actually meant what the captain and the sailors implied. Alex would never entrust his ship, his life, and Andrie's life to a murderer.

With my mind focused on the mystery surrounding the captain, it thankfully seemed but a short time later that the sailors left the captain's quarters. I slipped out from the covers to hurriedly get my trunk of essentials from where Brighty had stored it under the bunk. First, though, I stole from Alex's cabin and quietly shut the main door leading to the corridor the cleaning sailors had left open and secured it with a wooden wedge. Hopefully they wouldn't notice that I'd shut it. I left the door to Captain Jansen's cabin open though, and curiosity had me straining to see everything I could from the doorway. I would have lingered longer, but I had more important things to attend to first. Later, I would venture inside for a closer inspection. I couldn't resist the opportunity to see what more I could learn about the enigmatic man.

As I tugged on the trunk, which fit a bit too snugly under the bunk, I found myself jumping at every creak of the ship or yell from a sailor, sure that someone had heard me scraping along the wooden planks or moaning from my desperate need. The *Black Dragon* was an older ship and Andrie wanted Alex to modernize it by adding a luxurious water closet. It was just my luck that it hadn't happened yet. Quick access to take care of certain needs would have been heavenly, as would a hot bath.

Freeing the trunk and relieving my problem made me realize that even the simplest task became hard when faced with new surroundings. It was also colder than I expected it

to be, as if the crisp, fall air knew just where to slip through the ship's nooks and crannies. I hid the old-fashioned, covered chamber pot beneath the desk and pulled out one of my three canteens of water and soap to clean my hands at the washstand. Then I quickly ate some cheese and bread with a sip or two of water while keeping my eye on the door, wondering if it would be safe enough to tiptoe over to Captain Jansen's cabin and take a peek.

I made it all the way to Alex's cabin door and stood, catching glimpses of the captain's neatly made bunk as the ship rose and fell. Eventually I decided to wait until later to look through the captain's cabin and set about exploring Alex's cabin instead. But even my most intriguing discoveries—the shelves of books from all over the world, the supply of Kill-daren's spiced wine, the detailed maps of all the continents, and the cabinet of instruments used for navigation—didn't distract me enough to keep my mind off Captain Jansen's cabin.

Trying to stay busy, I arranged my personal things in the trunk into sensible order, gasping at the amount of money Andrie had stuffed inside. It was more than I'd ever seen at one time and made me nervous even to hold it. I quickly found several clever places to hide the money in the trunk. Once that was safe, I decided to bathe, sure that by doing so early, I'd avoid detection. Sunlight cut a bright path through the porthole, spreading a little warmth amid the chill air, but goose bumps still covered my skin as I scrubbed myself pink with my lavender and mint soap.

I heard booted feet in the next room as Captain Jansen yelled, "Holms, no man sleeps until the repair to the ship is done. If any man is harmed because of Forbes's negligence, I'll flog him. If a man dies, Forbes'll hang. There's no excuse for not seeing to that problem when we were in port."

I froze with my undergarments half on. My heart leaped and raced. I had nowhere to run. Yanking up my drawers, I

grabbed my things and made a dash for the closet. Though I didn't think Captain Jansen would come marching into Alex's cabin, I couldn't be sure and realized I should have found out from Andrie where a key for the door was kept. Now it was too late.

Just as I pulled the closet door shut, I heard Alex's cabin door open. "You'll be wanting the sextant, right?" asked Holms, who I knew to be the captain's first mate. More booted feet crossed, coming right toward me. I shrank back in the small closet, holding my dress over my head. "Still smells like a flower garden in here even though John and Smitty just swabbed the planks," the man said.

"Then I'll send them back to swab the cabin again," Captain Jansen said.

"I don't think it'll do any good. The scent is likely coming from all the things Captain Black's woman has stored in here. Sent two more trunks last night, she did."

"Really?" Captain Jansen's voice sounded much closer . . . and very suspicious. "What the devil for? She's due to have her baby any day now."

"Brighty said something about her not being able to have her baby if she didn't get everything on her mind done. Insane, if you ask me. Don't know what the world is coming to. With women taking to the sea with their men, a man has no sanctuary left." I heard the cabinet next to where I hid being opened. "What scent is that exactly? There's something besides the lavender." I could hear him inhale, moving closer as if he were a bloodhound hunting down a rabbit.

I bit my lip hard, not daring to even breathe.

"It's bloody mint," the captain said, sounding irritated.

"Right you are. You've a good nose, sir." The voice moved away from my spot. The cabinet door snapped shut and his footsteps receded.

"No, Holms," said Captain Jansen. "Just bad as hell judgment."

I'm not sure how long I held my breath after the door shut, but it was long enough to make me grow faint. I thanked my lucky stars that Captain Jansen didn't know I was the only one of my sisters to wear lavender and mint. Cassie put the scent of roses in her soap and Andrie mixed rosemary with her lavender. Once my heartbeat steadied, my emotions dipped and swelled as I remembered the captain's words. His "bad judgment" remark certainly wasn't flattering, and yet I took pleasure the fact that he'd remembered my scent, sounding as if he couldn't get the fragrance out of his mind.

Once they left, I crawled from the closet and dressed, wondering if I'd survive the journey. My first twelve hours aboard the *Black Dragon* had my nerves screaming and my stomach tied in knots. I grabbed a book about the sea from the shelf and hid myself beneath the covers of the berth again, reading less than a page before my eyelids became too heavy to stay open. I fell asleep, rocked by the sea and the memory of Captain Jansen's dark kiss that always left me drowning in my dreams.

Pressed against unrelenting, rough wood, I woke to moonlit shadows in the cabin. The motion of the ship swayed more heavily to the right and to the left than before. This being my first voyage, I didn't know if that meant we were deeper at sea or if the weather had roughened. The chill to the air had more of a bite than before, and I could hear the wind now, the low moan of it calling out to all who listened. I imagined it thrusting against the sails to speed the ship through the sea, and I hated that I couldn't go onto the deck and feel it for myself, to taste the full measure of tangy salt in the breeze and feel the wildness of it touch my face. My stomach rumbled, letting me know that I'd sorely neglected it and demanding that I eat some more cheese and bread. I didn't know what time it was, but I knew a day of my journey had passed. Stumbling around in the shadows

as I learned to adjust my weight and my step to the sway of the ship, I located my cheese and bread and took them over to the porthole to eat, entertaining the idea of opening a bottle of spiced wine. But I forgot all about wine as I stood in awe of the scene before me, a creation of darkness bathed in fluid silver, from its roiling waves to its drifting clouds. It was a dark beauty, rough and unpredictable, and in some way reminded me of Captain Jansen. Cresting it all was a huge moon that hung low and bright on the horizon like a fat and tempting drop of pale lemon candy.

I wished I could rush up to the deck and drink in the view from every angle, to swirl around and see it all at once instead of just the tunneled vision through my porthole. And I resented the circumstances of my life that forced me to hide in order to do what I knew was right. Wondering about the quietness of the ship, I pressed my ear to the crack of the cabin door. When I heard nothing more than the sea and the wind wearing upon the ship, I made sure no light shone beneath the door and cracked it open.

The three portholes on the left filled the room with moonlight and I had to take several heart-pounding steps to them to see more of the silvery sea. As I stood there, I heard the faint, rhythmic breathing of someone sleeping coming from the captain's cabin. I'd resisted going up on deck to see the full measure of the moon and the sea but I couldn't deny myself looking at him, even though my pulse roared so loudly in my ears that I swore it could wake the dead. Thinking of the dead, I immediately and pleasantly registered the fact that the captain's ghosts weren't about.

He lay on his stomach without a stitch of clothing, bathed in silver and shadows like the sea, only more exciting and more beautiful. My gaze ran swiftly down the length of him, absorbing the perfection of his sculpted body. Any innocent virgin should have been blushing at the sight, or at least contrite to be intruding upon a man's privacy. I wasn't. I wasn't

sure what that said about my character but I didn't spend another second examining the matter right then. Not when there was something much more interesting to focus on.

Despite the chill, only a small corner of a sheet covered part of his hip and buttocks. The rest of the covers on the bed were in such a wild disarray that it seemed he had to have been battling with them for hours. They'd lost, of course. He stirred and groaned as if caught up in an unpleasant dream. I wanted to know what had made him so restless and I wanted to go cover him against the cold, but I curled my hand into a fist and quickly stole back to Alex's cabin, only to have nightmares chase me the rest of the night. Flora's death was never far from me.

Morning brought a deeper pitch to the ship and a demanding howl to the wind along with a bone-shivering chill. I knew without question what had brought about the change. A storm at sea. A real storm. I'd heard stories about the horrors of such storms and about the untamed beauty of them as well. Scurrying from the bunk, I calmed the queasy edge in my stomach by pretending I was on a swing and with each roll of the deck I was trying to soar higher into the sky. Awed, excited, and fearful, I rushed to the porthole and blinked at the fury of the waves on the horizon. The sky was a grayish-green black streaked with deadly lightning and thick with rain.

Too nervous to bother with buttons, I donned a loose gown over the chemise I'd slept in and pulled on some warm stockings before I ventured from Alex's cabin to peek through the other portholes. Though I knew Captain Jansen would be above deck, facing the storm with his men, I still took care before leaving and made sure I was alone. After shutting the door to the corridor as I had yesterday, I went immediately to the three portholes across the room. Here I saw a better picture. The ship, though nearly engulfed by the storm, was sailing swiftly in the direction of what appeared to be a less angry section of the sea.

Looking for more, I went into Captain Jansen's cabin and had to climb upon the bunk for the best porthole view. I'm not sure how long I stared out at the sea, but suddenly my eyes caught a movement on a crushing wave almost directly in front of me and I stared in horror at a man flailing in the sea. I couldn't hear him screaming, but I could feel it in the desperation of his movements. He seemed to be drowning. He must have been swept overboard from the deck above me. Had anyone seen him?

Dear God, I had to help him. Just as I was backing away from the porthole to rush up to the deck, I saw another man dive into the sea. He fell short of the other man, because a huge wave had carried the other man farther away. I'm not sure how I knew it was the captain who'd dived to the man's rescue, but it was more than the black of his hair. The answer lay in the determined power and authority of his actions. He sliced into the sea and immediately surfaced, swimming toward the wildly thrashing man.

I grabbed the rim of the porthole, my nails digging into the wood, sending pain up through my fingers. I couldn't breathe and I couldn't look away, sure that another swell was going to carry both the man and the captain too far from the ship. The captain reached the other man, who immediately tried to cling to the captain, pushing him beneath the sea. The captain burst up from the surface and plowed his fist into the panicked man's face, knocking him out. Immediately grabbing the man around his shoulders, the captain began to swim backward toward the ship. A gigantic swell crashed into them and I knew they'd be carried farther away, and it wasn't until they came closer that I realized the captain had a rope tied about his waist. I think I breathed then, but just barely. When both the captain and the man disappeared from my view, I fell exhausted onto the bunk, noting for the first time that I was in the captain's bed. His scent surrounded me and I lay there drinking it in, waiting

for my heart to stop pounding so painfully in my chest. I picked up one of the captain's pillows and wrapped my arms around it, burying my face in its softness.

I had to believe they were back on the ship. That the other sailors were on hand, helping the captain. I couldn't consider anything else and I prayed hard. I was so lost in the praying that I didn't hear anything until men suddenly barreled into the main room. All I could do was roll off and under Captain Jansen's bed to lay in the dust. My nose itched and I pinched my nostrils hard to stop the urge to sneeze.

"He shoulda just let Forbes drown, I tell ya. No sailor worth his salt would panic like a swooning doxy. Nearly drowned the captain, he did."

"Don't know how we're gonna git the cap'n into a tub of 'ot water. Not with the storm still trying to suck us into its clutches. Good thing were leavin' that behind."

"Y'all worry about filling it up and Holms'll make sure the captain's arse gits in it. He says he'll even knock 'im out iffen he has to. Cap'n thinks 'e's invincible, but he ain't. The first mate don't want him sick again and neither do we. Made us all miserable last year."

"Best have Holms check the cap'n's shoulder. I'm thinking he hurt it, but he won't let anyone take a look. That wave that slammed him into the ship would've killed a lesser man."

"Do ya two think 'e's a real devil? Ain't seen a man as darin' as him."

"Nah, Smitty. Those devil stories are just rumors to keep us fools in line."

There were three men. Two left and the other man stayed and began cleaning up the captain's quarters, hanging up clothes left flung over the back of the chair and . . . making up the bed that I hid under. I'd moved as close to the wall as possible and lay there, trying to cling to it so that the

storm-thrown ship wouldn't send me rolling out from under the bed. I shivered from the cold and the fear, but mostly fear. And not necessarily fear of being discovered. I shook from what almost happened.

*Would've killed a lesser man.*

The captain almost died while I sat watching, and he must be injured badly enough that his men were willing to face his wrath to get him warmed. I kept praying he was all right and I kept praying for an opportunity to sneak back to Alex's cabin. But the sailor never left the captain's quarters and the other men came and went. The tub was filled and the room grew warm, making me realize they must have some method of heating the cabins in the ship.

"You're overstepping your authority, Holms! I'll change into dry clothes, but I'm not going to sit in some bloody tub of hot water like an invalid."

At the sound of the captain's booming voice, the remaining sailor dashed from the room. The captain entered, then the first mate, Holms. I recognized his voice from the day before.

"Captain, I request you honor your word. You said that—"

"If I didn't bring Forbes back alive, I'd hand the ship over to you. He's alive, Holms, so I don't see your point."

"Pardon, sir. But your exact words were 'if I don't bring Forbes back kicking and screaming, then I'll hand the ship over to you.' So, until Forbes wakes up from you cold-cocking him, and can kick and scream, then this ship is under my command and you're ordered to rest. Now, if you're through arguing, I have the fringes of a storm to prove my salt on."

Holms turned to leave and the captain laughed. "One hour, Holms. The *Black Dragon* is yours for an hour. Try not to sink her."

Wet clothes fell to the planks and I heard the captain climbing into the tub, muttering something about "bloody,

mothering fools,” and then groaning as if pained. I bit my lip, forcing myself to stay hidden, though I wanted so much to go to him and lend whatever help I could. I’m not sure how long I stayed frozen under the bed, but I suddenly realized that I needed desperately to breathe. I inhaled, managing to take in a good amount of dust and air.

Oh God. The sneeze came so quick that I hardly had the chance to pinch my nose.

# 5



My hopes that the splash of Captain Jansen's bathwater or the noise of the storm had drowned out the sound of my stifled sneeze sank as I heard his movements still.

It was too quiet considering the fury of the storm. Nothing but the hard rocking and the groaning creak of the ship could be heard. I didn't dare breathe or move, yet my heart thundered so loudly that I knew it had to be echoing off the cabin walls. I was a fool. I should have stayed in Alex's cabin. I never should have ventured into the captain's quarters.

"What in the bloody hell?"

I must have shut my eyes in dread, because I popped them open when his hot, wet hand clamped around my arm and he dragged me from under his bunk.

He was naked again, but this time I was seeing everything I'd missed last night. I couldn't seem to think about anything else but that. Forget that my plan to reach Northrope before

revealing my stowaway status had just gone up in smoke, threatening everything I knew I had to do.

The only thing that mattered was that he was naked and I was flat on my back staring up at him. Any sense of modesty escaped me. I was much too interested in seeing up close what I had spent a year imagining.

I didn't even spare a glance at the ghosts who were again hovering over his shoulders, but kept ignoring their crusty, sea-weathered faces to gaze at the man before me. I couldn't have shut my eyes if my life had depended upon it.

He knelt on the floor, all tanned skin, solid muscle, and dark curly hair sluiced with water. Droplets fell from the hard edge of his shadowed jaw, splashed upon my neck, and rolled between my breasts, making me lick my lips in thirst.

His blue gaze, flashing with anger and something intriguingly darker, felt like a brand upon my lips. The tension filling the air between us sparked almost as much heat inside me as his unrestrained kiss had. My lips parted, remembering the hard demand of his desire that had awakened a deep hunger inside me.

I sucked in air and his gaze shifted to the rise of my breasts and stayed there. The loose gown I'd worn had been displaced when he'd dragged me from under the bed. The bodice had been pulled so low that only my gossamer chemise kept me somewhat decent. My hair had come unbound and the long, wavy curtain of it seemed all tangled about me. He reached out with his other hand and clasped a tendril between his fingers, sliding his thumb over it, making me ache to feel that touch again, to know his kiss again.

The flare of heat in his eyes left me no doubt that he was remembering our kiss, remembering how he'd cupped my breasts and brushed his thumbs over their aching crests until I'd shuddered with need. Once again I quivered with that need.

Instead of covering myself, I dropped my gaze to absorb

his broad chest and a puckered scar near his heart. His waist tapered to slim hips, strong legs, and . . . jutting male anatomy that suddenly grew . . . larger.

“Good heavens, that’s . . . amazing.” I blinked several times to assure I was seeing correctly.

Releasing my wrist and my hair, he stood. “No, Miss Andrews, what is amazing is that I’ve refrained from throttling you within an inch of your life. Why in the bloody hell are you on my ship, in my cabin, under my bed?”

The ghosts laughed until they were rolling around in the air, making so much noise my ears hurt. I sent them an admonishing glare and tugged up my bodice.

The ghosts stopped laughing and a look of confusion and doubt crossed their swarthy faces.

“Did she just look at us, Pierre?”

“It seemed so, *mon ami*.”

The captain hadn’t waited for an explanation. He turned away from me, strode to the tub, and wrapped a towel about his waist before facing me with a glower. “Bloody hell. What possessed you to pull such a childish prank? There’s a bad storm behind us on its way to land and we’ll now have to head into the thick of it to get you back. Hopefully we’ll reach Dartmoor’s End before anyone learns of this idiocy and your reputation will remain intact.”

Though I wanted to gasp with outrage that he’d labeled my mission of duty a childish prank, I forced myself to calmly rise from the floor and dust off my gown, inciting another sneeze. His opinion of my venture stung my mind back in order.

Naked or not, the captain was proving himself to be as insufferable and stifling as Andrie’s trunk had been. I dismissed the ghosts from my mind and focused my attention on the captain.

“I’m not returning to Dartmoor’s End, Captain Jansen,” I said firmly. “Not until I help Mr. Lincoln.”

He laughed, harshly and incredulously. "Miss Andrews, you're barely from the schoolroom and have thankfully had few dealings with the realities of murder. There is nothing you can do to help Mr. Lincoln that the authorities aren't already doing. And your brother-in-law Sean Killdaren will do what he can once he secures his family and can travel to Northrope."

Whether it was because of his utter disregard of my abilities or because I'd spent so many years suppressing everything about me that didn't fit into the frivolous facade I'd been forced to keep up, something inside me snapped. I wanted to shake Captain Jansen off his high mast. I wanted to break free and grab life with my own hands instead of watching others live . . . and love. I'd made a bold move to stow away on the *Black Dragon*, and unless I was just as bold with the captain, I would lose everything I'd gained. He had to face me as a woman, and he had to know about my gift. It was up to me to prove them both to him.

"Schoolroom? You make nineteen sound as if it is a step past wearing nappies." He'd prefer to see me as too young for him to avoid having to face his feelings—both Cassie and Andrie had agreed with my assessment after I'd told them his reaction to kissing me. And both had said it was up to me to show him the error of his thinking. My sisters had had a great deal of experience with the erroneous thought patterns of men. I sauntered to Captain Jansen, my left brow arched with doubt. I didn't stop until my breasts pressed firmly against his damp chest. Then I moved closer until the feel of his arousal pushed enticingly against me. "At least part of you can admit the truth."

He grabbed my shoulders, pulling me harder against him. The feel of him was everything I remembered and more—hard contours, supple muscle, warm skin, heady scent, and seductive power. My lips opened, ready for his kiss, but instead of kissing me, his deep blue gaze stared

intently at me. It was the look of a man torn. "You don't understand what the real truths are, Miss Andrews. I'm a reputed murderer." He pressed the hard bulge of his sex tighter against my stomach. "And wanting sex has nothing to do with love or a future. I have nothing but sex to offer a woman. I have no title. No great wealth. No home. No family. Not even an honorable reputation. Only a fool would waste her virginity on a man who will never give her what she wants in life. You can't even begin to imagine the evil at large in Northrope. There is nothing you can do but walk the street and get your foolish self murdered as well. You're going back home and hopefully you'll never make such a childish headstrong decision again. Next time you might just get a man who won't think twice about taking all of the sweet temptations you offer and then walking away, leaving you ruined."

I slid my palm to his cheek. The rough scrub of his beard wakened my nerves just as every part of him did to every part of me, inside and out. "I don't believe you're a murderer. I don't care what they say and how many say it; I won't believe it. You can call me a fool if you want, but I know what the spirit of a murderer feels like, and you're not one." I eased back from him and he let me go.

I didn't want to see the disbelief that would color his gaze when I told him about myself. Turning to gaze out the portholes, I spoke. "You're wrong about everything else, too. You see, I can help in Northrope because I might be able to speak to the murdered woman and find out exactly who her killer was. Since I've experienced Jack Poole's spirit before, I may even be able to tell everyone if he is the killer, even if the woman's ghost doesn't know who he is."

"Speak to a ghost? Good God!" His exasperated exhale reached across the room. "Listen, Miss Andrews . . . Gemini, I don't want to hurt your feelings so let's not insult either of us with some fantastical story made up to get what

you want, although why you'd want to go to Northrope is beyond me. If all of this is just a ruse to be with me, then I'm flattered."

The captain sounded as if he was indulging a recalcitrant child, making me wince that he'd chosen that moment to call me by my name. "Believe me, I'd give anything for it to be a fantastical story. In truth, it's a nightmare I've lived through my entire life. I really do see and communicate with ghosts. I was very little when my mother found out and she made me promise to ignore the ghosts, to fill my mind with other things and never speak to them. Even though it was like locking a part of myself into a prison while another part pretended to be a frivolous nincompoop, I became two persons, like my namesake. The Gemini everyone thought they knew, and the Gemini who hid from the world. I kept my promise to my mother, year after year. Until last year."

He laughed again and I turned to face him.

"I must say, you'd do very well as an actress upon the stage. You almost have me believing in your story. It doesn't matter. I need to get you back to Dartmoor's End before your reputation is ruined."

"My reputation is nothing compared to someone's life," I said, frustration sharpening my voice. "For a man who has two ghosts almost constantly hovering over him, I'd think you'd be a little less cynical."

"Miss Andrews, you are carrying out this farce too far. I'm—"

"Besides Pierre and Knothead, what are your full names?" I asked, looking directly at the ghosts. Their eyes widened in shock and they looked at each other with their mouths gaping.

"What did you say?" the captain demanded.

"You two have been blathering up a storm every time I've seen you, so don't pretend you're speechless now."

"Who are you speaking to?" the captain asked. "Miss

Andrews, I think maybe you need to lie down and rest. You're sounding a little ill." Captain Jansen crossed the room and placed his palm against my brow. "You are warm," he muttered.

If I was the least bit feverish it was because of him. I reached up and grabbed his fingers. "This is very important. You must listen to me."

He nodded, but a sad expression settled on his features as he looked at me. One almost of pity, as if I were truly insane.

"One ghost is tall and thin with wiry blond hair and gets called *knothead* or *mon ami* by the other ghost, who is short and round with graying dark hair and a large mustache. He is called Pierre."

"What in the bloody hell is going on here, Miss Andrews? Who have you been taking to?"

Any amusement had drained from the captain's face, taking all color with it. He appeared pale and shaken.

The ghosts recovered from their shock.

"Blimey, Pierre, she can see us."

"*Oui, mon ami!* She can help us save *Le Capitaine*. Please, mademoiselle, forgive us. My name is Pierre Lamont and my friend here is—"

"Answer me!" The captain set his hands on my shoulders, shifting me enough to bring my gaze to his.

"I am speaking only to the ghosts you carry with you. One is Pierre Lamont and the other is"—I looked up at Pierre, who answered—"Davey Kratch," I said repeating Pierre's answer.

Davey spoke up next. "We were part of his unit. We were killed while on a secret mission with the cap'n. He didn't murder us. Another bloke did; not sure who. Framed the cap'n, he did, lookin' very much like 'im. Even wore his uniform."

I relayed this to the captain, who released me as if

burned and backed away from me, almost in horror. His reaction made me feel as if I were a monster standing before him. The pain of his rejection slashed through me, and tears blurred my vision.

“How did you learn this? Who is making you do this? Why are you doing this?” he demanded.

I blinked at him, partly in confusion and partly to clear my eyes. I shook my head, baffled. “What do you mean? You didn’t believe me so I had to give you proof that I can really speak to ghosts.” I turned my back on him, blinking away more tears. The abhorrence in his expression tore at me. “You’re looking at me as if I’m either insane or a witch. Are you going to burn me at the stake, Captain Jansen?”

“Enough!” he yelled.

At that moment a loud clattering sounded in the outer room and the captain rushed to the door, giving me a full view of his back and the large reddened bruise that covered his right side from shoulder to hip. I nearly moaned from the pain he must be in.

“What are you doing, Smitty?”

“It’s her,” came a frightened voice. “The storm’s a turning and coming after us. No one ’as ever seen the likes of it before. It’s because of her, I’ll wager. The devil brought his wench to sea and the witch will kill us all.”

The captain’s rejection didn’t even come close to the horror in this man’s voice. Were Sean and Cassie right? Would everyone want to kill me if they knew of my secret gift?

“Oh, God,” I cried, feeling so faint that I sat down on the floor, afraid I might fall otherwise. The ship tilted wildly, spilling bathwater over the edge of the tub.

The captain cursed words I’d never heard before and ran from the doorway. “Come back here, you superstitious fool!”

Nausea churned inside of me and I had to gasp for air.

“Mademoiselle, do not distress. *Le Capitaine* will straighten out this mess. He is an honorable man. He will not hurt you or let another harm you either,” said Pierre the ghost.

I looked up at him. “Thank you, but I don’t think your captain—”

“Bloody hell!” shouted the captain as he stalked back into the room. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? God help us. We’ll both be lucky to live through this. Men trapped on a boat at sea, thinking they’re going to die, will do anything to save themselves. They’ll throw both of us overboard.” His fury blew as great as the storm. He grabbed a pair of pants and pulled them on, wincing with pain at the movement. He dropped the towel on the floor and snatched a shirt from a chest, groaning as he slipped it on. He finished by putting on his wet captain’s coat that hung on his desk chair, dripping puddles onto the planks.

“That’s impossible. Men wouldn’t be that superstitious now.” Right? I asked myself, sucking in a bracing breath to calm my nerves and focus on what was important. My heart pounded with the need for the captain to understand me. To believe me. “All I’ve done is tell the truth. I’m trying to save lives.”

He marched over to me and grabbed my arm. “Get up. We have to hurry.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, pressing my trembling knees together for support.

“On deck where Holms will immediately marry us. You’re going to swear upon the Bible you were jesting about seeing ghosts. That you said what you did in order to upset me because I was angry you’d stowed away on the ship. That we’ve been secretly engaged and you grew tired of waiting until you were older to marry. When we reach Northrope, we’ll have the marriage annulled, and once you’re back home, I’ll disappear to America or some other place far away, like I should have done nine months ago.”

“Go marry *Le Capitiane, cherie*,” said Pierre the ghost. “This is perfect! He will not be able to resist you.” He jabbed Davey with his elbow. “We’ll be back.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s their wedding night, knothed. We cannot intrude.”

“But we always wat—”

Pierre clamped his hand over Davey’s mouth. “Do not worry, *cherie*. We’ll give you and *Le Capitaine* privacy,” the ghost said, and he dragged his friend through the wall and disappeared.

Stunned, I let Captain Jansen lead me out of the cabin, along the corridor, and up the stairs. Everything was wet and the odors of salt, old ale, and sweat assaulted me. The floor and walls gleamed as if they’d just been coated with water. I could even hear it dripping in spite of the chilly wind’s howl from outside. The ship listed heavily to the right when we were halfway to the top, throwing the captain against the stairwell’s wall and me against him. He cursed harshly, pushed from the wall, and had to stop. With his eyes shut, he breathed in deep breaths, leaning hard on me, and I knew it was pain from his injured shoulder making him weak.

“This is ridiculous,” I said, trying to tug him back to his cabin. “You need to be in bed and you need to let a doctor look at your back.”

Opening his eyes to a hard stare, he spoke through clenched teeth. “What I need, Miss Andrews, is for you to have stayed put where you belong. Now all we can hope to do is stop a mutiny before it spreads. These men live their lives on the legends of the sea. Bad enough to be in the midst of a storm and unexpectedly find a woman aboard. For her to be accused of being a witch will send them over the edge of reason.” He covered the rest of the stairs two at a time, which left me scrambling to keep up with him.

“Captain, I rather think you are making more of this than

there is. Surely your men have a great deal of respect for you—”

“Deverell or Dev.”

“What?”

“My name, dear bride.” He stopped at the top of the stairs and reached down to pull me up to his step. Then, threading his fingers into my hair, he lifted my face to his, and he kissed me hard, with no gentle prelude before unleashing his lust. His tongue immediately thrust against mine as he grasped my bottom and pressed me intimately against his arousal. He demanded my response and when I finally relaxed against him, he ended the kiss. It was a rough kiss, one that held none of the seduction I’d felt before, but I had still been aroused in some dark way. “Now you don’t look like you’ve just lost your best friend. Don’t forget all that I said. You have to convince them of it. Your life—both our lives—may depend on it.”

He pulled open the door and a blast of cold wind and rain hit me, knocking me backward. Had the captain not been standing behind me, I would have gone tumbling down the stairs with the flooding rain.

He brought us out into the storm and I grabbed onto his arm, uncaring of how helpless an act that seemed. I was frightened by the magnificent, terrible beauty surrounding me. It literally sucked the breath from my lungs. The sea had changed into a dark, angry monster with huge swelling fists that rose up and tried to pound the ship beneath its surface. The wind whipped the rain at me with force enough to sting my skin even through the material of my dress. My hair blew wildly. Within moments I was completely soaked. Looking down, I gasped in shock. The white of my loose gown not only clung to my gossamer chemise and drawers, but it had turned transparent. I would have tried to cover myself, but I didn’t dare let go of my hold on the captain’s arm.

“I have to go back,” I yelled.

"Not until we stop the rumors. We need to marry before the storm worsens," he said, glancing my way. "Good God." The captain jerked off his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. Thankful, I slid my arms into sleeves that hung inches below the tips of my fingers.

Just then six sailors came running from around the corner.

"There's the witch. I told ya I weren't lyin'."

"I order you back to your posts, now!" First Mate Holms marched around the corner and froze at the sight of me.

Mr. Lincoln appeared next, his blond hair darkened by the rain. "Bloody hell," he said, looking at me, shocked.

"I'll handle this, Holms," the captain spoke, his tone deadly. "Smitty, you're defaming my fiancée, or should I say bride, since Holms is about to marry us. Unless you want those words to be your last words, you'd better change them."

"I heard her with my own ears say—"

"Please! Forgive me," I cried, fighting to see through the rain to their fearful faces. "I said what I did about talking to ghosts and being a witch because I was hurt and wanted to set the captain on his ear. Instead of being happy that I'd stowed away to be with him, Devereil was angry. Last Christmas, he'd secretly asked me to marry him when I was older. Then he sailed away for nine months." Tearful and pleading, I looked at each of them, searching for a glimmer of understanding or belief. "Last night, he told me he didn't have time to marry now, that he had to help Mr. Lincoln and didn't know when he would return. I'm afraid I was extremely miffed and acted rashly." I stepped forward, forcing a smile to my cold lips. All six sailors stumbled back, staring at me, unconvinced.

"Back to your posts or face the penalty. If any man has a problem with this, he can take it up with me personally," the captain said, staring each of the men down.

"And me," said Holms, stepping to the captain's side.

"And me," said Mr. Lincoln, stepping to my side.

There was a long, dark silence as everyone stared hard at each other. Then the men beside Smitty took a step back, leaving Smitty alone.

"Beggin' yer pardon, Cap'n," Smitty finally said, and he and the men turned away without setting their gazes on me. I felt as if I stood on a high precipice with the ground crumbling beneath my feet and nothing but air within my reach.

After they left the first mate spoke. "The men were already saying that a curse was upon them before Smitty came up with his story. More than those six are grumbling."

"I knew they would," Deverell said. "Let's get this ceremony over with."

A sharp pain cut through me. As many times as I imagined getting married at sea like my sister Andrie—and yes, as many times as I imagined that the man I married would be the captain—I never considered that it would be like this. A farce in the middle of a storm with icy rain pouring down on me in my oldest, ugliest gown, with my hair a bedraggled mess. I was too stunned to even cry.

"Mr. Lincoln, will you stand as witness?" asked Holms.

"I'll stand witness as to this day's events," he said cryptically. He and the captain stared at each other for a long moment.

"Then we are ready to proceed, Holms," said the captain.

"We are here—"

"Time, Holms. Just the vows."

"Captain Deverell Jansen, do you take, um, Miss—"

"Gemini Andrews," the captain inserted.

"To be your wife? To—"

"I do. Hurry, Holms."

"Miss Gemini Andrews, do you take Captain Deverell Jansen to be your husband?"

"I do," I said, nearly choking on the words.

"Then by the power vested in me I pronounce you husband and wife . . ." Holms's words were drowned out by an

erupting roar on the black-clouded sea. We all turned to look and I stared at the twisting horror coming right for the ship.

“Waterspout off the starboard bow!” came the shout from above.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing; the vortex seemed to be sucking the entire sea up in its violent, spinning winds. The ship and everyone on it appeared to be doomed.

# 6



Staring at the monstrous water serpent twisting toward me, I suddenly understood why the captain had feared mutiny from his men. In the face of the death and destruction bearing down on us, were I superstitious enough to believe I was the cause of such violence being directed at the *Black Dragon*, I'd have thrown myself overboard to save the rest of the men. But unlike Jonah, there'd be no saving whale waiting for me. I shuddered hard.

"God help us all," I heard the captain hiss under his breath. He looked at me, his eyes narrowed and dark with some indecipherable emotion, then he pushed me toward Mr. Lincoln. "Both of you go below and stay there. Up here, you'll either be swept overboard or cause someone to die trying to save you."

The captain immediately turned away and shouted orders as he jumped onto a rope and climbed up the rigging.

That he barely used his right arm told me how injured he was. Yet he didn't hesitate to take full charge of his responsibilities. "Holms, hard tack to the southwest until I get a good look at this monster. Men, raise the mizzenmast and prepare to fight for your lives!" His voice boomed over the noise of the storm and the approaching destruction.

A huge wave hit the side of the ship as it angled to turn and a wall of seawater crashed into me, knocking me off my feet. I choked, gasping for air as my eyes stung so badly that I could hardly see. The ship listed to the port steeply, and if I hadn't latched onto a rope and Mr. Lincoln hadn't quickly grabbed my other hand, I would have slid down the deck into the sea. I didn't want to go below the decks and not know what was happening in the storm, but I realized it was too dangerous to do anything else. Besides, seeing Captain Jansen climbing higher and higher up the rigging with the wind and the careening ship throwing him to and fro was too nauseating to watch.

Mr. Lincoln and I fought our way below the deck. I went directly to the outer room of the captain's quarters and he followed. Heat flagged my cheeks despite the chilling cold seeping into my bones, for as I entered the room that connected to both Captain Jansen's and Alex's cabin I realized for the first time just how compromising my circumstances appeared to a stranger, to someone who didn't know me and my sisters. I'd been so sure that I wouldn't be discovered until we reached Northrope that I hadn't given the matter any thought. Nor had I considered that it would be too terrible a situation if I was discovered. Andrie had sailed on the *Black Dragon* several times since marrying Alex without any trouble from the men at all. But then she hadn't been heard calling herself a witch while a terrible storm threatened the men.

If I'd had the slightest idea that my words of being a witch could have been overheard or taken seriously, I never

would have uttered them. At the time, I'd been hurt by Captain Jansen's reaction to my revelations and had spoken rashly. I now pulled his jacket closer about my person, shivering from the serious repercussions of my actions, and moved over to a table that I knew was anchored to the floor. I needed something solid to hold on to to keep from being pitched from one side of the cabin to the other. The storm had the ship rocking fiercely.

Mr. Lincoln was drenched as well, and a deep frown furrowed his brow. "Miss Andrews, I'm not sure exactly what has transpired here today, but I am highly disturbed by the entire situation. I've heard some things about Captain Jansen that cause me concern. Are you aboard the *Black Dragon* of your own free will? Were you forced to marry him just now?"

"Great heavens! Mr. Lincoln, that is not the case at all and don't you for a minute believe those ill rumors about the captain. They aren't true. I assure you I stowed away on the *Black Dragon* of my own free will and completely without Cap—um—Deverell's knowledge."

"Forgive me, but I must ask you why. I find it hard to believe a woman of your station in life would feel it necessary to stow away. Nor did your rushed union just now appear to be one of wedded bliss." His dark eyes were shadowed with concern.

I crossed my fingers, hoping that my half-truths would allay his concerns. "Mr. Lincoln, I'm not sure exactly what to say about the matter. The truth is Captain Jansen did make his, uh, affections known to me last Christmas and I returned them in kind. I have waited a long time for him to come back to Dartmoor's End and was frustrated that necessity allowed for him to only be there overnight. But that wasn't the reason I stowed away. My intent in coming wasn't to put him in the position of having to marry me immediately. I honestly did not believe I'd be found until we had

reached Northrope. You see, I feel very adamant about helping with the murder in Northrope and with the missing woman. If Jack Poole is walking around in disguise, I hope to be able to spot him. This man nearly killed my sisters and I want him caught and punished for his crimes before he has a chance to return to Dartmoor's End. I fear the captain is very upset with me over this matter." I didn't dare mention my gift to Mr. Lincoln. Not after the reactions of the captain and his crew. I didn't think I would ever tell anyone of it again.

"Good Lord!" Mr. Lincoln raked his fingers through his wet hair and paced across the cabin, fighting the shifting floor. We were both soaked and water from our persons pooled upon the planks. "As well he should be. I cannot believe you left the safety of your home for such a foolhardy mission. This situation is dangerous at best, and a very gruesome affair as well. It is nothing that a young woman should ever be involved in. Miss Andrews—um—Mrs. Jansen. I'm not sure how I should properly address you at the moment. This murder investigation is a matter that you need to leave to the men to handle."

I stiffened my shoulders, determined to be taken seriously. "While I respect your opinion, Mr. Lincoln, I beg to remind you that both my sisters and I were instrumental in exposing Jack Poole and uncovering his crimes that had remained hidden for at least eight years. Who knows how many more women the murdering constable would have secretly killed had we not intervened. I also assure you that I am fully aware of the gruesomeness of Jack Poole's crimes and do not think lightly of them. But no matter how abhorrent the situation is, it is my moral and civic duty to do what I can. You and Captain Jansen are going to have to accept that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I would like to change from these wet garments."

I wondered if any woman had ever before disagreed so

decidedly with Mr. Lincoln, for he stood staring at me as if he hadn't heard or understood my words. After a long, uncomfortable moment, he shook his head and cleared his throat. "We'll set the discussion aside until you're less distraught and can think more coherently."

Distraught? Me? I wasn't distraught and my thoughts were quite lucid. I might be slightly unsettled considering that within the past thirty minutes I'd been married, half drowned, thrust into the worst storm I'd ever seen, and the cause of the crews near mutiny in order to throw me overboard. But I wasn't distraught. In fact, I thought I was remarkably calm and clear considering the circumstances. How could he possibly call me distraught or incoherent?

He continued on as if he hadn't said anything erroneous. "Before I leave, Mrs. Jansen, you must understand that, well, quite frankly, if the marriage is not consummated then you can file with the authorities to have it annulled. I have attorneys in Northrope that will immediately see to the matter, and I can offer my protection until then if necessary. I feel it my responsibility that you fully realize you do not have to remain married to Captain Jansen should you not wish to be. I'm sure the captain thought that he was protecting you, but his rushing the matter may not have been entirely necessary, though I will admit I am unfamiliar with the workings of a sailing crew and what might incite them to act irrationally. Still, I'll stay close just in case. If you need anything, you've only to call out."

"Thank you, Mr. Lincoln. I'm sure I won't need your protection in regard to the captain himself. The crew, on the other hand, might be a different matter. They definitely were not happy to see me. So I appreciate your willingness to guard my door, so to speak. I'm in need of a rest and will try to do just that until this storm is over." I couldn't address the other issues he brought up, for tears flooded my eyes, forcing me to excuse myself as quickly as I could.

I made my way into Alex's cabin, unsure as to why I was crying and desperately needing to be alone to sort out my feelings over all that had just happened. Captain Jansen himself had already stated the marriage would be annulled the moment we reached Northrope. But I hadn't been able to tell Mr. Lincoln that truth. I didn't know if it was too humiliating to reveal, or if in my heart I so wanted to be married to Captain Jansen that I didn't want to consider *not* being married to him—though I surely did not want to be married in the manner in which we had married. I didn't feel married either. I felt like I was adrift on the sea in the midst of the storm, only all by myself.

Frustration also churned in my stomach. How could Mr. Lincoln reduce my strong, levelheaded explanation about why I stowed away on the *Black Dragon* to my simply being distraught and less than coherent? Why did Captain Jansen and Mr. Lincoln seem to have the same reaction toward my involvement in the murder investigation? And why did I feel bad about that?

With the captain, I felt guilty for stowing away and forcing him into a situation that necessitated him marrying me, though I hadn't asked or expected him to. And just now, as I left Mr. Lincoln wet and uncomfortable guarding my door, I felt badly for speaking my mind so firmly to him. Cassie and Andrie had both made bold moves while investigating the murders in Dartmoor's End, and I don't think anyone considered them to be distraught and less than coherent, or even childish.

Moving over to the mirror, I glared at my bedraggled image and cursed my petite size once again. The captain's jacket made me look like a child dressed in adult's clothing. I stripped it off and placed it over the back of Alex's chair to drip dry. As I removed my sodden dress and undergarments, I quickly tried to clean the sticky salt of the sea off my person and dressed as warmly as I could as I wiped

away my tears. They weren't doing anything but making me miserable. I don't know if it was because of the cold, or my fear of the sailors and the storm, or my shock at the day's events, but I couldn't seem to stop shivering. I finally had to crawl beneath the covers of the bed and pull them over my head.

The storm raged and I lay there with my fists clenching the sheets, wondering what danger the captain was meeting head-on at that moment and wondering about all that I would face in Northrope, from the annulment of my marriage to a murderous Jack Poole, provided that I lived that long. For hours I drifted between biting fear of the storm and nightmares where images of Flora's death and me being burned as a witch played before my eyes. At some point though, the previous night's restlessness caught up with me, and I fell asleep. The next thing I knew, blankets were being pulled from my grip and Captain Jansen, holding a lantern, was staring down at me, his grim expression made eerie by the play of light and shadows on his rough features.

"What is it?" I exclaimed, sitting up abruptly and blinking. I brushed my hair back from my face, sliding the heavy curtain of it over my shoulder.

"The storm is over," he said, moving to attach the lantern to a nearby hook, diffusing the light in the cabin to a soft glow.

"Over? But . . . it can't be." I knitted my brow. "I couldn't have slept through the whole thing! My first storm at sea and I missed it? How?"

He laughed, a rusty sound that held little mirth. "Considering it was the worst storm we've ever faced, I was about to ask you the same question. Are you ill?" He approached the bunk and set his palm to my forehead. "You've no fever." His touch, the briefest possible, left me feeling as if a fever had immediately erupted.

Heat flashed through me. Somehow, in the shadows of

the night, being alone with him like this seemed as intimate as disrupting his bath. Maybe more so now that he wasn't pacing and shouting, but was instead quiet and intent. My pulse sped and my stomach fluttered.

I could see he'd changed into dry clothes. His wind-blown dark hair still gleamed with moisture from the storm. The night's events had taken a toll on him. Lines of either exhaustion or pain creased his brow, leaving his expression bleak and his voice hoarse, just barely above a whisper. He looked and sounded like a man who'd been pushed past his limits on all accounts.

I wanted to soothe the furrow in his brow, to brush the remnants of the storm from his hair. I wanted to climb from the bed and hustle him into it so he could rest.

Or . . . move over and make room for him. Did I dare? At the very least, I couldn't keep staring up at him. Still sore from having cut my way free from the trunk, my neck and shoulders protested at the angle I had to stretch in order to see him as he stood next to the bed. I scooted closer to the wall and patted the edge of the bed. "I'm not ill, just exhausted from lack of sleep, but I will have a broken neck from looking up at you if you don't sit."

He hesitated and I bit my lip, waiting with my breath held. After a long moment, he moved closer to the bottom of the bunk and sat on the edge, resting his left shoulder against the bed's wooden frame. His gaze studied me intently, making me feel as if I were a puzzle he was trying to decipher, or a wild animal whose behavior he was trying to predict.

"What time is it?" I finally asked, my mouth almost too dry to speak. It seemed surreal to be sitting here with him so calm and quiet, considering our earlier encounter.

"After midnight."

I wet my lips, my mind racing with questions. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Just a few minor injuries to a half dozen of the crew. A miracle, considering the strength of the storm and the waterspout. Only the *Black Dragon* came away scarred. Her main mast is intact, but her foremasts are nothing but twisted splinters where the waterspout grazed over the bow of the ship. The worst damage is the masthead being snapped in half. We now have a headless dragon leading the ship."

"I would have thought the sailing masts were more of a concern."

"Not when superstitions are involved. The men fear the *Black Dragon* is now a doomed ship. We couldn't have had worse luck. Something like Saint Elmo's Fire would have turned the superstitious tide in the right direction and set the men at ease. Instead we're cursed more than ever."

"Saint Elmo's what?"

"Fire. It's a blue aura that can mysteriously cover the masthead during bad weather. Scientists worth their salt attribute the blue light to the electrical energy gathered during a severe storm. The superstitious consider it God's blessing upon a ship and its crew. *You'll* need to pray our trip to Northrope isn't plagued by any other mishaps and that the winds get us there swiftly."

The way he phrased his last sentence gave me the feeling he didn't pray—ever. And I wondered why as he continued to speak to me. My focus drifted from his words to the shadows that deepened his features and then to the full, firm curve of his lips and the memory of the kiss he'd given me just before we went out onto the deck. The kiss had been as elemental and turbulent as the storm. Both the same as and different than the way he'd kissed me in December, and I found myself wondering if the next time would be different, too. Now that we were . . . man and wife. I bit my lip. Would there even be a next kiss?

*When we reach Northrope, we'll have the marriage annulled, and once you're back home, I'll disappear to America,*

*or some other place far away, like I should have done nine months ago.*

Did he find me so abhorrent?

He paused and frowned at me. "Miss Andrews, is there something wrong?"

"Wrong?" I asked, gritting my teeth. "What possibly could be wrong? You could call me Gemini. After all, we were married earlier. At least I think that is what happened." I couldn't keep an edge of irritation from sharpening my voice.

He winced. "That is among the things I was just saying we need to discuss. Now would be the best time. Less chance of being overheard by anyone again."

"I take it that Mr. Lincoln is no longer just outside the door then?"

"No. He left for his own quarters, rather reluctantly though, I might add. He bordered on acting as if I were a pirate who'd just abducted you from the arms of your family. What did you say to him?"

"Nothing other than that I stowed away so that I could help with the murder investigation in Northrope."

The captain groaned. "Please tell me you didn't give him the same 'speaking to ghosts' story that you gave me."

"You mean the truth? No, I didn't tell him *that part* of the truth. I merely pointed out that my sisters and I were the ones who uncovered Jack Poole's crimes, which had remained hidden for eight years while he continued murdering. And that I considered it my moral and civic duty to see Jack Poole arrested in Northrope. The thought of him returning to Dartmoor's End and threatening my sisters and the babies makes me ill."

"Miss . . . Gemini, I can fully appreciate your concern and your desire to protect your family. It isn't necessary to fabricate this story of speaking to ghosts to gain my empathy. What you don't understand is that this affair is too dangerous for you to involve yourself in."

He said my name! My heart tumbled, but I sincerely wished it had been in passion and not in hurtful accusation. "Deverell, I am not fabricating anything. Do you know of a Pierre and a Davey who were killed? Were you blamed for their deaths? They say you were framed. They said that someone wearing your uniform was guilty of the crime. What happened?"

Deverell shoved his fingers through his hair and exhaled harshly. "Pierre and Davey were two of my most devoted soldiers. Ten years ago, they were on an important mission with me in Egypt for the British government that involved secret negotiations to buy shares of the Suez Canal. With the canal's opening in sixty-nine and its ownership in the hands of France and Egypt, the British Empire was severely compromised both in its military capabilities and its trade profits should the canal be closed to its use. By having shares in its ownership the British could safeguard their world power. My job was to negotiate a deal with Khedive Ismail, the ruler of Egypt, without France finding out until after the sale was finalized. On the eve of success, I accepted a large amount of money from the French government to sabotage the deal, killed my men so they wouldn't be able to testify against me, and tried to assassinate the khedive."

"I don't believe you did that."

"Why not? There were witnesses who claimed they saw me. Not to mention the overwhelming circumstantial evidence produced. I was found outside the khedive's palace with a fortune of jewels on my person."

"No matter what you say, I don't believe you did it."

He narrowed his gaze. "Why? You don't know me. You don't know what I'm capable of doing."

I shook my head, refusing to be swayed. "I would know more about you than just what I feel if you would share more. But there's something inside my heart that won't let

me believe those lies. Now tell me your truth. How did you come to be outside of the palace with the jewels?"

"The truth? I woke outside the palace having had a severe blow to my head, but don't exactly remember how it happened. My being knocked out was attributed by my military superiors to the palace guards apprehending me. Everyone refused to believe that the guards had found me injured, and of course, since the khedive's life was threatened by me, supposedly, they weren't about to give up the glory of having caught me. My impeccable record of service, social status, and a large sum of money passing over to untold individuals enabled me to be dishonorably discharged instead of executed. After all, money and social standing are more important than anything else, right? It's all of little consequence now. The British gained some control of the canal five years ago in another secret deal, and nobody cares about the murder of two loyal men who had no family, no title, and no money."

His hard tone left me no doubt how deeply his bitterness cut inside him.

"What do you remember before waking up at the palace?" I asked softly.

"Are you always so persistent?" He sighed. "I remember everything about my mission there in Egypt, but that night becomes blurry. After dinner that night, I left my quarters for the khedive's palace. I felt ill, but was determined to see the negotiations through. I remember getting into a public conveyance and the next thing I knew I woke up when the palace guards found me on the grounds with the jewels."

My heart pounded and my nails dug into my palms. I was outraged by his story. "You were drugged and framed and your friends were murdered! You can't just let that go."

"Miss—Gemini, I appreciate your defense of me, but there is nothing that can be done. By the time I was released from prison, any evidence was gone. Perhaps if someone

had believed my story and immediately investigated it rather than clamping me in irons, the real culprit could have been found. But it is too late now.”

“Pierre’s and Davey’s ghosts don’t think so. Maybe there is some information they can give us that will help find the real murderer.”

“People may think a lot of different things about me, but I am not a fool. You don’t really expect me to believe there are ghosts hovering over my head that you can speak with.”

I sighed. “Believe what you will, but it is true.”

He arched a heavy brow. “Fine. Then ask Pierre what happened in Barbados. Only he can tell you that.”

“I can’t at the moment.” Great heavens, where was a ghost when I needed one?

The captain smiled in triumph.

I blew out an exasperated breath. “They aren’t *always* hovering over you. And it’s *your* fault they aren’t here right now.”

“My fault? This is getting past the point of ridiculous. I cannot believe that I am even trying to logically discuss this with you.”

“It’s completely logical and, yes, your fault. You insisted on marrying me today and they’ve gone off to give us privacy for our wedding night. I gather they are according me more respect than they usually do. From the moment I first met you they’ve been angling for some woman to— What was it they said?” I shook my head and grimaced. “They wanted a woman to give the *Diable* his due.”

The captain moved so fast that he was a blur in front of my eyes. He leaned forward and latched his hands on my shoulders, bringing my face within inches of his. He glared intently into my eyes. “What did you say?”

I braced my hands against his chest, pushing back just a little for comfort. He eased his grip, but not by much. I’d certainly said something to gain his attention. “The first

time I met you after Alex and Andrie's wedding, when you came over to the crate and spoke to me, and then again when you kissed me last Christmas outside on the balcony, the ghosts spoke of giving the devil his due. I gather it's in reference to being intimate with a woman. They were at first complaining that I was too proper to give you your due and then, well, after you kissed me they didn't think that anymore."

"It's just not possible," he whispered. He stared at me for a long time, then he drew in several deep breaths of air, but seemed frozen, unable to do anything but look at me. The heat of his body seeped into mine and I could no longer just sit there. He smelled of salt and spice, and the firm supple strength of his chest beneath my fingers beckoned for me to feel more. I filled my lungs with the scent of him and flexed my fingers against his muscles before I slid my palms up to his shoulders and felt the tenseness bunched there. My gaze dropped from the sharp intensity of his eyes and went to his mouth.

"Yes, it is," I said. Leaning forward, I brought my lips to his. I felt so very unsure of what I was doing that my whole body trembled. My breath caught and my heart paused as I brushed my lips against his. He stiffened. His grip on my shoulders tightened and I knew he was about to pull away from me, but just as I thought I should pull away from him first, I remembered his determined kiss before pulling me out into the storm. He'd not really given me a choice. He'd kissed me and demanded that I respond. Why couldn't I do the same?

Falling forward, I crushed my chest against his and slid my tongue into his mouth. His responding groan rumbled deep, and as he thrust his tongue against mine, the kiss became a powerful explosion of pent-up desires. I'd waited nine months for him, dreamed of him, craved another taste of his passion, and all I could think of was feeling more.

I ran my fingers into the damp silk of his hair, relishing in its thick richness. His rough palms cupped my cheeks, anchoring me to wave after wave of his flooding desire. His tongue delved deeper into me, claiming every part of me as he swept my passions into a hot, stormy tide.

Suddenly feeling as wild as the wind, I pushed my hands past the collar of his shirt to touch his skin. He trembled beneath my touch, as if it were something he needed to feel as desperately as I needed to touch him. He groaned deeper and I kissed him back harder, rising to my knees in the bed. He felt so good and firm and warm that I pressed for more, but the buttons on his shirt inhibited my quest.

"Please, let me touch you more, just once. There is so much that I want to feel and know," I whispered, trying to get to the buttons that were crushed between us. It seemed as if I'd spent all of my life waiting for things, and I wanted them now. Had to have them now.

"God, Gemini," he whispered. Easing back from me, breathing heavily, he grabbed the edges of his shirt and ripped them apart. Buttons flew. He left the shirt on but hanging open. I slid my hands inside and shoved the cotton from his shoulders so that I could not only feel the full expanse of his chest but could see it as well. He shut his eyes and appeared to be offering himself to my exploration. His body trembled as I touched him, tentatively at first, then with more assurance. I slid my fingers over the scar next to his heart, wincing at how close he must have come to dying. "How were you hurt here?"

He tensed. "It's not something I talk about. Ever. I wasn't looking when I should have been."

I didn't press for more of an answer, for I didn't want him to turn from me.

He knelt on the bed as I did, only he sat back on his heels whereas I remained on my knees. Leaning up, I kissed him softly and then pulled his shirt all the way down until the

sleeves caught on his fisted hands. Then I gazed at all I had uncovered.

Broad and firmly sculpted, he was like a statue of a Greek god come to life. His chest and stomach rippled down like wave after wave of fluid strength and power. Following the smattering of dark hair across his chest, I ran my fingers over the supple, vibrant warmth of him. Silky and soft hair still tickled my palms, making me tingle until my toes curled. I brought my fingers back to the center of his chest and slid the tips down the dark path bisecting his stomach. His skin was darkly tanned in contrast to the pale whiteness of mine. When I reached the indentation of his belly button his hips jerked. I snapped my gaze lower and saw his arousal pressing tautly against the buttons of his pants. They looked uncomfortably tight and I lifted my gaze to his face. He'd been watching me touch him and the vulnerable yet predatory expression on his face sent my heart pounding even harder, for I knew at that moment I'd never been more powerful in my life, and at the same time so powerless. Knowing him was a compulsion I could not turn from. Touching him was as necessary as my next breath.

With my gaze locked on his, I let my hands slide lower, down the silky line of hair to the soft cotton of his pants and the hard metal of its top button. He shuddered. My mouth went suddenly dry and my breath left me in a *whoosh* as I thought of undoing that button.

# 7



Tentatively, I let my fingertips slip over the soft cotton, brushing the top of his arousal. The heat of him seemed to burn my fingers then vibrate up my arm to warm and shake places inside me that I never knew were there. The cloth and buttons of his pants were stretched to the point that I wondered if they would burst apart. Good heavens, I thought, expelling a breath. He had to be extremely uncomfortable. With this sort of anatomy, why did men even wear pants? It seemed pants would be more suited to a woman's figure and those men who wore kilts were smarter than the rest. Surely he had to be hurting, as swollen and constricted as he was.

I started to ask him just that, but he shuddered again and grabbed my wrist. I gasped and lifted my gaze to his, wanting to protest. I hadn't had the chance to really know what that part of him felt like. But before I could speak, he thrust

my palm hard against his arousal, rubbing it up and down the solid length of his male sex several times. I didn't have time to dwell on how utterly amazing I thought that was because, groaning, he jerked his shirt off and then, wrapping his hand in my hair, he claimed my mouth in a kiss so forceful that I found myself falling back upon the bed with him following. His body pressed me deep into the softness of the bed. I felt gloriously excited and oddly comfortable considering the heaviness of his weight upon me, but it was as if we were exactly where we belonged. Bereft of his arousal, I explored his back from his neck to the hard curve of his buttocks, careful not to hurt his bruised right shoulder. I knew it had to pain him, but not enough to diminish his passion, or the heat of his desire. He made me burn—everywhere.

I was still lost in the power of his kiss when he pulled back, leaving me breathless and wanting more, and I couldn't fathom why he had stopped. It wasn't because he didn't desire me. His breaths were as ragged as mine and the telltale pulse at his throat beat as wildly as mine. He leaned on his left arm, shifting his weight to the side, and looked down at me, drawing in several deep breaths as if he were trying to think. I didn't want him to do that. In my opinion he thought too much and let himself feel too little.

"You look like a golden Sea Siren," he said as he slid his fingers through my hair, fanning it out across the bed. Then he slid his hand slowly up my arm to my neck and drifted his touch along the lace edging of my bodice. His expression of want was akin to a child standing outside a store, desperately craving something inside that he could never have. He stopped at the top button, pausing as if the future of the world rested on his next move. I thought for sure he was about to pull away and leave me. I didn't want the world weighing on this moment and knew I had to do something or forever regret losing this opportunity to feel his touch.

Unsure, I followed his example. I grabbed his wrist, and when his dark gaze sought mine, I pressed his hand to my breast and arched my back. "Touch me," I whispered. "Please. I want to know what your touch feels like. What it feels like to be touched."

He exhaled harshly. "Gemini. You can't, we can't—"

Leaving his hand on my breast, I pressed my fingers to his mouth, searching his dark gaze. "All my life I've heard 'you can't.' Please, this once. The world isn't going to end if you touch me." In fact, I'd watched my sisters carefully and it seemed that Cassie's and Andrie's worlds really began with their involvement with Sean and Alex. And I knew some of that happened *before* they were married. And here I *was* married.

Still he hesitated. Swallowing any uncertainty, I slid the first button of my dress loose, moving to the second, then the third. He watched me. He was so still that I wondered if he even breathed. As I fumbled with the fourth button he groaned and pushed away my fingers and deftly undid the buttons all the way to my waist, peeling back the edges to expose the thin chemise stretched too tautly over my aching breasts. I usually outgrew my clothes bosom first, and things had been snug of late, but never this tight. It was as if my breasts had swelled from my need for him.

I arched my back again and several buttons on my chemise popped off.

"Hell," he whispered. "I'm sure to dine there for this," he said, then he finished the deed. The rest of the tiny chemise buttons popped and cool air fanned my breasts as they spilled free from the binding. "Good bloody hell!" he said.

"What's wrong?" I asked, attempting to sit up, wondering what had disrupted him so.

His gaze left my breasts and met mine before he shook his head. "Nothing's wrong. You're just so . . . blessed." Looking as awed as I felt, he leaned down and kissed the tip

of each of my breasts. Fire flashed through me, going deep, eliciting a ragged moan. Any hesitation or reluctance he'd shown disappeared, evaporated beneath a scorching blaze of passion. His mouth covered one breast and his hand the other, and I didn't know which had me gasping the most. The wet heat of his mouth suckled one breast, his tongue dueling relentlessly with my aching nipple. And the hot, manly roughness of his palm and fingers rubbed my other nipple to a peak that throbbed fiery pulses to my feminine flesh. I grew damp everywhere, as if every part of me wept from the sheer pleasure of his touch. A fever came over me, blurring my mind, I couldn't think of anything but knowing more of this wild heaven. I touched him everywhere I could reach. I heard sounds, deep, needy sounds that grew, but didn't realize I was the one crying out until he brought his mouth back to mine to kiss me softly and whispered, "If you moan any louder, I fear you're going to wake the ship."

"I'm sorry," I said, and gasped. "But . . . but I can't help it. I feel as if I'm on fire and . . . I don't know what to do . . . But I don't want it to end . . . ever. I feel as if I'm dying with the pleasure. Oh, help."

"I'll not only dine in hell, but will most likely burn there as well," he said roughly, before he kissed me. Hard. His hand left my breast and moments later he pulled my skirts up, leaving them bunched at my waist as he untied my drawers and tugged them down past my knees. Sliding his thigh over my knee, he urged my legs apart. Cool air brushed over my skin, but did nothing to ease me. Nothing helped until he pressed his palm to my feminine sex, creating a shard of pleasure so intense that my hips lifted, pushing against his hand. Then I felt his fingers open my most secret folds, sliding along until he found a place that made me shudder uncontrollably with pleasure.

My breaths came so quickly that I could not get any air, and my heart beat so hard that I couldn't hear anything but

a roar that was louder than any storm in the sea. My back bowed from the bed, my heels digging in as my body strained for him and the relentless flicker of his finger over that most sensitive part of me. I felt as if I were climbing toward the stars and then I burst apart as a bright light of pleasure exploded inside of me. My vision went all dark, my mind shuddered, and my body convulsed as I screamed in ecstasy right into his mouth.

He rolled on top of me and the hard urgency of his arousal pushed against my thigh. I felt him unbutton his pants and the hot, thick shaft of his manhood pressed like a brand, sliding up my leg. But instead of delving inside of me as I knew he was supposed to do, he shifted so that he trapped his arousal between his stomach and mine. He filled his palm with my breast and claimed another kiss before thrusting his hips against me until he moaned and shuddered and a hot wetness covered my stomach.

I knew he'd then gained the same pleasure he'd given me. We'd shared pleasure from each other without actually being together, as I knew relations between a man and a woman were supposed to be. I felt a little disappointed, that something more could have been shared had we been together that way, but I didn't dwell on the feeling, for he soon pulled me close, brushed his lips over mine, smoothed my damp hair from my brow, and fell asleep practically in an instant. There was no mistaking the soft snore against my temple.

I smiled softly. He'd learned tonight that though petite, I was far beyond any schoolgirl notions he'd used as an excuse to stay away from me. In fact, he'd been enthralled with me, and for the first time in my life, I didn't feel frustrated with how God had fashioned me.

Pinned beneath him, I relished that all I could do was hold him close and wait for him to wake. Being touched by him, knowing the pleasure he could bring me, was so much more than I imagined it could be, and I embraced the sensations of

it, replaying in my mind every touch, every feeling, every need. I let it all wash over me like a flowing benediction, until my heart swelled with all we had shared.

I slept some, but mostly I stayed awake, absorbing the feel, the scent, the warmth, and the comfort of Deverell's body so close to mine. And during the night, something inside me that had stayed in a tight knot of horror for so long began to loosen. As if the pleasure I'd experienced with Deverell gave me the strength to face the evil Jack Poole had done to Flora McGowan. I'd lived her murder through her ghost last year and the details of her torture had lain deep within me, in a dark corner of my soul that I hadn't had the courage to think about. I knew I would never be free of the horror, but it helped to realize that being close to Deverell could ease that harsh reality. It also made what lay ahead in Northrope, should I find the murdered woman's ghost, a little less daunting.

I woke on fire and didn't want to move, but I didn't know how long I could lay still and burn either. Sometime while we slept we had shifted, for I was no longer on my back beneath Deverell, but now lay on my side. And the rough stubble of his jaw was no longer pressed to my temple, but was buried against my chest. His every exhale sent a breath of heated air over my exposed nipple, making me tingle all over again.

The lantern had gone out at some point during the night, leaving the cabin bathed in shadows that lightened as muted pink and gray brightened the dawn just visible through the portholes. Rocking gently, the ship seemed as if it barely moved upon the sea, but it was enough to cause his thigh, snugly seated between mine, to brush me intimately . . . repeatedly.

I'm not sure what I did to wake him, whether it was the

deep breath I drew, or if my hips had shifted closer to him, but he suddenly tensed and his head lifted. He met my gaze then he looked down at my breasts, which were inches from his face, and blinked twice before falling onto his back and groaning.

“Good God. I can’t decide if I’m in heaven or hell,” he muttered. “You’re more dangerous and tempting than . . . anything.” He reached over and pulled a corner of a blanket up, but as he covered me he slowly slid his hand across my breasts, making me gasp. He then groaned and fell back on the bed. “Bloody hell. I don’t think I can even walk at the moment.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, confused. Anchoring the blanket to my breasts with a hand to my chest, I sat up to look at him.

He slid his eyes open to look at me and the needy heat in them burned a path to all of the secret places he’d uncovered last night. My toes curled. In the silken shadows of dawn, he was more handsome than ever, all rough and rumpled. His blue eyes were smoky with desire and turbulent with need, like a wild, misty sea. His dark hair lay mussed along his furrowed brow and unshaven jaw. My fingers clenched as the urge to touch him all over again gripped me. My gaze dropped to the tanned contours of his chest and the path of dark hair that led to . . . Oh, my . . . His arousal had the hem of my dress looking as if it were hoisted upon a sword. I considered snatching my skirts back.

“What’s wrong?” he repeated. “Last night should not have happened. I should be shot for letting it happen. And this morning . . .” He groaned. “You’re killing me.”

I frowned at him, even more confused. “Was it not pleasurable to you? It was the most wondrous thing I have ever felt.”

He shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s not the point.” His jaw clenched.

"Surely you're misguided in that assessment. Giving pleasure is most certainly the point of these sorts of relations. Good heavens, you're not taken with the notion that a man and woman can only be intimate for propagation purposes, are you?"

"Propagation what?" he asked, coughing as if he choked on the words. "No!" he said, holding his hand up as he glared at me. "We are not going to engage in any conversation about the propagation of anything. Didn't you hear anything I told you yesterday? I am a ruined man with nothing to offer a lady. A man who doesn't even have honor to give."

"Nonsense. Honor is not measured by the amount of gossip uttered by fools. It's gauged by a man's actions, and you've been honorable, to a fault even. I'm still not sure it was entirely necessary to marry me to protect me yesterday. Even Mr. Lincoln expressed such an opinion as well."

"What?" He sat up so quickly that I couldn't help but immediately look to see what his abrupt motion did to my precariously perched skirts.

I caught a full glimpse of his arousal before he tried to cover himself with my skirts again. But when they wouldn't quite reach, he cursed, tossed them aside and then amazingly managed to button his pants, grunting uncomfortably as he did so. I imagined stuffing himself into such tight confines hurt and would have asked him why he was so determined to do so had he not seemed somewhat frantic about covering himself. Was he ashamed about his natural body? I'd heard of such religions; they had propagation notions as well.

"There's no reason to be embarrassed about your male member. You're very nicely fashioned, I suppose. I've only Zeus to compare you to, but you're very similar, I think. In size, too. Though as hard as his male member is there'd be no stuffing it anywhere. I am surprised you made yourself fit." I seriously didn't know how he had. Surely his buttons would burst at any moment.

“Gemini!” He cleared his throat. “Would you look at my face?”

I snapped my gaze to his, my cheeks heating. I hadn’t meant to stare and probably wouldn’t have if he hadn’t acted so peculiar. “Yes?”

“Do not say another wo— I—” He exhaled hard. “Who the hell is Zeus?”

“The Greek god.”

“So you see and speak to gods as well as ghosts?” His voice rose so high that had he been my aunt Lavinia I’d be racing for the smelling salts, sure that she was about to swoon.

“Heavens no. Whatever gave you that idea? There’s a very well defined and rather large statue of Zeus in the gardens at Killdaren’s Castle.”

His jaw clenched. “What did Mr. Lincoln say to you yesterday?”

How had he gone from his anatomy to Mr. Lincoln’s advice?

“Mr. Lincoln was concerned for my welfare. After I assured him that I hadn’t been abducted, but was on board the *Black Dragon* of my own free will and without your knowledge, he advised me that an unconsummated marriage could be quickly annulled by his attorneys. He also offered me his personal protection should I be in need of it.”

“He did, did he?” Deverell rolled over me and climbed from the bed. He paced across the room as if perturbed. Very perturbed.

“Yes.” Good heavenly day. “I don’t know why you’re disturbed by his offer to assist me. It isn’t as if an annulment wasn’t your original plan anyway. But since that has changed, it is of little consequence now.”

He froze and looked at me, his hand in mid rake through his hair. “Changed? Nothing’s changed.”

My eyes narrowed even as my mouth dropped open in

surprise. Everything inside me caught on the edge of the painful breath I drew. "But last night—?" I was too choked to speak and gestured with my hand to my person.

He shook his head. "Last night should not have happened. It was a mistake and I am sorry. You are still a virgin, Gemini, so—"

"Get out!" I shouted.

"Shh! Someone will hear you." He opened and shut his mouth twice, before finally speaking. "Listen, you can't let what happened ruin your future prose—"

He should have just kept silent. I threw a pillow at him and he ducked. Then, tossing off the covers, I scrambled from the bed, so mad that I could scream. Thankfully, I'd kicked free of my drawers during the night so I didn't have to worry about tripping over them in my haste. My skirts fell to cover my femininity and I clasped my dress closed over my stomach, which was faintly sticky. I couldn't manage to cover my breasts and still have a hand free to throw something at him with, so I didn't bother. And, quite frankly, the way his gaze had riveted to my bosom and stayed there, I made sure my breasts were as visible as possible as I marched to the desk and picked up my silver brush.

"Get out! Or your heart's going to get bruised, too," I said, holding up the brush, my chest heaving with anger and a pain I didn't want to acknowledge. I'm not sure I had expected him to completely change his mind about things, but I hadn't expected he could dismiss last night so easily. Last night mattered and I wasn't going to let him pretend it didn't.

He jerked his gaze to mine, looking a little dazed. "Gemini, you can't think that last night meant—"

I let the brush fly. He ducked to the side, which would have been a fine thing had my aim to his chest been anywhere near accurate. Or perhaps I was shorter and he was taller than I supposed. Regardless of the reason, the brush hit him in the crotch. He grunted as if shot and grabbed

himself there. His tanned face washed white and he fell back against the door on his right shoulder, then groaned again. "Bloody hell," he gasped. "What kind of aim is that?"

I took a step toward him, my mouth hung open in surprise. I hadn't meant to hurt him. I'd meant to make him leave before his words put any more needles into my heart, but I hadn't meant to cause him serious injury. "Deverell?" I managed to say.

"Don't move," he said, sounding as if his teeth were clenched tight. He opened the door behind him and stepped backward from the room, then shut the door firmly.

More tears flooded my eyes as anger at myself and at him churned inside me. I marched across the cabin, irrationally wanting him to come back so that I could yell at him, wanting anything but the sudden silence. I had wanted to stop the painful words he was thoughtlessly delivering, yet now that he was gone, I hurt even more.

I stepped on something soft and looked down to see Deverell's shirt. A clear picture formed in my mind, him stripping it off just before he kissed me as if I were the only woman on the face of the earth. I picked up the shirt and hugged it to my bare breasts, breathing in his scent, unable to stop more tears from flowing. Stumbling to the bed, I crawled in, feeling wretched. I shouldn't have lost my temper. How could I expect him to see me as a grown woman if I reacted like that? I should have calmly told him that I hadn't expected him to acknowledge the passion between us so quickly. But I hadn't been able to think. How could he think that last night didn't mean anything at all?

# 8



According to my timepiece, it was noon. Deverell had yet to return since his predawn departure, nor had anyone else appeared. In the interim, I'd managed to recuperate from this morning's upset. An invigorating scrub in front of the washstand and polishing off my cheese and bread with several—well, maybe a dozen—tiny sips of Kildaren's spiced wine had done wonders for my outlook and physical state. I tingled everywhere and had to keep reining my mind back from reliving last night's pleasures.

Donning the prettiest gown in my trunk, I studied myself in the mirror. My eyes looked brighter than ever and my lips appeared fuller, as if at any moment I expected something wonderful to happen. Something like the captain, Deverell, my new husband, kissing me and touching me again.

The dress was a soothing shade of blue made of soft wool with delicate touches of white lace and yellow flowers

at the cuffs and lining the décolletage, which dipped tantalizingly enough to catch a man's attention. The matching bonnet framed my face and blond curls with the same "breath of spring" fashion, making me feel fresh and sunny, a look that would hopefully alleviate some of the sailors' apprehensions—and attract Deverell's attention.

Over the past few hours, I'd come to the conclusion that my only course of action in the face of yesterday's events would be to do as I had started out my journey doing—taking control of my fate rather than letting others determine it for me. To that end, I couldn't continue to stay sequestered in the cabin. The crew had a misguided notion of who I was and Deverell had erroneous ideas of what we were. And only I could put things right. Beginning now.

Still, as I drew a blue parasol from my trunk and exited the cabin, I paused for a long time in the corridor, listening to the sounds of the sailors working and gauging their mood. It wouldn't do to be attacked the moment I emerged. Unfortunately, their shouts, bits of conversation, and occasional laugh or curse revealed very little, and I finally forced myself up the stairs and out onto the deck.

At first I stood in the doorway, unable to move as I took in the extent of damage the storm had wrought. The entire bow of the ship above the level of the deck resembled a splintered wreckage. The foremasts and masthead had been destroyed and now a number of sailors busily worked about the area. Some untangled ropes and sails from the jagged pieces of wood; others picked up debris and tossed it into the sea. To look at the beauty and the brightness of the day, a storm of such viciousness didn't seem possible. The sun, a full disk of radiating warmth, brought all the glorious shades of blue in the sky to light and sprinkled the sea with glittering diamonds. Salt and a slight chill invigorated the air. I welcomed it, drawing in several deep breaths, finding the combination more exciting than the spiced wine.

One sailor looked my way and appeared to frown, but I wasn't sure, for the sun affected my sight. He immediately stopped working and nudged another sailor beside him, who also halted. They didn't run my way as if ready to toss me overboard at that moment, so I took heart and stayed. I wasn't about to test their restraint by approaching them too soon, though. Smiling in their direction, I nodded and then turned to walk toward the starboard railing. Halfway there I encountered Mr. Holms, the first mate who'd married me to the captain yesterday. Attractive in a wholesome way with kind, gray eyes and reddish brown hair that turned bright red on his beard, he looked to be not much older than I.

"Mrs. Jansen!" he said, coming to a surprised stop. "You shouldn't be up here. We're still assessing the damage from the storm and it's not safe yet."

"The damage looks to be very bad."

"Not too. With some work she'll be steady again. I must apologize for the rough and abbreviated ceremony, but the situation was a bit harrowing." He seemed more than just a little uncomfortable about it all.

My cheeks heating, I nodded. "Thank you, sir. But there is no need to apologize. Captain Jansen felt the situation dire and there was little time for trivialities. But if you wouldn't mind, I've been stuck below and desperately need the air. Is there a safe place that I might sit or stand for a while?" I looked about, hoping to spot either Deverell or an out-of-the-way place I could stay.

"If you're looking for the captain, he's up above, checking for any damage to the rigging. He's never been a man to stand on the deck and watch others work; always rolls up his sleeves and pitches in."

Craning my neck, I caught sight of Deverell at the very top of the sails. "He's also a man who doesn't give himself any quarter either, does he? His shoulder and back are more than just slightly bruised."

"You know him well," said Holms. "So you also know he won't be pleased if you're endangered in any way."

"Surely there must be someplace that I could sit for just a little while?" I wasn't beyond employing a pleading look on occasion, and now did so.

He exhaled heavily. "Very well. Let me escort you to the helm. We're just easing through the water until we can get the *Black Dragon* ready to sail again." He offered me his elbow and I rested my hand on his arm. He led me to the helm, where two sailors were polishing the wood to a warm glow, one man on the platform's railing, the other on the huge knobbed wheel that directed the ship.

"Will it be long before we are under way?" I asked.

"I'm not anticipating more than an hour or two at most. And if all goes well we'll arrive in Northrope by late tomorrow evening."

I bit my lip and refused to even think about the darkness that awaited me in Northrope, not while the sun was so warm and beautiful. Instead, I put my mind toward enjoying the day and mulling over what I could do to set Deverell's annulment notions straight. Despite what he thought, my young age and the questionable allegations about his honor weren't acceptable reasons for us not to be together. In fact, the only reason I'd accept would be that he didn't care for me, which, judging by our passionate encounters, wasn't the case.

After a stiff introduction to the two sailors, Mr. Holms seated me on a small bench on the inside left corner of the steering platform. The ship rocked gently on the waves and, with no sails up, it moved slowly with the light breeze. Once I was seated, Mr. Holms stood at my side, fidgeting with his fingers as he gazed about the ship. I had the distinct impression he was foregoing his duties in order to watch over me.

"Mr. Holms, I'm sure there are things you need to attend

to. If I promise not to move from this spot without escort, will you leave me to my private musings for a while?"

His face crinkled with relief. "I'll return to check on you in fifteen minutes."

"Please take your time. I've my parasol to ward off the sun, so I'm in no hurry to go below and would like to stay as long as possible."

"Very well. Send one of the sailors for me should you need anything before I return."

"I will." Content with my promise, he left, moving back to the bow of the ship and the worst of the damage.

Leaning back, I searched for Deverell again and found him still hanging precariously amid the ropes, beams, and furled sails at the very tip of the masts. Another man was with him and they appeared to be moving along the rigging, testing each knot and connection. Deverell was by far the most charismatic and powerfully built man on the ship. While others had a wiry or bulky countenance that leant a burliness to their motions, Deverell moved with dynamic grace. Much as Alex Killdaren's Friesians compared to mules or plow horses. Whenever I was at Dragon's Cove with Andrie, we would often sit on the terrace for lunch or tea and watch the magnificent black war horses train with Alex, something he did by words and his will and not by whip. My brother-in-law was a master at smooth talking. A trait Deverell obviously had not picked up from his association with Alex. I winced as my mind went over our conversation this morning.

"I see you've made a miraculous recovery, Miss, um, Mrs. Jansen," Mr. Lincoln said. Turning, I found that he'd approached from the back of the ship to join me at the helm. His burnished blond hair lay windblown across his brow and his dark eyes held concern for me. Dressed in a dark brown coat over a crisp white shirt, fawn pants, and gleaming black boots, he had the look of a gentleman at leisure.

"How so?" I asked, smiling.

"When I inquired about you this morning, Captain Deverell said you were ill and might be so for the duration of the voyage. I was about to go below and attempt to speak directly to you."

The fact that Deverell intended to keep me below decks until we'd reached Northrope perturbed me and made me more determined to stay above deck.

"He must have misunderstood my request for quiet this morning," I replied, barely restraining myself from glaring in Deverell's direction. Moving over on the bench, I patted the place next to me. "You're welcome to join me."

"Thank you. I think I will," he said. Sitting beside me, he stretched out his long legs and settled his ungloved hand against his thighs. His hands were large and capable, but uncalledoused, a gentleman's hands. While not pale, he wasn't tanned either. So unlike the captain, he didn't spend a lot of time outdoors. I noted his handsomeness again, thinking that prior to meeting Deverell, I at one time would have likely been attracted to Mr. Lincoln. He had both Lord Percy and Lord Ashton's golden genteel appeal, but there was an underlying steel and sense of purpose to Mr. Lincoln that the other men lacked.

"If I appeared rude yesterday after you escorted me below, I apologize."

"No need. The situation was rather difficult."

"Still, I thank you for your help and your concern. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to set yesterday's concerns aside and have you tell me about yourself and of Northrope. Being a coastal town, is it similar to Dartmoor's End?"

"Larger. Northrope's proximity to France makes it a busy port. And added to the railway's arrival in nearby Bournemouth and the general lessening in trade restrictions, Northrope's township increases every year."

"And yourself?"

"Are you asking if I grow larger every year as well?"

I laughed, louder than I meant to. The sailors nearby looked up, their expressions curiously questioning. I hoped they were realizing that I could in no way be considered a witch. But then, the definition of a witch would take some time on my part to define. Having experienced what I considered to be true evil from Jack Poole, I would never condemn anyone over any belief or practice unless they were akin to Jack Poole's malevolence.

"Heavens no," I said. "And what about yourself and Northrope? If you remember those were my questions."

"There isn't much to say. I am a scientist."

My brows lifted as my eyes widened. "A scientist? I supposed you to be a person of authority in Northrope."

"My good friend Rhys Williams is the magistrate. Currently he is leading the search for the second woman who is missing. He didn't want to leave during the investigation. Since I have a rather flexible schedule, I volunteered to make the journey on his behalf."

"I see," I said, wondering why he'd responded to my desire to assist with the murder investigation as a person in authority would. "What is it that you study?"

"Whatever I take an interest in," he said. "My methods are quite unorthodox, I'm afraid. Most scientists choose a subject and immerse themselves and their entire lives to the exclusion of everything else. After a time, I become bored with any one subject of study. I was considering a study on the habits and behaviors of coastal birds and those in the salt marshes, but I may change that now."

"Oh?"

He sighed, heavily. "This is a poor subject for so beautiful a day, but truthfully, while I was out observing the wildlife, birds in particular, I discovered the murdered woman at the Druid ruins. So little is known about the Druids and why an

individual would choose the site for so horrific an act that I may make those ancient people the focus of my next study.”

As much as I wanted to ask him about what he found, I didn’t want to go to the site with any known facts about what had happened. I’d compare those with what I hoped to learn after going there myself. I forced a smile. “You’re right. There will be time enough in Northrope to speak of what happened. Perhaps we should return to the other question then.”

“Of my growing larger every year?”

I laughed again. “You’re incorrigible, Mr. Lincoln.”

“No. I believe I just like seeing you laugh, Miss—”

“Mrs. Jansen,” interjected Deverell as he dropped to the deck from the rigging above. He stood between me and the sun, casting a dark shadow over me and making it impossible for me to read his expression, though his tone spoke volumes. During my conversation with Mr. Lincoln, I hadn’t noticed that Deverell had descended from his high perch. Based on his tone, he obviously didn’t like something about my exchange with Mr. Lincoln. But what? Then it occurred to me that he’d sounded rather proprietary. Was it possible that he was jealous of Mr. Lincoln?

It didn’t seem likely, but I found myself irritated that he had no trouble claiming or denouncing our marriage when it suited him.

“Good afternoon, Deverell,” I said, smiling up at him. “I see you have recovered from your morning ailments as well.” Then I gazed at Mr. Lincoln and shook my head a little. “I’m afraid being called Mrs. Jansen will take some time for all of us to adjust to. So I insist we simplify things. Please call me Gemini, Mr. Lincoln. After all, working on the murder investigation together will be complicated enough.”

Deverell stepped my way and I caught a glimpse of his tense expression. Mr. Lincoln’s brow furrowed as if he

wasn't sure what to do next. After feeling so ineffectual my entire life, I had to confess that disrupting both Deverell and Mr. Lincoln felt rather good. I'm not sure what that said about my nature, but I did enjoy the bolster of strength it gave me.

"My, this sun is glorious." I popped up my parasol, opening and angling it to block out Deverell's glare.

"Mrs. Jansen," Deverell said with emphasis. "Would you like a tour of the ship?"

Eagerly standing, I tilted the parasol and looked at him. "Since I'm not the least bit *under the weather*, I would love to see the ship. Having never sailed before, I'm bursting with questions."

Deverell narrowed his eyes. No matter what his mood, I wasn't about to turn down an opportunity to learn more about sailing. Though I knew from his expression his intent wasn't to show me the ship but likely to discuss my appearance on deck, or my plans regarding the murder investigation, or my familiarity with Mr. Lincoln—which wasn't necessarily too familiar, considering the man had been a guest at Kildaren's Castle, played an evening of cards with me and my sister, and witnessed my marriage.

Mr. Lincoln stood. "Then I'll leave you two to your walk and look forward to seeing you both at dinner. And Gemini, feel free to call me Nathaniel." He spoke with a hint of wry amusement that had me smiling as well.

As Mr. Lincoln turned away, Deverell caught my elbow with a firm grip, guiding me in the opposite direction. After several steps he shortened his stride to match mine.

"What would you like to know about the ship?" he asked in a perfectly normal tone, as if he hadn't been glaring daggers just now. As if this morning's debacle hadn't happened. Glancing down, I noted that everything had gone back to normal there, too. Well, if I could ignore ghosts, I could ignore the unresolved issues between us as well.

“What do I want to know?” I swung my arm out, gesturing to the entire ship. “Absolutely everything you can tell me. How do you navigate it? What do you call the different parts of the ship? What does it feel like to steer? What does it feel like to be all the way at the top of the sails? How fast can you travel? What do the different places of the world look like? Have you been to every continent?”

“Is that all?” he asked, shaking his head, letting out a rumble of laughter.

“It will do for a start,” I replied. “I’ve an insatiable curiosity for adventure.”

“Among other things,” he muttered. “We’ll start with the stern. The *Black Dragon*’s is slightly rounded and the bow not as sharp as extreme clippers. She’s called a medium or a half clipper because she’s designed not only for speed but to carry a sufficient amount of cargo as well. The faster a ship can move trade the more money the investors can make. With a good wind she can do sixteen to twenty knots.” From there he launched into a detailed description of the ship as he showed me everything, its masts, rigging type, sails. He introduced me to all of the men working about the ship’s deck, and while they greeted me cautiously, I didn’t sense any hostility from them, except for one man, Smitty, the man who’d overheard my comments to the captain. His dark gaze rightfully accused me of being a liar and followed me whenever we passed near where he worked on the splintered foremasts.

Below deck, I learned that the stairs leading from one deck to the next were called companionways and that there were several decks levels below the one where I’d stowed away. We moved past the doorways of the captain’s and Alex’s cabins, and that’s when I caught the delicious aroma of a savory stew over the scents of damp wood, brine, and close quarters. My stomach rumbled. “What time is dinner?” I asked. “I feel as if I haven’t eaten in forever.”

“Good bloody hell.” He grabbed my elbow and steered

me to a secluded corner between a stack of lashed crates and the galley's wall. We were alone in the corridor. Sunlight streamed in from several portholes across the way and gave me enough light to see the horrified expression on Deverell's face. He pulled me closer to him, peering down at me. "With everything that has happened, I didn't even think about having food sent to you today. Have you eaten or had anything to drink? Come to think of it, what have you been surviving on?"

"I'm fine," I assured him. "Andrie packed bread and cheese for me, but I ate the last of it this morning with a little of the spiced wine Alex keeps in his cabin."

"I'm sorry, I should have been thinking . . . but . . ." He paused as if searching for words. "I'm also sorry for telling everyone you were under the weather this morning. At the time I thought it best for you to stay out of sight of the crew."

"Apology accepted . . . for that," I said, reminding him I was perturbed over other things that had happened this morning as well. "But I think I did the right thing in leaving the cabin. Given my wild, half-drowned, waiflike appearance yesterday, the sailors were surely speculating that something was wrong with me or that I had something to hide. Now they know I'm simply a respectable woman."

"You're right," he said after a long pause. "Seeing you helped ease tensions among the sailors." That Deverell so readily admitted that I'd made a wise decision surprised me. "Unfortunately, you have to realize that you are entirely too trusting, Gemini. Your nature makes you ill-equipped for investigating this murder in Northrope and is of serious concern to me. I brought Nathaniel Lincoln to Killdaren's Castle for Sean's help based only on the grave circumstances in Northrope, but I know very little about the man and cannot vouch for his trustworthiness."

"I'm sure he's reputable. He's a friend of Northrope's magistrate."

"I know, it was Magistrate Williams who introduced me to Lincoln. Rhys is a good friend of mine. But I don't trust a man until he's proven himself to me. A woman has been murdered and anyone who lives there might be guilty."

"Considering what you went through in Egypt, I completely understand your caution, but speaking with the man in public in the daylight is hardly a concern. You have to remember that Nathaniel chose to back you in face of the crew's unrest last night when he didn't have to. He stayed to make sure I remained safe during the storm when he didn't have to. And he stood at my side while you and I were married. The formalities of Mr. and Mrs. seem entirely too stuffy."

Deverell frowned. "I sent you below decks last night in his care because the situation was life threatening."

"Exactly my point. If he was trustworthy enough for that task, then speaking with him as I did today was entirely appropriate."

His frowned deepened. "Gemini, you have a way of twisting things around that confuses the point."

"No. The point is you fear I am blindly trusting Nathaniel when that is not the case at all."

"It's not? You seemed extremely comfortable with the man earlier."

"And perhaps you're not being completely unbiased in your observations. I have my questions about him."

"And they would be?"

"First, he's a scientist without a focused field of study. Something that I think is a little odd. Second, he's researching the Druids and their practices. He claims finding the body spurred this interest, but he could be lying. His interest could have started much earlier. Third, and most importantly, he is the man who discovered the murdered woman's body. I'm well aware from reading the London crime chronicles that Cassie buys that some murderers will report

their crimes just so that they can be a part of the investigation.” Then, after looking about to make sure no one was close enough to hear me, I leaned closer to him and lowered my voice. “But this entire discussion will be superfluous once I make contact with you know who at the Druid ruins.”

He looked both bemused and aggravated as he squinted at me. “I see you have thought a number of things out,” he said slowly. “But you’re still insisting upon your story?”

“Yes, one that I will prove true once certain entities return and I can ask your Barbados question. I thought it would be this morning, but they must think wedding nights last much longer than they actually do.”

Deverell sucked in a breath then coughed forcefully, and for a moment I thought he wasn’t going to catch his breath. His eyes watered.

“Are you all right? What happened?”

He held up his hand, nodding. “I’m—I’m fine. Just give me a minute.”

“Some spiced wine might help your cough. I’ve a bottle opened in Alex’s cabin.”

“Spiced wine? As in the wine that was served last Christmas?” His voice deepened and my gaze connected with his. “I remember it well,” he said. “There is something very unique about the wine that is . . . unforgettable.” Though he spoke of the Kildaren’s special recipe, my heart thrummed as if he were speaking about me and the kiss we’d shared. My gaze dropped to his mouth, wanting his kiss. I completely forgot that we were standing in a public corridor. But how was I supposed to remember something so trivial when the heat of Deverell’s touch was seeping through my dress, reminding me of all the magical things his hands could do to me? I burned inside for everything he had made me feel last night. Was it the effects of the spiced wine I drank earlier that had me feeling this way when he’d barely touched me? I was more than curious about the matter.

"Funny you should think there is something special about the wine," I said, my dry mouth made my voice raspy. "My sisters do, too. I overheard them talking about it."

"What did they say?"

"Well, that it has certain properties they enjoyed."

"I'm sure that can be said of all wines," he replied.

"These were properties of a special nature."

"And what would those be?"

Tipping up on my toes, I brought my mouth close to his ear, having to brace my hands on his chest to keep my balance. "Its aphrodisiac properties are amazing," I whispered, repeating Andrie's exact words, then, settling back on my heels, I met his gaze. "What do you think?"

"That I'm going to go up in flames or jump into the sea and strand us all because it will immediately evaporate."

I drew my brows together, confused. "Does that mean you agree with my sisters or that you don't? I'm very much interested in knowing, and you're the only person I can ask who will tell me the truth. After I drank some earlier, I felt invigorated, but nowhere near like I did last night or right now with you so close to me. Isn't that what something of that nature is supposed to make you feel? Do you think my sisters are mistaken? I mean my aunt Lavinia tried to take an entire bag of the spiced wine with her to Greece for medicinal purposes last fall, but my father confiscated the bag as they were boarding the ship, so I wondered if my parents—"

"Gemini." He exhaled hard. His hands tightened on my arms and he rested his forehead on the top of my head as he sucked in more air. "Jesus. Just stop talking a moment and let me try to think." His voice sounded strained and scratchy. Together with his earlier coughing fit, I wondered if he was coming down with an ailment.

"Very well." I sighed. "You may want to refresh your memory of the wine by having some this evening at dinner."

"I . . . can't . . . wait . . . that . . . long," he said, sounding

even stranger. Concerned, I eased my head back enough to look at him. His expression appeared pained.

He groaned loudly then came at me much as the storm's huge wave had last night. His body hit mine and backed me into the wall. His mouth claimed mine and stole my breath with the fury of his kiss. His tongue, hot and demanding, thrust against mine, and I felt as if I was suddenly slipping into a deep, wild sea, only this time I didn't grab for a rope to save me. I wanted to drown.

I had to get closer to him. I wanted the heat and silk of his skin against mine. I wanted to feel the hard contours of his chest against my breasts. I arched my back, offering him myself, digging my shoulders into the wall behind me to give him more of my body. His hands slid from my shoulders to my hips, anchoring them as he thrust his arousal against me.

"Huh, huh, knothead. What did Pierre tell you?"

"Never seen the cap'n like this before."

"He's in love and they are still having le honeymoon. Another moment and *Le Capitaine* will sweep her into his arms and carry her to his bed. We will come back another time."

I twisted away from Deverell's kiss, gasping. "Wait!" I shouted. "I have to ask you about Barbados!" But the ghosts had disappeared. I sank my head back against the galley's wall with a thud.

Deverell pulled away from me, his dazed expression slowly twisting with . . . abhorrence?

I wanted to cringe from the look, to run and hide from the pain of his obvious rejection of me. I wanted to cry out at the unfairness of it all.

He opened his mouth as if he was going to say something. But didn't. He just turned on his heel and walked away. Pain ripped through me, making every place that had burned with pleasure a moment ago hurt. Tears filled my

eyes. I ran for Alex's cabin, not even seeing where I was going in the dimly lit passageway. Suddenly, I ran into a man and knew instantly from the stale sweat and rum odor that it wasn't Deverell or Nathaniel.

Smitty's dark eyes were wide with fear and hate. He cried out and shoved me back so hard that I had to catch myself from falling by grabbing the wall. My nails tore against the rough wood, sending pain shooting up my arm.

"Try an' cast a spell on me like wot you did to the cap'n and I'll kill ya!" He spoke with such vehemence that I brought my arm up to ward off a blow from his raised hand. But instead of hitting me, he started slapping at his body as if ridding himself of ants, and then backed away until he finally turned and ran.

# 9



I made my way to Alex's cabin with a cold fear burgeoning inside me, for I had no doubt that Smitty would kill me if he thought I was hexing him. And the most frightening part of it all was that I wouldn't be able to stop him from seeing even the most innocent of my actions as a threat. All I had done today was accidentally run into him.

Shutting the door behind me, I had to take deep breaths to calm the panic sweeping over me. My heart pounded so hard that my chest and ears hurt. My body shook and I could barely force my muscles to work. Standing was an effort. Breathing was an effort. Thinking was impossible, but I had to.

Deverell was right. I was too trusting. Even in the face of the crew's unrest last night it never once occurred to me that I needed to carry a weapon on my person. All my life, I'd always been surrounded by people who I knew wouldn't harm

me and would do anything to protect me. But I'd chosen to leave that safety and now I had to take responsibility for myself. I couldn't rely on anything, or anyone, else. Truly, I knew that if Deverell had thought I'd run into danger, he wouldn't have left me alone in the passageway even though I was just a short distance from his and Alex's cabins.

The trouble was that he *had* left me. There *had* been danger. And I *had* to learn to rely on myself. A picture of Andrie deftly holding Alex's dagger settled in my mind. She'd learned how to protect herself. Alex had taught her.

I needed to learn. Heavens, at the very least I could carry the daggers she'd given me. One of them was still inside the trunk I'd been trapped in and the other I'd been using to cut cheese for my meals. My mouth was so dry that I could barely swallow. On shaky legs, I made my way over to the desk and uncorked the spiced wine, taking a number of bolstering sips from the bottle. A little warmth seeped into the cold fear inside me, and I felt strong enough to search out the daggers.

First, I grabbed the dagger I'd used with the cheese and set it on the bunk. Then I tried to pull out from under the bed the leather trunk in which I'd been transported onto the ship. But some shifting of the ship must have occurred during the storm because it was wedged tight. Getting down on my knees, I reached through the hole I had cut to escape through and felt around as far as I could but found nothing. I knew the dagger had to be in there. Since I couldn't see into the dark interior of the trunk, I lit the lamp and put it on the floor beside the opening. In order to see, I had to lie flat on my stomach on the floor, a more than slightly uncomfortable position for me. Somehow, though Deverell's body seemed as hard as the floor, being against him was much more comfortable. I was rewarded with a glimpse of the shiny dagger at the opposite end of the trunk. There was also a white piece of cloth with something dark resting against it.

The figurines Alex had acted so strangely about. I had

forgotten. Inching forward, I eased myself into the opening of the trunk, stretching out both my arms to grasp the dagger and the figurines. Wincing at the pain from my torn nails, I finally got my fingers wrapped around them when I heard the cabin door open.

“Gemini? Good bloody hell!” Deverell shouted. His booted feet thundered across the planks and vibrated my body pressed flat to the floor.

Suddenly, my skirts were lifted and cool air hit my legs and drawers. I reared up, banging my head on the top of the trunk. “What are you doing?” I shouted from inside the trunk, scrambling out.

“Me? Your skirts are almost on fire!”

“What?” I yelped, finally exiting the trunk and flipping over.

He stood over me, the lantern gripped in his hand. “Your skirts were pressing next to the lantern and were smoking.”

I inhaled, smelling a hint of scorched wool in the air. Dropping the dagger and figurines onto the floor, I pulled the hem of my dress up and saw that a spot the size of my fist had browned. “Oh dear God!” I was horrified at what I had almost caused. A fire on a ship would have put everyone in jeopardy. Tears filled my eyes. “Look at what I almost did! Look at my dress.”

“Good God, woman! I’m more worried about your person and the bloody ship than I am about your dress. Does disaster follow in your wake? What were you doing under there, anyway?” He knelt and peered at the things I’d dropped. Frowning, he set the lantern down and picked them up.

Then, gasping, he looked at me more shocked than I’d ever seen him. “What are you doing with this?”

I expected him to hold up the dagger, but instead he held up the figurine. Sunlight glinted off its gleaming jade surface. I sat up and took it from his fingers. “You sound as if I’ve stolen the crown jew—” My voice died in my throat as I

looked at the jade piece. Surely that wasn't what it looked like. I turned the figurine over, but still saw the same thing, a very detailed carving of a man and a woman together, naked. That would have been troubling enough, but the man lay on top of the woman with his face in her privates and her face in his. I turned the piece again, thinking that I just had to be looking at it wrongly.

"Gemini."

I looked up at Deverell, brow knitted. "Whatever are they doing?" Then my heart slammed hard as anger hit me. "What is Alex doing to my poor sister! No wonder she was so upset. And she's pregnant, too. I should run him through with his own dagger."

Deverell brought his hand to his temple and pressed hard with his palm. "Are you going to explain what you're talking about?"

My eyes watered as I looked at the figurine again. Deverell plucked it from my fingers. "Start talking, Gemini."

My cheeks were burning, so I knew my face had to be as red as fire. "I'd hidden in the trunk and Andrie had arranged for Brighty to bring it to Alex's cabin." I then explained the whole story. "I hadn't seen or even remembered the figurines. But just now when I was trying to get the dagger out of the trunk I found it. There must be another one still in there! My poor sister."

Deverell sighed and stood. "Come here," he said. The gentleness in his voice surprised me and I looked up at him. He offered me his hand; his expression appeared tired and worried. I set my hand in his and let him help me off the floor.

As he moved to the bed, he saw the dagger I'd set next to the pillow. "Why are you gathering weapons?"

"It's come to my attention that I need to be able to protect myself at all times. Given my gift and how others see me, this has now become a necessity."

"Did something happen?" he asked sharply, placing the dagger from the bed on the desk with the other one.

I shook my head. Telling Deverell about what Smitty said would only cause more trouble aboard the ship. Tomorrow we'd arrive in Northrope and the best thing would be for me to stay out of Smitty's way until then.

"Gemini?"

"Please. I've just realized that you were right. I am ill equipped for this mission I've set upon. I've come to the conclusion that I cannot go through life expecting that there is always going to be someone to protect me. I must learn to do so myself."

"Gemini, as long as you're under my protect—"

"That is fine. But you aren't always going to be there, are you? You walked away from me today because I spoke to your ghosts. You couldn't even speak to me before you left."

He sat on the bunk then urged me down next to him. "Which is exactly what I came back to apologize for doing. A good thing, considering you were about to set yourself on fire. I don't know exactly what I believe at the moment. I don't think you're lying to me. Not anymore, but to actually believe I've had two ghosts hovering over my shoulders for years, watching everything I do, is more than just a little difficult to consider. So, to believe you, I'd have to accept that, and I haven't been able to, yet. It's much more personal than if you'd simply told me you conversed with a spirit at some supposedly haunted mansion. Considering that I claim to be able to hear the Sea Sirens call my name, I'd be hypocritical if I didn't at least acknowledge that you can hear the whispering of spirits. But the interaction you describe is so much more involved that I have a difficult time accepting it. I'm sorry, but that's the truth of it."

He clasped my hurt fingers and I winced, which prompted him to examine them. My nails were broken and ragged, their tips bloodied. Releasing my hand, he cupped my jaw,

lifting my gaze to his. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

I swallowed. "I just lost my balance on my way back to the cabin from the galley and grabbed the wall to stay upright."

His blue eyes were dark with shadows, his brow furrowed with concern, and my insides felt as if they'd tumbled. "Somehow I believe your ghost stories more than I believe that. Jesus, Gemini. What am I going to do with—"

Instead of uttering the "you" that I knew sat on the tip of his tongue, he brought his mouth to mine, kissing me gently, and nothing seemed to matter but giving in to the soft heat. Not what happened this morning, not what happened this afternoon. His gentleness and honesty were a balm to those hurts, a balm I couldn't help but absorb. I leaned into him, sighing as his tongue brushed my bottom lip and slipped deeper. He teased my mouth and tongue, then kissed his way along my jaw to the hollow of my neck, making me feel as if the sun were slowly melting away my bones. He brought his mouth to mine again and kissed me more as his hands eased to my shoulders and my back, urging me closer until my breasts pressed to his chest. Every place his lips brushed, every place his hands slid, I tingled and burned.

His kiss and his touch seemed different, yet again. If before he'd been drawn into passion reluctantly and always given himself to the fiery desire in a fierce flood, I now felt a gentle seduction. The burning heat was still there, only instead of scorching hot, it simmered just under the surface, seeping out into a warm liquid pool of need that I languished in. He loosened my hair from its bindings, letting it fall about my shoulders. "It's like a shower of sunshine," he said softly.

Then he angled more kisses down my neck to the curve of my breasts and I arched closer to him. He cupped my

breasts, rubbing his thumbs over my nipples as they crested beneath the layers of wool and cotton. Groaning, his fingers went to work on the buttons, tugging my dress down as he moved his way to my waist. As before, my swollen breasts seemed to spill from the confines of my gown, straining at the thin material of my chemise. Once my bodice was undone and off, he loosened my skirts and drawers. Standing, he pulled me up and slid my clothes down my hips to a puddle on the floor. My shoes and stockings followed.

I shivered slightly as he loosened the buttons of my chemise and took it off, leaving me completely bare.

"You are so beautiful. Everywhere. Like a golden Venus," he whispered. Kissing me again, he swung me up into his arms and laid me on the bed. He followed me down into the softness, and dragged his mouth from mine to lightly lick and nip his way down my neck to my breasts, where he again teased me into a fever of want. I grabbed at his shoulders, urging him over me. I wanted all that a husband might share with a wife. He moved, sliding his legs between mine, widening their spread. After a suckling pull upon each of my aching nipples, he dropped a kiss on my lips, but instead of pressing the bulge of his arousal against me, he slid his tongue down the center of my chest and kissed his way to my stomach.

"Whatever are you doing?" I asked, laughing a little at the tickle that accompanied the brush of his rough jaw against me.

"Exploring your beauty and the golden fire here," he replied, brushing his fingers over the curls of my femininity. "Close your eyes and count to ten, and if by then you don't like what I'm doing I'll stop."

"But what . . . ?" My breath caught as he kissed lower. I couldn't close my eyes. In fact they opened wider, stealing away some of the fire he'd loosed inside me as a shocking thought occurred to me. The figurine . . . Was he—

"That's one, Gemini. Remember to count. Think about counting. Trust yourself to me."

"Surely, you can't—" He brought his lips lower and I tried to sit up.

"That's two. Now say three, Gemini," he demanded as he splayed a hand on my stomach and pressed the other on my leg, sliding his fingers up my thigh. "Say three, Gemini."

"Three," I whispered.

His hand pressed my leg open even wider and his mouth went to the intimate folds of my sex, bringing a hot rush of sensation. Sensation that became lost in the roar of blood pumping hard in my veins.

I tried to move away from him, but he pressed against my stomach, anchoring me to the bed.

"Four. Say four, Gemini."

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. "F-f-fo—" He brought his mouth back to me and this time I felt more than his lips upon me. The heat of his tongue thrust against me, sliding up and down and then back and forth over the most sensitive spot he'd touched last night. The roar in my ears ebbed as pleasure erupted throughout my entire being. I felt as if I'd been instantly thrown into the midst of a fire, only one of intense pleasure rather than pain. Flushed and heated, I writhed from the flame of his tongue, the sensations burning me with an exquisite fire that consumed everything. I cried out as bright stars burst before my eyes and left me quivering in a fiery heaven, a place where I could only moan in ecstasy, over and over.

"Shh." Thrusting himself on top of me, Deverell covered my mouth with his, kissing me hard. He tasted different and yet the same, and all I could do was absorb the scorching passion he unleashed, feeling as if I were sinking farther and farther into the bed . . . or into him. I couldn't tell which. Suddenly he threw himself to the side, his lungs heaving as much as mine for air. I couldn't speak, couldn't

do anything but grasp at him, trying to pull him back to me. I felt bereft without his fire. When I saw him peeling off his clothes and noted his body trembling, the desperation inside me eased. I let my gaze slide over him. His arousal came into full view as he knelt on the bed. He was much larger than I remembered, so much larger. Good heavens! How could he possibly put all of that inside me?

Resting his weight on his hands, he thrust himself slowly upward. I felt the hot brand of his arousal glide along my thigh until he reached my sex. He groaned and his passion-dark gaze locked onto mine and the hard shaft of him easily slipped into my feminine folds. My swollen, drenched flesh still tingled from the heat of his kiss. He pressed into me just a little and I gasped at the invasion and the sudden change in sensation from pleasure to an uneasy discomfort.

His body was trembling so badly that the entire bunk shook. Sweat beaded his brow and the intensity of his expression seemed as fierce as last night's storm. He thrust a little more and I winced, my body tensing at the painful fullness.

"God, Gemini, you're too tight. You're too tense. I'm hurting you, aren't I?"

"I'm . . . I'm . . . all right," I whispered, trying to relax my hold on his shoulders. I hadn't realized I was so tense.

"Good bloody hell, woman, don't lie to me. I could injure you if you're not ready. I'm barely an inch inside you. I haven't even reached your maidenhead yet, and that's supposed to be the most painful part for a . . . virgin. I've never—" Either unable or unwilling to finish his sentence, he exhaled hard.

I didn't know what to say. Tears stung my eyes. I was too small for him. All of my insecurities rose to the surface; I wasn't enough for him. He cursed, rolling off me and the bed. He crouched beside the bunk, drawing in deep, ragged breaths. Then, standing, he shuddered and groaned, but not

in pleasure. This sounded almost like pain, real pain. He looked in deep pain as he gazed at me. "God curse me," he said roughly, and left the cabin.

I curled into a ball on the bed, but I couldn't seem to give in to the tears, though my whole being yearned for the release. I lay there breathing, trying to absorb it all, trying to reason through what had just happened. I concluded that Alex was definitely *not* harming Andrie in the least. And that Deverell was being harmed in some way. But how could I help being too small? Did that mean I wouldn't be able to have relations with a man? Surely there were other women as petite as I. Did they spend their whole lives without giving pleasure?

Gasping, I jumped up from the bed, found the jade figurine and examined it again. Perhaps I could pleasure Deverell the way the woman in the statue was. I started to go to him, but then decided after dinner would be better. After dinner and . . . some spiced wine.

Dinner was set and served in the shared room between Alex's and Deverell's cabins. Since no one had dined there on the first night of the voyage—the one calm night at sea before the storm hit—I surmised it was in deference to me. A concession I appreciated, because no matter how hungry, I didn't think I would be able to eat a bit if Smitty were anywhere near. Deverell sat to my left and Nathaniel opposite me. The rich beef and vegetable stew was thick and served with a soft-centered, crusty bread. As hungry as I was, I enjoyed every bite of it and did very little talking during the meal.

Two bottles of spiced wine sat on the tabletop and one of them was already empty. I'd partaken of one glass; the men had each had two. That plus Nathaniel's questions about the repairs to the ship seemed to ease the initial tension pouring

off Deverell's stiff shoulders. It was as if his discomfort had grown twofold in the space of time from when he'd left Alex's cabin until now. And that tension had nothing to do with the *Black Dragon*, because shortly after midday, the crew had put the ship into motion, heading directly for Northrope. I assumed it either had to do with what happened between us earlier or his plans for when we reached port.

"We've a strong tailwind," said Deverell. "If she holds out we'll arrive even sooner than I predicted, despite the *Black Dragon's* damage."

"That is good news," Nathaniel said. "I can't wait to put my feet on solid ground." He emptied his wineglass and poured himself another, topping off Deverell's then, at my nod, refilling mine. I noticed that Deverell glanced my way every time he drank his wine, as if he were thinking about what I'd told him. Or perhaps it was I who couldn't get the aphrodisiac question from my mind. Whatever the reason, I was very much aware of Deverell and the occasional brush of his knee against mine. The rush of warmth suffusing me made my head whirl and my toes curl.

"Being from a major port, I thought you'd enjoy sailing," I said.

Nathaniel shrugged. "I'm not from Northrope. So perhaps I'd feel differently had I grown up near the sea. I go when I must, but it's not an enjoyment. You surprise me, though," he said.

"Me? How so?" Hearing he wasn't from Northrope had surprised me.

"Most women I know would be constantly complaining during the journey, disrupted over the motion of the ship. They'd find the smell of the sea lacking, preferring the scent of expensive perfumes. The limited menu of stew and bread would be too uncouth for their delicate sensibilities. And they would have been hysterical during the storm. You are remarkable."

Deverell shifted forward in his seat, eyes narrowing at Nathaniel.

I smiled and gave a soft laugh. "You obviously do not have a clear understanding of what remarkable means," I told him. "It's not remarkable to love the feel of the wind or dream of flying through the air. Nor is it remarkable to feel the rock of the ship as a reassurance that all is well. Babies in cradles around the world do so. And what use is hysteria? There are things so much worse than a storm or even . . . death from a storm." I added the last softly. How Flora McGowan had died was never far from me. Drawing a deep breath, I moved on. "What I think remarkable is how a ship doesn't get lost in the night, for the stars, unlike the sun, are more difficult to read. And what happens on a starless night?"

Nathaniel's brows drew together and after a moment, he said, "Maybe I need to go back on deck tonight and take another look at the world through your eyes." He looked at me as if he were about to ask me to accompany him, but Deverell laughed, abruptly. His uncharacteristic response drew my attention.

"Your curiosity never rests, does it?" Deverell said. "I can . . . I can show you after dinner. We've a number of instruments to help guide us along, but the stars are our Bible."

I thought it odd that his offer sounded as if I'd forced it from him, but I didn't hesitate to accept. "I would like that. Having grown up at Oxford afforded few opportunities to learn about ships and the sea."

"Oxford, you say?" Nathaniel asked, his eyes widening. "I spent a number of years studying there. I've even been back to lecture on my unorthodox methods."

"Then you might have heard of my father? Professor Andrews."

"By George! What a small world. I've long admired your father's archaeological suppositions. What news do you have of his expedition in Greece?"

“The last letter my sisters and I received said they’d discovered artifacts that would be in keeping with those of a temple not far from where my father determined Alexander the Great had built Apollo’s temple. They are excavating the site now and we’re all anxiously awaiting word. Most academics think my father is insane and predicted his failure on this venture.”

“Which is why I admire him so. In the face of great opposition from the entire archaeological world, he pursued his interest.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, when were you in Oxford? I don’t recall having heard of a Nathaniel Lincoln, but then I’m sure I don’t hear about every scientist there.”

“In the academic circles, I’m known by my title, unfortunately. Viscount Baylor. I use it as little as possible. In my opinion, tedious social trappings such as titles and entailments are losing their importance. A man is much better off being free to decide his own future and fate than to be slave to obligations determined centuries before his birth. Wouldn’t you agree?” Nathaniel directed his gaze to Deverell. “Haven’t you—”

“The hour grows late, especially if I’m going to explain some points on how to navigate at night.” Deverell stood, his chair scraping the planks.

Nathaniel cleared his throat and stood as well. “I believe I’ll retire for the night, as the storm afforded me very little sleep. I believe I will take this with me, if you don’t mind?” He tapped his half empty glass of spiced wine. “The flavorful sweetness of this wine is not only unusual but extremely enjoyable.”

“Here,” Deverell said, handing the half empty bottle to him. “Take the remainder with you.” He acted as if he couldn’t rid himself of the wine fast enough.

I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying anything. I

had plans for that wine tonight. It was a good thing Alex had plenty of it stored in his cabin.

"I believe I will." Nathaniel said. He set the bottle on the table next to his glass and then came around the table toward me. Offering me his hand, he bowed slightly as he brought my fingers to his lips. "Your company this evening, Gemini, was most refreshing, and I look forward to discussing more about your father's work tomorrow. I'm highly curious as to what sent him looking for Apollo's temple to begin with." The warmth of his mouth and breath upon my hand was nicely pleasurable and lingered just a moment longer than necessary. Then he straightened and collected his glass and the bottle. "I'll bid you both a good evening and see you in the morning."

I agreed and Deverell didn't say anything until Nathaniel was almost out the door. I didn't hear what Deverell muttered and Nathaniel didn't look back.

Deverell caught hold of my elbow and turned me to him. He opened his mouth, then shook his head before saying, "We'd better get started."

"All right. Let me get a wrap from my trunk and I'll be ready."

He nodded. As I left for Alex's cabin, I noted out of the corner of my eye that Deverell picked up his nearly full glass of wine and drank the whole thing—then looked as if he were going to throw the glass. I hurried out, smiling.

An hour later Deverell and I stood on the *Black Dragon's* deck amid the chill breeze and the sparkling diamonds in the night sky, all of which were trying to outshine the glow of the moon. An impossible task considering the moon was so full and large above me that I itched to try to touch it. He'd already shown me the use of the sextant and explained how important the North Star was in orienting sailors in the northern seas.

“What’s it like up there?” I asked, pointing to the crow’s nest, where one of the sailors stood, staring out at the sea. “Is there always someone at watch?”

Deverell chuckled. “Do you ever ask just one question at a time?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Yes, there is always someone on the lookout, especially at night. He’s watching for other ships that might cross our path and looking for anything upon the surface of the sea that can damage the ship. Being at the top of the ship is exhilarating and nothing I’ve known before has matched the freedom I feel up there.” His voice deepened. “When I was released from the Egyptian prison—God’s hell on earth—I spent most of my time up there. It was where I could breathe. Where I could sleep.”

Was that why his sheets had been in such a tangled mess that first night I’d seen him in his bunk? I wanted to reach out to him, to pull him close to me, to make him forget, but I clenched a handful of my skirts instead. He was just beginning to open to me, his shoulders easing back from the stiff stance that had gripped them all evening. “Not all prisons have bars and are in foreign lands. Sometimes, for a woman whose spirit wants to soar, they can be homes with warm hearths and loving families that bind them,” I whispered.

And sometimes prisons can be something as simple as seeing and speaking to ghosts. A gift that I was beginning to think came from Satan, for surely nothing from God could bring such pain and hell with it. I shuddered and shook off the thought. Glancing at Deverell, I found him studying me with a puzzled intensity, one to which I didn’t know how to react.

After a long moment, I drew a deep breath. “Anyway, I quite imagine that being at the top of the ship would be like flying, wouldn’t it? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve sat upon the dunes and wished I was a gull. Wished that I could fly across the sea.”

“Would you like to go up there?”

“Truly?” My heart leaped with excitement. “Yes, oh yes!” I moved forward and hugged him, barely able to keep myself from jumping up and down and squealing. After a slight hesitation, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer a moment before he cleared his throat and stepped back.

“We’ll need some rope,” he said gruffly as he led me to the mast beneath the crow’s nest. “Hold on.” Going to what appeared to be a hidden storage bin, he returned with a rope and moved behind me. “You’re going to have to follow my directions exactly. Do not do anything I don’t tell you to do, understand?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re going to have to leave this behind,” he said, easing the shawl from my shoulders. I gasped as he brought the thick rope around my waist and pulled me back until I was flush against his hard chest. He wrapped the rope around us both another few times, securing me to him completely. I wasn’t going to go anywhere he didn’t, except for maybe going up in flames. The feel of him, of his heat and his strength behind me, set me on fire again.

He brought one arm around my waist and grabbed the rigging dangling over my head, pulling it down to my level. “Catch hold of this rope and pull yourself up, but don’t overstrain yourself as we climb. I don’t need your strength to get us up there, but I thought you’d enjoy the feel of the rigging and experiencing the climb yourself. So rest against me anytime you need to. Ready?”

All I could do was nod. His voice, so close to my ear, sent shivers of desire down my spine. As we climbed, the heat of his breath on my nape and the feel of his hard body moving against every part of my back and bottom and legs fanned those shivers into flames that not even the chill breeze stealing up my skirts could douse. Within minutes I knew that more than just his muscled body pressed against

me. His arousal seemed to be scorching right through my skirts. The higher we went, the more I rested against him and his branding staff, for there truly was no other euphemism for his sex for me. From the first moment I'd felt it and his passion, I hadn't been able to get either out of my mind. And now that I knew of a way I could pleasure him, I couldn't get that out of my mind either.

# 10



When we reached the crow's nest, Deverell told the sailor on watch to return in an hour. He urged me to the railing, and as I gazed over the large expanse of the star-studded night and the silver sea, I wanted to cry out that an hour wouldn't be enough time to absorb the beauty. An eternity wouldn't either. We were alone at what felt like the very top of the earth.

He untied the rope, but once the binding fell away from me, I didn't move away from him. He didn't move either. I stood facing the wind, reveling in its sweeping touch as it fingered its way through my hair and brushed my face and body with a forceful stroke. I welcomed the cold and the salty sting, drawing in what had to be the freshest air in the world.

Parts of me came alive and I shouted with joy.

"I didn't know it was possible to feel like this. I mean, I dreamed of it, but heavens. This is like touching the moon

itself.” Reaching my hand up into the breeze, I stretched my palm toward to the sky and it seemed as if the moon rested on my fingertips.

After a moment, Deverell slid his hand up my arm, laying his palm to the back of my hand so that we both held the moon. “Being with you makes the impossible seem possible,” he said softly.

I couldn’t say anything and I didn’t want to say anything. I didn’t want to erase that thought from his mind. So I leaned into him more and stayed silent, absorbing the nighttime and the man with all of my senses. We stood just like that for a long time, and when my muscles began to tremble from the strain of holding out my hand, he folded his fingers over mine and brought our arms down, wrapping them around my waist, pulling me even closer against him.

I sighed. Besides his passion, nothing else on earth had ever felt this perfect, could ever feel this perfect. Then he slid his hand up, lightly skimming over my breasts to cup my cheek. He slowly angled my face toward him, bracing the back of my neck with the solid support of his shoulder as he brushed his lips gently over mine. Inhaling, he drew in the breath that I’d released, buried his face against my neck, and held me tighter than ever before. I rested completely against him and knew that I was wrong—with him even perfection could be made more perfect.

The hour went too quickly and before I was ready to leave, I heard the watchman returning. Deverell released me and gathered the safety rope. It was only then that I felt the real bite of cold wind and realized that for a man alone, even flying and touching the moon would be a burden to bear. Heaven didn’t lie in solitude but in communion.

By the time the sailor climbed into the crow’s nest, Deverell had himself tied to me and we began the climb down. The descent was scarier. Every time I looked down my head swam. I began to tremble and I lost my footing.

“Easy,” Deverell said, quickly trapping me between his solid strength and the support of the rigging. “Take deep breaths and don’t look down. Focus on feeling the rope between your fingers and pressing into the soles of your feet. Relax and let your body flow with the sway of the ship and the wind. Don’t fight it. Just like you do with the rock of the deck beneath your feet, you absorb the motion and flow with it. Becoming tense freezes your muscles and makes it impossible for you to—”

“That’s it!” I cried, grasping the ropes, feeling a wave of confidence sweep through me. I’d been concentrating so hard on doing exactly what Deverell was telling me to do that by the time he’d finished speaking, I’d regained my equilibrium. The trick did lie in not looking down. Well, at least all the way down to the deck. I had to peer a little farther down in order to see where to place my hand next. But that wasn’t what had me cry out in excitement.

“That’s what happened this afternoon, isn’t it? I’m not too small to have relations with you. I was just tense. I kept wondering how all of you would fit inside me. You’re so large and when it was so tight I just knew you wouldn’t.”

Deverell froze. I could feel his every muscle grow tense and his hold on the rigging wavered as a gust hit the sail. “Bloody hell. You’re killing me, Gemini. Don’t say another word until we’re on the deck. We’ll be lucky to make it that far.”

I stayed silent the rest of the way down, but he stayed tense and hard. His arousal was unmistakable. The moment our feet hit the deck, he untied the rope from my waist and swung me around to face him. I didn’t have a chance to say a word before his mouth descended on mine, hot and demanding. He scooped me up into his arms and kissed me as he carried me all the way down the companionway to the cabins. He didn’t take me to Alex’s cabin, but to his.

Setting me on my feet, he pulled his lips from mine and

met my gaze with dizzying intensity. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Do you understand me?"

"Then why did you leave this afternoon?"

"To protect you. There is nothing wrong. You are perfect."

"Then show me," I whispered. My fingers trembled as I reached for the buttons of my gown, slipping them loose.

Halfway down my bodice, he set his fingers over mine. "When I left the cabin this afternoon, it was to protect you. There will be . . . there will be another man who can give you everything you need. No matter how much I desire you, it doesn't change the reality that I've nothing to give a woman. My life has become the sea. And anything I was before is gone. I am known as Captain Devil, a reputed murderer."

Releasing a button, I set my palm to his smooth cheek. He'd shaved before dinner and smelled of soap and the sea and the unforgettable hint of spice that was more drugging than the Killdaren's wine. "You're Deverell to me and I know the truth of the past, so none of it matters. As for having anything to offer me? You just made my greatest dream a reality; you took me to the top of the world. Besides being in your arms, I've never known a more perfect moment."

"Don't you realize that is but one moment, one stolen moment on a ship? That isn't reality."

"Climbing to the crow's nest and touching the moon was more real than the ideal future you think awaits me. My reality is that I am a woman no man will ever *want* to marry."

"Why?"

"I see ghosts, I speak to ghosts. No man will accept that. You can't." *And there are even worse aspects to your gift*, my conscience shouted. But I couldn't bring myself to tell him a ghost had inhabited my body and mind.

At that moment I realized that if Deverell, a man who desired me more than any other man I'd met, couldn't accept my gift with ghosts, no man would. Nor would Deverell ever

be able to understand what happened with Flora McGowan and how she'd spoken through me to her family. Dissolving our shipboard marriage was the only thing to do, but I had to know what loving him completely felt like. Just once. "In truth, Deverell, my reality is that I'll spend my life alone, constantly afraid of what will happen to me should anyone discover my secret. But this one time, this one night, could you share with me all of your passion? Will you show me what it feels like for a man to love a woman?"

"God help us both," Deverell whispered, then kissed me, and I knew his answer to my question was yes. This time my fingers didn't tremble as I slipped buttons free of their moors, for it was his shirt that I unbuttoned as he in turn freed me from the confines of my clothes. Neither of us stopped our quest until we stood naked before each other.

He swung me up in his arms and laid me on his bed, down upon the softness that enveloped me in his heady scent. He stood a moment, looking down at me. "You are so perfectly fashioned, so beautiful." He threaded his fingertips through my long hair. "This is like silken sunshine running through my fingers." He drifted his touch over my face. "The blue of your eyes is like the warm southern seas, crystal clear color and sultry heat." Leaning down, he brushed my lips with his. "The sweetest of wines." Moving to my breasts, he suckled each tip. "And Venus would envy your bounty." Then he ran a finger down my stomach, sliding all the way into the wet folds of my sex. My hips jolted at the fiery intrusion when he dipped his finger inside me, but then he swirled it around and around and in and out, creating such a burning ache in me that I arched my hips upward, wanting, needing more.

He smiled and slid his finger from me and shockingly brought it to his mouth and sucked upon it. "I could feast on the honey of your desire forever," he said, his voice a deep rasp of need.

I could no longer stay still. Easing up on my elbow, I hooked one hand around the back of his thigh to bring him closer and brought his jutting arousal to my mouth. He groaned deeply, letting me know the depth of his desire. My lips fit snugly over him and slid so easily along his shaft. He was unbelievably velvety, so very hot, and . . . alive. But as soon as I had him in my mouth I froze. What did I do next?

“Bloody hell,” he groaned harshly. His hips jerked, which sent him deep into my mouth and against my tongue. I tasted him then. A little salty, like the sea, along with another tanginess I couldn’t name. I slid my tongue over him for another taste. His hips surged toward me and I coughed at the unexpected thrust and had to turn away from him to catch my breath.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped as he sat on the bed and pulled me into his lap to hold me close to his chest. “You made me lose control. Another touch of your tongue on me and I’d have been completely lost. Hell, I’m already so far gone that I don’t know if I can—” He shook his head. “Hold on. I think I have something that will help.”

I moved to the side and he got up, moving to his chest at the end of the bed. He opened it and rummaged around then returned with a tiny vial of clear liquid.

“What is it?”

“Something called Dragon’s oil. Alex gave it to me a couple of years ago. He said that—well, never mind. This should help.”

“With what?”

He sat on the side of the bed and faced me. “This will help me slide comfortably inside you. It’s made especially for that.” Uncapping the vial, he palmed some of the oil and spread it over his arousal, making it glisten in the lamplight. Then he dribbled some more on his fingers. “Lie back and open your legs for me, Gemini.”

Feeling a bit odd, but also strangely liking him telling

me to do something so intimate for him, I laid down and spread my thighs. As he slid his fingers inside my feminine folds, making them slick with the oil, I widened my legs even farther.

"That's it my little Gem, open for me." His gaze was centered on my sex. Again, I felt strange but I liked the way he looked at me.

He slid his finger inside me again, eased back out and then moved two of them, sweeping deeper as he circled around and around. And in and out, adding another finger. Heat built and my hips undulated to his movement until I couldn't stop myself from moaning.

"That's it," he said. "Let the honey flow now." He eased his fingers out and climbed over me, settling his arousal against my opening. This time as he slid inside me, I felt the intrusion, the stretching, but no pain. I arched to him and he slid deeper. His breath caught and his body trembled as he met my gaze. "This next part is going to hurt a little. Let me know when it stops."

"All right, but I'm fine so far. Actually really very, um, good."

He inched a little farther. His body shaking from the restraint.

"Good heavens, Deverell, I don't imagine it's going to kill me. But I do think you're going to expire in the delay." I grabbed his buttocks and shoved him closer as I thrust my hips to him.

Pain, searing and sharp, tore through the very core of me. My breath escaped from my lungs in a loud rush and I groaned. "Dear God," I said. Deverell shifted and I thought he was going to withdraw from me again. "Don't move," I cried, wrapping my arms around him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. He sounded wretched. Blinking tears from my eyes, I met his gaze and saw two tears spill from his eyes and fall to his cheeks.

I didn't care if I was dying at the moment; I had to ease him. "I'm fine," I assured him, though I couldn't even draw a deep breath yet. "Just . . . just kiss me."

He sighed and brought his mouth to mine, gently claiming my lips. Shutting my eyes, I tried to breathe, to fight my nervousness.

*Take deep breaths . . . Relax and let your body flow . . . Don't fight it . . . Absorb the motion and flow with it. Becoming tense freezes your muscles and makes it impossible . . .*

His words from earlier washed over me and I breathed. I didn't think about what would be next, but gave myself over to absorbing him, having him inside me, and the pain ebbed as a burning, needy ache filled me. I shifted my hips to him a little, testing the feel, and a sliver of pleasure broke through.

Next, I thrust my hips against him and the pleasure spread, but then the burning became almost scorchingly exquisite as if I had to move or I'd die. He ended the kiss and looked at me. "You're all right?"

"Yes, but . . . I feel as if I'm on fire with pleasure and that it's going to kill me if we don't do something about it."

A chuckle escaped him. "That sums up the last nine months of my life exactly," he said, then thrust himself all the way inside of me.

I arched to him, moaning, pressing my breasts against his chest. With every move that followed, the fire between us grew hotter; the need to meld our bodies into one became desperate. Nothing I'd experienced before matched the feeling of him driving himself deep within me. My body became not my own, but his to claim. He lashed my breasts with his tongue; he punished my mouth with his; he bowed my body with the power and depths of his plunges into me. I writhed and cried as the fire burned so hot that my mind, body, and soul were marked by the pleasure that exploded inside my being. But when he shuddered and cried out from the peak of his pleasure, having fulfilled himself within me,

the deep, elemental intimacy of that and what we shared together changed me forever. I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him as close as I could. I'd known from the moment I saw him, there would be no other for me. I loved him wholly.

When my breathing evened and the beat of my heart steadied, he rolled over, pulling me on top of him. And there we lay in the silken shadows of the night, not speaking, my head to his shoulder, my breasts to his chest, my leg over his. He kept sifting his fingers through my hair and I caressed the contours of his chest, counting the most pleasurable moments of my life by the beats of his heart until I fell asleep, wrapped in his arms.

I awoke in the early morning to find Deverell gone, and though I knew he had duties to attend, disappointment still cast a shadow over me. Either that, or the realization that we would soon be in Northrope did, for I rose with a sense of foreboding knotting my stomach. That plus the blood I found smeared upon the sheets had me feeling completely unsettled. I touched myself, but other than a slight soreness, I didn't think anything was wrong with me. Gathering my clothes and stealing his sheets so that he wouldn't see, I wrapped myself in the blanket from the bed and stole across to Alex's cabin where I hurriedly bathed and prepared my things to disembark.

Sitting on the bunk with everything ready, from the daggers hidden within the pockets of my gown to several bottles of spiced wine packed in my trunk, I was just wondering if I should wait for Deverell to return or dash up to the deck when I remembered there was another figurine somewhere in the leather trunk. I couldn't just leave it there for, well, for anyone to find. And I had to know what it was, didn't I? First on my hands and knees and then flat on my stomach,

I searched, feeling around in the dark—I didn’t chance setting another lantern near my skirts. Finally, my fingers closed over something hard and cool and I backed out of the trunk. Sitting up, I brought the jade figurine into the beam of sunlight, and a stream of warmth that had nothing to do with the wave of heat flooded through me—a mixture of honeyed desire and hot embarrassment. Oh! My!

The look carved on the woman’s face was pure ecstasy, on the man’s it was fierce, intense passion. The woman was bent at the waist, hands gripping a bar similar to a ship’s rail. Her legs were spread wide. The man stood behind the woman, buried intimately into her from the back with his hands cupping her breasts.

The creak of the door and the sound of a step in the outer room set my heart to pounding. I stuffed the figurine into my pocket and jumped to my feet, smoothing down my skirts in an attempt to gather my sensibilities.

“Deverell?” I called, going to the door and opening it. Smoke greeted me and I horrifyingly found a fire right next to the door. Someone had piled up rags and set them on fire. Hot flames scorched the wall and licked up the leg of a small settee. Moments more and the furniture would be on fire.

“Fire!” I yelled, running to the other end of the settee and pulling on it. But it didn’t budge. Panicked, I jerked up on it and realized it was anchored to the floor. I ran to the door, trying to call for help, but though the knob turned, the door wouldn’t open. After a moment of crying for help, I knew I had no more time to spare. I ran into Deverell’s cabin, gathering the blanket off his bed and the ewer of water from his washstand. Returning to the fire, I threw the blanket over the rags and then dumped the water on the burning settee leg. My eyes watered and I coughed at the smoke filling the cabin. It wasn’t going to be enough.

The door rattled behind me and I screamed, wondering if whoever set the fire had returned to harm me.

“Gemini, bloody hell! What’s wrong? Open the damn door!”

“Dev!” I coughed as I rushed to the door. “I can’t! It’s stuck. There’s a fire!”

“Move back!”

I stepped to the side and the door splintered open, bringing in a rush of fresh air. Leaning on the door frame, I gulped in deep breaths.

“What in God’s name happened?” He shouted as he stomped on the smoldering blanket with his booted feet. Then going back out, he returned within moments with a barrel and dumped the contents on the blanket.

“I don’t know. I had just finished packing my things and heard a noise. Thinking you had returned, I went to the door and found the fire next to it. I tried calling for help but I couldn’t get the outer door to open.”

“Bloody hell, woman! Do you know what you’re saying?”

I nodded. “Someone is so afraid of me that they would risk killing everyone to harm me.”

Feeling something slide down my cheek, I swiped at it and realized I was crying.

He pulled me into his arms and I rested my head against his chest, leaning into him as my heart pounded. “The risk to the ship was there, but more likely you would have been overcome by smoke before this section burned enough to bring down the ship. Once the alarm was raised, we’d have doused every place we could and then we would have bored holes into the deck above the cabins to get where we couldn’t reach and poured seawater down. We’re also sailing parallel to the shore. The crew would have been easily saved. Whoever did this meant for only you to die. I’ll flog every man—”

“No. That will just make the situation worse,” I whispered. “All of them will hate me instead of just one . . .”

“Every man who was involved will be punished.” Then

Deverell paused. "Why would you say only one? Unless . . ." He grabbed my hand, looking at the broken nails. "Smitty. Smitty hurt you and he's likely behind the fire as well."

"He didn't necessarily 'hurt' me. I, uh, wasn't seeing where I was running and I ran into him. I frightened him."

"I'm not stupid, Gemini. There's more to it than that. You're protecting a potential murderer here. Do you understand that? You wouldn't protect Jack Poole, would you?"

"But—" I sighed. Deverell was right.

"It happened just as I described. I ran into him. He is frightened of me, sure that I am a witch. He pushed me away from him and my nails caught on the wall. He did mention that he'd kill me if I tried to cast a spell on him as I had you. He must have overheard my foolish taunt about you burning me at the stake for being a witch, and he thinks I have won you with a spell."

"I'm not entirely sure you haven't" he said dryly, one brow raised. "But good bloody hell, woman, why didn't you tell me he threatened your life?"

I swallowed hard, ashamed of my answer. It wasn't like I could say that I didn't think Smitty had been serious. I knew that he had. "Because I didn't want to cause any more trouble than I already have. We're arriving in Northrope today. I'll be leaving the ship and the situation will be over."

"Bloody hell. I'm not sure who is worse, you for thinking that or Smitty for thinking he could get away with harming you. Come with me for now. I'm not leaving your side until you're safely back—"

"Home," I said, glaring into his eyes. "You were about to say home as if nothing that has happened between us has any meaning at all."

"Gemini, I . . . We have to be realistic—"

"Realistic!" Everything inside of me exploded at that word. My finger hit the middle of his chest and he backed up one step, then another with each pounding point I made.

“You’re the only one being unrealistic here if you think after *this* voyage and *your* bed that I’ll ever be content knitting booties and living other peoples’ lives again. I at least am woman enough and *mature* enough to admit what I feel and what I want. And until you *free* yourself from the self-imposed prison you *hide* in, you aren’t man *enough* to be by my—”

“Enough!” Deverell roared. He came at me fast and hard and within seconds had me flung over his shoulder with his arm clamping my knees against his chest. I stared at his backside and the floor for a second, dazed.

“Ahem. Sorry to interrupt, Captain, but it seems as if we’ve a man who has jumped ship.”

I reared up, horrified to see Mr. Holms standing in the doorway, grinning from ear to ear with high amusement dancing in his eyes. Then he sniffed the air. “I smell smoke.”

Deverell swung around to face Holms, leaving me to look at the cabin wall, which meant my skirt-covered bottom was eye level to the first mate. Heat scorched my cheeks and I struggled against Deverell’s hold. “*Put me down!*”

“Quiet!” Deverell smacked my bottom, leaving me utterly speechless and too embarrassed for words. In fact, I thought I would immediately expire from it.

“It’s Smitty,” Deverell said. “He just tried to kill Gemini and wisely knows I’m going to kill him. We aren’t far from the shore or Northrope. Send three of our most trusted men in the rowboat to capture him. When we reach town, I’ll ride back down the coast for them and will hopefully have the constabulary in tow. I’ll be above deck shortly.”

“Aye, aye, sir. Take your time, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“I mind. Now go!”

Deverell swung around, giving me a view of an empty doorway. He marched across the planks to his cabin, kicking the door shut. Four giant steps brought him to his bunk

where he flung me down and laid on top of me from stem to stern. The ferocity of the storm we'd survived didn't hold a candle to the expression on his face.

He didn't say a word, but brought his mouth to mine, kissing me with a tempestuous fever of desire. Just as I couldn't look away from the dark beauty of the storm, I couldn't turn away from the elemental explosion of passion. I kissed him back, drowning in his need so deeply that I became heated and drenched everywhere, especially where I wanted to feel him the most. He must have known how I felt, because soon my skirts were up, his pants were undone, and he'd buried himself inside me. His thrusts were like crashing waves, rocking me to the very center of my soul. I was a vessel upon a wild sea of passion, amid a storm of pleasure that tore my world apart in a blazing flash of intense ecstasy. His shuddering groan let me know I wasn't the only one drowning in pleasure.

When our breathing eased, he put a forefinger to my lips. "Now, I'm going to finish my sentence. I'm not leaving your side until you're safely back home where you'll be protected until I can make arrangements for a place to live."

"Oh," I murmured, my breath escaping in a whoosh. "Well, you can't expect me to be sorry for interrupting."

# 11



Standing on the *Black Dragon's* deck, I watched as she sailed smoothly into Northrope's harbor, despite the loss of her foresails. My mind was a jumble of thoughts. The more I thought about Deverell's statement—"... *until I can make arrangements for a place to live*"—the more bothered I became. First, he hadn't said *we*, but then he hadn't said just *you* either. Second, I wasn't entirely sure that at this point I wanted a place to "live." Despite my problem with Smitty and the fact that a water closet would be an essential comfort, I loved sailing. And as Deverell had said, the sea was his life. I couldn't imagine him giving it up for any reason. Nor would I necessarily want him to . . . Not entirely. So, I was caught in a quagmire of suppositions and emotions, wondering what he meant and what I wanted.

I didn't ask him outright though. Not yet. I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the answer at the moment. My optimistic

self preferred to bask in the knowledge that he'd moved past thoughts of an annulment.

And I needed to set the matter from my mind and enjoy my first arrival into a new port. A huge lighthouse on the opposite side of the harbor's mouth seemed to be rising from the middle of the sea. I questioned Deverell.

"It looks that way. But what you can't see from here is that there is land and marsh that ends in a rocky point where the lighthouse is located. It and the man who lights it up every night have saved thousands of ships and sailors from death. The rocks there are treacherous because some of them lie just beneath the surface of the sea and will rip a hole in the hull of a ship before you can blink an eye."

"So someone goes out there every night and lights the lamps?"

"No. The lighthouse keeper lives there. He has to be on hand should the lantern go out in the middle of the night."

"He lives there all by himself?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"How lonely for him." I could almost imagine a man standing at the top of the lighthouse, looking across the harbor at the people there. People who didn't even remember that he brought safety every night.

"Some people prefer to be alone," Deverell said quietly. "Especially if the alternative is too painful."

His words and the quiet sadness in them brought my gaze to his and I set my hand upon his arm. "And maybe you have to walk through the painful parts to find that there is more to life than what you thought." I had to do that when relating to ghosts. I had to walk through the pain before I found the peace on the other side.

He didn't say anything, but he set his fingers over mine, clasping them tightly.

Drawing a contented breath, I turned my attention to the

noises drifting across the harbor. The town's port thrummed with such an intensity of activity that no amount of worries could dampen my budding enthusiasm. Excitement stirred in the air and burrowed in my breast.

I'd been by Deverell's side since the incident with Smitty and learned my husband had a charming side to his nature. He'd explained more about the ship and its workings and had even let me man the *Black Dragon's* helm for a time. My hands still tingled from the power of guiding so vast and swift a vessel along the glassy sea. I loved the feel of the wind and the sun upon my skin and the taste of salt upon my lips, especially with the warmth and strength of Deverell either behind me or at my side.

Shortly after the *Black Dragon* was anchored in the harbor, the sailors settled the sails and unloaded the cargo. A handful of men would remain behind to guard the ship.

"No wonder you said your favorite port is the one you'd yet to see," I said to Deverell as we walked across the deck to the rowboat waiting to take us to shore. "Arriving someplace new is exhilarating."

"That would be a matter of opinion, Gemini," said Mr. Lincoln, sounding a tad ill. "I'd define the feeling as profound relief." He held his hand up to block the sun from his face as he stepped from the shadows where he'd apparently been hiding. I realized for the first time that I hadn't seen him all morning.

"Are you all right, Nathaniel?" Leaning closer, I noted that he appeared more pale than I remembered. He kept blinking as if his eyes found it impossible to adjust to the brightness of the sun.

"I'll live," he replied. "But I'd advise anyone not to drink too much wine while at sea."

"Have you been seasick?"

He cleared his throat. "Not exactly. I spent the entire

night restless and pacing my cabin, plagued with . . . well, all sorts of . . . thoughts. Didn't even come close to falling asleep until well after the sun had risen."

"Really?" I wondered what thoughts had given him such a difficult turn. I'd only heard of the aphrodisiac effects of the wine. "What exactly plagued—"

"You missed quite a bit of excitement this morning," Deverell said, speaking over me. He caught my hand and gave my fingers a cautionary squeeze.

Nathaniel blinked in Deverell's direction with a questioning brow lifted.

Deverell answered the unspoken question. "Smitty attempted to murder Gemini and jumped ship."

Nathaniel shook himself as if to force off a heavy cloak. "Dear God! What happened?"

"He set fire to her cabin and jammed the door shut. I sent several men to shore to capture him and I plan to ride up the coast to meet them after I settle Gemini at the Royal Stag's Inn."

"Then you're not taking her to—"

"No," Deverell said, his voice tight with anger or warning. "Please don't mention it again."

I remembered overhearing the sailors talking about Deverell's mother's death and his estrangement from his family. I had to bite back the questions on the edge of my tongue. Considering Deverell's response to Nathaniel, I decided to see what I could find out on my own first.

"My apologies," said Nathaniel. "If you don't mind, I'll ride with you to the magistrate's house in order to give him a report of Mr. Killdaren's willingness to help. We'll find out if there has been any progress made toward apprehending the murderer."

I drew in a deep breath. "Then you'll need to make arrangements for the three of us to visit the magistrate's office, Deverell. For I, too, wish to know what progress has

been made on the case and I might have a few questions of my own.”

“Gemini,” Deverell replied, shaking his head, “there’s no need for you—”

“There’s every need,” I said.

Deverell caught my elbow in a firm grip. “Excuse us a moment, Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel coughed. “Of course.”

Deverell pulled me to the side, far enough away to assure we wouldn’t be overheard. “Gemini,” he whispered. “Your situation is precarious enough. You cannot pursue this madness of involving yourself with the murder investigation in the manner that you plan. Especially now, with witch rumors fresh on the sailors’ minds. Despite my cautioning them not to carry false tales, someone is bound to say something that will cause more rumors to arise.”

“I understand your concern, but I have no choice in the matter. This is something that I must do.”

“Then you give me no recourse. I forbid you to involve yourself. As your husband I exercise my right to protect you from the disastrous course you’ve set upon.”

My face went numb as I blinked at him incredulously. Forbid me? He *forbid* me? He’d yet to even barely acknowledge that he wasn’t seeking an annulment of our marriage and he was *forbidding* me? There would never be a time that I’d accept such a decree. After being inhibited my entire life, I had just achieved some measure of freedom, and I wouldn’t let him steal it all away. It was as if he slapped me in the face and cut my heart in one fell swoop. Biting my cheek hard, searching for any stimulus to put my mind back into functioning order, I met his gaze and leaned in very close. “Deverell, I must be frank with you.”

“By all means. No reason to change now,” he said dryly.

“I began this journey with an important mission, not to marry you or to share your bed, and I will not be deterred

from what I have to do because of your ignorance or disbelief in my abilities. A wife and husband stand at each other's side. She is not under his thumb. Now, you have a choice. I'd like for you to stand at my side as I see this mission through and to share whatever future we decide as being mutually beneficial. But, I will not live under your thumb. If necessary, I will petition for an annulment of our marriage this afternoon. You can let me know your decision once we reach the inn." I didn't care if I had any legal standing or not. Besides, what could he do? Shout to the world that he had indeed consummated our marriage? It wasn't something he would do.

He stood there staring at me with his mouth opening and shutting repeatedly, his face garnering a red hue, so I decided to return to Nathaniel and the sailors waiting to lower us to the rowboat.

Deverell soon joined me. He didn't say a word, but his presence, akin to an ominous dark cloud, not only darkened the day but did not portend well. It seemed he would need a large period of time in which to digest my frankness, and though the distance to the docks required a good amount of rowing, I didn't think it half as long as it should be to give him enough time to come to a proper decision. Not with the thunderous looks he kept shooting my way as we cut across the waves. With each oar stroke I prayed Deverell would understand why I had to fight this battle.

My efforts to allow nothing to dampen my arrival in Northrope were dashed, wrecked upon Deverell's stubborn insistence and my determination to face and destroy the evil in Northrope. Still, excitement breathed in me as I looked at that town looming larger and larger before me, for I didn't see darkness surrounding me. I saw . . . possibilities and realized that was what appealed to me most about arriving in a new place—the new possibilities, of people to meet, novelties to see, and things to do.

We were halfway across the harbor when Deverell's ghosts appeared. Pierre and Davey waved hello to me as they grinned and bounced about over Deverell's shoulders.

I groaned. Why couldn't they have shown up when I could properly speak to them without Nathaniel and a handful of sailors as witnesses? What if they disappeared again before I could ask what I needed to know?

Deverell had chosen to sit across from me rather than next to me. I knew this was so he could glare at me. Noise from the wind feeding into the harbor from the sea and from the sailors whipping the oars through the water required a person to speak up to be heard, but it wasn't necessary to shout. But yell I did, for it wasn't Deverell's attention I hoped to gain.

"I've been thinking about what happened in Barbados. You remember Barbados and what happened there, right?" I glanced up at Pierre, my gaze pleading. Then I looked back at Deverell. His eyes were practically popping from the ferocity of his stare at me.

"Gemini!" he shouted in warning. I saw Nathaniel and the sailors look at us strangely.

"I apologize but you have to tell me now!" I sent another desperate glance at Pierre then quickly looked back at Deverell. The color of his face had moved from red to purplish.

"That's enough," Deverell said. He didn't yell, but the tone of his voice spoke volumes.

"Look who's a knothed now, Pierre," Davey said. "She's blimey asking you to tell her whot hap'ned in Barbados."

"I know that, but . . . *mon dieu*. I cannot tell her," Pierre said. "I swore to the cap'n I'd go to my grave before breathing a word of it."

"'Ave ya bloody lost yer mind?" Davey declared. "Yer already in the grave, in a manner of speakin' that is. We are and we aren't. Didn't get a proper burial, we didn't. Now tell 'er. It sounds important."

I couldn't resist sending Pierre another pleading glance and nodding my head.

"In Barbados, while in his cups on account of his mum's passing, the cap'n . . ."

"Whot?"

"He got married," Pierre said.

I stared at the ghost.

"He whot?" asked Davey. Then he smacked Pierre. "Yer not supposed to tell her things like that."

I shot my gaze at Deverell. "You got married!"

Deverell leaned forward and grabbed my hands. A tight jerk replanted my bottom back on the seat. Without even thinking about where I was, I'd been about to stand and at the very least would have likely ended up in the harbor even if I managed to avoid capsizing the boat. Deverell was as white as a sheet and as grim as an executioner. "No, I didn't. Not really. A fake priest and his scamming daughter tried to make me think I had when I awoke from a night of mindless drinking. They expected me to pay them to keep silent. Instead I marched them to the governor, who had them deported from the island. Now, is there any other laundry you want to air while we're trapped in this bloody boat, or do you think you can hold your tongue until we're settled at the inn?"

I wanted to give Pierre a piece of my mind and would have if it wouldn't have made me look even more unbalanced. Pierre could have said that a woman tried to scam him into a marriage. Then I wouldn't have appeared to be such an insane fool.

Thank God Nathaniel was making light of the incident. He snorted. "Deverell, you obviously haven't learned that it is impossible to stop the wind. And, quite frankly, Gemini is very much like the wind."

"Yes, I've thought the same myself. A relentless force bent on wreaking havoc."

I gasped. "If you're going to malign me in my presence you can at least have the courtesy to do so to me directly."

This time Nathaniel laughed hard and the ghosts laughed harder. I had to bite back my retort to them all.

For the sake of appearances, I continued to ignore Pierre and Davey until we were in private.

Nathaniel recovered to give me a warm smile. "My dear, you're a breath of air so fresh you could turn the inside of a tomb into a spring morning."

"Glad you think so," Deverell said dryly. "Because spring is about to be sprung in Northrope and I doubt anything will ever be the same again." He leveled his gaze on me; his blue eyes were dark and probing and so very serious that I had little doubt that he believed me now. "Would you care to settle *our* things at the inn and see the magistrate this evening, or would you rather go immediately?"

"Go immediately," I replied.

All amusement fell from Nathaniel's face. "Gemini, surely you aren't insisting on involving yourself in this—"

"Yes, she is," Deverell interjected. "And I'll be beside her every step she takes."

Warmth flooded through me as tears bit the backs of my eyes. I'd expected that even after he believed me, I'd still have to fight him every step of the way to accomplish what I needed. To feel him move up beside me in so decisive a way, even though he disagreed with me, meant more to my heart and soul than any bauble or flower or gift he might have given.

As it turned out, we didn't have to go to the magistrate. Deverell had just dispatched our trunks to the inn when a man met us on the dock, looking as if he'd raced from some battle and carried grim news. He was about the same age as Deverell, with a rugged appearance that said he was a man who'd fought for his place in life. For some reason I expected

the magistrate to be a stone-faced man with graying hair and a portly countenance. Probably because the only magistrate I'd met before had been in Oxford where Magistrate Edward Pomppernil had been called a pillar of the community, and not for his exemplary reputation alone—he was as stiff and stoic as cement.

This man was far from stiff and stoic; large and vibrant were more apt descriptions. He looked over the group and disappointment fell over his features. "Nathaniel, Deverell, I apologize for my haste gentlemen, but as matters have worsened, I'd hoped Killdaren would be with you."

"He will be coming shortly, once he sees to the safety of his family," Nathaniel responded. "Worsened how?"

"Shortly isn't going to be soon enough," the man replied. "Sarah has been found murdered."

"Oh God," Nathaniel whispered. "I'd hoped—"

The burden that another had died before I could get here to help hit me hard, making me draw a sharp breath. Deverell slid his arm behind me.

"Gentlemen, I suggest we take this conversation to a private room at the inn. But first, Rhys . . ." Deverell urged me forward. "Gemini, may I introduce you to Magistrate Rhys Williams. Rhys, my wife, Gemini."

The magistrate whipped his gaze from me to Deverell and then back, eyes wide with shock. "Your wife. This is indeed an honor." I offered my hand and he responded with a bow. "I hadn't realized you wouldn't be alone. We can postpone until you are settled and Mrs. Jansen is resting."

Nathaniel coughed.

"That won't be necessary," Deverell said. "Gemini is Sean Killdaren's sister-in-law and contributed to Jack Poole's discovery and capture in Dartmoor's End. She is here to help identify him. I unfortunately have a limited amount of time at the moment and need a favor from you, Rhys. One of the sailors attempted to harm my wife and then jumped

ship about an hour's ride west of here. I sent several of my men after him and need to meet them. Hopefully they will have captured Smitty."

"An hour's ride west, but that's near—"

"Unfortunate, but of little import and no need to even mention," Deverell replied, curtly. "Can I count on your assistance?"

"Of course."

"Then let us proceed to the inn, so you can tell us what has happened."

I wondered about what had gone unsaid between Deverell and the magistrate. Tension weighed heavily between them, but I didn't find any answers in Deverell's guarded expression and decided I'd ask questions later. He offered me his arm and I moved my hand to rest on his, feeling the instant warmth and strength of him through the cloth of his shirt and coat.

"Are you all right?" he asked, leaning nearer.

"Fine," I whispered. I couldn't let learning of the death of a second woman affect me so or I would become too upset to do anyone any good. As we moved up the dock, I turned my attention to the activity bustling around, searching for that distance. Northrope's port had to be four times larger than the one at Dartmoor's End. The ships in the harbor ranged from half the size of the *Black Dragon* to double. Smells of fish being readied for market and the sweat of sailors moving heavy crates in the hot sun were minimized by the ocean breeze pouring in from the east and the fragrant scent of tea being loaded onto a cart nearby. Very few women were on the docks, but there had to be men from every nationality in all manner of dress hurrying about their business. We soon reached an elegant street with richly appointed shops lining the cobblestones. Scrolled lantern posts decorated the corners, and polished benches with large urns of flowers sat under scalloped awnings.

"The inn is three blocks down. Would you prefer a conveyance or to walk?" Deverell asked.

"A walk would be most welcomed," I said. "Magistrate Rhys, I have to say that Northrope is beautiful."

"Thank you. The town leaders take great care in planning and aim to avoid the usual troubles that come with being a busy seaport. They want Northrope to shine from the moment you step onto the dock."

"They have succeeded admirably."

"It was one of the reasons that I've stayed after stumbling upon Northrope," Nathaniel said.

"How long have you been here?" I asked absently.

"About a year and half, wouldn't you say, Rhys?" Nathaniel asked.

"Yes, though when he starts extolling on a scientific curiosity it seems twice that," said the magistrate.

I listened to their small talk as we made our way up the street. Then they fell slightly behind as they paused at a corner for a carriage to pass after Deverell and I had crossed the street.

"I assume that my ghosts have returned," Deverell said once we were alone, "for there's no other way you could have known what happened in Barbados."

"Yes. Pierre and Davey are back for the moment. Directly above your head if you must know."

He glanced up and then shook his head. "I don't want to know. Would be better off not ever having known."

"At least you have a choice in the matter. I don't."

"At some point in private, I will have some questions. Why are they with me? What do they want?"

"What I can tell you so far is they are bent on clearing your name. Also, one of them said something about them not having a proper resting place. Do you know anything about that?"

"Since I was in prison for a long time after their deaths

and then was immediately deported from Egypt upon my release, all I know is what my commanding officer told me. Pierre and Davey were killed in a fire and they were buried nearby.”

“I’ll ask them when I have the chance.”

“I don’t need to remind you that any odd behavior on your part will only give room for more rumors to grow.”

“No, you don’t. I’ll be as careful as I can.”

“You weren’t. I thought for sure everyone on that bloody rowboat was going to realize that you weren’t speaking to me. That was a rash thing to do.”

“Perhaps, but I didn’t know if they were going to disappear again before I could speak to them in private, and I had to prove to you that I’ve been telling the truth.”

He paused, bringing me to a stop on the street. “Promise me, never again. Don’t ever again endanger yourself to prove anything to anyone, especially me.” His gaze was so serious that I would have promised him anything.

“I promise,” I said.

Sighing, he began walking again. “Besides, I should have told you. I already believed you.”

“You did? But how? Why?”

“The more I thought about it, your description of Pierre and Davey and their interactions was just too accurate not to be believed. But, more importantly, I . . . well . . . I came to know you more. You’re bluntly honest, to a fault, and you don’t cower behind subterfuge. I couldn’t not believe you. But I wouldn’t accept it because I didn’t want you to endanger yourself by becoming involved with this killer. I still don’t.”

“Then why have you changed your mind about my helping with the investigation?”

“It’s what you said about being at one another’s side and not under my thumb. My mother lived under my father’s thumb. My whole family did. I don’t want anyone under mine.”

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I heard that your mother passed away."

"Several years ago. She's dead, and the rest of my family is dead to me. Now why aren't you checking out these magnificent shops we are passing by so quickly?"

I glanced at the shop he mentioned. A ladies dress shop. I recognized several of the newest fashions drawn in *Godey's Lady's Book*. I would have smiled at my lack of excitement had Deverell not deliberately tried to distract me with frills.

"Please," I said. "If you don't want to speak of a subject then just say so, but don't try to foist my mind off on frills. For most of my life, my mother insisted that I focus on every bit of fashion news and gossip just so I would completely ignore anything about ghosts. I did so to excess and now find that I have little interest in them. If you don't want to speak of your family then tell me about your travels, excepting Barbados. I've heard all I want to know of that. Pierre is going to get a piece of my mind as well. He could have simply said a woman and her father tried to blackmail you. But no. He blurted out that you'd gotten married and offered no explanation."

Deverell laughed. "That's Pierre for you."

We reached the inn and turned to wait for Nathaniel and the magistrate. Though I could readily see the camaraderie between Nathaniel and Rhys, I still thought it odd that Nathaniel had made the journey to Dartmoor's End in the magistrate's place, especially given Nathaniel's sentiments toward being at sea. But then perhaps he was a man who put others before himself. And considering the lengths I was going to to help people I didn't even know, my questioning of Nathaniel seemed ridiculous. Still, I couldn't help but keep in mind that Constable Jack Poole was the murderer of the victims whose deaths he was pretending to investigate. There

was a sick power in helping to solve a crime you committed and leading the investigation in false directions.

At the inn we were immediately escorted into a private parlor, one that I had to say equaled if not surpassed the elegance of Killdaren's Castle. Marble floors, thick rugs, silk-covered walls, carved inlaid woods, and richly appointed furniture adorned the interior. An elaborate mantel topped by a masterful painting lorded above a warm fire and enhanced the stately welcome of the room. This was not a mere traveler's inn, and I immediately worried that Deverell had brought me here because he thought I needed to be surrounded in such luxury. He couldn't afford such expense.

As soon as Deverell left to go after Smitty, I'd have to secretly pay the proprietor and have him swear to Deverell that an unknown benefactor had covered the expense.

Before we had a chance to sit down, a formal butler wheeled in a tea cart laden with everything from scones to delicate sandwiches. "Would madam like to pour?"

Deverell, Nathaniel, and the magistrate glared at the tea cart with ambivalence. It was obvious that they were simultaneously hungry and irritated at having yet another delay in their discussion. The butler stiffened, clearly wondering if he'd caused some sort of insult.

"Thank you, I would love to pour," I said. "I'll let you know should we be in need of anything else. With so many ships in the harbor, I'm sure there are a number of things that need attending." I moved to the settee near where he placed the cart.

"Very well, madam. The bell pull is in the corner to your right." He motioned to a hanging peacock-embroidered panel capped by a large tassel, then bowed and exited the room. "Gentlemen, would any of you care for refreshment as you continue your discussion? Time is short and we can't

waste any of it on small talk or niceties. Come fix yourselves a plate and tell me how you take your tea.”

A collective sigh sounded, then each man eagerly filled a plate as I prepared their tea.

Deverell spoke first. “When you’re ready, Rhys, please tell us what has happened.”

The magistrate’s expression tightened into grim lines. “The murder of Sarah is so horrific, I cannot bring myself to utter the details of it in your presence, Mrs. Jansen. Just suffice it to say it is the most heinous crime I’ve ever encountered. And the killer is the most bold and cunning I’ve ever heard of. He knew we had men watching the Druid stones, yet still chose to murder Sarah there. A heavy fog had set in that night, making it difficult to see more than a few feet. We had a man hiding on the perimeter of the Druid stones and one upon the path from the road. We didn’t think anyone fool enough to come through the marsh with its treacherous bogs, but the killer did. Sarah was bound and gagged and apparently unable to make any cry for help. I personally pray to God that he drugged her and she never knew what happened.” He shuddered.

“When did this happen?” Nathaniel asked.

“The night after you sailed for Dartmoor’s End. It’s been a nightmare. Every available man has been patrolling the streets day and night, and all the women have been advised to not set foot from their homes alone.”

“Well,” I said, “bold, vicious, and cunning would aptly describe Jack Poole. And having been a constable, he would already know every move the authorities would logically make and prepare for it.”

The men mumbled their agreement.

“When I visit the Druid stones in the morning, I will give the matter some thought. Once it is determined what he would logically do next, we’ll have to do the opposite.” That statement left them blinking at me blankly, as if to say that it

would be completely illogical to do the illogical. I stood and Deverell set his cup aside, standing as well. "No need to accompany me upstairs," I told him. "I'll just retire to my room and let you gentlemen have a few moments alone."

"Are you sure?" he asked, leading me to the door.

"Positive. I'll go rest and await your return."

"Gemini," he said softly as he motioned in the corridor for a servant to escort me. "Promise me that you'll not venture out alone. Not for any reason. No matter what."

"Heavens, I'm not a fool and I've no wish to die, but do tell the magistrate that it isn't enough for the women to not venture out alone. He needs to tell the women to arm themselves. To have their menfolk teach them how to use a weapon to protect themselves."

Deverell lifted both brows. "Do you have any idea what sort of anarchy that would cause? A bunch of frightened women running around with deadly weapons. We'd likely lose half the male population in a single night." He shook his head.

"Not if the women were trained properly. Besides," I said, sliding my hands into my pockets. "I've been armed with two daggers all day long and haven't had a single mishap." As my fingers closed over the steel hilts, I also felt something small and hard and smooth. The figurine. I'd forgotten about it. My fingers tingled and then other places in my body joined in, adding to the sensual visions in my mind.

He shook his head. "I'll mention the defense idea to Rhys. I shouldn't be gone more than three hours. When I return we'll have dinner together." He paused.

I blinked. "What did you say?"

"When I return would you like to have dinner together?"

A broad smile curved my lips. "That would be very much to my liking, Deverell."

He looked down at me and drew in a sharp breath, then slid a finger over my lips. His eyes grew dark with hunger.

Heat pulsed from my bottom lip to my unmentionables with lightning speed. I grew damp and my breasts seemed to swell. I would have leaned into him had not the servant he'd motioned for arrived at our side.

"Until later," he said.

"Yes," I whispered. Then some imp inside me couldn't resist calling out to him as we separated. "I found the other figurine."

He froze, his gaze riveted to mine. "Gemini," he rasped.

"Until dinner, Deverell."

I couldn't wait, and from the expression on his face, neither could he.

# 12



The rooms, all four of them, were as luxuriant as the parlor and twice as welcoming. A central area with a sunny balcony offering a view of the sea opened up to two lush bedrooms and the most amazing water closet I'd ever seen. The first thing I did was order a hot bath and soak beneath its scented steam until the water grew too cold to tolerate and I had nothing left to vigorously scrub. Clean from my head to my toes, I went to my trunk, only to find that my garments had a slight smoky odor to them, one that immediately put me back on the ship, fighting the fire and the panicked feeling of being trapped with the flames. I prayed I would never have to face such a situation again.

After calling for a maid, I sent my dresses to be aired and requested a meeting with the proprietor at his earliest convenience.

Within half an hour, a knock sounded at the door and I

found a very tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed, exotic looking woman wearing a fashionable ensemble of—good heavens, was it pantaloons or a dress? “May I help you?” I asked.

“You wished to see the proprietor, my lady? I am Merrill Emerson.” Her dimpled cheeks held a wry smile that widened at my surprise.

“Yes,” I gestured. “Please come in.”

She stepped gracefully into the room and I found myself nearly drooling with envy. She walked about at heights I’d always dreamed of. There was no crowd that she’d get lost in. Nor could anyone assume her a child. She was very tall and perfectly proportioned, and in no way appeared to be the oddity that I’d always felt. Well, at least how I had felt until Deverell’s reaction to me naked.

“What I wanted to see you about, and hope you will help me keep from my husband, is that I would like to pay for our stay here. I imagine it’s quite a lot for such grand accommodations, and I fear his funds are limited. Not that mine are vast, but I do have some with me.”

“Your husband?” the woman asked, bringing her fingers to her reddened lips, her dark eyes going wide.

“Yes. Captain Deverell Jansen.”

She drew a deep breath and then seemingly gathered herself and curtsied. “You’ll have to forgive my shock. I did not think the marquis would ever marry. May I offer you my congratulations?”

The blood drained from my head and left me swaying like a loose sail in a crazy wind. I grabbed for the nearest settee and sank onto it. “What did you say?”

“Oh,” the woman gasped. “I, oh, bloody hell.” She threw her arms up in the air. “I’ve mucked things up good and proper now.”

Suddenly all of the exotic poise crumbled and the woman began pacing back and forth across the room, talking to herself. “But why did he bring you here if he wasn’t

going reclaim his position? How could he expect that you wouldn't learn of his title?"

I drew in several deep breaths and fought for equilibrium. The woman's bloody hell curse did wonders toward helping me. Put me right back in the center of my family and friends at Killdaren's Castle, where Cassie and Andrie and Bridget McGowan had railed about the idiocy that men could sometimes achieve. Bridget's favorite phrase had been bloody hell, to which Cassie would reply a lady never says bloody. That worked fine until Sean drove Cassie to the point where she was muttering bloody hell herself.

"Would you mind explaining all of this to me?" I said to the woman.

She stopped pacing and shook her head. "All I can tell you is that your husband is the Marquis of Rayburn whether he acknowledges it himself or not. His father is the Duke of Wakefield, and his family's estate, Clearview, lies on the coast about an hour's ride to the east. More than that I really can't say. You'll have to ask him." She sighed. "And there's no need to pay for your stay here. The marquis is welcome to stay anytime. If it weren't for him, I would not have this establishment. I owe him everything."

She left before I could recover enough to ask her more questions and I sank onto the settee. A marquis? I'd married a bloody marquis who would one day be a duke? I laughed until I cried.

At some point, exhaustion must have weighed in, because the next thing I knew I lay on my back upon the settee and Deverell was kissing me. He was on his knees on the floor and leaning over me, his chest pressing hotly against mine, his mouth firm, demanding, and desperately hungry. He broke off the kiss. "You must tell me," he said with an almost urgent tone. "What did you find? You have no idea how much I've thought about it since I left."

The figurine. He was talking about the figurine. Pierre

and Davey were floating above him, grinning from ear to ear. "He loves her, Pierre. Ain't never seen the captain ride a horse so fast. All that talk to the magistrate about wanting to git here to see her safe was just an excuse."

"*Oui, mon ami*. Our *Le Capitaine* is in love."

"More like trouble," I muttered.

"What?" asked Deverell.

"You want to know what I found?" I asked him. "You'll never guess."

"I can imagine," he said softly.

I planted my hands against his shoulders and shoved him back as I struggled to sit up. "I found out that you're a bloody marquis! Did you not think it something you should have told me?"

"This does not sound good, Davey," said Pierre. "Not good at all."

"But she loves him, don't she?" Davey asked.

Deverell sat back on his haunches, practically eye level with me. "No. I didn't. That has nothing to do with me anymore. I am simply the man you married. The captain of the *Black Dragon*. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Yes, I do."

An icy expression fell over his face and he stood. "I see." He turned his back on me and walked across the room. "Well, that comes as a surprise. I—"

"Don't you dare say another word!" I moved to him and caught his shoulder, swinging him around to face me. It was obvious from the expression on his face—a mixture of anger, hurt, and disgust—that he thought I had more interest in his title than in him.

"I have a problem with a man not being honest with me. I have a problem being deliberately left in ignorance for no good reason. I looked like a complete fool earlier when I found out that I was married to a marquis and that his family's

estate is an hour away from here where his father, the Duke of Wakefield, resides. And no matter how much you want to deny, run away from, and ignore your past, you can't. It affects you, and as your wife, it affects me. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I am no longer that man. My title has nothing to do with me and I have no family either. They are dead to me."

"What happened?" I said softly, easing my palm to his cheek. Though he put on a cold face to show the world, I knew Captain Devil for the passionate, loyal man that he was.

"As you so aptly phrased it, I refused to live under my father's thumb, which put us constantly at odds, but his conviction of my guilt in Egypt and what he did when I returned made any relationship between us impossible."

The stoic expression on his face in no way matched the pain I read in his eyes. His father had hurt him to the core, a fact that wrenched my heart deeply. The desire to know anything else was snuffed out by his pain. "Then the answer to your question, Deverell, is no. I don't have a problem being married to Captain Deverell Jansen."

Pierre let out a huge sigh. "*Oui, mon ami*. She loves him."

Love him I did. But I wasn't fool enough to stick my head in the sand either. One day his title would find us and he would then have to deal with all of the hurts he couldn't face now. Until that day I would love and protect him as best as I could. I brought my lips to his, leaning into him. He met my kiss hard and swung me up in his arms.

I glared at Davey and Pierre.

"Time to go," Davey said.

"You are right. I'm beginning to think our *Le Capitaine* no longer needs saving, *mon ami*."

"Blimey, whot would we do with ourselves then?"

They disappeared, leaving Deverell and me alone. Quickly covering the distance to the bedroom, he kicked

the door shut and carried me to the bed. He set me on my feet and reached for the buttons of my gown.

"Wait," I said. "I forgot to give you something." I quickly palmed my gift to him. The mirrored dresser was situated on the other side of the bed and I could see him watching me in the mirror, his gaze suddenly very intense. I smiled at him, then, turning from the mirror. Taking his hand, I placed the figurine in it.

"Before I look at this," he said, keeping his gaze on mine, "I want you to watch me touch you. No closing your eyes. I want you to see everything."

"Well, I suppose I do that, don't I?"

"Not like this," he said. He swung me around to face the bed and moved in behind me. Undoing my hair, he brushed the long locks through his fingers and buried a kiss against the nape of my neck. Then he slid his hand around my waist and I looked down to watch his fingers slide up my stomach and over my breasts to my neck. He cupped my chin and eased my face up. "Look in the mirror, Gem."

I did. Across the bed, I met his gaze. He stood so tall and darkly handsome behind me. My breath caught as he cupped my breasts in his hands and flicked his thumbs over the tips until they peaked beneath my clothes. When I moaned for more, he unbuttoned my dress and somehow managed to divest me of the rest of my clothes, and his followed quickly. Then his hands covered my breasts again, but this time he feathered his fingers over my nipples, back and forth, up and down, over and over until the hardened peaks throbbed and my hips danced to his touch.

I leaned back against him. Watching him touch me. Watching him watch himself touching me. His arousal was a hard, pulsing shaft against the small of my back. He abruptly left my breasts and plunged his hands to my thighs.

"Spread your legs for me."

I did.

"Here. I need to see more," he said, lifting me up until my knees rested on the bed. "Now spread your legs wide and arch your hips forward." Reaching from behind me, he slid his hands to my sex. I thought he'd slip his fingers along the dampened flesh, but he didn't. He caught the folds of my femininity on each side and pulled me open until a flushed strip of pink flesh appeared between my golden curls.

"Do you see yourself, Gemini? Do you want to see more of me touching you, loving you?"

I nodded.

"Watch me. Watch me taste you." When he slid his fingers free of my sex, he flicked each one over a most sensitive spot, making my hips thrust to the whim of his touch. He sat on the bed beside me with his back to the mirror and leaned over until his mouth met the heart of my sex. The sight of his dark head so intimately placed and his naked body next to mine, so dark to my light, sent shivers of desire through me. The lashing of his tongue and his sucking kisses to my sex spiraled me into a hot sea of pleasure. I cried out, gasping.

"I hope you had a good nap today, because there's a whole lot more to come," he said. He set something down on the bed in front of me. It was the figurine I had given him.

Then he stood up and moved behind me again. I watched him in the mirror, all hard lines, dark hair, and jutting arousal, so thick and flushed with desire. Pulling me back against him, he eased me off the bed. "Put your hands on the edge of the mattress and hold on. Look at the figurine. Watch me make it happen for you."

He set the jade figure so that I was looking right at the woman and her ecstasy. He came in behind me, easing my legs apart as he slid his shaft along my wet core and positioned himself to thrust gently inside me. I'd braced myself for some discomfort or pain, but only felt a huge, pleasant

tightness inside me. He thrust again, and that pleasing fullness grew.

"I'm almost all the way inside you," he whispered. "Ready for more?"

"Yes," I said, pushing my bottom back against him.

He groaned. "Now."

He thrust hard and a spasm of pleasure raced through me. "Oh my, I— Oh that felt . . . good."

"Tell me when it's better than good," he said. Bringing his hands around, he claimed my breasts, grasping the hardened peaks between his thumb and forefinger, tweaking them back and forth as he slid a little ways out of me and surged back inside. "Oh, heavens," I cried at the fire shooting through my loins and my mind.

"Better than good?" he asked.

I nodded, pushing back against him.

"It's going to get even better, Gem," he said, thrusting with each sentence spoke. "Look into the mirror and watch us. Some day, I'm going to do this to you in the crow's nest. I am going to be deep and hard inside you while the wind blows your hair wild and the moon kisses your skin. You'll hold on to the rail and fly with me into the wildness you bring alive within me. I can't get enough. I can't get deep enough."

The power and pace of his thrusts became a frenzy of pleasure. I reached the stars, touched the moon, and came apart at the seams of my soul from the ecstasy he plunged me into. He shouted and I cried out, fulfilled beyond any measure. We fell upon the bed. At first my nose was buried in the coverlet and the weight of his body was upon mine, but he quickly rolled to the side and gathered me into his arms. His breathing was ragged, his chest thundered against my cheek, and his arms held me so closely that when my mind became capable of thought and my body's trembling eased, I found my soul had melded to his.

Suddenly, Deverell tensed. "Bloody hell, Gemini. Where

are Pierre and Davey? If they are anywhere in here, I'm going to kill them."

I laughed. "They left before you kicked the door shut."

"How do you live with it?" he asked softly, looking into my eyes. "The entire afternoon, as I met up with the men and we brought Smitty to the jail, I kept looking over my shoulder wondering if they were there."

"Usually it isn't a constant situation in my life. As a child at our home in Oxford, I only saw a ghost sometimes outside by an ancient tree. I would sit on the lowest limb and talk to him about important things. He was a scholar and went about predicting the weather. One bright, sunny day, he said that I had to leave the tree and hurry back inside. That I had to get my sisters out of the playhouse and take them in, too, because a terrible storm was coming. When I reached the playhouse, I found my sisters had already gone inside. I told my mother what the ghost said and she laughed, patted my head, and told me that it wasn't going to storm.

"An hour later a fierce storm suddenly hit the town. The tree and the playhouse were struck by lightning and three people in the town were killed. White as a ghost herself, my mother made me swear that I would never speak to a ghost again or else people would hurt our whole family. Then she gave me lots of paper dolls with lots of pretty dresses to put on them and I immersed myself in dolls and fashion and never spoke to a ghost again until we came to Dartmoor's End. You're the only person I've met who carries ghosts with them. All the other ghosts I have seen are in buildings . . . or rooms." I swallowed hard, and tried to shove the memory of Flora from my mind.

"I wonder why that is," he said.

"I don't know. I do know that the spirit world isn't a predictable place. And why ghosts linger is usually tied to something they have to see, say, or do in the real world."

As he pulled me close and sifted his fingers through my

hair, my mind wandered back to Flora and I shivered at what tomorrow would bring.

A misty fog moved in with the coming of the night, casting eerie shadows onto Northrope's charming streets in keeping with the darkness I felt closing in around me. Deverell had wakened me from a nightmare a short while ago and its lingering effects still had my heart racing, urging me to run away before it was too late.

Only a fool wouldn't want to run away from evil.

From where I stood on the balcony of our room, I drew a deep breath of the damp, cold air and searched across the harbor for the shrouded beacon of the distant lighthouse, which was hardly visible in the foggy night. We'd both fallen asleep after our erotic journey into what was becoming an ever deepening and broadening expression of passion between us. We'd only woken when my cries had frightened us both.

My memory of what Jack Poole had done to Flora hadn't been this sharp since I'd experienced it for the first time, in the mansion, when Flora's ghost had taken over my mind. In fact it had all but faded. I had to wonder if my renewed recollection was because, on some subconscious level, I might be sensing that Jack Poole was nearby.

"Dinner will arrive shortly," Deverell said, joining me on the balcony. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my middle to ease me back against him. Since the hour had grown late, he'd suggested a private dinner in our suite rather than dining in the establishment's elegant rooms downstairs.

It was a decision that suited me. I wasn't in any mood to be around other people. I felt too vulnerable and too much an oddity.

"Are you ready to tell me what it was all about?" he

asked. He wanted to know about the nightmare, but I wasn't sure if I could tell him. It had been difficult enough for him to believe that I spoke with ghosts. What would he say when he learned that sometimes it was more than that? Maybe I could only tell him part of it and keep the rest secret. Besides, my mind and body being taken over by a ghost had only happened that one time. Maybe it wouldn't happen again.

But what if it did?

What if it happened tomorrow? Deverell had to know. He would have to bring me back here and keep everyone else away until I was better. Now that I considered things in this light, I knew without a doubt that Cassie would likely strangle me when she caught up to me.

"After dinner, I will tell you. Just give me a little more time until I have to think about the nightmare again."

He sighed. "I'm going to hold you to your word."

"I promise. By the way, did you speak to Rhys about teaching women to defend themselves?"

"No. There wasn't time and I'm still not convinced it's a good thing."

Dinner arrived, interrupting the conversation. The table was set up with linen, crystal, and silver—everything one could imagine accompanied the succulent meal of herbed pheasant with soft peas, a savory soup of beef and potato, and fresh bread. As the meal progressed, Deverell told me a number of funny stories about his adventures at sea and I didn't bring up the subject of women's defense again for fear it would lead to a discussion of my dream. We enjoyed ourselves immensely, lingering over a dessert of iced lemon cookies and tea. It was the perfect meal. Well, as perfect as it could be without the spiced wine and despite the fact that it didn't last long enough.

Deverell set aside his napkin. "I've been as patient as I can."

"You have to make me a promise first."

He stiffened. "What kind of promise?"

"What I need you to do should something odd happen to me."

Getting up from the table, he moved to my side and urged me up as well. Looking hard into my eyes, he said very succinctly, "What the devil are you talking about?"

"You have to promise first," I said.

He threw his hands up in exasperation. "Good God, woman. I promise. Whatever it is, I promise. Now tell me what you're talking about."

"Let's go sit down." Facing the past would be easier near the warmth of the fire. After we were situated—he on the settee with his long legs stretched out and I curled up next to his side in the crook of his arm—I started my story. "When my sisters and I were investigating the murders of Helen Kennedy and my cousin Mary eight months ago, we went to the deserted Kennedy Mansion. No one has lived there since Helen's father killed himself shortly after Helen's death. I'd heard the place was haunted and was drawn to it, much like a moth to a flame. As soon as the buggy came to a stop in front of the mansion and the four of us exited—myself, my sisters Cassie and Andrie, and Cassie's friend Bridget McGowan—I heard the screaming. Screaming so loud that I couldn't hear anything else. Screaming so loud that all I could do was run as fast as I could to the person needing help. At the time I didn't even know that I was the only one who could hear the screaming. I wasn't even aware of my sisters yelling at me, trying to stop me. I don't remember what the place looked like or anything at all. All that was real to me was the woman screaming. When I burst into the bedroom the screaming came from, everything suddenly changed." I stopped, trying to gather my courage to go forward. "I was no longer Gemini standing in the doorway to an empty bedroom, Deverell."

"It's all right," he said, pulling me closer. "Just tell me."

"I was . . . I was the naked woman tied on the bed and Jack Poole was standing over me with a horrific device. I already hurt all over my body from where he cut me or bit me, just enough to scar and feel pain but not enough to kill me. Not yet. He was telling me that I needed to be purified for my sins. That only blood and sacrifice could wash away my sins. He raped me. Then after, he hurt me even worse—"

"Bloody Jesus, hell," Deverell cried, jerking me hard against him. His body was shuddering, or was it mine? I couldn't tell. Maybe we both were.

"Everything became a black void as I died in agony," I whispered against his chest. "I don't remember anything else about that time. When I woke up, I was back at Killdaren's Castle. Cassie, Andrie, and everyone else were there. I'd been unconscious for almost a day. I remembered hearing the woman scream, but it wasn't until weeks later that I was able to remember what happened to me after I opened that bedroom door. I think my mind needed time before it was strong enough to face Flora McGowan's torture."

Deverell cupped my cheek and brought my gaze to his. I had to blink at the searing pain and anger burning in his blue eyes. "You aren't going anywhere tomorrow but as far away from here as we can get. You are not going to go through something like that ever again. Dear God, it is a wonder that experiencing something like that didn't make you insane. The very thought of what you describe tears me apart inside. I cannot even begin to imagine actually experiencing it."

"Then you believe me?" I asked softly. "You really believe me?" Tears stung my eyes. "I've never told anyone exactly how it was. Not even my sisters."

"Though what you're saying seems too fantastical to believe, I cannot *not* believe you. Why didn't you tell your sisters?"

"Because they were already overwrought about what had

happened. By the time I remembered everything about that day, Andrie had just married and Cassie was pregnant with Darragh and Jarrett. It would have only caused them needless distress at a time when they did not need it, and besides, if they had known they would have locked me away in a protective tower . . . which would have only been a prison for me. I have to go tomorrow.”

“No. I can’t let you.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, smiling sadly. “Flora was Bridget’s sister. Jack Poole killed her and in some strange way he killed me, too. He killed my cousin Mary. And when I didn’t remember he was the killer when I first regained consciousness, I almost cost Andrie her life, for Jack Poole kidnapped her. What he did before isn’t going to happen to another woman. He isn’t getting near my sister, or anyone that I love. This time I won’t let the horror overwhelm me. This time I am going to win. I have to stop him.”

He cursed and pulled me into his arms. “This time, no matter what, you won’t be alone. I’m not leaving your side.”

But I told him what to do should the worst happen and I became unconscious. Even being at my side wasn’t going to change the fact that when it came to ghosts, I alone had to face them. I just buried myself against the solid strength of him and held him close, so very thankful that I wasn’t alone at this moment.

# 13



The morning air, laden with fog, held enough of winter's bite to frost my breath and steal away any warmth I might have drawn from Deverell's presence. He walked at my side, grimly silent as we strode toward the Druid stones. Overhead, gray clouds threatened rain and blocked the rising sun's touch while a somber Pierre and Davey floated through the mists, looking truly ghostly for the first time ever. I didn't have to hear their misgivings to know this place had never portended good. I could feel the malice.

My skirts grew heavy, dragging against me, damped by the cloying mists and the patches of marshy ground soaking the hem. I felt as if I were marching to my execution. But it was more the men's hushed voices and measured steps making me feel so than the dreariness of the chill day. The magistrate and Nathaniel led the way while a policeman

followed behind Deverell and me along the isolated path to where two women had now been murdered.

Both the magistrate and Nathaniel had been completely against my seeing the Druid stones, and it was only because of Deverell's insistence that I was here. The magistrate had the location heavily guarded, letting no one into the area. He was determined to apprehend the killer, but now that I saw what he was up against, I knew it would be no easy task. A low-lying maritime forest lay dark and forbidding to the left of the path. To the right, a rambling marsh was barely visible through the fog. So many places for evil to lurk.

"There are the cursed things," said the magistrate, coming to a stop at a sharp bend in the shell and stone path. "Always knew there was something bad about this place and hated coming here. Unfortunately, I often had to."

"And why was that, Magistrate Williams?" I asked. His words surprised me, but I kept my gaze focused on the blackened stones that towered above the ground, a circle of dark creatures rising from the dank earth that lay waiting for their due.

"You may as well call me Rhys. And it's no secret, but growing up a bastard doesn't leave room for any weakness, even if your father is the Earl of Claiborne. I had to face any dare that came my way, and spending the night amid the Druid stones was a dare issued more than once, and one of the worst. Still it was worth it. I always walked out of here at sunrise, much to many a coward's amazement, and felt like a king for having conquered both the dare and my fears."

I jerked my gaze from the stones to his face, expecting to see bitterness instead of the wry amusement I found. Jack Poole had been a bastard, but he'd been bitter and angry. "We all have crosses to bear and fears to conquer, but not many do it with courage and determination."

He shook his head. "A stubborn fool would be a more apt

description of me.” Then his half smile died. “Why are you here, Mrs. Jansen?”

“Call me Gemini, and I’d rather not tell you at this point. Just suffice it to say there are worse things in this world than being a bastard, and I pray you never have to find that out.” I directed my gaze to Deverell’s. “I would prefer that only you and I go forward at this point.”

“No,” said Rhys. “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything happened to you. We need to be closer to the stones. Watson can stay here if necessary,” he said referring to the policeman that accompanied them.

“Nothing is going to happen to her, I assure you,” Deverell said firmly.

Rhys set a hand on Deverell’s shoulder. “I don’t doubt that you’ll watch her like a hawk, but considering the density of the fog, will you be able to keep a close eye on any approaching trouble and on her at the same time? There is too much area to cover.” He released Deverell and swept his hand toward the marsh, the stones, and the forest.

Deverell scanned the area then exhaled in defeat. “What if we make a compromise, gentlemen? Let Watson stay here. Rhys and Nathaniel, you come as far as the outer perimeter of the stones and then turn your backs to the center. Will that work for you, Gemini?”

“Yes,” I said, then bit my lip, hoping it would. I had no real idea what might happen, for my experience with ghosts had ranged from just casual conversation to what happened with Flora McGowan. Slipping my hand into my pocket, I slid my fingers over the sheathed dagger Andrie had given me, a vial of smelling salts, and two of my softest handkerchiefs. Then, turning from the group, I began walking to the dark stones.

Deverell quickly caught up with me, firmly grasping my elbow. “You don’t move unless I am at your side or else we don’t go.”

"I don't know if I can promise you that or not. I have to make contact with the women's ghosts if they are here and I don't know if I can do that with you right next to me."

"Bloody hell, I'd rather be sailing into that killer storm we barely survived than walking into this. At least at sea I know what I'm fighting and how to do it."

"If I had a choice, I'd rather be at your side against a storm than here. There's something about the sea and the wind that sets me free from this burden."

Loosening his grip, he slid his hand down my arm to clasp my hand. "I know what you mean. After prison the sea gave me a new life."

We walked the rest of the way to the stones in silence. I could already hear a low moaning coming from somewhere beyond the dark pillars and knew that it was a ghost because none of the men reacted. But Davey and Pierre did.

"Blimey, what's wrong with her?" Davey asked.

"I don't think we want to know, *mon ami*." Pierre swooped down in front of me. "There is evil here, *Le Capitaine's* wife! You must stop."

I shook my head at him. "I must go on," I told him under my breath then covered my words with a slight cough.

He folded his arms and narrowed his gaze. "No."

I kept walking, passing right through him. It was an odd sensation, one that brought goose bumps to me, for I felt his spirit—a rowdy, loyal spirit with a deep sense of injustice for what had been done to Deverell.

Pierre groaned.

"What's wrong?" Davey asked.

"Trouble, *mon ami*. Big trouble."

I stopped before entering the circle of the Druid stones and handed Deverell the smelling salts and handkerchiefs. "Use the salts if I faint. Use the handkerchiefs if I start screaming and don't stop."

"What?" His eyes widened with shock.

"Gag me if I scream continuously. If I fight you then tie my hands. I already hear a woman moaning in pain."

"No," he said, pulling me roughly in his arms. "I didn't realize it would be like this. I don't know what I thought, but you're not bloody doing this."

"What's wrong?" Nathaniel called out. He and Rhys had dropped back from us along the trail, giving me some of the privacy I'd requested.

"Nothing," Deverell called out. He loosened his grip on me.

I leaned up and brushed my lips to his and then wrenched quickly away from him, running to the center of the circle.

"Gemini! Damn!"

Deverell's shout was lost in the growing moans of the woman. I could see her outline in the mists, her ghostly body lying on a stone slab in the center of the Druid pillars. She writhed as if in terrible pain. Once I saw her, I slowed my step, moving forward cautiously, bracing myself for anything that might happen.

I felt Deverell's hand grip my arm, but only because of the heat of his touch upon my chilly skin. At every step I took toward the woman, my body grew colder and colder. Instead of the time-worn, nebulous visages carved upon the monoliths at the Circle of the Stone Virgins near Killdaren's Castle, the faces on these stones were well-defined, caricatures of evil that glared lewdly at the altar in the center. At the head of the altar stood another pillar.

The woman's moans turned to low sobs. She seemed completely unaware of our human presence, clearly wrought up in her own hell. The seemingly red gown that clung to her body in shreds had patches of white at the hem hanging off the altar. It was the only indication of what color her gown had been before her murder.

I moved closer. "I'm here to help you," I said.

She didn't acknowledge me, didn't respond, but continued

to cry. Then I realized she was tied to the altar, hands and feet bound by ropes anchored to metal loops embedded in the stone. A gag kept her cries muffled. I had to free her.

Reaching the altar, I felt my stomach heave violently at the mutilation of her body. Symbols had been carved into her breasts and her stomach. I knew what I was seeing wasn't actually there. But that it had happened before didn't lessen the horror or the impact of it. I had to help her. I set my hand on her arm, intending to untie her wrist, and the moment I did, everything changed.

My hand passed through her arm and my body began to shiver violently. I cried out as unbelievable pain enveloped me. A dark, bloodred haze dimmed my vision and I suddenly couldn't move. Looking up, I found that I lay upon the altar, bound and gagged, staring up into the evil stone face of the pillar. I'd become the woman. I was the vicar's daughter. My name was Sarah. My mother and father and sisters were no longer mine, but hers, and I grieved for this family, knew I would never see them again, never touch them in love, or sing with them in praise at church. I'd never hear the deep rumble of my father's voice, or feel the soft warmth of my mother's smile.

Agony ripped through me and I moaned. All I wanted to do was die. Please God. Let me die now before he returns. I heard the dreaded scraping of stone against stone and then the sudden appearance of him. His dark, hulking shape emerged against the blanket of night and fog. I cried out, but couldn't yell for the filthy rag in my mouth.

"Shut up, whore," a man said, slapping me so hard my jaw skewed to the side. The sharp pain poured into the river of agony I already was drowning in.

He was back. I saw him through a veil of red and prayed my end had come.

"You're a sinner. You need to be purified. Only blood and sacrifice can wash away your sins." He held up a knife,

long and sharp, and already thick with my blood. He held it to my throat. "Where should I cleanse you first? Here?" He tapped the blade against my throat. Then shook his head. "Not enough suffering. Here?" He jabbed the knife into my breast. My body convulsed from the fear and the pain. "No. This is where your sin lies." I saw the knife arc upwards and come down and I knew he would cut me open where he had violated me. I screamed.

"Gemini! Talk to me!" Deverell yelled. I felt him shaking my body from where he held my shoulders. Opening my eyes, I saw that we were standing next to the altar. The ghost woman whose death I had just lived through was still there, moaning as she had when I first arrived. Then she began to sob quietly, as before, and I realized that what I'd just experienced, her ghost was living through again and again.

"We must free her before he kills her again," I cried. My voice was hoarse. My throat was sore. My body shook so badly I couldn't move.

"Jesus," Deverell cried. He scooped me up into his arms.

"What can I do?" Nathaniel yelled.

My gaze took in the fact that both the magistrate and Nathaniel stood next to Deverell, pistols in hand, pointing into the mists.

"I'm getting her out of here," Deverell said.

"No," I rasped, struggling. "Must free her." I couldn't leave her like that, but if I touched her would I just be drawn into her hell again? It didn't matter. I had to try. I fought Deverell's hold. "Let me free her."

"That's enough! No more." Deverell turned from the altar. I grabbed Deverell's neck, pulling myself up so that I could see the woman over his shoulder. "I have to," I cried.

Pierre's French curses rang over the woman's cries. "Help me, Davey, before *la jeune femme* dies again! Untie her!"

Blinking away tears, I watched, amazed, as Pierre and Davey freed the woman from the altar. Pierre swept the

woman up in his arms. "Where should we take her?" he yelled, looking at me.

The woman's memories sifted through my mind and I remembered her joy of singing with her family in the church. "To the church. The small white one near the north end of the town," I said. They disappeared into the fog.

I sank back into Deverell's arms, relieved, wanting nothing more than to give in to the exhaustion weighing heavily upon my every muscle. My eyes drooped, then I remembered the scraping of the stone and the sudden appearance of the killer. The man had had Jack Poole's voice. He'd used Jack Poole's words, but he hadn't looked like Jack Poole. That confused me. Maybe I was mixing up what happened with Flora with what just happened, but this man had been different. If I was confusing this with Flora's murder, wouldn't he be the same? Maybe I was confusing the details of the men in my mind. I didn't know.

One thing I did know, there was something about the altar that had to be investigated now. I drew a deep breath. "Deverell, look at me."

He brought his gaze to mine.

"I'm all right now. The woman is gone. Pierre and Davey freed her."

He stopped in his tracks. "What do you mean, freed her?"

"They untied her from the altar and took her to her father's church. You have to take me back to the altar. There is something that I need to look for."

"If you think you're ever getting near that place again—"

"No," I said. "I must. Nothing will happen now. I don't know where the ghost of the first murder victim is, but she's not here. Not right now." I trapped his cheeks between my palms, meeting his gaze directly. "I think I know how the killer was able to get by all of the guards. Please take me back to the altar. I think there is a secret passage there."

"Jesus," he whispered. "Do you know how much I want

to just say bugger that? Do you know how much I want to put you on the *Black Dragon* and sail as far and as fast as I can from this?"

"No matter how much it is, I don't think it could match how much I want to do just that as well. But we can't."

He swung around. "Bloody hell. If anything at all happens, you're leaving and you're never coming back."

"What are you doing?" Nathaniel demanded as we immediately met him and Rhys.

"Going back for a moment."

"After what just happened?" Rhys's disbelief was palpable. "I don't know what in the devil did happen, but—"

"She thinks there's a secret passage at the altar," Deverell interjected.

"What?" Rhys's jaw dropped.

"How would she know . . . ?" Nathaniel's voice trailed off and both men narrowed their gazes at me.

"I'll answer those questions later," I told them. "I think the passage entrance is on the end opposite the pillar," I said. "Deverell, set me down. I think I can walk now."

He eased me to my feet but kept his arm around me, which was a good thing considering my knees had the consistency of pudding. I kept blinking at the mist-shrouded altar as I cautiously moved back to it. This time, I knew the dark stains upon the stone were blood. The rusty hooks at the head and at the foot of the stone were what the woman had been bound to. I shuddered as nausea churned inside me and I had to look away from it all. I watched the ground until the bottom of the altar came into view, then I knelt down to study the carved stone. Many unknown symbols stared back at me. But nothing gave any hint as to the altar's secrets. The bottom was a solid piece of stone with no panels to offer any possibility of a secret passage. I pushed on it. Nothing. The men had knelt down beside me, all looking at the altar.

I exhaled loudly, exasperated. "There has to be something. I heard a lot of scraping stone."

"Let me take a closer look," Deverell said.

"I know it came from the bottom," I said, moving to the side.

Deverell pushed hard on different sections and in different combinations, but to no avail. I glared at the side of it. Then I noticed that when he pushed on it the crack between the base and the side became thinner.

"Pull on it, Deverell."

"How?"

"There must be some sort of handhold," I said.

He slid his hand along the bottom edge, pressing aside the weeds. "I've got something," he said. He pulled back and the crack widened.

"That's it," I cried.

He pulled harder with only slightly better results. I could now stick my finger in the crack. As I studied the stone, I heard the faint wail of many voices crying out. I stood up, my heart beating hard.

"You'd need an army to open this," Deverell said.

"Let us help," said Nathaniel. "I'll get this side. Rhys, you get the other."

I moved even farther back as the voices grew louder.

"Pull on the count of three," Deverell said and began the countdown. They pulled hard and suddenly a loud pop sounded.

I jumped, thinking I'd heard gunfire, but then the men came tumbling backward as the bottom of the altar slid out like a drawer to reveal an entry to a dark, cavernous hole. A chorus of cries hit me in the face like a hard slap.

"Good God!" Rhys exclaimed, immediately peering deep into the void. "It's hard to tell how big the area is without a lantern, but this appears to drop down into a room."

“Or a tunnel,” Deverell said. “One that will likely lead you to an obscure place in the middle of the forest perhaps.”

“More bodies,” I whispered. “There are more bodies from a long time ago,” I said louder, whipping around to glare at the ogling faces of the stones. “These aren’t Druid stones. Long after the Druids were gone, somebody made these stones to look like Druid ruins, but they aren’t. They’re stones of demons created to worship their leader—Satan. The skeletons you’ll find down there were sacrificed to him.”

The voices grew louder and I had to cover my ears as a sharp pain pounded in my head. I groaned.

“I’m taking her out of here. Do not breathe a word about this to anyone or I will personally kill you, friend or no friend,” Deverell said. “We’ll answer questions later, after you’ve both investigated the passage.”

The pain grew worse.

Deverell swept me into his arms again and I didn’t protest. He didn’t walk, but ran as if he could feel my desperation to escape. He didn’t even stop to answer Watson’s question as we passed. I closed my eyes and rested against him, realizing that I had been wrong last night. He had helped me more than I could have ever imagined. Still, I wondered how he would accept all that he’d witnessed today. And another revelation sprang to life. He’d been forced to threaten the lives of his friends in a need to protect me. He’d had to do the same with his men at sea, and now one man was in prison and would likely hang for what I’d driven him to do. Being married to a woman like me would mean a lifetime of such sacrifices. Prison and betrayal had already taken so much of his life already.

What right did I have to take even more?

# 14



“I’m . . . I’m all right now,” I told Deverell, raising my voice enough so he could hear me over his own labored breathing and the crunch of his boots on the shelled path. We were within sight of the carriages waiting on the main road.

He slowed to a stop, his keen gaze studying me.

“You don’t look as if you’re all right,” he said. “You’re pale. Your pupils are so dilated that your eyes are black, not blue, and you’re still trembling.”

“But the ghosts are gone and the pain in my head has eased. You don’t have to run anymore, and I think walking a little will help me recover faster.”

“We’ll see about that in a minute. Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“Yes, but not here.”

“I understand. I’m not sure how much time we will have

before Rhys and Nathaniel will want answers to their questions. The first of which should be, is Jack Poole the killer?"

I sighed. "No and yes. The man I saw was not Jack Poole, but the words he used and his voice were. So I don't know if I am confusing what happened to Flora with what happened to the woman on the altar or not. I don't think that I am because the . . . well, the way he killed the woman on the altar was different in some ways from the way Jack Poole killed Flora. But he still ripped her open . . . Jack the ripper. How can I be experiencing the murders of two different women by two different men, and yet those men have the same exact voice and say the same things to the women before killing them? It doesn't make sense to me and that makes my head hurt worse."

"Hell, I'm sorry." He pulled me close against his chest, pressing his lips to my forehead. "Don't think about it right now."

I smiled. "You must have magic in your lips. That eased the headache for a moment."

"There's a lot more to come," he said, easing me to my feet. Before letting me go, he hugged me close to him. "Gemini, I . . . God help me it almost killed me to watch you go through what you did. I wanted to fight what was hurting you. I wanted to kill what was causing you pain and I couldn't do a bloody damn thing."

I wrapped my arms tighter around him. "But you did. You don't know how much having you there helped me. Having you believe in me, knowing you were right there to protect me, helped tremendously. And thank God for Pierre and Davey. I don't know what I would have done if they hadn't stepped in, freed the woman, and taken her to a place where she might find some peace."

Deverell shifted me so that our gazes met. The intensity of his emotions cut his rugged features into harsh lines. "Gemini, I—"

The crunch of boots pounding on the shelled path caught our attention, and Deverell turned, shoving me behind him.

"Ever'thin' all right with ye, me lord?"

Hearing the voice of Watson, the policeman, I moved to Deverell's side.

"We're fine," Deverell replied, his tone terse.

"Begging your pardon. Sorry to hear ye took a fright at the stones, me lady. Not a place for a lady to visit, but you won't believe whot the magistrate and that scientist 'ave discovered. A secret passage, there is. That scientist, Lincoln, said he got to lookin' at the altar and some nonsense about the symtry of the stones didn't sit right with him. Found him a secret passage, he did. Now we know how that bastard made it though our watch the other night and murdered the vicar's daughter."

"Very interesting," Deverell said, then narrowed his gaze at the policeman and lowered his voice. "I wouldn't tell another soul about it. Might be a good idea to keep it secret and set a trap for the killer. He'll be thinking he can get by you again and you all can nab him. So the fewer people who know about the passage, the better."

"Right ye are, sir. Right ye are. Might even go mention that to the magistrate right now before we bring any more men to investigate."

"That's an excellent idea," Deverell said. "Were you running up the path for a reason just now?"

"Almost forgot. The magistrate needs the lamps from the carriages so they can see whot they've uncovered."

"Well, don't let us keep you. And I wouldn't let the drivers know about the discovery either. Word has a way of getting around these days."

The policeman moved on and Deverell took my hand, urging me toward the carriages as well.

"I should be shot," he said.

"Whatever for?" I asked. "I think your plan ingenious."

At least someone is thinking past the immediate moment. It never even occurred to me that the passage could be used to trap the killer."

"I'm sure Rhys or Nathaniel will come to the same conclusion shortly. They're most likely still in shock over its discovery. I need to be shot over the fact that it could have been the killer coming up to us instead of Watson. I was too distracted to even notice his approach. Let's get to the inn and we can talk more there.

The return trip passed by swiftly and he was soon escorting me inside the inn. The clerk, a slight man with a benign smile, a pointy nose, and thick spectacles, came alive the moment we walked in the door. "My—uh—Captain. You've a visitor in the Gold Tea Room."

"And to whom do I owe the pleasure?"

"Lady Claire."

Deverell inhaled sharply, his expression turning dark and closed.

"Tell her I am unavailable," Deverell said, his voice clipped with anger . . . or pain.

Who was Lady Claire? My heart squeezed around what suddenly felt like a burr in the middle of it. Yesterday, after encountering Merrill's surprise over Deverell's marriage, added with her owing Deverell for having the inn, I'd surmised they might have been lovers in the past. And I was sure there were more, given Deverell's sensual nature and expertise. But something about the clerk's reverent and exquisite intonation of Lady Claire's name made me acutely aware that Deverell had been forced into marrying me; that I'd seduced him into consummating that marriage; and that, apart from my family, were anyone to know me and my cursed gift, they'd say my name with revulsion.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask who Lady Claire was, but I bit off the question, not wanting the clerk to realize how little I knew of my husband.

"And you may inform the marquis that I have no intention of going away. Ever," a woman said, marching into the entryway. Her voice, perfectly melodious yet imperious, rang with the authority of a queen, and her gleaming, dark-haired beauty was that of fairy tales, with lily white skin, rosy lips, and thickly lashed golden eyes. Her tall but unmistakably feminine figure was draped in a delicate dress of cream and gold silk brocade embellished with antique lace. Only the cleverly simplistic style of the dress kept the ensemble in the realm of a day dress. She took my breath away, leaving my heart to sink.

"Claire," Deverell said. "There is no point."

The woman lifted a perfectly arched brow, then set her gaze on me. "It would seem that there is every point now, Dev. I'll not be put off. Shall we do this in public or will you be civilized enough to join me for tea?"

The clerk cleared his throat. "I'll make sure the tea cart is being readied now," he said, and left the room.

The woman's sharp gaze swept over me, suddenly making my harrowing morning and my damp clothes too much to bear. I had to get away. "Deverell, I'll let you see to your guest in private while I change from this soiled dress and get some rest."

He shifted his gaze from the woman to me, searching my face a moment, then sighing. "It would seem that my sister is bent on incurring the wrath of her father and making me break my word in order to meet you. After you change, will you come down for tea for a short time?"

I blinked at him. "Your sister?"

He frowned at me, brows drawn in puzzlement. "Yes. Who did you think—?"

"Your lover, perhaps?" I planted my finger in the middle of his chest, tears stinging the backs of my eyes. Yes, I was overwrought by the morning's events, but I was also tired of

not knowing anything personal about him. "You never even told me you had a sister. Why should I—?"

"Please, don't blame him. He gave his word. As long as he stays away father won't kill him or punish us," Lady Claire interjected into what I'm sure would have been a rather embarrassing display of emotion on my part.

"He what?" I said, wondering what kind of father would threaten his children so horribly.

"He told you?" Deverell said, looking completely stunned.

"Father's health and mind have been declining in the five years since mother died, and he has mentioned a number of interesting things among his nonsensical ramblings about horses and investments. He said you renounced your title to let our fool brother Alastair inherit it? I'm very glad to see you've changed your mind."

"I haven't. I want nothing to do with being the Duke of Wakefield and all that it entails."

Claire lifted a brow. "Whether you continue to shirk your responsibilities for the rest of your life or not doesn't really matter. Now that you're married, your son will inherit them."

Deverell appeared as shocked as I felt. His sister had only stated the obvious, but since our hurried marriage at sea I don't think he or I had had the time to even think about a child or the ramifications of having one. A child should have been the foremost thing on my mind, but that had somehow escaped me in the fever of my interest in experiencing all the pleasure his arms offered. Heat flushed my cheeks, while Deverell looked as if he'd blanched.

"Why don't I let the two of you talk? I'll go and change and join you shortly," I suggested.

Deverell seemed to recover himself. "Do you need any help?"

"No, I'll be fine." I smiled at Claire and held out my hand. "I'm Gemini."

She clasped my hand warmly. "And as you've heard, I'm Claire, and I am so very glad to meet you"

"Me, too," I told her. "I'll be down shortly." Releasing her hand, I hurried up the stairs to our rooms, quickly changing my damp dress and petticoats for a warm, paisley wool day dress in a soft lilac with silver embroidered upon the sleeves and along a front panel that snugly accentuated my bosom. Once dressed, I set a brush to my hair and did all that I could to repair my disheveled state

Just before leaving, I found myself checking my appearance in the mirror. My hand went immediately to my flat stomach. The promise of a child filled me with joy as well as concern over just how much I was affecting Deverell's life. If I were with child, I couldn't just disappear once this situation with Jack Poole was resolved so that Deverell could go back to his life at sea.

Then, looking a little closer, I touched the shadows in my eyes on the mirror's glassy surface, wondering what was happening to me. I'd been so sure of everything just days ago. So sure that to unmask Jack Poole all I had to do was speak to the victim's ghost. So sure that all Deverell had to do was admit to the passion between us for there to be a happily ever after. And now that I'd achieved both, I was less sure of anything. I went downstairs, knowing forward was the only direction I could go at this point. But the future was as shrouded and opaque as the foggy marsh.

I reached the Gold Tea Room on the heels of a tea cart laden with silver, china, and a queen's assortment of confections. Once everyone had been served, Claire began the conversation. "Before I ignore you to learn more about your new bride, I've noticed you haven't inquired about our dear brother. Aren't you curious as to what Alastair's latest antics are?"

"No. He's father all over again and is most likely carousing in London while the manager oversees the estate."

"Had we spoken six months ago, you would have been entirely correct. Unfortunately, Alastair is not in London, but at home. And he is not carousing for once, but attending his fiancée, Lord Pemberton's daughter.

"Good Lord, from the neighboring estate? She's a mere child."

"That was ten years ago. She is now sixteen—young to marry, but hardly scandalous. They've been engaged since she was twelve. She's an only child and I think Alastair's plan was to join the two estates. But now that you've married . . . Well, let's say he wasn't exactly joyful over the news. I expect he'll be paying you a visit as well before the day is over." She turned to me. "Now, we've got a lot of catching up to do. I'm twenty, and apart from the tragic drama of my family, I've lived an entirely boring life."

I settled my teacup in the saucer and smiled. "I don't think you and boring could inhabit the same universe."

She laughed. "Are you certain Deverell never mentioned anything about me?"

"Yes. As for me, I grew up in Oxford with no family drama apart from whatever I could push my older sisters into. My parents' archaeological expeditions kept us buried in artifacts, and until last year, when my sisters and I traveled to Dartmoor's End to investigate the disappearance of my cousin, I'd lived a sheltered, uneventful life."

Her eyes widened. "Your cousin disappeared? Is she all right?"

Deverell cleared his voice. "No. She was a victim of what we think may be the same murderer stalking Northrope."

Claire shuddered. "It's horrid. Alastair said that two women of rather questionable repute have died."

"No!" I said. "She was innocent and loving and kind and cared deeply for her family and for those within the church that she ministered to . . . And even if she weren't, no one deserves to die for their mistakes, much less to be mu—"

"You're quite right," Deverell interjected, setting a hand on my shoulder as he looked at his sister. "Gemini is very passionate about the matter."

I drew a deep breath, tamping down the force of my response. I almost felt as if Sarah's ghost were still inside me and she'd been crying out her defense from the grave.

"As well she should be," Claire replied, eyes contrite and understanding. "I am so sorry to hear about your cousin. And you must forgive me. I unthinkingly repeated Alastair's words when he told me of the news last evening and I shouldn't have done that. He alone has most likely been responsible for any rumors of ill repute of Northrope's women anyway. Why is it that men are called incorrigible rakes and admired while women are reviled and called horrible things for the same behavior? No need to answer," Claire said, holding up a hand to stave off Deverell's response. "I'm more interested in hearing what Alastair neglected to tell me. Who here in Northrope was murdered? Shameful to say, but I've been under the weather for the past week. Wouldn't even have known you were here and had married had I not overheard Alastair and father."

"Two weeks ago, Jane, who worked in the Rusty Tavern, was found murdered at the Druid stones. Then this week, Sarah, the vicar's daughter, was killed there as well," Deverell said.

Claire's perfect complexion blanched to gray white. She swayed in her seat as if she were about to topple over. Deverell quickly reached her side and caught her shoulder in a firm grip. "Claire? Are you all right? I'm sorry if I gave you a shock. You knew these women?"

"Oh dear God. Sarah? Are you sure? Why just last month . . . she . . . I . . . we—"

"Lady Claire and Sarah had foolishly taken a handful of children out to explore the seashore," said the magistrate from the doorway. The look in his eyes was one of anger

and something akin to frustrated desire. "They all had to be rescued off the rocks near the lighthouse. In fact it was Simon, the lighthouse keeper, who sounded the alarm and helped with the rescue. Luckily, I happened to be on hand as well."

It was instantly clear that Rhys wanted Deverell's sister. Having seen that exact look on Sean's and Alex's faces in regard to my sisters, and, yes, on Deverell's when he looked at me, it was easy to read. But I winced over how much that frustration was sharpening his voice with irritation and just how unpolished his direct manner would seem to a woman raised with such polite manners.

Claire's back stiffened with offense. "Well, you don't have to make it sound as if the education of children is a frivolous endeavor. We just wandered out a bit too far . . . Dear God, I can't believe she's been murdered."

Rhys frowned, his mouth drawing into a grim line. "You didn't know? I came to Clearview and spoke to your brother last week when Sarah first went missing. I wanted to know if you had seen her or might know where she would have gone on her own. You were ill and your brother, after going up to see you, came back down and said that you hadn't been with Sarah since she almost led you to your death last month and didn't care where she might be."

"Alastair never even spoke to me. And I would never say anything like that, nor would I ever be so rude. How dare you even think so!" She stared daggers at him, her cheeks high with color.

Rhys seemed to be unrepentant in his opinion. "Despite that, I still sent a note informing you of her death and her funeral. Your return message said you had previous commitments and would not be able to attend."

Claire stood, her mouth tightened with anger. "I never received nor sent such a missive. It would appear that my brother and I have a great deal to discuss as soon as I return

home. Gentlemen, Gemini, you'll have to forgive me, but I will come visit tomorrow. This is a matter that I feel simply cannot wait. He is worse than father at trying to control and manipulate a person's life."

"I'll come with you," Deverell said.

"No," said Claire. "It's not necessary. Having you come to Clearview over this matter will only detract from Alastair's culpability. He'll create a scene over your return and find a way to excuse his actions."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

Rhys stood in the doorway, blocking Claire's exit. She marched up to him. "You surprise me, Magistrate Williams. I thought you of all people would be less judgmental of others. Obviously, I was mistaken. And so was Sarah. She hung the moon on your rescue of us and had developed tender feelings toward you. Her beliefs were obviously misguided. Now, if the judge and jury would move aside, I'll go see that justice is meted out to the right individual."

Rhys's expression went from confusion to shock to a flushed anger. He didn't move. "Considering the recent events, you can't go about unescorted. It is not safe."

"You need not concern yourself. I'm in a carriage with two footmen to see to my safety."

"I take everyone's safety seriously."

"Obviously not seriously enough to protect Sarah. Now if you'll excuse me," Claire said.

Looking as if he'd been struck, Rhys stepped aside and Claire sailed through the doors as if the devil had set fire to her skirts. "Your sister proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that roses have the sharpest thorns," Rhys said.

"I didn't know that you were acquainted with Claire," Deverell said. From the lift of his brow, I thought he picked up on Rhys's interest in Claire as well.

"Not really acquaintaned. That would imply amicable

conversation within appropriate social realms. We have what you might call occasional disagreements, most likely based on the fact that she's never forgiven me for a lecture I gave her a number of years ago. It was dusk and she was racing her horse along the shore so fast that she'd been unable to avoid a large piece of driftwood. The horse managed to jump almost clear, sustaining a minor injury to his foreleg. Unfortunately, your sister was thrown and knocked unconscious for a few minutes. Had I not been there and had she been thrown into the sea rather than upon the sand, she wouldn't be alive today. What I didn't realize at the time was that your sister was racing blindly because of your mother's passing. I added to her pain and she'll never forget it."

Deverell sank into the chair Claire had just abandoned as if his legs had become suddenly weak. His hands were fisted so tight that his tanned skin turned white. "I wasn't told of my mother's illness or passing until long after the fact and hadn't thought past my own pain. Claire has had a very difficult time of it. I should have been there. I should have . . . I could kill—" He clipped his sentence off, clenching his jaw tight. From the anger and the look of self-disgust on his face, I knew he blamed his father and himself.

Rhys shut the door and seated himself. "I won't judge or ask why you walked away from your life, but I would agree with you about Lady Claire. There are prices no man can pay and remain a man even if it would have spared a young woman anguish. Unfortunately, I will have to ask about this morning and will not be able to spare your wife's part in the events."

Deverell set his gaze on me. "Maybe it would be better to just accept what information is given and not question the why of it."

"Considering my position of authority and what decisions I'll need to make with the information, I can't do that.

I have to know how and why your wife knows what she does. The tunnel from the altar did lead into the forest and was lined with skeletons placed neatly in boxes. Old skeletons with one immediate commonality: The left upper rib cage of each was broken.”

“They were sacrificed,” I said softly.

“How did you know about the tunnel?” Rhys demanded.

I met Deverell’s gaze. “I think it would be better to give Rhys a full explanation so he can help.”

Deverell leaned forward and focused on Rhys. “You’ll take to your grave how Gemini knows what she does or you might send her to hers. Do you understand?”

“Fully,” replied Rhys. “Does she have visions?” he asked, sounding as if he were asking something as simple as if I took cream in my tea. It made me take a closer look at him, trying to see past the ruggedness of his features and his guarded demeanor. Only then did I realize the shadows in his eyes meant more than the cloud of his illegitimate birth.

What did he know about visions? Did he know someone who had them? I tucked the question away until later. “I learn what I know by my interactions with ghosts.”

His brows shot up. “You see them?”

“See them. Hear them. Speak to them. And when one is in extreme anguish, I’m pulled into them and their pain to the point where I experience whatever event has them trapped in this world as they lived it in their last moments. Today, Sarah’s ghost was tied to the altar and reliving the last moments of her life, over and over again.”

“You know what he did to her?” Rhys asked, blanching.

“I lived it and felt all that she felt, saw what she saw,” I said quietly.

A long silence filled the room as the men absorbed the gravity of what I had said.

“Christ,” Deverell muttered, shutting his eyes.

Rhys dragged his hand through his hair. "Then you saw her killer?"

"Yes."

"Is it Jack Poole?"

"The man's voice was Jack Poole's. The man's words were Jack Poole's. He told Sarah almost the same thing he told the last victim Jack had tortured and killed. But the man wasn't Jack Poole. This man was bulkier and taller. His hair wasn't black like Jack Poole's, but grayed, I think. It was hard to tell in the dark with so little moonlight."

"So we're dealing with a different killer then."

"Well, I wouldn't necessarily say that either."

"Why? The man either was Jack Poole or he wasn't."

"The man's evil aura even felt like Jack Poole's. I've been trying to puzzle out how he could disguise himself to be the man that I saw."

"What about the man's features? Do you see anything else that could identify him?"

"His face was too much in the shadows to tell a lot. I know he didn't have Jack Poole's prized mustache. Broad and blunt are words that come to my mind, but Sarah's vision was hazed over by pain and terror. I, oh God, I really can't tell you more than this right now."

"That's enough," Deverell said. Standing, he reached me in two steps and urged me up from the settee to pull me against his side.

"More than enough," Rhys said quietly, standing as well. "I apologize for putting you through this, Gemini. And wish to make amends. Deverell, should you and Gemini be up for joining me for dinner this evening, I would be honored. Send word to my home and I will see if Nathaniel would care to join us as well. I assume you give me permission to relay to him what Gemini has told me?"

"You may tell him. If he has any questions, though, direct him to me," Deverell said.

Rhys nodded and left. The moment the door closed, De-verell pulled me into his arms, bringing me so very close to his heart.

“What can I do to help you? What do you need?”

“Hold me, touch me, make the nightmare go away.”

“Come,” he said, leading me from the tea room to our quarters at the inn. At the bedside, he cupped my cheeks and kissed me softly, looking deep into my eyes with the tenderness of his own. “Come, let me love you. Let me fill your senses and drown in your pleasure.”

He loved me then, gently, wholly, with a magical touch that chased away the darkness of the morning’s events from my soul, but nothing seemed to touch the worry in my heart. By stowing away and coming to Northrope, I’d hoped to stop a killer. I’d little expected to marry, and I wasn’t sure where it would all end.

# 15



Feeling decadent but completely refreshed, Deverell and I surfaced from the inn midafternoon to visit the shops along Northrope's main street. He'd sent a message to Rhys accepting the dinner invitation and now we were walking in the sunshine together, musing over the wares in the windows much like a young married couple out for a relaxing walk. I felt both extremely comfortable and yet oddly strange. Being with him was so natural, but I knew we were both avoiding everything that we should have been confronting—finding the killer and discussing his family, our marriage, and the possibility of a child and what that would mean to both of us.

But somehow we were too weighted down with everything to take on the added burden of talking about it. So we talked about nothing. We had just purchased two melt-in-your-mouth confections when Deverell was almost run

down by a dog that was clearly fleeing for his life. The rather large male mutt was in the midst of suffering the indignity of having pink ribbons tied about its neck and tail. Two little girls wearing angel white dresses and bright grins were fast on the dog's heels. One of the girls carried a pink bonnet, waving it over her head with the obvious intention of placing it on the dog.

Deverell recovered his balance and brushed off his pant leg where the dog's white fur had left its mark. "And they say little girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice. That dog is most likely scarred for life."

I laughed. "We are. Sometimes there's just a little more spice than anything else. Which reminds me, you never did give me your opinion about The Killdaren's spiced wine. Do you think it an aphrodisiac or not?"

"An impossible question for me to answer. I'd have to conduct an experiment before I could offer you an opinion."

"Why?"

"Well, my little gem, the only time I've had spiced wine has been in your presence, and since you have such a potent effect on me at all times, I really can't say that the wine had anything to do with it."

"Oh." We walked a few steps farther. "What sort of experiment would you conduct?"

"Hmm. I believe I would have to remove you from the equation. Only then would I be able to properly give you an opinion."

"So you would have to have the wine when I wasn't around?"

"More than that. I would have to have the wine and would have to have another lady there as well. Then if I found myself as attracted to her as I was to you, I'd be able to offer my opinion."

I felt as if a gust of wind hit me then stole the breath from my lungs. This conversation was not going well. I

glanced at him from the corner of my eye. He walked along as if he hadn't said anything particularly, well, asinine, for lack of a better description. Then I caught the little tick on his cheek as if he were biting it to keep from smiling or laughing.

"You know, Deverell, you might just be right about that. Except for two occasions earlier, when I was much younger and unaware that things like aphrodisiacs existed, I've only had spiced wine while you were present as well. In fact, our passion for each other might be based on that false assumption." He stumbled, but I pretended not to notice and kept walking. "I think the premise for your experiment an excellent one. Why don't we—"

One moment I was walking down the street and the very next I was whisked into a narrow alley and Deverell had me pressed against a wall.

"Too much damn spice," he said softly, then kissed me hard. "And sugar," he whispered. "And everything nice everywhere," he added. "Wine has nothing to do with this, believe me. For nine months after our first kiss, all I could think about was how much I wanted to kiss you again. Any more talk about spiced wine and you're going to spend the rest of your day in bed and miss out on seeing all the lovely fashions."

"If you insist," I said, pressing myself against him. "But you can't get angry with me. The experiment was your idea."

He huffed out a laugh. "It was a bad one and I had planned to follow up with the fact that it was doomed to fail, but you didn't let me get that far."

"And why would it have failed?"

"Because you're in my blood, Gemini. You've taken me over like a fever and I can't do anything but crave everything about you." He kissed me hard again. "We'd better leave the alley before we're caught. If we hurry and check

on how the crew is coming along with the repairs to the *Black Dragon*, we might have more time before dinner than we'd planned."

I laughed and followed him out, smoothing my skirts, but somehow my smile wasn't as big as before. I loved that he craved me, but something about being a fever in him didn't sit well. It implied he couldn't do anything but succumb to me and left me feeling more than ever that I'd unfairly commandeered his life. He'd been forced to marry me. How would he ever know if he truly wanted to be with me unless I gave his life back to him?

Soon we were moving down the dock toward where the *Black Dragon* had been brought alongside the pier and was crawling with men. Sweaty men were carrying boards and beams and hammering as they shouted to one another. Pierre and Davey suddenly appeared over Deverell, their usual comedic antics absent. It was the first I'd seen them since the Druid stones and I wanted to ask about Sarah, but really couldn't now. They didn't say anything, didn't do anything, but just hovered over Deverell. In fact, I couldn't even tell if they looked in my direction at all. Were I to hazard a guess, I would have to say they were in shock.

Just as I was about to suggest we return to the inn so that I could talk to the ghosts, Mr. Holms swung down to the dock. "She's going to be better than new, shortly. About two days will do it."

"Then we found a craftsman for the masthead?"

Holms nodded. "Yes, a gray-haired burly man by the name of Stone. He can wield a mean carving knife."

Suddenly my heart started racing. Could it be as simple as that? Could an offhand comment lead to the murderer? I shook my head, trying to dislodge the notion, but couldn't. I tugged on Deverell's sleeve.

He looked my way then turned in alarm at my expression.

"What is it?" He slid an arm around me, pulling me closer.

“What Mr. Holmes said. How he described the carver. It reminded me of . . . of the man that—”

“Bloody hell,” Deverell said. “Let’s go speak to Rhys. Holmes, if you’ll excuse us.”

“Of course, but if you need to speak to the carver, he’s down at the Boar’s Head Tavern getting a pint. Says he does his best work when he’s loosened up a bit. I wouldn’t take Mrs. Jansen there. It is a rough place.”

“Thanks,” Deverell said, then turned to me. “I’m taking you back to the inn and then I’ll check this man out.”

I started to argue with him. I should be the one looking for Jack Poole in disguise. But I could tell from Deverell’s glare it wasn’t a battle I would win.

“You’re not going to do it alone, right?” I said, deciding to graciously save my fight for something more important.

“I’ll have the magistrate with me. But it’s not as if I’m going to go in and accuse him of being the killer. I’m just going to get a good look at him and speak to him about the masthead and see if I can get a feel for what sort of character he is.”

“Just be careful,” I said.

“Got news about the Druid stone here!” a boy shouted on the street corner. He had a stack of newspapers in his hand.

Deverell came to a stunned stop. “What news?” he demanded.

“Sorry, milord. Gotta give me the pence to read it for yourself.”

Deverell plopped a handful of coins in the boy’s outstretched, ink-stained hand, making him grin from ear to ear. Snatching up the paper, Deverell immediately held it up to the sun’s light and began reading the article.

“Bloody hell, how does anyone here know anything about Jack Poole already? If Rhys or Nathaniel have breathed a word of this I’m going to personally wring their necks. And who in their bloody right mind is publicly suggesting the

women arm themselves with pistols? First you suggest women do so, and now this article. It's like there's a conspiracy. Good God, that would be a mess. It's anonymous. Obviously whoever wrote this didn't want Northrope's men coming to hang them."

"May I see it?" I asked.

He handed over the paper. It didn't take me more than two sentences to determine who the author of the article was. Cassie had managed to carry through with her desire to help. I had to bite my lip to keep from smiling. I didn't inform Deverell of my discovery. He might try and send Sean a telegraph. Which is something that I should have done the moment we arrived, but I was avoiding that whole situation. Because once I contacted Cassie, she'd demand I return home on the first coach, and I wasn't ready to do that yet. Besides, I was married now, and that would have to be taken into consideration as well. No, it was better at this point to keep the doors of communication shut. I knew that Sean would show up here sooner rather than later, and that would be too soon for me.

"What's wrong with women arming themselves?" I asked him again.

"Let's hurry," Deverell said, urging me up the street as he frowned with confusion. "Didn't we already have this conversation? Didn't I already say it was more than likely that good men would get shot rather than the killer?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Because women are more emotional than men and they tend to be more accident prone. They are more easily frightened and therefore are more apt to shoot the wrong person for the wrong reason. God just made men differently, more adept physically and more competent with weapons."

"That's nonsense. Were a woman to be taught properly, she could be just as good as a man. There is no reason a woman shouldn't be encouraged to defend herself and be

taught how to do so. Perhaps if any of the women Jack Poole had killed had had a gun they might still be alive today.” Looking at Deverell instead of where I was stepping, I tripped on an uneven brick in the cobblestones and pitched forward.

Deverell grasped my arm, stopping me from falling. As he pulled me up, I turned to face him, laughing at myself. Here I was trying to defend a woman’s physical abilities and I couldn’t even walk and talk at the same time. It was mid laugh that I caught sight of the man behind us and a funny feeling slammed into my stomach. He was a large man with moonlike features and dull, sandy-colored hair. He was not as tall as Deverell, and much bulkier. His gaze seemed to be blankly surveying everyone on the street. Then he looked directly at me and a sense of disappointment washed over me, for I don’t even think he saw me. I’d expected to see anger, or hate, or resentment, or even a hint of Jack Poole–like condemnation in his gaze, but his eyes reflected nothing. He appeared empty of any emotion, or too tired and alone to even care about anything. His clothes were old and worn thin, his shoes ragged, and his hair unkempt. His gaze moved on and he kept walking by in a manner that seemed to indicate he was searching for someone, though his expression hadn’t shown it.

Squeezing Deverell’s arm, I whispered, “That man. The one that just passed us. He kind of matches the description of the killer, too.”

Deverell narrowed his gaze at the man. “Is it him?”

I shrugged. “I don’t feel the sense of evil that I felt from the killer.”

“Sir,” Deverell said to a lean man with wiry gray hair who was sweeping the entrance to his shop. “Do you know that man ahead?”

The man squinted, then gave a toothless grin. “That be Simon. He’s been keeping the lighthouse safe for years.”

"Thank you." Deverell drew a deep breath. "Look across the street at the man washing the window. He fits the description as well in a way, doesn't he?"

I studied the heavysset, silver-haired man whose movements were very slow and methodical. I shut my eyes, trying to picture him as the killer, then tried to picture the other man, and all I kept seeing in my mind was Jack Poole, his black hair, his handlebar mustache, his anger and hatred. Tears welled in my eyes. "I just don't know," I said. "I just don't know. I'm sorry."

"Don't," he said. "Don't apologize. You haven't done anything wrong, you've only helped. Finding the tunnel may be the very thing that saves another woman's life. And maybe you are trying too hard to find the killer. Let's get back to the inn so you can rest while Rhys and I talk to Mr. Stone about the masthead for the *Black Dragon* and see if his interest in carving goes beyond wood."

I nodded, looking back up the street at Simon, who was almost too far ahead to see now, and then back at the window washer. Deverell was right. I was trying too hard to make every person who fit the description into the killer. Yet how could I not do so?

Upon our return to the inn, we found a message from Claire that she was under the weather and would not be coming to town for a few days. I thought it odd because she seemed so vigorous earlier. In a hurry to get the magistrate and speak to Mr. Stone before he left the pub, Deverell secured me at the inn and departed. Pierre and Davey, who'd been solemnly floating with us, stayed when Deverell left.

I spoke to them the moment we were alone. "I can't thank you enough for freeing her. Did you take her to the church?"

"*Oui*. She is there," Pierre said. "But, *la jeune femme*, she will never be whole. *Le monstre* took too much of her soul."

"In time, there among the healing presence of those who loved her, I think she will gain peace."

"Ya really think she might?" Davey looked at me, a glimmer of hope in his bleak gaze.

"Yes," I said, praying with my whole heart that it was so. I'd been inside Sarah, felt she'd be all right, if she could only reach the church.

"We're with you for now," Davey said.

"What?"

"*Ma petite*, Davey and I, we will stay at your side from now on. We have discussed this and *Le Capitaine*, well, he no longer really needs us. Not with you at his side. But you, after what you went through this morning, you need us. *Bon Dieu*, I pray there may never be such a situation again, but we cannot be sure, so we must be at your side to help."

Good heavens. Was I now to carry a ghostly entourage? I wanted to smile, laugh, shudder, and scream all at the same time. I couldn't just reject them, but neither could I welcome their constant presence either. "But what about proving Deverell innocent?"

"We will still do what we can, but Davey and I have decided that you must come first."

"Well, I thank you. I'm not sure it's necessary."

"You need protection from the harm that spirits may cause you, just as you need protection in the world. No argument, *ma petite*, oui?"

"Well, maybe until we capture this monster, but how you both can help me with a killer here, I don't know. I see your hearts and spirits are willing, but there is the small matter that you are ghosts and our killer is not."

"Still, we will be here for you, *ma petite*."

"Very well," I said, wondering what to do next. I wanted to lie down and rest, but that seemed rude. And yet I was tired. Good bloody hell. What was I supposed to do with two ghosts for constant company? When they had been haunting

Deverell, I could ignore them somewhat, but now that they were haunting me and I knew I could talk to them, I couldn't seem to push them from my mind.

*You're going to make yourself insane if you don't, I thought. Just excuse yourself and go lie down, just as you might if you needed the privacy of the water closet or a bath.* I excused myself and Davey and Pierre floated over to the door of our rooms. "We'll be here, guarding," Davey said.

I retired to the bedchamber and tried to rest, but had too many things on my mind to relax. Namely, two ghosts hovering about. Exasperated, I got up and read the article Cassie had written from beginning to end. She'd done a magnificent job in telling women how to spot suspicious behavior and instructing them on the many ways they could protect themselves. I wondered how many of the women in Northrope would take the time to read the paper, though. Then it occurred to me there just might be a church or literary ladies' society here that might help inform the women. My first thought went to Deverell's sister, Claire. Then I remembered she was unwell. I made a note to mention to Deverell that we should go and see her. Then I thought about Merrill, the inn's proprietress. She might know of a women's society where I could send the article for them to share amongst their members. I summoned a maid to request a visit.

Ten minutes later, with Pierre and Davey floating overhead, I was escorted into a stylish office on the first floor of the inn. I set the ghosts from my mind, determined not to allow their presence to affect me in any way. Here, all of the furnishings, though tasteful, weren't lavish. In fact, were I to describe the interior, serviceable was the one word that came to mind. Nor were there any ladylike frills such as lace doilies, framed pictures, or padded furniture. Simple wood chairs, lamp tables, and a desk were all surrounded by wall-to-wall, ceiling-to-floor bookshelves that were filled to the brim.

Merrill stood and greeted me in a businesslike manner. She again wore a pantaloon dress in a deep, rich blue. The color was as stunning as her exotic appeal. "I apologize for having you come here instead of meeting in the tea room."

I smiled. "No need. I realize that you have a business to run and, truthfully, I find your office much more fascinating than the tea room."

"I fear the office reveals too much about me."

"That you like to read?"

"And that I'm too lazy to have any comfortable settees about. I fear I'd always be napping rather than working."

I laughed. "Actually I thought it more that you wanted to be taken seriously as a businesswoman, so you stayed away from anything that might be considered soft. It's the office of a very competent, determined person."

She smiled. "That, too. So, what can I help you with?"

I handed her the newspaper with the article folded out. "I wanted to know if there were any ladies' societies here in Northrope. I'd like to approach them about what we can do to help women protect themselves. Also, I think there is a great deal more the women in Northrope can be doing to help stop this man from killing again."

She set the paper down. "I read the article earlier. I found the ideas of self-defense excellent, but hadn't had more time to think about what that could mean. Are you suggesting gathering Northrope's women together to discuss and learn about protecting themselves?"

I blinked. It hadn't occurred to me to actually teach the women. It was a great idea. "Yes," I said. "We'd need to notify everyone, have a gathering place, and then find men willing to teach the women."

She closed the ledger on her desk. "I think this paperwork can wait until the end of the week. Will tomorrow afternoon be soon enough? There are several women's groups in the area. I can contact the leading members today. Also,

I think I may be able to speak to Sarah's father, the vicar, about meeting in the church."

"Tomorrow would be perfect. The only problem with the church is that it might afford very little space for self-defense lessons."

Her brow knitted. "You're right. A warehouse would do though, right?"

"Perfect."

"And just so that we both understand each other . . . This isn't just for Northrope's rich, correct? You're wanting all of Northrope's women to come?"

"As many as are willing. And while you set this up, I will speak to the magistrate this evening about having as many men there to teach the women as possible."

"I suppose they'll be a necessary evil in this instance. Women have unfortunately been led to believe they are helpless without a man."

I studied her for a moment. "Was it Deverell?" I asked softly. "Was he the one who hurt you so deeply?"

Her cheeks flushed. "No. The marquis was kind beyond measure when I was in horrible straits, but he was never involved with me like that, as much as I might have wanted it. You have to know that I wish you both every happiness. I didn't realize I wore my heart on my sleeve."

"You don't. And yes, I feel your sincere well wishes, which tells me that gratitude for his kindness makes or made up a good part of your attraction to Deverell. You strike me as a strong and passionate woman. If it wasn't gratitude but instead love or passion, you'd want to scratch my eyes out for starters."

She laughed. "You may be right about that. What makes you think I don't?"

I stood and smiled as well. "I like you too much, and you don't strike me as someone who hides her true intentions. Unless I've read you wrong."

"Not at all. You strike *me* as a smart woman who reads others very well. In fact, I have a feeling that you're not only going to give the marquis back his life, but I think you're going to set Northrope on its ear."

She walked me to the entry hall, but before I could excuse myself, a man shouted at the desk clerk. "You've told me twice that my brother is not in. Don't tell me that again. My question to you isn't if he is in, but where he might be."

Merrill stepped forward. "While you are welcome in my establishment, Lord Alastair, you may not demand my employees break the rules of my establishment. George will take a message and give it to the marquis upon his return, but he is not permitted to reveal a client's whereabouts. You may wait in the tea room should you wish to."

"Miss Emerson, I haven't traveled all the way from Clearview to spend my time speaking to clerks, taking orders from a doxy, or drinking tea."

I gasped at the slur, noting Merrill blanched. Something inside me exploded. "And I haven't traveled all this way to watch a supposed member of my family insult decent people and make a spectacle of himself in public. Asstair, is it?"

Merril's laughter quickly turned into a cough. The clerk was beaming behind Alastair's bristling back. I swear Deverell's rude brother turned three shades of red before settling a purple.

"Your ignorance does not become you," he said. "The name is Alastair. And you, I assume, are Deverell's supposed bride?"

"Supposed?" I replied. The entry door opened, but I didn't spare a glance in that direction, not caring who overheard me. Alastair ignored the newcomer as well, but then I got the impression that most people were below his notice.

"I'll not satisfy myself that Deverell was stupid enough to saddle himself with a chit of a girl until I see the marriage license in hand."

“*Mon Dieu*,” Pierre cried. “I think it is him.”

“Him who? The lady killer?” Davey said, peering closer at Alastair.

“No, knothed. The bloody man who framed *Le Capitaine* in Egypt and murdered us.”

# 16



I sucked in a sharp breath, not from the man's threat, but from Pierre's revelation. "Are you sure?" I blurted out.

"*Bon Dieu*, no I am not, but it seems to be him," Pierre said.

Alastair lifted his nose. "Of course, I am, madam."

I ignored Alastair. Was it possible he had framed his own brother for murder? Alastair was similar in appearance to Deverell, with the same dark hair, blue eyes, and imposing stature, but their demeanors differed greatly. Deverell was commanding competence and Alastair was condescending malice. A stranger could have mistaken the two, though.

"Were you more of a man, Alastair, I'd call you out for insulting my wife. It would seem time changes nothing." We all turned to see that Deverell had entered the inn. He walked my way, his scathing gaze focused on his brother. "As it is, I don't waste my time on fools. And you're wasting your time

here. There's nothing that needs to be said, so go back to your puppet master and tell him nothing has changed."

"Everything has changed." Alastair glanced my way. "That is why I was forced to come."

"No. It was your own greed that drove you here. Gemini, do you mind readying yourself for our dinner engagement while I rid us of this fool's company? It shouldn't take more than a minute's worth of conversation to send him on his way."

"Of course," I replied, curving my lips into a tight smile. "I would say it was a pleasure, but then lying isn't something I do well. Gentlemen," I said, sailing to the stairs on the heels of Deverell's bark of laughter. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Merrill grinning before she ducked away to her office.

Pierre and Davey followed me upstairs and I turned to face them the moment I reached our rooms. "What makes you think that Deverell's brother is the man who framed him? And why aren't you sure if you think that he is?"

"He looks like *Le Capitaine*, does he not? But different, *non*? This is how it was with the man who came. But this is not enough for me to say without a doubt."

"True. Which means we have to decide if we tell Deverell or not."

"Perhaps we wait just awhile, *ma petite*, and Davey and I will think about this."

"I don't like it, but before we accuse a man of something so horrendous, I would want to be a little surer. Now I need to hurry and dress for dinner."

I left Pierre and Davey and went into the bedchamber where I quickly rummaged through my clothing, which the maids had cleaned and repaired for me. I wore the sky blue wool dress that I'd almost set on fire while on the ship. The inn's seamstress had placed a scallop of complementing lace along the bottom of the skirt, covering the scorch mark

as well as bringing it into higher fashion. I was just putting the last touches to my appearance when Deverell arrived.

"I apologize for my brother's rudeness," he said, looking both grim and pained.

Going up to him, I brushed my lips against his. "No need to. From what I can see, your brother is rude to everyone. How did he turn out so differently from you and Claire?"

"Other than to say he's my father reborn, I'll never know the answer to that question."

"Did you and Rhys find Mr. Stone?"

"Yes, in the pub like Holms said. Other than his prowess with a knife and his general description, there wasn't anything that he said or did that would indicate that he is the killer. Rhys is going to have a man watching him, though. It won't take me long to dress for dinner." He went to the water closet and I perched on the edge of the bed to watch him strip down to his waist before washing his face. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him what Pierre and Davey feared about his brother, but then as I considered how much it would hurt me if Cassie or Andrie were to betray me in so devastating a manner, I bit back the words.

Still, I couldn't quite let it go. "Deverell, when you served in the military, what did Alastair do?"

He glanced over, surprise arching his brows. "My brother is a strange man. Has a number of cronies along the coast who lounge around London and other favored spots of the peerage. They've always been cloaked in secrets, probably some society that prides itself on womanizing, gambling, and a bit of smuggling to fund their growing appetites. I assume he was at his leisure in London while I was in the military, because as I recall from my mother's letters, Alastair was absent from Clearview a good deal. Why do you ask?"

"Did anyone ever mention to you how much you two look alike at first glance? Especially if a person didn't know either of you very well?"

“What are you suggesting?”

“Nothing really. It’s just that Pierre and Davey immediately noted how much Alastair looked like you the moment they saw him. It, uh, surprised them. Was today the first time you’ve seen your brother since you were released from prison in Egypt?”

Deverell frowned. “Yes, I guess it is. He wasn’t at Clearview when I first returned and I haven’t been back there since. Nor have I gone to London, either. The sea held everything I needed.”

“I’m glad,” I said, determined to change the subject. I’d said more than I should have at this point, and would hold my tongue until Pierre and Davey were sure about Alastair. Even if I were estranged from my sisters, it would still hurt me deeply for one to betray me so greatly. And heaven knew I wanted to wrap my arms around Deverell and protect him from any more pain in his life. He was a man who made me feel everything deeply.

Just the sight of him caused me to tingle everywhere, made me want to revisit the sensual world he’d opened up for me over and over again. Bloody hell, that wasn’t true. He made me want to *live* there *constantly*. He lathered his face and slid his razor along his cheeks and neck. Droplets of water slid down his chest and found their way to the dark line of hair bisecting his stomach and disappearing beneath the waistline of his pants.

The tingle inside me began to burn to the point where I could no longer sit still. I slid into the water closet to press myself against his back, then reached around with my hands and followed the damp trail the water had left. I peeked around his shoulder to watch in the mirror as my hands caressed him, light skin to tanned. As my finger slid over the dark disc of his nipple, it hardened. I did the same to his other nipple. He stopped shaving to stare at me in the mirror, his eyes sensually intent.

“Does that feel pleasurable to you?” I asked.

“Very.” His voice vibrated naughty things inside me and I slid my hands to the buttons of his pants, popping the first one loose. “As pleasurable as when I touch you here?” I slid my fingers into his pants and brushed the top of his arousal, which was straining to be released.

He pressed up into my touch. “That is more so.”

I slipped the rest of his buttons loose, letting his arousal free. “And when I touch you like this?” I grasped his arousal with both hands and slid them over the hot, velvety tip of him before sliding down to the thick, silky hair that nestled his sex.

“Even better,” he said, his voice strained.

Easing to his side, I crouched down and urged him to turn so that I could bring the tip of his arousal to my lips. I then took him inside my mouth, sliding my touch over his hot, smooth skin. He groaned, his body vibrating almost as if I’d struck a tuning fork. After several licks, I eased back. “And that?”

He exhaled, looking as if he were having trouble thinking. He set down his razor. “Better yet,” he said, his voice as rough as broken glass.

I took him back into my mouth, doing the same thing again until he shouted my name and pulled me away from him. His breathing was ragged and he looked as if he were about to lose control.

“What would make it better still?” I asked him.

Grabbing a towel, he swiped the lather from his face, then, catching me under my arms, he pulled me up and pushed me from the confines of the water closet to the bedroom floor. He lifted my skirts and jerked off my pantaloons before kneeling between my legs. I expected him to immediately bury the burning heat of his arousal inside me where I itched to feel him. He didn’t. Instead, he grasped my hips and pulled me up until he hooked my knees over his shoulders and began lashing my sex with his tongue,

leaving little nibbles here and there that made me cry out with the intensity of the pleasure. Only my head and shoulders were on the ground, everything else was high in the air, fully exposed. He slid his hands from my hips to my bottom and began kneading and squeezing me to the rhythm of his tongue. And just when I knew I was ready to explode, he stopped, eased me down, and thrust deep into me.

"This is the best. There is nothing better than this, but it is a lot of fun getting here," he said.

I tried to speak, tried to smile at him, but he slid his thumb over my most sensitive place as he drove into me harder, then faster, and my mind refused to function other than to shout with the ecstasy that hit me like a hard wave and swept me away to drown in the sea of his pleasure. This man and no other was the captain of my life. I loved him.

The interlude cost us time that we didn't have and we had to rush to the magistrate's house, already late. Both Rhys and Nathaniel were awaiting us in the drawing room. "Sorry to be late," Deverell said. "A little family drama delayed us."

"Did your sister return?" Rhys asked. "You should have brought her with you."

"Not that lucky. She may be under the weather."

Rhys frowned, his expression both questioning and disappointed.

"Alastair paid me a visit," Deverell added. "Or I should say *us* a visit." He looked at me wryly. It was then that I noticed that half of Deverell's face was smooth and the other half scruffy. "I'm afraid he is going to try to cause Gemini trouble, and we may need you to sign an official document, Nathaniel."

Nathaniel had been studying Deverell's face from the moment we walked in. "You know that I will do anything I can to help, but what will I be signing?"

Deverell exhaled hard. "Alastair is likely going to bring my marriage to Gemini into question. Since it occurred on my ship mid-voyage, with my first mate performing the ceremony, I want to be assured there is no way he can dispute the legality of it."

"Let me give it some thought and I'll see what documents can be drawn up to satisfy any legalities. I can even issue a special license and you two could have a secret or public ceremony here in the church, where it can be officially recorded. I assume your assistant entered the information on your ship's log?"

"Good God. I'll have to check with him. Didn't have much time to think about it with the storm and everything."

"Doesn't look as if you had time to finish shaving, either," Nathaniel added, arching a brow.

I felt my cheeks burn.

Deverell reached up and felt his jaw, then cleared his voice. "Well, I did say I was interrupted by family drama."

Rhys cleared his throat and handed me a sherry and gave Deverell his drink. "A toast, then," said Rhys, and we all held up our goblets. "To never-ending family drama."

Despite what Deverell claimed, I could tell Rhys and Nathaniel knew exactly why Deverell's shave had been interrupted and why we were late, and I thought I would burn up with embarrassment. It would seem men liked speaking of it as much as they liked the doing of it. I downed half my sherry in a single gulp.

"Another toast, gentlemen," Deverell said, holding up his glass. "May prudent tongues live to see the sun rise."

Rhys and Nathaniel coughed to cover up their laughter.

"On that note, I believe I'll take my prudent tongue to the dining room." Rhys led the way. His home was by no means richly appointed and reminded me of my own home back in Oxford, simple and comfortable. Rhys was not a gentleman of the peerage, but a man who had done nicely

for himself in life and his house reflected that. I was suddenly struck by a sense of longing for what had been so safe and familiar all of my life, and I wondered if anything would be so again.

We were seated and a butler served us. The meal, though simple in courses, was well prepared. The pheasant, soft peas, and delicate crusted spiced meat pie were all a treat. When dessert arrived, I gave out a very undignified squeal. "Marzipan," I said with a sigh. "It's my favorite."

"I know," Rhys said. "Nathaniel mentioned that I should have some on hand."

Deverell narrowed his gaze at Nathaniel and Nathaniel only smiled calmly. "It seemed the least that could be done for you after what you went through this morning."

"Let the lady enjoy her dessert and then we'll talk," Rhys said.

Though I would have enjoyed eating every last bite, I did share. I didn't even see Deverell eat his marzipan, it disappeared so fast. The time to talk came all too soon. Rhys led us back to the drawing room where a warm fire burned softly in the hearth.

I decided to tackle what I hadn't wanted to face but realized that I needed to. "I must return to the Druid stones. Two victims were killed there, and this morning I was only able to see one of them."

Rhys shook his head. "As magistrate, I'm not going to allow it." At my angered dismay, he sighed. "Gemini, Nathaniel and I have talked, and while your help this morning was invaluable, we don't want you to go through what you did again. Just the thought is unbelievably horrifying. We can't even imagine what you had to do. And you can't do it again."

"I agree," Deverell said.

"And were it not absolutely necessary," I said, "if we had another recourse, I would agree as well. But I knew what I

was getting into before I ever left Dartmoor's End, gentlemen. I've been through this before. The most important thing is finding out as much about the killer as we can."

"Your courage puts mine to shame," said Rhys. "And now you have to realize that there is no need for you to put yourself through it again. We have a description of the man responsible and I have several men watching a few suspects that match that description. Mr. Stone included. There is nothing more to be gained by you returning to the Druid stones."

"Unfortunately, there is. You see, it isn't only a matter of finding out who their killer is, it is a matter of finding the key that will let their souls discover peace."

"What do you mean?" Nathaniel asked.

"From what I can tell, ghosts hover because of something that ties them to this world. If you can resolve their issues, then you can set them free." I explained about Sarah's ghost repeatedly reliving the last moments of her life. "It is my feeling she would have gone on that way into eternity until someone set her free. There was another woman murdered there—Jane—and I at least have to go back and make sure the same thing isn't happening to her. Also, what you don't realize, gentlemen, is that each victim will see something different about their killer. By experiencing their deaths, I can potentially learn more about him."

"Christ," Rhys said, covering his eyes with his hand.

"Double that," said Nathaniel.

"Bloody hell," said Deverell.

"Jane might not even be there," I said. "I didn't look for her because Sarah's ghost was in such agony. I have to try though."

"Maybe if we delay it a day or two," Rhys said. "Wait and see if the killer returns to the Druid stones to take a look around. He knows that we are there watching and he'll want to thwart our efforts again. Only this time we'll have him trapped. You explain," Rhys told Nathaniel.

"Simply put, I rigged the closing mechanisms on both ends of the tunnel to fail after they have been triggered. When he comes to look around, he'll be trapped. We also now have men watching both entrances to the tunnel."

"But what if he doesn't return out of curiosity?" I asked. "What if he has another victim? Is that what you want to wait for?"

The men shuddered, giving a resounding no.

"Then I suggest we at least try to let me find what I can at the Druid stones in the morning. With the tunnel shut I shouldn't hear the cries of the victims trapped there from long ago. Once this is over they are going to need to get a proper burial in a churchyard so that they'll feel they have been redeemed."

"As soon as possible," Rhys replied. "I will speak to the vicar about it. I'm even sure there will be some burial service he could provide."

A heavy knock at the front door had us all turn expectantly to the butler when he appeared in the doorway. "You're needed at the jail, Magistrate Williams," the butler said. "Apparently there has been an escape, sir. About an hour ago. They're unable to find the prisoner."

Rhys stood, as did Deverell.

"Is it Smitty?" Deverell demanded.

"Since he's the only one being held in the town's jail at the moment, that would be an excellent guess. I need to get down there and find out how it happened."

"Come to the inn when you are done," Deverell said.

"Are you afraid he'll come after you there?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of getting a report. If any of my sailors from the *Black Dragon* were involved in his escape, I need to know about it immediately."

"I'll come to the inn with you," said Nathaniel. "It won't hurt to have an extra hand around."

"Dear me!" I cut in. "That reminds me, gentlemen. I

need your assistance tomorrow afternoon. Yours and whoever else you deem adept enough to teach. It is of the utmost importance."

"Teach what?" Deverell asked, frowning with suspicion.

"Self-defense. Most of the women in Northrope will be gathering to discuss how they can protect themselves."

The magistrate gaped.

"Gemini! I thought we decided that was a bad idea," Deverell said.

"There was no *we* about it," I said. Deverell shook his head as if stunned.

"Holy hell!" said the magistrate as soon as he gained control over his mouth. "The women in this community are meeting for self-defense instruction?"

"Yes. Should I have Merrill tell them to bring guns for shooting lessons as well?"

"No!" All three men shouted so loud I had to cover my ears.

"I don't believe this," Deverell said. "I left you for barely an hour this afternoon and look at what you've done!"

Nathaniel laughed. "The wind, Dev. Remember?"

"So you will be there," I affirmed, glaring at each of them.

"Yes," they said as if I were leading them to the gallows.

"Northrope's men will never forgive me," said Rhys as we left his house. Though he lived a short distance down Northrope's main shopping street, we still took a carriage to the inn. Deverell and Nathaniel appeared tense. I kept looking out the window at the shadows lurking along what had been a bright and lively street a few hours ago. Now most everything was deserted. Though very little fog hovered in the air, the streetlamps still cast eerie shadows upon the cobblestones. The hint of rain misting the air had diminished, leaving the night clear. I could even see the distant beacon of the lighthouse way out upon the rocks edging the bay.

The carriage came to a stop at the inn. Nathaniel exited

first, then Deverell and then me. I stood between them as we turned to enter the inn. The driver of the carriage pulled away, horses neighing nervously for some reason, as if a tension hovered. A gust of wind from the ocean swept over us, taking Nathaniel's hat with it.

"Hold there," he yelled, ducking behind to catch his bowler. Then he cried out in pain as a sharp report sounded.

Deverell grabbed me, flinging me in front of him as he plowed open the inn's door. I stumbled headlong inside.

"Good God, I've been shot," said Nathaniel, barreling inside behind us.

"How bad?" Deverell demanded.

"Just my bloody shoulder."

"Stay inside, get behind the clerk's desk," Deverell yelled, then ran back out into the night.

# 17



“Bloody hell, Deverell!” I looked at his disappearing back, wanting to chase after him, and must have made a move toward him because Nathaniel grabbed my arm.

“Stay and help me,” he said, moving over to the clerk’s desk to lean against it.

“I will.” I clenched my teeth, reining in my urge to foolishly chase after Deverell. “Let me see your shoulder.”

He grimaced, his complexion blanching. A large circular bloodstain was already covering the right shoulder of the back of his jacket. I glanced about the room, looking for anyone who could help as I rolled up the hem of his coat and pressed against the wound. “Pressure will stem some of the bleeding. But we need to get you a doctor instead of cowering behind a desk. What was Deverell thinking?”

“That you’d be a target for someone shooting through a

window, but the shades are drawn and with Dev after them, I doubt they will try and kill again this night."

"Good God!" exclaimed the clerk as he came hurrying into the entry from whatever errand had called him from his post. He looked flushed and flustered. "I'll get Miss Emerson." He turned toward her office, but she came running out before he made it from the room.

"What on earth is going on, George?" Irritation knit her brow.

"Someone shot Nathaniel in front of the inn," I told her. "Deverell is out looking for the perpetrator now."

Shock washed over her features as she quickly reached us. She took one look at the growing stain on his white shirt and started giving orders. "Tell Clara to have someone put water on to boil and bring clean linens and then attend the desk while you go and get Dr. Samuels immediately." Then she set her gaze on Nathaniel's face. "Now, sir, you're bleeding like a stuck pig. If you don't mind I'd like to take you to a room so that we can attend your injury."

"Capital idea," Nathaniel said, sounding much weaker. "Not feeling up to snuff at the moment and doubt I'd make it home without some difficulty."

"I doubt you'd make it up the stairs. Gemini, since I'm taller, I'll keep pressure on his wound while you get his other side so we can help him to the bedroom."

"Madam, are you suggesting that I can't take a bullet like a man? Of course I can walk."

"I'm not sure where you found this fool, Gemini, but do tell him he isn't Zeus."

"And ask this Aphrodite-looking Titan how would she know if my name is Zeus or not?"

"Nathaniel Lincoln, Viscount Baylor, meet Merrill Emerson, owner and proprietress of the Royal Stag's Inn," I said, introducing them as we made our way from the entry room. Merrill led us down the same corridor I had taken to

her office, but instead of turning to the right she went to the left and opened a set of double doors. This led into what I could only describe as an exotic emerald green bedroom. There was a canopied bed swathed in gossamer curtains, large urns filled with tall feathers, and half of the huge bed was covered in jeweled pillows of every color and size.

A maid entered on our heels with a basin of hot water and an armful of white sheets.

"Gemini, take the basin." She nodded across the room. Then she told the maid to pull back the coverlet and tear some bandages. "Now, my lord, let's get these clothes off."

"Are you always so bossy?" Nathaniel grumbled as she urged him to slip off his jacket and adeptly undid the buttons of his shirt.

"Yes," she said, sliding his shirt off his uninjured shoulder. Then, taking a large strip of linen, she folded it into a pad and quickly exchanged it for the bunched material she'd been pressing against his wound. The sight of blood oozing down his back made me slightly woozy. Merrill didn't appear to be affected. She took up a towel and wiped off Nathaniel's back.

"Pants, too, my lord," she demanded. "The waistband is soaked. Gemini, we can clean him before putting him to bed, if my lord can stand that long."

"That much blood, huh. Uh, call me Nathaniel, I never take my pants off for a woman unless we're on a first-name basis." He sounded a little odd, as if he, too, was woozy.

"Since you have such a precedent, I assume you do it often," Merrill said to him, then sent the maid for more linens and to hurry the doctor.

"Not as often as I would like. Would you stop wavering so I can see what color your eyes are?"

Shaking my head, a grin tugged at the corners of my mouth despite my worry over him and Deverell.

A loud thud sounded.

“Bloody hell!” Merrill exclaimed, her voice muffled.

Running to the other side of the bed, I found a naked, nicely formed, Nathaniel lying facedown on top of Merrill on the floor. She still managed to keep pressure on his wound. She looked at me in exasperation. “He’s out cold. We need help. You and I could move him, but we might harm him more. Either the sight of his own blood got to him, or he’s losing more blood than we realize.”

“I’ll be right back.” I dashed for the door, hearing Deverell, Rhys, and a stranger in quiet conversation, coming closer. “We need help,” I called out.

Booted feet immediately pounded down the corridor. Deverell reached me first. “What is it?”

“Nathaniel has passed out on top of Merrill.”

Rhys appeared with a formally dressed man who was wearing a top hat and carrying a doctor’s black bag. They hurried into the room. Deverell and I followed.

“How much blood loss has he had?” the doctor asked, taking a peek at the wound and then reapplying the pressure and checking Nathaniel’s pulse. “He’s lost some blood, but not a tremendous amount from what I can see. Looks like the bullet is lodged in his shoulder. A good thing; no vital organs involved. Should be a simple operation to get the bullet out and he’ll be all right in no time.”

“I think he passed out from shock or pain or some combination of the two,” Merrill said, a breathlessness to her voice.

Deverell moved to Nathaniel’s feet. “Let’s move him to the bed. I’ll get his feet. Rhys, you support his head and Dr. Samuels can take care of the wound.”

“Lay him facedown,” the doctor said. A few moments and grunts later, the men had Nathaniel on the bed and I helped a flushed and flustered Merrill off the floor. The first thing she did was cover Nathaniel’s backside with a sheet. After that she seemed to regain her composure. We were all

relieved to hear that Nathaniel's injury, though not slight, was not terribly serious.

"Never thought I'd see the day when a man pinned you down, Merrill," Rhys said dryly.

"Not funny in the least, Rhys. And if anybody finds out about this little incident, I'll shoot you myself."

"Does that include telling Nathaniel himself? He's going to be upset that he missed out on all of the fun."

"You tell him and I'll shoot you both."

Deverell shook his head and sent me a look. "That's why women shouldn't carry guns."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

Dr. Samuels gave Nathaniel an injection of morphine to ready him for surgery.

Deverell frowned. "What happened to a pint of whiskey and the good old days when a man had to suffer like a man?"

"Nothing is sacred anymore," Rhys replied.

"And you two criticize women's reasoning?" I said.

"Hush and let the doctor think," Merrill commanded.

The doctor snorted. "Ever tried surgery on the battlefield? Nothing bothers me, young lady, but I'll need your help."

The next hour passed in a rush. Rhys and Merrill helped with the surgery, while Deverell and I helped the staff to provide the doctor with everything he needed. Much to everyone's relief, the procedure went well and the doctor declared Nathaniel would soon be as good as new. He gave Nathaniel another injection for the pain and promised to return in the morning.

"Now come with me," Merrill said. "My maid will watch over Viscount Baylor, and the three of you can join me in the drawing room for a drink while somebody tells me what in the hell is going on. Having gentlemen shot on my doorstep is not a successful way to do business. Were you robbed?"

"No," said Deverell. "But Rhys and I have a theory. We'll explain it in the drawing room."

After asking Merrill for permission, Rhys poured everyone a brandy. It was my first experience with the spirit, which had more fire in a sip than spiced wine ever dreamed of having. I managed not to choke and to concentrate on the conversation.

Rhys spoke first. "Tonight, a sailor who had already attempted to murder Gemini was broken out of jail. This happened about an hour before the shooting. My men delayed letting me know because they had hoped to recapture the man and his accomplice."

"I didn't catch sight of who the shooter might have been," said Deverell. "The coward had already disappeared, but it makes sense to suspect Smitty was attempting to murder either Gemini or me." He turned my way. "That means you don't go anywhere unless I am with you. He's too dangerous."

"How did Viscount Baylor get shot then?" Merrill asked.

I swallowed hard. "A gust of wind blew off his hat and he moved behind me to catch it." My hands grew clammy and a cold sweat beaded my brow, prompting me to take large gulps of the liquid fire from the snifter I held.

"One last thing," Merrill said. "I can think of a number of reasons why a man might try to murder you, Deverell, but why did he attempt to harm Gemini?"

"That would be my fault," I said. "I stowed away on the ship and was discovered in the middle of a storm. Smitty overheard me sarcastically asking Deverell if he was going to burn me at the stake for being a witch. The storm became worse and almost destroyed the ship. Smitty blames me. He thinks I've cast a spell over Deverell."

Merrill laughed. "Did you really stow away?"

I nodded.

"How fascinating. Some day you will have to tell me how and why. Now, about all this witchcraft nonsense." Smiling, she shook her head. "Part of it must be true, as Deverell swore he'd never marry. You obviously cast a potent spell on him, but I think it's called love, not witchcraft."

Rhys laughed.

“Love?” Deverell whispered under his breath. I doubt anyone else in the room heard him but me, since I was seated next to him on the settee. His frown would have been comical were it not for the deep question in his eyes. A sharp stab of pain went right into my heart. What did he think our passion was about?

He downed his drink in a single gulp. I did too and choked on the burn, giving a good excuse for the tears stinging my eyes.

Deverell hit my back. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” I lied, setting my glass on the lamp table. “But it has been an extremely exhausting day. I think I’ll retire for the night.”

He stood. “Of course. Please excuse us. Merrill, let me know if Nathaniel worsens or needs anything during the night. Rhys, I will see you first thing in the morning.”

All I had wanted to do was to escape upstairs alone, so that I could crawl in bed and curl up to withstand the emotions roiling inside of me. It was foolish, I know, but I’d expected that, given our intimacy, Deverell felt as I did. Loving him wasn’t even a question in my mind. But then, it never really had been. So that left me to wonder: If Deverell didn’t love me now, would that ever change?

I didn’t have to pretend the weary exhaustion that weighed upon me as we climbed the stairs to our room, and Deverell was very quiet, troubled, more so than after Nathaniel had been shot. I couldn’t help but determine it was because of what Merrill had said about love. After readying for bed, I slid between the covers, too anxious to really sleep, but too tired to keep my eyes open. I lay there listening to him. He paced the room, went out onto the balcony where I imagined he watched the beam of the lighthouse flashing across the harbor and drew in the fresh coolness of the night air. I wanted to join him, but didn’t. What seemed like a long

while later, he finally climbed into bed, lying on his back beside me for a time before sighing and turning to pull me into his arms. He didn't say anything, just settled my body against him and went to sleep. I'm not sure how long I listened to the rhythm of his breathing and the steady thump of his heart before I fell asleep. I just knew that even feeling as confused and unloved as I did, I still found ease in his nearness, and that made me hurt worse.

"He killed Jane quicker than he did Sarah, hurt her less," I said as I left the circle of the Druid stones early the next morning. I kept having the urge to look back over my shoulder, as if someone was watching, but every time I turned to search, I found no one there. And I knew no one was there now. Knowing Smitty was loose and had attempted to shoot either me or Deverell in the back had me so anxious that I could barely breathe.

From the moment we had arrived at the Druid stones, Deverell had taken my hand and had yet to let go. He had his fingers entwined tightly with mine, and had given me support and strength to experience the death of another victim: Jane, the barmaid who had been the first woman killed at the Druid stones. Pierre and Davey were with me as well, their countenances solemn and grim. This time in order to set the ghost free all that had been needed was for me to promise that I would find her daughter and tell her that Jane loved her.

Mists once again blanketed the marsh, hovered along the edges of the maritime forest, and swirled amid the grotesque stones. Though the day held the promise of warm sunshine, it could not break free of the habitual cloud that seemed to cover the stones.

"Were you able to learn more about the killer?" Deverell asked.

“Not physically. He wore a cloak that kept his face in shadows. But Jane spoke to him as if she knew him. She kept asking him why, after all this time, he would suddenly do this. His voice kept changing when he spoke to her, sometimes sounding like the same man who killed Sarah, which to me sounds like Jack Poole’s voice. At least, what I remember it sounding like. Then, at other times, he sounded confused, insisting he had to do what he was doing whether he wanted to do it or not. His hands shook as he cut her.”

Rhys sighed. “You do realize that the killer you are describing now in no way matches the description you gave of Sarah’s killer.”

“Yes. It’s almost as if between the time he killed Jane and Sarah, he went from being unsure about what he was doing to completely practiced evil.”

“Extremely odd,” said Deverell. “Is it possible that there are two people involved in the murders?”

“You mean like Warwick helped Jack Poole?” I asked. “I can’t say for sure because of the difference that I feel between the two murders, but the killer seems the same, just more evolved.”

A long silence followed my words as we moved along the path to the main road.

“I’m sorry,” I said after a few minutes. “I thought I would be able to tell you more.”

“No,” Rhys said. “You’ve told us quite a bit. I’m just trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Every mystery has a key that will unlock it. Sometimes it just takes time to ferret it out. Nathaniel is good at physical puzzles. The stone entrances to the tunnel beneath the altar back there are based on a series of weights that unlock the doors. He had it figured out in no time at all. What I need to do is to write down all of the information about this, every little fact, and then see how it all fits. Speaking of which, how is our resident scientist this morning?”

"Grumpy to the point that Merrill was threatening to make *Nathaniel* toast instead of feeding him toast," I said.

Rhys smiled. "It doesn't take much to bring her to the threatening stage. Though I am surprised Nathaniel is giving her a difficult time. He's always been exceedingly polite."

"I think that's because you've never attempted to incarcerate the man in bed," Deverell said. "Before we left the inn this morning, Nathaniel wanted to be up and about and Merrill wouldn't let him move."

"You mean she has tied him to the bed?" Rhys's brows arched. "And he's complaining? I'm going to have to have a talk with the man about taking advantage of certain situations."

Deverell laughed hard. "I don't think he's quite seeing it that way. And last I saw, he wasn't leg shackled yet."

"Good," said Rhys. "Then there's time to talk some sense into him."

I studied both Deverell's and Rhys's expressions, trying to determine what was so funny about their exchange and why Rhys thought he needed to have a talk with Nathaniel.

"Why would he want to be tied down?" I asked. "That doesn't make any sense."

Rhys coughed and Deverell lifted his brows. "Just a joke, Gem. I'll explain it to you later."

Rhys then changed the subject. "Do you expect that Lady Claire will be visiting you today?" He didn't look at Deverell or at me, so I couldn't read his expression, but from the sound of his voice, I could tell he'd forced the question from a tight knot inside of him.

"Her note said she was ill and it would be a few days before she could come," I told him. "It surprises me, because she seemed just fine when she left. Angry, but not ill."

Deverell snorted. "From the time she was two, Claire could bring the house down with an ill mood. She most likely still has the household in an uproar over Alastair's

highhanded behavior in regard to Sarah's disappearance and death," Deverell said.

"She does have a temper," Rhys added. "I've felt the brunt of it. And that would explain things."

"Explain what?" I asked.

"Oh, uh, why she hasn't come back to visit," Rhys said, sounding odd.

"I don't know," I replied. "Do you think we should go see her?" I squeezed Deverell's hand.

Deverell came to an abrupt stop, releasing my hand. "No, we'll never set foot in Clearview. Don't ask again." Then he started walking to the carriages up ahead, his pace clipped and fast.

I gaped at his back, flooded with emotions ranging from anger to pity.

"You'll have to forgive him," Rhys said to me. "I don't think he realized how harsh he sounded. You might say that when a lion is in pain, he can't hear his own roar."

"And if the lion refuses to tend his wounds, then the pain will only get worse and the infection will likely kill him."

"Then, little mouse, it's a good thing you're here, isn't it? Otherwise, the lion might have to live forever with the thorn. I'll ride out to Clearview after the meeting today and see how ill Lady Claire is," he said.

"When are you going to tell her how you feel about her? She doesn't realize it, you know."

His gaze riveted to mine with such dark intensity that I gasped, unsure of how to react to the depth of emotions burning in his gaze. And, truth be told, I wasn't even sure what all of those emotions were. It was more than desire, I knew that. I almost felt as if anger and some odd loathing played a part in his expression.

"Never," he said. "And neither will you. There are some things that should never be."

I stared at him a moment, wondering what more lay

beneath the surface of his supposed calm. Wondering why he would be so adamant about never letting a woman know how he felt about her.

"It would seem Deverell isn't the only foolish lion roaring either," I said and then marched up the path to the carriages. Deverell had finally realized Rhys and I were no longer in step with him and had turned to wait for us. I sailed past him.

"Gemini?" he said. "Listen, I didn't—"

"Don't speak to me at the moment," I told him, stiffening my shoulders. "I can't hear you. I'm roaring right now."

The noise in the warehouse waved like a flag of excitement in the air. Even without knowing how many women resided in Northrope, I was impressed with the number of them who'd come to the self-defense meeting. Merrill was in the process of calling the women to order and I stood off to the side of the podium that had been set up. Deverell and Rhys were with me. Pierre and Davey were overhead, making comments on the meeting. They were having a debate on how long it would be before one of Northrope's men would be joining their spirit ranks.

Deverell and I hadn't had much time to talk since returning from the Druid stones. Merrill had been waiting on us and most of the time between then and now had been spent planning and setting up for the meeting. I did sit down and do what Rhys had mentioned, writing all of the facts and my opinions about the murders on a piece of paper. I'd made a column for each victim and a column for the killer, and then listed a chronology of unfolding events beginning back when my cousin Mary disappeared in Dartmoor's End. I kept the paper in my pocket and had pulled it out several times during the day to study it, looking for the "key" to the puzzle of whether or not the killer was Jack Poole.

The only two things that made me doubt it was Jack Poole were his altered or masked appearance and the killer's uncertainty when killing Jane.

Looking out at the hundred-plus women gathered, I felt the heavy responsibility of stopping the killer before any of them could be harmed. In the very back row Nathaniel sat with his arm in a sling to immobilize his shoulder. He had a coat tossed over his shoulders to keep his injury from being as noticeable, a fruitless effort because he looked so peaked, anyone could tell there was something wrong. He'd won the battle with Merrill to be up and about after the doctor had insanely told Nathaniel that he could do anything he felt up to doing. Even I, of my supposed tender years of age, knew better than to tell a man that. They always felt up to more than they were actually capable of doing. Whether it was ego, male bravado, or just stubborn pride—known among me and my sisters as masked stupidity—I don't know, but Nathaniel sat in the back of the room along with about ten of Northrope's men that Rhys had coerced into coming.

Merrill had me speak to the group next. I called the women's attention to the article Cassie had written and to how much their awareness of the world around them and their abilities to protect themselves would reduce their risk of being harmed. I explained how they could even help the authorities capture this man by being observant. I told them that by being observant, my sisters and I had helped stop a killer. After I finished, Rhys spoke, giving the women a general description of the killer. He explained they were currently searching everywhere and questioning everyone. Then he broke the women into groups and assigned a man to each group. I found myself in Deverell's group. From what he told the women to do should a man approach them from different directions, I could tell that he'd given a lot of thought to the matter. He kept emphasizing over and over

again that their best defense was to never put themselves in a vulnerable situation to begin with. To never be isolated from help. To never go out alone, especially after dark. To listen to the voice inside that whispered when something wasn't as it should be.

Rhys walked around checking on each section. When he reached mine, Deverell was in the middle of showing a woman how to hold a small knife. We were all discussing where one might keep a knife close enough to be of use if attacked. Reticules were immediately ruled out, for a woman usually dropped them when attacked.

I pointed out, with some humor, that a woman could carry a good sized stone in her reticule and hit her attacker in the head before she had to use the knife. This brought a number of laughs from the women and a few agreements as well. Deverell explained that unless a woman trained herself to quickly retrieve a knife from her boot even before she was going to need it, the best way to carry a knife was in the pocket of her skirt or coat.

"I'm afraid I'm in your debt, Gemini," Rhys said after a while.

"Did you decide not to roar as loudly?" I asked.

He knitted his brow in confusion. "What? Oh, no, I'm not referring to our conversation about Lady Claire and my feelings. I was speaking about you organizing this meeting. It wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be and the women are much more calm and adept than I gave them credit for."

"What did you imagine it would be?"

"Let's just put it this way: The last large gathering of women for a certain cause occurred in Bournemouth a few years back. The British Women's Temperance Association moved en masse and shut down all of the pubs and forced every single man their mob could corner into signing a pledge to abstain from alcoholic beverages for the rest of his life or he would burn in hell. The magistrate had complete

anarchy on his hands, for the gentlemen were calling for the arrest of the mob of women and he didn't know what to do with them."

"Heavens, that sounds very extreme. What happened?"

"Unfortunately, a bout of influenza fell upon the city and the women were so busy caring for their sick that they didn't have time for the Temperance Association and it never gathered as much steam again. They still meet, but there's no—"

Suddenly he fell silent and a strange blank look slackened his features. His hands fisted.

"Rhys, what's wrong?"

When he didn't answer I set my hand on his shoulder, giving him a little nudge. "Rhys? What is it?"

He continued to stare blankly.

Suddenly an odd feeling crept over me. Looking at him now, he appeared similar to what my sisters said I was like when Flora's ghost had taken over my body. I didn't know what I was doing. But surely Rhys couldn't see and interact with ghosts, too.

Surely he would have said something. It had to be something else.

He was now sweating heavily and a look of anger was furrowing his brow and tightening his lips. He was starting to scare me. "Deverell," I called, interrupting him from showing a young lady how to hold one of my small daggers. "I need to see you right now."

He was at my side in an instant. "What is it?"

"It's Rhys," I whispered. "Something is very wrong. He was talking and then all of a sudden went into a trance. I can't get through to him."

Deverell narrowed his gaze at Rhys and shook the man's shoulder. "Hey!"

Rhys didn't respond. But his body began to shudder.

"I think we need to get him out of here. Does he have nervous attacks?"

Deverell merely blinked at me. I lowered my voice and added. "You know, episodes where his mind is not quite functioning properly? Epilepsy?"

"Bloody hell, not that he's ever spoken of. Come with me," said Deverell. He bent, swung Rhys over his shoulder, and quickly carried him from the warehouse out into the fresh air. Deverell had just set Rhys on the ground when both Merrill and Nathaniel came out the door.

"Is Rhys ill?" Merrill demanded.

"I don't know. He just suddenly stopped speaking midsentence and hasn't responded to either Deverell or me since."

Suddenly Rhys cried out and came awake. "Oh, God!" He gained his feet, looking about frantically, as if no one were around, as if he didn't even see us there beside him. "I've got to hurry," Rhys said, turning away.

Deverell grabbed his arm. "You're not going anywhere until you tell us what is going on."

Rhys blinked at him as if finally realizing where he was. His face was pasty white, his eyes bleak. "It's Claire. I have an awareness of her and something very bad is going to happen to her. Maybe it has already happened. I see her racing on the beach and a big man wearing a hooded cloak is chasing her. He knocks her off her horse with a long stick and kidnaps her."

Rhys had visions.

My heart slammed into a wall of dread and my body grew cold all over. Claire. Oh dear God, not Claire.

# 18



Sweat poured from his brow despite the cool air. Rhys looked at all of us, his eyes dilated and filled with desperation. “You have to believe me. I . . . I have these visions. It’s only her that I see. Nobody else. I don’t know why. I knew she was going to be thrown from a horse on the beach all those years ago and that’s why I was on the beach. I knew she was going to be stranded on rocks and that’s why I went out in the harbor on a boat. It’s only happened twice, and there isn’t a lot of time between the vision and when disaster strikes. We have to hurry.”

All I could think about was Claire dying the way Sarah had died. My stomach roiled.

“Let’s go,” Deverell said gravely. Panic and what I realized was worry for me had sharpened his expression to the jagged edge of broken glass.

I not only feared for Claire, but realized that if we didn’t

save his sister, Deverell would be lost, too. I understood because I felt that about myself as well.

Deverell grabbed my shoulders. "You must go with Merrill and Nathaniel to the inn now. Go in a closed carriage and stay with them. Don't go anywhere alone. Please promise me."

Shaking, I leaned up and kissed him. "I promise. I'll be fine. Don't worry about me, just find Claire before—" I couldn't say anything else; my throat closed from the dread and sickness welling inside of me.

Nathaniel stepped up beside me. "We'll watch over her. And if worse comes to worst, I've another shoulder should Smitty try anything else."

"You'd be better off using your hard head," Merrill said. She grabbed Rhys's sleeve. "Take the men from inside. You may need them."

Rhys cursed and sucked in a deep breath. "I need to stop reacting and start using my head. We'll get every man we've got and put them out on the shore. We'll also need someone to ride to Clearview and see if Lady Claire is there, just in case I'm wrong. And I pray to God that I am."

"I'll see to all of that," Nathaniel said. "You two leave *now*. Ride the shore from here to Clearview."

"Yes, go," said Merrill.

Deverell and Rhys ran for the stables. Pierre and Davey stayed with me and hovered as Nathaniel, Merrill, and I went back inside to explain to the men that Lady Claire might be in danger and where to look for her. Nathaniel assigned a man to ride to Clearview and the men left in a rush. The women went home in solemn groups to pray for Lady Claire.

The afternoon shadows were darkening into evening gloom far too quick as Merrill, Nathaniel, and I went back to the inn to wait in the drawing room with Pierre and Davey over my shoulders. After one day their presence was starting to weigh upon me. What in heaven's name was I going to do if they decided to take up permanent residence?

More importantly, what was I going to do if Deverell and Rhys didn't find Claire?

Desperate, I pulled out my paper of facts and impressions to try to keep from going insane with worry, almost wishing that some ghost would come and take over my mind so I couldn't think about Claire—

"Bloody hell," I cried, sitting up and blinking in shock at what had just occurred to me.

Nathaniel jumped at my outburst and winced in pain. "Good God woman, I thought Smitty was standing in the doorway with a pistol. What's wrong?"

I glanced at Merrill, hesitant to discuss what I was thinking, but then realized there really wasn't any point in keeping anything secret from her. She was already part of the whole situation and I believed that I could trust her. "Have any bodies washed ashore over the past year?"

Both Merrill and Nathaniel frowned with confusion. "Not that I know of," replied Merrill.

"Nor I," said Nathaniel. "You'd have to ask Rhys or some of the fishermen in the harbor. You're going to have to explain yourself."

I set my gaze on Merrill. "You seemed to believe Rhys without too much shock earlier. Why?"

"I've known Rhys for a long time and we've had a number of discussions about things. What he doesn't realize is that I know that when he brings a subject up, it is because he himself is wrestling with it. About five years ago, he showed up here completely unsettled and over several brandies brought up the subject of visions. So what he said today came as no surprise. I'm not a conventional woman and I pride myself on the fact that my mind can accept the unconventional."

"I'm about to tell you some really unconventional things and I need your word that you will keep them secret between us. There are those who would harm me because of it."

"Like Smitty," she said. "I glad you're finally going to

tell me what this is all about. And just so you know, you had my vow of silence even before you asked. I never break a confidence.”

“Thank you. First, I need to tell you that I can communicate with ghosts—see, hear, and speak to them. And sometimes when one is in horrible turmoil, I relive that turmoil as if I become the ghost and the ghost becomes me. What I’m going to suggest sounds extremely unbelievable, but what if the person who is killing here in Northrope has been taken over by the ghost of the killer from Dartmoor’s End? Jack Poole disappeared into the sea and we don’t know if he lived or died. What if his body washed ashore here or a fisherman from Northrope found him while fishing? It would explain why I think it is Jack Poole but why the man appears differently.”

“I think you are on to something,” Nathaniel said. “I’ve been puzzling why there was a difference between Jane’s and Sarah’s deaths. If this ghost’s possession started out weak and grew stronger it would account for the change.”

“Dear God.” Merrill looked at me with tears and empathy filling her eyes. “You really experienced those women’s murders?”

I nodded. “But I’ve realized there is something even worse than that. It’s what Rhys must be going through right now. Having a vision of something that is going to happen and trying to stop it. My sister Cassie grew up having prophetic dreams. Once or twice her dreams foretold the death of a loved one. Unfortunately, only once was she able to stop the death. The little girl she dreamed about was in the same house and she went to rescue her immediately— Oh my God! What if Claire has already been taken by the killer? What if Deverell and Rhys get there too late? He said that there was little time between the vision and its occurrence.”

Nathaniel jumped to his feet, groaning. “It would mean the killer might already have Claire at the Druid stones, or will shortly.”

I stood. "We need to go there now." Why hadn't I considered this option earlier?

"It's dark now. You're staying here. Deverell would have my head if I let you come with me. If the killer is there, then he'll be trapped in the tunnel."

"*Non! Ma petite!*" Pierre interjected. "You cannot go. If what you say is true and you find this man who is possessed, how do you know that this evil won't try and possess you, too? You cannot take the chance."

"I must," I told Pierre, then turned to Nathaniel. "And the killer will only be trapped if he uses the tunnel. What if he doesn't?"

Merrill stood. "You're not going alone. I'm as good with a gun as any man."

"We'll all go," I said. "In fact, since the policemen are out searching for Claire, I think we should spread the word through the town and tell everyone who can carry a lantern and a weapon to come. We'll turn the night into day and be assured no one is alone."

"I'm a dead man," Nathaniel said, shaking his head. "My only defense to Deverell will be that I couldn't stop the wind."

"Do something to stop *ma petite*, Davey!" Pierre cried.

"Like whot? All we can do is be there to stop the bloody bastard from trying to harm her. Never thought I'd meet a soul more stubborn than the cap'n. Marriage to her is like riding a high wind in a constant storm. I'm thinkin' only the cap'n can man her helm."

Deverell has certainly manned my helm well.

I would have smiled had my heart not been so caught up with what might be happening to Claire.

Merrill set the inn's staff to summoning every available villager to come to the Druid stones. Then she had two of her biggest workers, armed with guns, come with us. They rode

on top of the carriage with the driver, where I had no doubt that Pierre and Davey hovered. Merrill, Nathaniel, and I sat inside. Nathaniel muttered the entire way, putting in requests for what he wanted to have happen before Deverell had him shot. He listed what he wanted to eat for his last meal. Stated what he wanted done with his belongings and who we were to notify. He was clearly doing his best to distract us from our sickening dread for Claire.

"Is there anything else?" Merrill asked dryly when he'd finished.

Nathaniel grinned. "Yes, but I'll have to speak to you about that in private later. It would seem that I missed out on the experience of a lifetime by passing out last night."

Merrill gasped and Nathaniel smiled.

"Who told you?" she asked.

"Told me?"

"Yes, who in the devil told you that you fainted on top of me?"

"I did?"

Merrill paused with her mouth open in shock. Then she snapped it shut. "No. I was merely ascertaining who was telling lies."

Nathan knitted his brow. "I don't think so. This is very interesting. Tell me more."

"You'd better be thinking about what we'll do at the Druid stones or you may end up with another bullet in you," Merrill said. "Mine," she added.

I bit my lip and looked out the window. "We're almost here," I told them, my heart clenching in dread.

"Where are all those people that you claimed would turn the night into day?" Nathaniel asked.

"They'll come." Throwing a small measure of caution to the wind, I pushed aside the panel and took a quick look at the road leading to the town. "Let me rephrase that. They're right behind us."

Merrill and Nathaniel looked, too. The road leading from town was like a lighted snake weaving through the dark. Carriages that had raced after us pulled up moments after we exited. The men and women of Northrope had come to help one of their own.

We made our way to the Druid stones, feeling a power in the number of people who had joined us and those who had yet to arrive. It seemed to me as we approached the stone circle that we'd come upon the stones unawares. Mists from the marsh had yet to shroud them and they looked garishly naked in the clear lamplight. Pierre and Davey shuddered and uttered grave warnings.

"You should not be here, *ma petite*," Pierre said. "This is bad. Very bad."

"Worse than bad. Yer soul's not safe. I can feel the devil himself 'ere," Davey added.

I had to put their warnings from my mind. We had to come and the relief I felt at finding the altar and the satanic circle empty nearly buckled my knees. Hope was a humbling emotion. Nathaniel and I both rushed up to the stone altar just to make sure there were no fresh bloodstains on or around it.

Merrill hung back with her two workers from the inn, their guns at the ready. Others that came encircled the outer perimeter, keeping their voices low.

I set my hand on the stone, covering the hidden tunnel latch, feeling the cold, sensing the evil lurking beneath the surface, even if it was only in my mind. I knew this place was one of horror both in the past and now. A chilling sweat covered my body. I didn't want to open the tunnel, didn't want to face the assault of the ghosts inside, but I had no choice. "We need to see if he is trapped inside there with her," I told Nathaniel.

"I know. I need to gather some men, and you and the women will have to move back or I won't open it. This time,

wind or no wind, I'm insisting my better judgment prevails."

Suddenly a howl and a loud thump sounded against the tunnel's opening.

I cried out, jumping back, feeling like I'd heard Jack Poole. "Oh, God. He's there."

"Bloody hell," Nathaniel gasped, grabbing me and dragging me away. He hurried over to Merrill and her armed men. "He's in there, trapped in the tunnel beneath the altar."

The pounding and splashing of horses approaching from the marsh caught everyone's attention. Three horses came into view, one of them riderless. Then I recognized Deverell as he raced through a patch of moonlight. Rhys was with him.

They thundered to a stop outside of the circle and came running toward us.

Deverell glared at me, telling me he'd have a few words to say about finding me here. "We found Claire's horse alone on the shore and raced immediately here."

"He's trapped in the tunnel," Nathaniel said. "We heard him trying to get out. He must have Claire with him."

"There's something you need to know," I told them. "There's a possibility that Jack Poole's ghost has taken over the man's body. Jack the ripper may be living inside an innocent man."

"I don't care," Rhys said. "He's harmed Claire. He dies." Rhys started for the altar.

Deverell pulled him back. "We rush him and he might kill her immediately."

"You don't understand what I see!" Rhys cried out in anguish. "Is it happening now? Is it what will happen? We have to get to her!"

"Believe me, I feel it, too," Deverell cried. "Here's what we'll do." He outlined his plan and everyone fell into place immediately. Lanterns were extinguished, voices silenced,

hiding places found, then Nathaniel went to the altar and released the trap. He quickly ran from view to where Merrill and I hid in the forest skirting the perimeter of the Druid stones. The two armed workers were with us. Deverell and Rhys were the only people close at hand in the stone circle. They crouched behind the large pillar at the top of the altar, the one that looked down upon the sacrifices made.

I watched in agonizing slow motion as the opening to the tunnel slid open. The cries of the souls trapped inside grew louder and louder. I had to cover my ears and force my mind to ignore their pleas. A large, cloaked, hulking man emerged from the tunnel. The hood hid his identity. He had a bound, blindfolded, struggling Claire slung over his shoulder. Her white dress was soiled and wet, stained red at the breast. My insides wrenched with dread. The killer didn't even look around or show any caution at all. He was completely absorbed in the task of laying Claire on the altar.

Merrill's nails dug into my hand as she squeezed it tight. My stomach roiled at the sight of Claire fighting helplessly against her bindings and the knife in the killer's hand.

Deverell and Rhys sprang up the second the killer leaned back from Claire to look at her. Approaching from the opposite side of the altar from the killer, Rhys scooped Claire off the sacrificial bed and ran.

The killer bellowed with rage and lunged at Rhys, but Deverell caught the killer by surprise, grabbing him around the neck from behind. Stabbing the air with a wicked, curved dagger, the killer tried to throw Deverell off as he thrashed wildly. Bigger and bulkier than Deverell, the crazed man had to be stronger than an ox, for he was flinging Deverell as if trying to shrug off a pesky child. The hood fell back, revealing the killer's identity.

"It's Simon!" Merrill cried. "The lighthouse keeper."

Just then the man turned the knife and thrust it into the arm Deverell had wrapped around the man's throat. I bit

back my cry. Cursing, Deverell released the killer, managing to kick the man behind the knees, trying to bring him down. The killer shifted, staying on his feet and arching the knife at Deverell's back.

"No!" I screamed out, jumping to my feet. The killer jerked his head my way. I'm not sure how he could see across the circle of stones and into the shadows edging the forest. But he did, as if he had some supernatural ability.

"Gemini." The deep voice sounded like a hundred Jack Pooles speaking at once. The killer smiled, looking right at me. My skin crawled and my stomach sank beneath the heavy weight of nausea churning inside me. I knew that evil. I'd felt that evil before. Only this time that evil was stronger, as if Jack Poole had made a pact with Satan himself.

Deverell had rolled to escape the knife and gained his feet.

Instead of going after Deverell now, the killer headed for me.

Deverell yelled at him, but the man kept coming. Deverell ran and hit him from behind, but the man seemed to have such a fanatical purpose that he barely shifted from Deverell's blow. My heart pounded hard. Merrill jumped up and grabbed my hand. "Run. We have to run."

"Stop or die," Deverell yelled. The killer ignored him and Deverell aimed his pistol, firing at the killer's head. It took three shots before the killer fell to his knees then landed facedown on the ground.

I sighed with relief and broke from Merrill's hold to go to Deverell. Reaching him, I snatched his handkerchief from his pocket and tied it around the cut on his arm to help stem the blood loss. Then I threw myself in his arms. "It was him," I said, shuddering. "He knew me."

"I know," Deverell, said, using his good arm to pull me tight against him.

"Gemini," said Jack Poole from just behind me, as if he were whispering in my ear.

I cried out and turned to see Jack Poole's ghost rising from the lighthouse keeper's body. Only his body was ravaged, the flesh hanging from half an arm, some of the bones of his face showing where flesh and muscle looked as if it had been eaten away.

"I'm coming inside you, Gemini. You're going to become me, my dear. And you're going to return to your beloved family and butcher them."

"No!" I screamed covering my ears and shutting my eyes. But I could still hear him in my mind. I could feel his evil coming closer to me. My body shuddered as a deep, burning cold brushed over my skin and then began to sink into me. I could feel the evil delve into me, penetrating deeper. I couldn't stop him.

"No! No! No! The Lord is my shepherd," I shouted. "I shall fear no evil though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall fear no evil though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

I felt Deverell pick me up. I heard him shouting, but at first I couldn't understand what he said. Then his words became clearer.

"Let me help you," Deverell said. "Use my strength." He brought his face to mine. "Look at me, Gemini. Open your eyes and look into mine. See me. Shut everything out but me. I love you."

Shuddering uncontrollably, I opened my eyes to the hot intensity of his, I drank of the emotion burning there and a wave of heat flooded over me. The cold receded. The sense of evil faded. "I love you," I told him. "Forever."

"Get away you fools," Jack Poole yelled. Turning, I saw Pierre and Davey attacking Jack Poole. They'd placed themselves between me and Jack Poole's ghost. Blue-white lightning seemed to be crackling the air against red streaks as good was trying to destroy evil, but their combined efforts barely held Jack Poole back.

I focused my thoughts, those that were full of Deverell's love and strength, on Pierre and Davey, and the blue-white light grew brighter, pressing Jack Poole backward.

Love was greater than evil.

Enraged, Jack Poole screamed, red sparks flew, and he lost ground until he hit the altar and fell back upon it. The pillar at the top turned from stone to a shiny black that oozed a putrid stench. Its eyes gleamed red and its mouth opened. The screams of the souls that burst forth was deafening. The pillar inhaled and the ghost of Jack Poole was sucked inside. Then the pillar turned to stone again.

Pierre and Davey fell upon their backs, hovering in the air as if they were small boats being rocked by waves. "Are you all right?" I asked them.

"Feel like I'm disappearing, *ma petite*."

"Me, too," gasped Davey.

"I'm fine," said Deverell. "It's you I'm worried about."

"We'll be back, *ma petite*," said Pierre. Then he and Davey disappeared.

I sagged against Deverell in relief, my body completely drained.

"I don't know what just happened, but I think I saw the impossible," Deverell said. "Did that stone just move? And wasn't it just shining in the moonlight?"

"That and a whole lot more," I told him. "Just pray to God the pillar is never brought to life again. That Jack remains in the depths of hell forever." I hoped with my whole heart and soul that it would be true, but deep down a tiny part of me wondered if it were possible. I'd seen the stone come to life once. Logic said it had to have happened before, and reason demanded that I realize it might happen again. To destroy the Druid stones just might unleash the hell I heard from the creature's mouth. But what if the stones were blessed? Might good start waging a battle against the evil here, maybe even silencing it forever?

Nothing could restore what Jack Poole had stolen from me. In mere seconds Jack Poole had taken everything away. Though I'd stood on shaky ground since coming to Northrope, wondering if I were taking Deverell's life away from him, deep inside of me, I still had hope of a future with him. That hope was now gone and the pain welling up inside me was more than I could bear.

# 19



Deverell entered the inn first, then held the door open for me and for Rhys, who carried a protesting Claire. Merrill and Nathaniel had traveled in a separate carriage and were a few minutes behind us.

“Honestly, I am sure I can walk,” Claire said.

“Not until the doctor sees you and tells me you’re fine,” Rhys insisted.

“My wrists and ankles hurt from where he tied them too tight, and I’ve a bump on my head from the pole he used to knock me off my horse, but other than that he didn’t hurt me.”

“I think you’re in shock and don’t know how badly you’re injured. You’ve blood all over the front of your dress, your cheek is bruised, and your lip is split and swollen. He obviously hit you.”

“That happened before.”

Rhys came to a stop and stared down at her. "Before what?"

She hesitated. "Before I was kidnapped," she finally blurted out. "I, well, I fell and bumped my face."

Rhys narrowed his gaze, clearly doubting her too-quick declaration. "How?" he demanded.

"I, uh, tripped, pitched forward, and hit the ground."

"Then your chin would have borne the brunt of your fall. Not the left side of your bottom lip." His voice darkened with anger. It was obvious that he thought she'd been hit and wasn't telling the truth.

Claire bit her lip then winced in pain. "It doesn't matter," she said, averting her gaze and suddenly sounding extremely tired. The vigor with which she'd declared she could walk was gone. "I think I would like to rest before the doctor comes."

"Rest is what you need the most," I interjected, staving off the objection burning in Rhys's eyes. He snapped his mouth shut, clenching his jaw tight. "The bedroom on the left is not being used," I told him. "Please take Claire there."

"She'll be staying with us," Deverell added. From the fury behind that one short sentence, I knew Deverell had little doubt that Claire had been struck. He didn't seem surprised by the abuse either, but rather almost fatalistically grim.

Moving over to Claire, I set my hand on her arm. "Rhys will take you upstairs and I'll help you change from your wet gown. I'm sure once the doctor arrives, he'll have a salve to alleviate your pain and help you rest. All right?"

She nodded, tears springing to her eyes. Now that I was closer to her, I could see the heavy lines of strain etched on her face, the bruised area around her split lip, and the harrowing shadows lurking in her gold gaze. She might be protesting that she wasn't hurt, but inside she'd been deeply frightened.

Even now that she was safe, I was still frightened for her.

I knew what her death would have been and my soul bled for that. And for what had happened to me tonight.

Breathe. Help Claire. Don't think about Deverell. Don't think about the love I'd finally found. Dear God. Don't think about how much I was dying inside.

Soon Claire was clean and she sank beneath the covers with a weary sigh. She immediately curled into a ball, much like a babe seeking comfort.

She'd gone for years without the loving hand of a mother and had never had the caring word of a sister to help her along. It was then I realized that even with all of my problems, Claire was more alone in her life than anyone I knew, including me. Indulging in my own tears and pain right then seemed so selfish that I shoved them away, concentrating on her. I sat on the side of the bed, resting my hand on her shoulder. Deverell's family and the troubles brewing there were a simmering cauldron of nothing good.

"If you don't mind," I told her softly, "I'm really tired and need to rest here just a bit before I go out there."

Claire nodded her head and I eased into bed next to her. But I couldn't keep my mind from racing through all of the things too painful to think about.

From the moment Deverell had killed the lighthouse keeper, there'd been an air of relief over everyone. Claire was saved, another woman hadn't been harmed, and all was well with the world. But it wasn't and I knew it. Unfortunately, the truth about what had happened could never be fully revealed. There would be whispers for years to come as to why the lighthouse keeper, a man who'd kept the harbor safe for years, had suddenly snapped and begun killing. My family would rest easier in some ways, knowing Jack Poole was gone, for now at least. But they would realize as I did that it might not be forever.

I also worried about Pierre and Davey, which was ridiculous since they were already ghosts. But their fate in the

spirit world concerned me and I hadn't even be able to thank them for helping me before they had faded, seemingly beyond their control.

Jack Poole's ability to start inhabiting my body even though I fought him with my entire being cut me to the core. Could he have caused me to murder my family just like he'd turned the lighthouse keeper into a murderer? The thought of something like that ever happening destroyed me inside. I couldn't stay with Deverell. What if I harmed him? I couldn't return to my family. What if I injured them?

I could barely breathe from the pain lacerating me and had to keep blinking back the tears. I had to keep telling myself to hold on just a little longer. If it hadn't been for Deverell, Pierre, and Davey, Jack Poole would have won. What if they hadn't been there. What if I'd been alone?

Tears burned my eyes, but I blinked them back, focused on drawing one breath at a time, and waited for the doctor to come. Once I'd found a way to free myself from those I loved, only then could I let myself cry, for I knew I would never stop grieving, but I had a heart full of memories that would last me forever. I grasped on to that with everything inside me. It was all I had to hold on to to keep me together.

Twenty minutes later the doctor arrived and, after examining Claire, he gave her a mild sedative and some soothing salve for the rope burns on her wrist and ankles. He advised her to sleep for the night and he would be back in the morning to check on her. He also said that he hoped the bastard boiled in hell for what he did to the other women and for punching Claire in the face.

I didn't leave Claire's room until she drifted off to sleep, which only took a few minutes. I had hoped it would be longer. I didn't want to have to face what would come next. I would have to tell Deverell about Jack Poole and why I had to leave.

Deverell, Rhys, Merrill, and Nathaniel were still in the

outer sitting room and the doctor was just leaving when I joined them. I noted that the door didn't completely close behind him, but the grim pain in Deverell's expression drew me to his side. I joined him on the settee, deciding to close the door later. Apparently, the doctor had given a detailed report of Claire's condition, confirming their suspicion that Claire had been punched in the face.

"We might as well air this laundry now," Deverell said. Either bitterness or anger hardened his voice to a cutting edge. "Either my father or Alastair hit Claire."

"It's Alastair," Rhys replied without hesitation.

"You don't know my father," Deverell answered. The strain on his face was chokingly tight, telling me he'd been subject to abuse from his father. His hands fisted at his side as if he were trying to hide his pain. I slid my hand over his, bringing his attention to me. My heart and my love must have reached him, for he drew a breath and gave a thankful nod, welcoming my comfort. This only made the pain inside me twist deeper. He needed me, and to save him I would have to walk away from him.

"Well," Rhys said. "I've only met the duke in passing and that was several years ago. But he didn't seem as self-absorbed as your brother is. And I've heard the duke's mind is now feeble."

Deverell shook his head. "I doubt his temper has suffered the same fate. But Claire did leave here yesterday ready to skewer Alastair, so he could be the likely culprit."

"Needs his face bloodied," Nathaniel said with disgust. From his drawn expression of pain and his pale complexion, I could tell he'd long outlived his bravado. He needed to be in bed and using some of the pain relieving medication the doctor had left for him this morning.

"I'd do worse," Merrill added. "Castration might cover it."

The men winced and I managed a wry frown. "I'd help you if I thought it would do any good. The only thing you

can do with someone who abuses power is to take it away from them and never give it back.”

“There’s only one man in this room in a position to do that,” Rhys said, looking at Deverell.

Deverell cursed. Sliding his fist out from beneath my hand, he stood and paced to the hearth, his back to the room. I knew without asking he was chafing painfully over being forced to give up his life at sea.

Just then a slight knock sounded and the outer door was pushed open.

Deverell swung around, pistol in hand, but concealed at his side.

Alastair entered, his lip curled with disdain and anger hardened his blue eyes to ice, making a night and day difference between him and Deverell, despite the similarities of their features. Another man entered behind Alastair, white-haired and pompously outfitted in what a king might wear to a coronation. Though his shoulders were slightly bent, and he used a walking stick for his balance, his height matched Alastair’s—so did the disdainful curve of his lip. I knew without being introduced that this was Deverell’s father, the Duke of Wakefield.

“Where is my daughter?” the man demanded. “She should have been brought home immediately.” He frowned and glanced at Alastair. “Right?”

Alastair’s mouth flattened in anger. “Claire’s reputation has suffered enough from being at the hands of such vile vermin. She needs to return to Clearview immediately.”

“She isn’t going anywhere near that place so long as you’re there,” Deverell said with deadly calm. I noted he’d returned the pistol to his coat pocket, but kept his hand close to the weapon.

“You’ve disgraced and besmirched this family enough,” the elderly gentleman told Deverell. “You’ll hand my child over to me or face charges of kidnapping yourself.”

Rhys stood. "Forgive me, your Grace, but the only one who stands to face charges in this room is Lord Alastair. I will personally see that assault charges are filed should he ever lay a finger on Lady Claire again."

"How dare you speak to a duke in such a manner. And over such a ridiculous matter," Alastair said. "Claire and I had a slight misunderstanding."

Rhys jerked forward then pulled himself back. He looked seconds away from murdering Alastair.

"Filing assault charges won't be necessary," Deverell said. The deadly conviction in his tone told me he wasn't issuing a threat but a promise. "He hits Claire again and he'll be too disabled to stand trial. I will break every bone in his body."

"Who harmed Claire? Did something happen to Claire? She didn't come read for me this evening. Did we leave her at Clearview? Bloody hell, why aren't we at Clearview? I want to be at Clearview." With each sentence the duke rapped his cane on the ground and his voice rose in anger.

Deverell stared at his father for a long moment; disgust and pity seemed to weigh in on his anger. "Your son will take you home immediately." Deverell directed his gaze at Alastair.

"Yes, very well. The carriage had better be out front or the footman will feel my wrath," the duke said and left for the stairs.

"I'll leave with Claire or not at all. Which room is she in?" Alastair demanded, uncannily marching right for the room Claire rested in.

"You'll leave now." Deverell moved to block him.

Alastair flung out his arm to push Deverell aside. Deverell knocked Alastair's arm away and Alastair went to punch Deverell, but Deverell caught Alastair's fist, forcing his arm down before planting his own fist in Alastair's face. Alastair cried out.

"This is your one warning. From now on for every punch you throw you'll get ten in return. Multiply that by a hundred if you touch Claire."

Though I abhorred violence, I had to admit it was more than satisfying to see Deverell give Alastair a taste of his own medicine. Alastair's lip was bleeding and split like Claire's. I hoped it pained him more.

"You need to leave now," Deverell said.

"You'll pay for this," Alastair replied, grabbing a handkerchief to hold to his lip.

"Gladly," said Deverell. "But before I do, I'll beat you to a bloody pulp. You can be sure you won't be able to lift a hand against another woman ever again."

"You won't live to know it." Alastair sneered then turned and stalked out of the room, the animosity inside him fracturing the air like an explosion of hate.

My heart raced so fast I couldn't breathe. I had no doubt that Alastair could and would kill Deverell. I had no doubt that Pierre and Davey's suspicions about Alastair were true. A man that filled with malice toward his brother wouldn't hesitate to betray him any way possible. Framing Deverell in Egypt would have been a pleasure. Maybe Alastair thought Deverell would have been executed in Egypt for attempting to assassinate the khedive. Or spend the rest of his life in a foreign prison, leaving the dukedom to him. I had to tell Deverell as soon as possible.

"Well, that man is a breath of fetid air, to be sure," Merrill said. "I'll have several of my men stand guard about the inn tonight. Just in case Lord Alastair decides to make good his threat in the middle of the night like the coward he is."

"No need to do that," Rhys told her. "I'm putting four of my best men on the job and I'll be staying here as well."

"I may be short a punching arm," Nathaniel added. "But my pistol aim is in top form."

Deverell shook his head, this time as if bemused by

Rhys's and Nathaniel's support. "Your concern is highly appreciated, but I can handle him. I seriously doubt even Alastair is stupid enough to attack me at the moment. Not that he wouldn't do the deed, but he knows he left a room full of witnesses to his threat."

"I'll still be here to keep watch," Rhys told him. "I don't want him anywhere near Claire."

"We're in complete agreement." Deverell studied Rhys closely for a minute. "You do realize that given today's revelations and events, you and I are going to have a long talk about Claire and her future."

"As long as Alastair is not in a position to harm Claire, there isn't anything to discuss," Rhys replied, his expression harsh. "Not if everyone here will swear to keep silent about what happened today. Which, given the vow of silence I've made to you on certain matters, wouldn't be asking for too much. There is no need for Claire to ever know about my situation. Now, if you'll excuse me, Gemini, Merrill, gentlemen, I have arrangements to make."

"This discussion isn't over, but it can wait," Deverell said.

Merrill stood and gave Nathaniel a sharp eye. "As can anything else tonight. You look like death warmed over and should have stayed in bed recuperating today. It's time you got there now, so we will say good night as well."

Nathaniel stood, grimacing as he moved. "Don't suppose I could entice you to watch over me all night again."

"In your dreams," Merrill replied sharply as she led him to the door.

Nathaniel shook his head and managed to grin. "You're a hard woman, Miss Emerson. Fortunately for me you're already there," he said, following her out the door.

"Already where?" Merrill snapped, loudly. "Have you a fever?"

"Yes," Nathaniel replied. He lowered his voice some,

probably thinking we wouldn't be able to hear, but I did. "A raging one because you're already in my dreams."

Moving to secure the door, Deverell heard, too. He met my gaze across the room, amusement softening the strain on his face. "I think Nathaniel has set upon a campaign to seduce our hostess."

"More like an insistent battle," I replied, heading into our room. "He started the moment he saw her last night after being shot. I thought then it was because he wasn't in full control of his faculties, but it looks like I was wrong."

The knots inside me were springing loose. I had to tell Deverell the truth and I wanted to do so in the comfort of our room. It felt so good to step inside its sanctuary. What we'd shared together in here, and how much my heart had grown in my love for him, now almost seemed to be a part of the intimacy of the room. Part of the soft, blue silken walls, part of the rich satin coverlet, part of the luxurious carpet, and part of the flowing drapes that framed a view of the harbor and the wavering sea. I walked to the window, where the moon had cast the seascape in silver.

"I would say his 'faculties' appear to be functioning well," said Deverell. "A good thing, too, because winning Merrill over will take a full-scale war, I think. She doesn't trust easily, and with good reason."

"I'd noted her reserve, but she seems to have no such hesitation about you," I replied, glancing back at him as he closed the bedroom door behind him. Would Merrill console him after I left? The thought of him with another woman sent searing pain through my heart. I knew I had no right to feel that way, but I couldn't help but feel possessive about him.

He lifted a brow. "Do I detect a bit of concern in that remark?"

"Perhaps," I said, looking back out the window. To keep

the tears from breaking free of my pain, I bit my lip and focused on easing the curtains closed. Maybe I could wait until tomorrow to tell him; maybe I could pretend for just one more night that his arms were forever.

I shut the night out with the drapes. A small fire warmed the hearth and lamplight had spread a soft glow about the room. Surely for one night I could just pretend Jack Poole's ghost hadn't touched me. I'd spent most of my life ignoring ghosts, living a lie. One more night wouldn't matter.

"There's no need," Deverell said, coming up behind me. The intimate timbre of his voice sent a shiver of pleasure to curl my toes. The feel of his hand on my shoulders stroked that pleasure. "I care deeply for Merrill and always will, but had I been inclined to have a liaison with her, it would have happened years ago, little Gem." He urged me around, bringing me face to face with his grave and pleading earnestness. I suddenly realized there was more between Merrill and Deverell than even Merrill had hinted at.

"I don't feel that way about her," he continued. "She's almost like another sister. I found Merrill beaten and left for dead in a London alley about a year before I went to Egypt. She's the daughter of an esquire up in Cambridge. He thinks her dead and she's never gone back to see him."

I pressed my hands to his chest, needing something to steady me. What he was saying was so far from what I'd expected. "Good heavens, who harmed her? What happened? Why would she let her family think her dead?"

"She'd been walking home from the store when a group of men on holiday, most likely from the university, decided she'd keep them entertained during their travel to London. They kept her captive and I don't have to tell you what was done to her. The beating and being left for dead was the good part."

My fingers gripped the material of his shirt, and I searched his gaze, desperately wanting to see that justice had been served. He didn't say anything. "Surely those men

found themselves dangling from the noose of a rope!" I prompted. From what I knew of Deverell he would have hanged the men himself. I wanted to do the deed. The outrage burning inside had me seeing red.

"No," he replied. "She never knew who they were and my investigations through a Bow Street runner after I had to return to my post ran cold. They kept her blindfolded. And, quite frankly, I think they drugged her as well. She gave some extremely odd accounts of hearing wolves howl almost constantly during her ordeal. Buying this inn for her and giving her the capital to make it into whatever she wanted it to be was the least I thought could be done for her."

I shuddered. "Is there no place safe in this world? Is such vile evil rampant everywhere?"

He pulled me close to his heart. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything, but I . . . Hell, Gemini." He pulled back, gazing intently into my eyes. "I wanted you to understand what my feelings for Merrill were. I want you to know that though I've had affairs over the years, I've never felt for another woman what I feel for you. I love you."

My heart seemed to be almost breaking as it flip-flopped with love for him. I knew I couldn't do it. The one time that I wanted most in my life to pretend that I didn't see ghosts and everything was normal, I couldn't. Deverell deserved all of my honesty. But, dear God, I wanted things different.

"We have to talk," I whispered, pressing my fingers to his lips, staving off his questions. He clearly had expected me to say how I felt about him as well. There was no question how much I loved him. I pulled from his grasp and moved to the fire, needing and seeking warmth, but knowing nothing could help the cold that Jack Poole had forced inside me.

"There are two things I have to tell you. First, you have to know that when Pierre and Davey saw Alastair, they thought he was the man who framed you in Egypt. I didn't say anything about it yesterday because Pierre wasn't absolutely

sure and wanted more time to think about it. But with Alastair's threats tonight, I think you need to consider the possibility that your brother is the man who betrayed you."

"I already have," he replied, coming to stand next to me at the fire. Instead of anger or bitterness, I heard nothing but a deep sadness in his voice and saw it shadowing his eyes.

"How? When?"

Deverell drew in a deep breath. "From your comments and questions about Alastair yesterday before going to Rhys's for dinner. You set my mind on a path that finally was able to make sense of what happened in Egypt. I'll explain the details of it later. Just rest your mind with the fact that my friend in London is questioning Alastair's cronies there. One way or another, my friend will learn where my dear brother was at the time of the fiasco in Egypt, because he wasn't at Clearview. My mother's letters prove that. Now, I refuse to talk about anything but you. What happened at the Druid stones? And don't try and tell me nothing. I want the truth. I know something is wrong."

"It's bad," I whispered, the tears I'd been refusing to let fall bursting through. "So bad that I have to do what Merrill did with her family. I have to disappear—forever. From them. From . . . you."

He grasped my shoulders, putting his face in mine, looking desperately into my eyes. "No! Do you hear me? I don't care how bad it was or what happened." He clearly wanted to both shake me and kiss me at the same time with such force that he trembled. "Tell me," he demanded. "Tell me what happened."

I put my hand on his chest over his heart, meeting his gaze with mine, begging him to understand. "Jack Poole. After you killed the lighthouse keeper, Jack Poole's ghost came after me. He . . . oh, Deverell, he said he was going to possess my body and make me butcher my family. I thought I could fight him, but I couldn't. Cold evil brushed over my

body and then went deeper inside me. I'm still cold inside and don't know if I'll ever be warm. I love you with my whole heart but I can never be with you. I could never take the chance that I might harm you or someone else. Not ever."

"Is he inside of you now?" Deverell demanded, shaking my shoulders. His voice rasped with a very dark and deep anger. "Is he?"

"No. No. He was driven back. You saved me. You made me look into your eyes and you told me you loved me. The love forced him out of me and Pierre and Davey drove him to the stone altar. Then the pillar at the head of the altar came alive, sucked Jack Poole in, and returned to stone."

He exhaled, his breath ragged and shuddering as he pulled me against him. "Then it's over. I thought I had imagined seeing the stone pillar come to life. It's over, Gemini. You don't have to worry about Jack Poole again. Although I understand your fears and why you have them, they aren't real anymore, my love. He's gone and you're safe."

I shook my head, pushing against his chest, tears filling my eyes. "No, I'm not. Not really, and it isn't over. If the statue came to life once then who's to say it won't again. And if Jack Poole was sucked in, who's to say he can't escape? What if next time you and Pierre and Davey aren't there? What if nobody is there and Jack Poole takes me over and I do horrible things to the people I love? What if next time it isn't even Jack Poole? What if some other evil ghost is bent on possessing me? What then?"

"I will be there," he declared adamantly. "We'll drive away any ghost or demon or whatever it is that threatens you with the force of our love." He claimed my mouth with a passion as fervent as his words, catching me up in a storm of desperate need to be with him one more time. To be held by him one more time. To lose myself in him one more time. To make all that had happened disappear.

I kissed him back with a fever of desperation that fueled

the fire between us even hotter. Clothes were wrenched away in haste. Nothing could stand between my need to love every part of him, or to feel him with every part of me. More needy than ever before, he came inside me, his stormy eyes fixed upon mine, shadowed with fear and with love. His silken touch inside me reached all the way to my soul and I cried out with my need, with the force of my love, and the depth of my sorrow. For as hotly as our passion flared, as deeply as his love drew me into the protection of his heart, a cold knot of doubt lived inside mine.

# 20



A scream awakened me. At first I thought it was me screaming from the nightmare of Jack Poole chasing me, until I heard a second scream, this one louder. Deverell came awake in a rush, going from lying flat on his back to standing naked with his gun in his hand before I could even blink.

“It must be Claire,” I told him, rolling from the bed.

“If Alastair is here, I’ll kill him.” He moved to the door.

“She might just be having a nightmare.” I grabbed for my robe and Deverell went for his pants. He had just pulled them up when Claire screamed again and a loud crash sounded from the other room.

“Stay here,” Deverell yelled, running from the room.

Staying back didn’t mean I had to stay away. Arming myself with the poker from the fireplace, I ran to the door. Then lowered my weapon when I saw that Rhys had busted

through the outer door and was rushing into Claire's room two steps ahead of Deverell.

Still, I gave the room a thorough glance for anyone lurking in the shadows before I dashed to Claire's room, poker in hand. It was a nightmare. Claire was thrashing, caught in the grip of her horror, even though Rhys was calling her name and shaking her shoulders.

"Somebody pick her up and hold her," I told him, knowing how much that would have helped me during the nightmares of Flora's death. It wasn't until the heat of Deverell's passion possessed me that the cold faded. Could that be what was wrong with me now? The cold I felt inside, would it soon go away beneath Deverell's love? Yes, my heart whispered. But that doesn't change the fact that I could one day be possessed and harm the ones I loved, my mind reasoned.

Rhys pulled back. "That's not my place," he said, harshly.

"Let me get my shirt," Deverell said.

I glared at Deverell, wondering why at this moment he would stand on ceremony, with his own sister no less.

Claire whimpered, thrashing harder beneath the horror holding her captive.

"Bloody hell," Rhys said, scooping Claire into his arms and pulling her tightly against him. "It's all right," he whispered to her, pressing his cheek to hers. "You're safe. Nothing is going to happen to you. I'm here."

Claire's agitation eased, but she still did not waken. I thought perhaps the medication she'd taken kept her sleeping. But then, I knew I'd had some nightmares I didn't necessarily want to wake up from because the reality was so much worse. I'd much rather face Jack Poole in my dreams than to wake and realize I had to leave all that I loved.

I saw the depth of Rhys's love for Claire through the tears stinging my eyes, and then I saw Deverell smile with satisfaction. Warmth flooded my heart. Deverell had forced Rhys into comforting Claire. Rhys didn't stand a chance of

pretending there was nothing between him and Claire but his visions. Should Claire return his affection, then the man was doomed.

I tugged Deverell from the room. Rhys was so caught up in Claire he didn't even look up as we left. I went to the balcony of our room and opened the curtains to see the first tendrils of dawn splayed across the sea like the luxurious locks of a Sea Siren beckoning a lover's caress.

Deverell came up behind me, and, as if reading my mind, ran his fingers along the curtain of my hair, brushing it aside to place a kiss at the nape of my neck. "Why is it that every minute I am with you makes me crave a thousand more? Why is it that every time I touch you, I'm driven a hundred times harder to touch you again?" He snaked an arm around me and pulled me against the solid strength of his body. I could feel his desire and want of me, but there was so much more in his embrace. "Don't fear the future, Gem. If every time I set sail, I were to believe that the disasters which have struck and destroyed so many ships before mine to be a surety, I would be insane to leave the shore. And those ills, though distant as they seem to me at the moment, are much more likely to occur than for any evil to consume you and force you to harm those you love."

I closed my eyes, swallowing hard, the emotion choking me. I so desperately wanted to believe him.

He slid his hand upward, pressing it over my heart. "There is nothing but good inside you. You're brave, caring, and passionate to the point that you endanger yourself in your giving. For any evil to gain purchase, there must be some ground for it to take root in. Some bitterness or resentment or hatred or anger. Something within that person upon which evil can feed. I fully believe Jack Poole would have failed in trying to take control of you, for there would have been nothing inside of you he could have used to his ill will." Stepping back from me, he turned me around to face

him, cupping my cheeks in his palms and brushing away my tears with his thumbs. "Do you understand what I am telling you?"

I nodded. "I think I do. In order for either evil or good to grow there has to be fertile ground for it. Like the wheat and the tares parable. You don't know how much I want to believe you," I said softly, blinking my eyes clear.

Then my breath caught at the sight of the tears streaming down his face. "Do you know why I have no doubt?" he asked.

I shook my head, unable to speak.

He smiled. "Because it's you, your heart, your soul that taught me what love is all about. Now just as much as you believed in me and the passion between us, I'm telling you to believe in yourself and the goodness of your heart. There is no room for evil inside you." He bowed his forehead to mine. "Trust me. I'm asking you, my wife, to embark on a journey with me, one where we take every day as an adventure and face the future storms together no matter what they are—a storm at sea or a ghost threatening to spread more evil in the world."

For the first time since we married, I truly felt as if I were his wife.

"I love you," I cried, wrapping my arms around him, kissing him with all of my heart and my soul. I could find no fault in any of his reasoning and I realized I'd reacted too rashly. He returned my kiss, warming me to the very center of my soul.

A heavy knock sounded on the outer door. Deverell pulled away, cursing. "We're sailing to a deserted island and not leaving until I've had my fill of you."

Smiling at him, I rolled my eyes and gave a short laugh. "I fear we'd be extremely old by then."

He went to the door with a grin as wide as the sea. I turned to follow him but came up short when I saw Pierre

and Davey floating on the other side of the room, their grins bigger than Deverell's. Their presence was just as faded if not more so than it had been after fighting Jack Poole at the Druid stones, twisting a knot of concern within me. "And how long have you two been there?"

"*Le Capitaine* does not need us anymore, for his heart is now safe, even if his name is never cleared."

"His heart is whot matters the most," Davey added.

"Thanks to you both, his name may yet be cleared." I told them about my brief conversation with Deverell and the inquiries he was making into Alastair's whereabouts.

Just then Deverell returned, but his expression was now grim. "I'm going out to Clearview," he announced.

My bubble of joy burst into a shower of dread. "You can't. It might not be safe. Why do you suddenly want to go to the one place you've been determined to avoid like the plague?"

"I'll take Rhys and several of his men with me. They're to arrest Alastair and hold him until the military representatives from London can arrive and question him. I've a telegraph from London. It would seem that Alastair was abroad during the time I was in Egypt and returned shortly after my arrest. The few letters he sent to friends were posted from Cyprus, where he claimed to be, which is but a brief sail across the Mediterranean. He made a fatal mistake, though."

"What was that?"

"One of his cronies is particularly fond of foreign antiquities. He sent a large number of Egyptian artifacts to him. That alone isn't proof. Smuggled artifacts can be bought anywhere. The caveat is this crony so loved the artifacts that he ventured to see the dealer himself—in Egypt. The crony heard firsthand how much time Alastair spent in Cairo, asking more questions than a tourist had reason to ask, and promptly paid the dealer to forget he ever saw my brother. But memory is a fickle thing amid too much wine.

And my friend does know exactly how much to pay a man to talk and what to promise, such as a few rare Egyptian coins. It would seem Alastair's friend is more loyal to his pocket and getting more artifacts than he is to his friendship."

"Pierre and Davey are here," I told him.

Deverell glanced about. "Where?"

I pointed up and to the right.

Deverell looked that way. "I can't see or hear you my friends but I thank you for what you've done. I didn't think there was any hope of uncovering the truth about what happened. What can I do in return? How can I set your spirits at ease?"

"Blimey," said Davey. "Just knowing we've saved our captain is enough."

Pierre, speechless for once, nodded in agreement.

I told Deverell what Davey said, then added, "You may be saved, but you aren't safe yet. Why do you have to go to Clearview, too? Why not just send Rhys and his policemen to arrest your brother?" I knew full well Alastair would not come willingly.

Deverell sighed. "It may be all for naught, but when I returned home from Egypt and prison, my father didn't ask me to leave and never return. He tried to kill me."

"His own father!" Pierre gasped. "Davey, *mon ami*, I think we have some haunting to do. Duke or no duke, he's about to see some ghosts."

Before I could say anything to them, Pierre and Davey disappeared. I turned my attention to Deverell, brushing the puckered flesh next to his heart with my fingers. "That's where this scar came from, isn't it? I'm so sorry." I wrapped my arms around him, pressing my lips to his scar.

"I have to be there when they arrest Alastair. If my father has enough of his mind left to realize his mistake, I want to see it. I want him to know Alastair for what he is."

"I understand," I said, fearful to the point that I wished I

could force him not to go. But Deverell had to walk the way his heart led him despite the dangers, just as I had to come here to Northrope and stop the killer. "Hurry back," I told him.

"I will. You and Claire stay here. I know the doctor will be along shortly and I expect Nathaniel will want to come up and keep you both company once the doctor leaves." He kissed me hard and then went to tell Rhys his plan. There was a great deal of activity to see Deverell off, after which I turned my attention to baths for both me and Claire.

Merrill sent up clothes first thing, rightly thinking that she was more of a match to Claire's size than I was. The nightgown I had given Claire last night fell well above her ankles. Taking the beautiful bronze and silk creation Merrill had provided, and the accompanying undergarments, I went in to visit Claire. I found her standing in front of the mirror, touching the bruise on her face.

"I am sorry you were hurt," I told her.

"It's not your fault," she said.

I shrugged. "We set things in motion with our actions and we never really know how they affect everything that follows. I came here because I thought I could help stop the killer. As a result, your brother married me, which in turn brought you to the inn and—"

"Enabled me to find out just how much of my life Alastair was trying to control and prompted an argument between us that has changed everything." She turned from the mirror. "Do you know that after my mother died, my life changed completely?"

"Everyone's life would," I said softly.

"Yes, but not as drastically as mine. I thought there was something wrong with me after her death. The friends I had before cut me off. Whenever I saw people in town they would say they'd call upon me or send me an invitation to the next party, but I would hear nothing. In fact, the only friend I had

was Sarah and that was just by chance. We first met along the sea shore while I was out riding and our friendship grew as we often spent time together on the beach. Sometimes she'd bring children along with her, teaching them different things, even how to read and write by drawing words in the sand. I would help her. I didn't tell my family about our friendship, because she wasn't a person of whom they'd necessarily approve. No one knew until we found ourselves stuck on the rocks and had to be rescued. I didn't see her again after that, though I often rode upon the shore at our usual meeting time. Do you know what I found out from Alastair yesterday?"

I shook my head, a sick feeling in my stomach.

"That he'd cut me off from everyone. Either bribed or threatened them into not contacting me, or just like he did with Rhy—uh, the magistrate's attempts to contact me. He lied and forged correspondence as if from me."

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know. I was too angry yesterday. I screamed at him. He hit me and I ran. To the stables, to my horse, to the freedom of the wind, and the sea, and the shore, right into the hands of a murderer. How did anyone know to look for me?"

I turned away and unnecessarily adjusted the lay of the dress on the bed. "Nathaniel discovered a tunnel under the altar and turned it into a trap. Rhys had men watching, so when the lighthouse keeper took you there, they were able to stop him."

Claire sighed. Tears filled her eyes. "So you won't tell me the truth either. I asked the, uh, magistrate and he told me the same lie. I'm not stupid. That would account for Nathaniel being there, and Rhys being there, but his policemen weren't there. You were there though, and Deverell, and Merrill, and what seemed like half of the town of Northrope. Is there something so wrong with me that I cannot be trusted to know what happened?"

I took hold of her hand. "No. Don't think that at all.

Instead, let me ask you a question. What are some ways an individual would know if someone else was in trouble?"

"If someone saw a person in trouble."

"Yes. And what are some ways a person could see that?"

She frowned. "Because the person is there and witnesses it."

"And what if that person wasn't there but still *saw* it?"

Her eyes widened. "You mean you can see things? You have visions?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm cursed in a different way. One that will take a long time to explain. But I will do so, just not right now. The doctor is due shortly."

"Then who?"

I smiled. "Search your memory and search your heart. I think you'll find the answer."

Her frown deepened. She opened her mouth as if she were about to say a name and I held up my hand. "I can't tell, because I've been asked not to. So perhaps you might tell me who you'd like to see you in this fabulous day dress today."

She blushed. "You mean . . . Is it possible? What if I'm wrong? Might this person have already seen me in my nightdress? Might this person have been guarding my door when I woke this morning?"

"I see you've done an excellent job in searching your mind."

"But he's always so . . . so disagreeable. Why, I don't even think he likes me."

"Let me tell you a little story about a lion roaring," I explained and then told her that the magistrate himself had relayed the idea to me. "You need to search your heart now and you'll most likely have to make your feelings adamantly known. Men are notoriously stupid when it comes to emotions."

"You say that as if you've a great deal of experience with the situation," she replied. "I take it Deverell was difficult?"

“Difficult doesn’t even come close to providing an apt description, but my sisters, Cassie and Andrie, had similar experiences with their husbands, Sean and Alex. So, I am fairly certain it is a problem specific to the male gender.”

“Andrie is an unusual name. I would have loved to have had sisters.”

“Andrie is short for Andromeda. My sisters and I are all named for star constellations that are rooted in Greek mythology. Cassie is short for Cassiopeia, but I fear my mother made a mistake with mine.”

“Gemini is a constellation and definitely part of Greek mythology. So why would you say that?”

“Because the twins were male, one the son of the king of Sparta and one the son of Zeus.”

“Maybe she wasn’t thinking about gender, but about what Gemini means in the night sky and to sailors,” Claire said.

“What is that?”

“Together the stars shine nearly the brightest in the sky. And on the mythological quest for the Golden Fleece, the twins protected a ship from a storm and are known as protectors of sailors. Sailors even swear by them. You’ve heard the phrase ‘by Jiminy’ before, right?”

I leaned my head back and laughed. “Heavens, so it could be supposed that if I hadn’t been on the *Black Dragon* during the storm we went through, the ship might have sank?”

“I’ve always wanted to sail, to journey to a new place and see a new land,” she said, then lowered her voice. “Don’t tell, but I have thought a number of times about stowing away on Deverell’s ship.”

I smiled. “Let me tell you what happened to me when I stowed away on your brother’s ship.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

She laughed with me as I told her an abbreviated version

of my story and then about my sisters and our life in Oxford. Before long, the darkness that had threatened to steal both of our lives away last night began to fade. There were still safe places left in the world. Those places were in the hearts of those I loved. I knew I had gained both a sister and a friend.

We managed to each bathe and dress for the day before the doctor arrived; he'd been delayed because he had changed Nathaniel's bandages first. Merrill accompanied the doctor and told me about Nathaniel while Claire was being seen. I had to be very careful to relate to her the same way I had before Deverell told me what had happened to her. I so much wanted to do something to remove that pain and evil from her life. Suddenly a loud clanging sounded from outside the inn and Merrill's face drenched white as she ran to the balcony.

"What is it?" I demanded, following her.

"The alarm means there is a fire. Dear God, I wonder where."

I saw a man dressed in the inn's uniform colors jerking a bell's rope for all he was worth out in the little garden in front of the inn.

"Where's the fire?" Merrill shouted at one of her employees who had appeared beneath us as he raced out of the inn.

"It's us, Miss Emerson, the Royal Stag is on fire."

Merrill stood stunned a moment.

I grabbed her arm. "Hurry, we need to get out. We need to make sure no one is left inside."

"Dear God," she whispered. "The inn is all I have. The inn is all I am."

I shouted at Dr. Samuels and Claire that there was a fire in the inn. Then I grasped Merrill's shoulders and shook her. "No! You made the inn what it is. As long as you have yourself you can make another one. We have to hurry."

Dr. Samuels and Claire dashed into the room. "Where is the fire?" the doctor demanded.

"We don't know," Merrill said, seemingly snapping out of her shock. "You two get Lady Claire downstairs. I'll check the other rooms on this floor. I have the keys. Nathaniel is—"

"Right here," Nathaniel said, bursting into the room. "Everybody out now. I don't know how bad the fire is, but it is in the back of the inn where the kitchens are. I don't see smoke inside the main floors of the inn but we can't take any chances. The fire department should be on its way."

"I have to check the rooms up here," Merrill said. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself if someone was hurt."

"Then you and I will do it together," Nathaniel said.

"I'll help," I said.

"You'll go now or I'll toss you out the window," Nathaniel said. "With this injury, I can carry one woman down if need be, but not two."

"Dr. Samuels, take Lady Claire and Gemini down with you. There may be injuries that need to be seen to."

"He's right," said the doctor. "Ladies, we need to hurry." With his bag in hand he motioned for us to proceed. On the way out we met a number of people evacuating, and when we reached the first floor, I was relieved to see no smoke, but I did detect a sharp, acrid scent to the air. In front of the inn a mass of people had gathered and were making way for the fire engine whose powerful horses were charging to a stop.

It was chaotic and Claire and I soon found ourselves pushed to the back of the crowd, jostled about by the many people trying to see the firemen work. I could barely hear what was being said because so many people were shouting. One moment Claire and I were standing next to each other then the next Claire was thrust forward into the crowd as someone pushed her hard from behind. I tried to reach for her, thinking that she'd become trampled in the crowd if she were to fall, but someone grabbed my arm and jerked me back so hard that I thought my bone would snap. I cried

out and swung around, ready to do the rude person harm and found myself face to face with Smitty.

He dragged me back. I screamed for help and kicked at him, but no one heard me above the commotion of the fire. Smitty slammed his fist against the side of my head, making my ears ring and my vision whirl. Rather than fight him, I decided to pretend a faint and let my body go slack. He cursed and shoved me forward. I hit something hard. My knees, stomach, and chest wrenched with pain from the impact. I didn't realize I'd been thrust through the door of a carriage until I saw a shiny black boot inches from my nose. Rough hands hauled me all the way inside, leaving me cramped on the floor. The light went out as the door shut and the carriage rocked violently as it raced away.

"Excellent job, Smitty," said a man. "You did well and have redeemed yourself from your lousy aim the other night."

So Smitty *had* tried to kill me in front of the inn.

"Seein' how you saved me from a hangin', it's the least I could do for ya, gov'ner. A bloke's gotta look after his own skin."

"So true," the man said. By then my ears had stopped ringing and I realized with a cold dread who the booted man was.

"Deverell will kill you for this," I told Alastair.

"He'll never know," he replied. "As far as the world is concerned, I'm in bed with a stomach ailment."

"Not for long," I replied. "You're about to have visitors." My eyes were adjusting to the black-curtained interior of the carriage. It was small. The seats and padding torn, the rest was dirty and stank. Or it was Smitty who stank. Smitty sat on one side, looking at me with fearful, hate-filled eyes that kept darting to my least movement as if expecting me to cast a spell on him at any moment. Alastair sat on the opposite seat, elegantly removed, his brow lifted in disdain.

I didn't make a move to get off the floor, but huddled

deeper into my corner. I preferred whatever filth I was sitting in to the vermin on the seats.

"Who? Let me guess, my dear brother is on his way to apologize for last night. No matter, my staff is under strict orders not to disturb me for any reason. They will not disobey me."

"No," I said. "Deverell isn't on his way to see you. He's at the inn. He'll be after you in just minutes."

"He wasn't in the crowd," Smitty said. "Made sure I wasn't seen grabbing the witch."

"Claire saw. You pushed her and she looked back just as you grabbed me. Claire saw. Deverell will be after you in minutes."

"Then we'll have to get this hanging over with quickly," Alastair said.

"Thought ye were goin' to burn her. It's the only way to kill a witch."

"No time for that now," said Alastair.

"But ya have to. She'll curse us both if ye don't. She'll come back and drive us mad. We've gotta burn her."

"Shut up," Alastair said. "I can't stand sniveling fools. Burn her after she's dead, but I'll not waste my time on such nonsense." After a moment, Alastair kicked my shin with the toe of his boot, sending a sharp pain up my leg. "Then I assume Claire is returning to Clearview to beg my forgiveness?"

"No. The magistrate is on his way with his police force to arrest you."

Alastair laughed. "For hitting my sister? Not a court in the empire will even hear the case. Especially when I explain her whorish ways."

"Actually, you're to be held for murder and for crimes against the empire. Possibly even treason," I told him. "There are military officials from London on their way to Northrope."

His satisfied smile went slack. "Now you're spouting nonsense."

"No. The truth of how you framed Deverell in Egypt has finally come to light."

He laughed. "That's ridiculous. I've never been to Egypt. There's not a shred of proof."

I glanced over at Smitty and realized how much power I had in his fear. "Pierre and Davey gave plenty of proof. They were eyewitnesses."

"Who?"

"Pierre and Davey, Deverell's men that you murdered. I spoke to their ghosts and they provided ample proof."

"Let me out," Smitty cried, reaching for the door.

Alastair pulled out a pistol and punched Smitty in the face. "Shut up or die. Nobody is going to believe you. Speaking to ghosts?"

"They'll believe me. I've already proven myself. I caught the killer before he murdered another woman from town. They'll all be on my side, but that's not going to be necessary. The authorities know everything now. They even know about the artifacts dealer you worked with in Egypt. There's proof."

"We're being followed, your lordship," the driver of the carriage yelled, and a harsh jerk had us racing wildly down the road.

"It's Deverell," I said. "You're both going to die."

"Not before you do," Alastair replied, pointing the pistol at me.

"No! Must burn her." Smitty hit Alastair's arm just before he fired and the bullet went through the roof of the carriage and was followed by a thud up above.

I blinked in disbelief. Had the bullet hit the driver?

"Johns!" Alastair shouted. "Answer me!"

The driver didn't answer and the carriage careened crazily from side to side, throwing Smitty and Alastair against one

side then the other. Down on the floor, I wedged myself tightly between the seats. Then it happened—the carriage flipped and tumbled. Horses screamed. Men screamed. I screamed, gritting my teeth and trying to hold on. Pain shot up my arm and something cut into my leg, but I forced myself to stay wedged tight.

When the carriage finally stopped, I opened my eyes to find Smitty directly in front of me. Part of him at least. His head, shoulder, and one arm had been thrust through the carriage window and had to be smashed against the ground for the carriage rested on that side and blood covered him. The roof of the carriage had been ripped off and I could see part of a grassy marsh and smell muddied water. Horses were screaming and Alastair was nowhere in sight. I loosened my hold and almost fell against Smitty, but managed to catch the side of the torn roof and pull myself out of the carriage.

Several inches of murky cold water covered the ground. As I blinked and pushed my hair from my eyes, I found myself in a marshy field. The sunshine and a light breeze touching my face seemed garishly surreal compared to the carnage.

Icy water seeped into my boots and sent a deep chill up my spine.

My hand hurt. When I looked at it, I saw I had cut myself on the twisted metal of the roof. From my right, I heard a groan and stumbled two steps in that direction to see Alastair lying on the ground, half in the water, half out. His lower body was twisted oddly. It was clear to me his back was broken.

“Help me,” he cried. “I can’t move my legs.”

My balance was off and I had trouble staying upright as I wobbled closer to him. “What can I do? I’m afraid to move you without a doctor or help.”

“You can die for me,” he said, pointing the pistol at me and pulling the trigger.

I dropped quickly to my knees, crying out, and to my utter amazement, I wasn't even hurt. A drop of water fell from the pistol's barrel. I scrambled to my feet, backing away from him as fast as I could. I didn't want to turn my back, because if he tried to shoot me again, I wanted to be able to dive away from the bullet.

Alastair cursed. And I saw him point the gun at his face, looking down through the barrel as if trying to see why it wouldn't work. He pulled the trigger. Nothing happened again. Then he did it three more times and the sudden report of a bullet being fired made me jump and fall back onto the water-soaked grass.

I sat up to see Alastair's ghost rising from his body. It came flying at me in a rage, clearly bent on doing me more harm. I thought of Deverell's love, of all he had said, and knew without a doubt he was right. Evil could not and would not win. Ever.

Alastair's ghost hit me. I felt the cold and I felt the evil, and I thrust hard against it with my whole heart and soul, repelling him from my body. "May God send you to hell," I shouted at it. "May every evil deed you committed be returned tenfold."

Alastair's ghost screamed as it twisted in the air, writhing as if it were on fire. I stood and turned from it and began walking away, ignoring his curses. Alastair's soul rested in wiser hands than mine.

"Gemini!"

Looking toward the road, I saw Deverell racing toward me with Pierre and Davey over his head. Behind him were Rhys and the policemen. I stumbled toward him, gathering strength with each step as a pure joy flooded my soul.

"You were right," I cried as he swung me up into his arms. "Evil found no hold in me. I'm free."

Looking completely ravaged by fear, he nearly squeezed the breath from me as he hugged me close to his heart. "No.

You're not free, because I'm not ever letting you go. We're finding that deserted island and staying there ghost-free, vermin-free, and evil-free forever."

I laughed. "Now who's fearing the future and being rash?" I met his gaze and made him look deep into mine. "It's all right, Dev. For the first time in my life I am truly all right. There is no place that I'll fear in our journey together, my husband. You're not getting off so easily from showing me the world. I've yet to see the best port."

He sucked in air. I could see him struggling with his own words to me. I could see how much he wanted to shelter me from everything that might cause the tiniest harm or the least fear.

"Please," I whispered. "Trust me."

Tears filled his eyes. "The best port is the one we haven't seen yet," he said softly.

"Exactly," I told him. "And I am most desirous of new adventures."

He kissed me then, passionately, and the promise of a full, wonderful life filled my soul.

# Epilogue



*Two months later . . .*

Blue diamonds shimmered across the sea and an unusually warm fall wind carried the tang of salt and sand up from the shore to the craggy bluff where Deverell and I stood, ready to say goodbye if we had to. Yet I hoped Pierre and Davey would stay around. But this was something Deverell and I wanted to do for them, and so we brought them here to see it.

Beautifully carved, the memorial stone depicting the *Black Dragon* with sails filled with a swift wind had been placed in its own special gravesite. The scrolled iron fence surrounding the memorial had been filled with bright potted flowers and sculpted bushes. A shaded arbor with latticed walls enclosed a marble bench, urging one to spend time watching the sea and remembering those honored.

A resting place fit for a prince, or should I say princes among ghosts.

“Blimey, but it’s too beautiful for the likes of me,” Davey

said, gazing at the engraved stone. His name and Pierre's were side by side. The epitaph read, "Two men of great valor and loyalty who gave their lives for their county and their commander. May they long be remembered for saving Deverell and Gemini Jansen, the Duke and Duchess of Wakefield."

"You must tell *Le Capitaine* that this is beyond measure. But there is one problem. The date of our death. It is not written."

Deverell watched my conversation with patient amusement. "Because, my friends, you are not dead to us. You live in our hearts and we welcome you in our lives whenever you take a notion to come and haunt us. But we wanted you to have a resting place to go to, a very special place just for you both."

"Then, *ma petite*, you are telling Pierre and Davey to disappear?"

"Never."

They both did a little flip of joy. "Huh, huh, huh, Davey, since we're here to stay, why don't we go pay a visit to Becky and Bertha?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Two very lonely ghosts in a cottage up the shore," Pierre said.

I frowned, thinking I would need to go and see how their souls could be laid to rest. "How did they die?"

"Exposure. Dancin' naked in the moonlight, they were," Davey said. "Still naked as the day they were born."

Pierre laughed. "They like what we can do for them, do they not, *mon ami*?"

"Like?" Davey cried, bristling. "Well, Bertha might only *like* how you made her happy, but Becky *loved* what I did for her. First ever, she said. Gave 'er a little charge of energy right—"

Pierre elbowed Davey hard. "Tell me later, knothhead. Yer talking in front of a lady, mind you."

"Whot, oh, beggin' your pardon," Davey said, blushing.

I shook my head. "Will you both be at the wedding this afternoon?"

"Aye, that we will, *ma petite*. Wouldn't miss it for the world. Never had a child, but I'd want her to be just like you."

"Then you'll be escorting me down the aisle this afternoon? Both of you?" Deverell wanted to give me a wedding day filled with love and sunshine, and for there to be no doubt I was the woman he loved completely.

"Blimey," said Davey.

"I would know of no greater honor, *ma petite*. Thank you."

"Then I had better go get myself ready," I told them.

Deverell caught my hand in his and led me from the memorial, up the garden path, and to the gazebo. We passed by the family cemetery, but didn't stop. I wanted no more reminders of the dark shadows that had threatened us. Alastair and Deverell's father's passing didn't have a place in today's celebration. When the duke had learned of Alastair's betrayal and crimes, he'd had a stroke. His last whispered words were an apology to Deverell, but they didn't make up for the years of harshness.

The question of Jack Poole's appearance in Northrope had been answered by his decomposed body having been found in the lighthouse. It had likely washed ashore and been found by the lighthouse keeper, who had become subjected to Jack Poole's evil spirit. Jack Poole's body now resided in a sealed coffin, deep, deep in the earth, giving everyone a slight measure of peace. The souls trapped in the tunnel beneath the altar had all been laid to rest, their skeletons buried and blessed by the vicar. The tunnel was destroyed. No more hidden secrets.

And Clearview, Deverell's family estate, was surprisingly a very peaceful place to me. Situated along the coast

with a distant view of the sea, the enormous mansion was full of light and color. It reminded me of a Greek temple with tall white columns and domed painted ceilings. What appealed to me the most was the very minimal array of art and artifacts cluttering its rooms. Every room was simple and perfectly done. Deverell said his mother spent many years making the estate into the peaceful home she'd long desired. I didn't tell Deverell, but I sensed her spirit there, gentle and kind, and too shy to appear. I promised myself that I would one day make Clearview into the happy, loving, peaceful home for which she'd longed. Once I'd answered the call of the Sea Sirens and had seen my fill of the world. Deverell had told me I could change anything I wanted and I told him he was already making the one change I required—a water closet on the *Black Dragon* with a huge tub and steam heat.

We reached the gazebo and Deverell pulled me inside its warm confines. Glassed in and swathed with lush plants and soft cushions, it was a hothouse oasis. He turned to me, frowning. "I've been trying to puzzle things out from your end of the conversation, but I'm missing a few pieces. What are Pierre and Davey up to?"

After I explained, he said, "Good Lord, do ghosts do that?"

"Do what?"

"Have sex."

"Heavens, so you think that's what they were talking about, too? Well then, dear husband, you can explain what Davey was about to say, as I am most curious. And this reminds me that you never did explain why Nathaniel would have wanted Merrill to tie him up."

Deverell laughed. "How remiss of me. I can give you a very thorough explanation of one thing now, but I'm afraid the other will have to wait until tonight."

"Very well, I'll settle for what I can get."

"And so shall I," he said mysteriously. "Have a seat right here, dear wife." He led me to a silken cushion which happened to be centered in a beam of hot sunshine. I sat and he knelt before me. Then, as fast as lightning, he lifted my skirts and jerked down my drawers. Sun glistened off the red-gold curls of my exposed femininity. The decadence of the hot sun, the open glassed room, and the burning desire for me in Deverell's eyes nearly had me panting and perspiring with need before he even touched me. He parted my pulsing folds and brought his mouth to the most sensitive spot of my eager sex and gave me a very thorough, very satisfying explanation. In fact, even after he finished, shivers of pleasure kept feathering deliciously over me. I didn't open my eyes because I didn't want the magic to end.

"Did that explanation suffice?" he asked.

"Most certainly. That was exactly what I thought it meant."

"Then you already knew what Davey was talking about?"

I smiled, eyes still shut as another wave of pleasure washed over me. "Of course. I just wanted you to *show* me."

He laughed. "You witch. You'll now have to suffer the consequences."

I opened my eyes to find him poised and ready before me. He thrust every burning inch of himself inside and took me on another journey, sweeping my pleasure higher with the satisfaction of his own. I felt as if I could have sprawled completely naked in the sunshine forever just as long as we were together, pleasuring each other, and told him so.

"By the time we leave the island I have in mind," he said, "you'll have your wish a thousand times over."

"A thousand?" I gasped.

"Well, all right. I can be talked into more. What do you have to bargain with?" He leered down at our still joined bodies and I felt him grow large again. "Besides the obvious."

"We could play a game of whist over it. Winner takes all?"

"Let me think on it," he replied, then gave a little thrust,

seating himself deeper. "I'm already the winner and taking it all." His hands cupped my breasts, teasing my nipples through the cotton of my gown before he undid the buttons and lavished more attention on them. I moaned. I wanted to have a minute or two to think, to figure out something that would entice him into more, but would have to do that later.

At the rate Deverell had been making love to me before my sisters, their husbands, and my nephews and new niece arrived last week, a thousand times would give us less than six months on the island. Not long enough, I should think.

"You look like an angel," Cassie whispered, tears in her eyes as she adjusted the train and then the shoulders of my satin and pearl gown. "When I write Bridget and Stuart, I'll tell her all about it. She can't believe that you're becoming a bloody duchess. And Mother and Father are fit to be tied that they aren't here, but having found Apollo's golden temple now, they said they were just going to have another lavish wedding for us all, since both you and Andrie have seen fit to marry without them being here. I'm just happy you found a man to love who truly loves you."

"Then you forgive me for leaving as I did?" I set my hand over hers. "I had to come to Northrope just as you had to go to Killdaren's Castle to search for the truth about Mary."

Cassie sighed. "Perhaps, but I'll have you know I was a lot older. And," she glared at Andrie, "wiser in how I went about my investigations. Whatever were you two thinking that made it all right for Gemmi to stow away in a trunk with a ship full of men? I hope to never hear such idiocy from either of you ever again. What if you hadn't been able to cut yourself out of the trunk? What if Deverell hadn't been the man who found you? What if it had been Smitty who found you? Good heavens, what if the men had

dropped the trunk in the sea while carrying it aboard?" She dashed at more tears. "What am I going to do without you underfoot? You're all grown up now."

Just then a loud wail filled the air, followed by a second louder wail, topped off by a third, louder still. Each of the twins had to outdo the other, and then Mary Elizabeth had to yell louder than the twins.

I smiled and hugged Cassie. "Somehow I don't think you're going to have time to even worry about me."

An extremely flushed and disheveled Merrill came bursting into the room, carrying Jarrett on one hip and Darragh on the other.

Claire hurried in on Merrill's heels with Mary Elizabeth in her arms and a panicked look on her face. "I don't know what I did wrong, she just suddenly screamed. And now she's quiet."

Andrie went to scoop up raven-haired Mary Elizabeth. "You didn't do anything. She won't let the twins yell louder than her, which means I am in serious trouble when she can do more than just yell."

The twins were a mess of constant, loveable trouble. Jarrett had a fistful of Merrill's hair, making her usually neat chignon a lopsided mess that worsened with his every joyous tug. It was apparent he thought he'd found the best toy ever. Well, perhaps it might be Darragh was in search of the greatest thing. He had his hand inside Merrill's partially undone bodice and was leaving wet marks all over her gown in his search for a nipple.

"I'm going to shoot him," Merrill declared.

Everyone gasped and my eyes widened in shock.

She frowned at us then shook her head and gave Darragh a kiss on the top of his head. "Not him. The poor little tyke is just hungry. It's Nathaniel I'm going to do in. I'm standing next to him holding these sweet little babes and then

Darragh starts searching for something and do you know what that man did? He offered to help the babe out and started unbuttoning my gown, practically green with envy over Darragh's rooting around. If that arse has a gentleman's bone in his body then I'll—I don't know what I'll do." Her breath exhaled in a rush.

Laughing, Cassie went over and retrieved Darragh from Merrill and then moved to the settee to feed him. "Every bone in a man's body can be one hundred percent pure gentleman, but it won't make a difference," Cassie said with amusement. "Their minds turn to mush when something else stands to attention. In our cases we've discovered that to be a sign of true love, though I know it isn't always so."

Neither Claire nor Merrill were surprised at Cassie's frank observation. They'd been privy to several conversations with my sisters over the past week and had fully joined in with their opinions of the male gender.

I could just see Nathaniel helping Darragh out. The more Merrill avoided his every advance, the bolder Nathaniel was becoming in his bid for her affection. I knew that if she really didn't welcome his interest, Merrill would have cut him off at the quick. I also knew that if Nathaniel really thought Merrill wasn't attracted to him, he wouldn't pursue her so strongly. They were playing this cat and mouse game as the tension between them grew bigger and bigger. I think her past held her back and I wished I could speak to her about it, but until she told me what had happened to her, I couldn't let her know that I knew. I hoped that one day she would be able to open herself to me.

A firm knock on the door startled us all.

"Cassie!" Sean called out.

Andrie opened the door. Sean filled its threshold, looking agitated even though I couldn't see his expression beyond the darkened glass protecting his eyes. "We need to talk," he said, brows drawn into a heavy frown. "Magistrate Williams

was just telling me about several anonymous articles about Jack Poole. Would you know anything about that?"

Cassie looked up at him with a soft, understanding smile. "I'm feeding Darragh. Then I have to feed Jarrett and finish getting ready for the wedding. So we'll have to discuss this tonight."

There was along silence. "I take it there is something to discuss then?"

"A wee bit," she admitted, not looking the least bit contrite.

"Cassie, this is no small matter," Sean warned.

"Of course not. I take my literary skills seriously," she said firmly.

Sean opened his mouth several times, looking as if he were about to say something but then thought he'd better not. Amazing. He didn't used to be so cautious about his declarations.

I bit my lip so he wouldn't see me smiling. A total of three articles about Jack Poole and how women could protect themselves against such evil men had been published in Northrope's paper. An entire women's group had formed because of it, the Society of Women's Awareness of Crime. Rhys was practically pulling his hair out, for Northrope's women were now involving themselves in police affairs.

"We'll talk later," he finally said and left.

Both Claire and Merrill were looking at Cassie in awe. "You wrote the crime prevention articles?" Claire asked.

Cassie nodded. "After our experiences with Jack Poole and how easily he preyed on the women of Dartmoor's End, I've concluded that women need to take some responsibility for their own protection. I've submitted a proposal to the *London Times* to run a column of such articles. I was waiting to hear back from them before I mentioned it."

I laughed. "Good heavens, Cassie. That is more than a 'wee bit.' Sean will be fit to be tied."

She smiled. "I'm fast learning it is better to ask forgiveness

than permission. Besides, by the time I finish with him tonight, he'll be more interested in seducing me than in arguing with me."

Andrie chuckled. "Tell him before the wedding that you're not wearing your drawers and by the time the festivities are over he will be insane with desire. I did that to Alex and the results were . . . amazing."

I tucked that little jewel in my mind. Between that and the figurines, my sister must have a number of "amazing" nights. My breath caught as I suddenly realized what I could offer Deverell to entice him for more than a thousand. I would have to get my hands on the figurines. Those would be worth quite a bit more, I should think.

Merrill frowned, switching Jarrett to her other hip. "Forgive me, but it seems as if none of you are powerless in your relations, but use them to your advantage." I could see that being in a position of power with a man on a physical level wasn't something she considered possible.

"A mutual advantage," Cassie replied. "I have no doubt Sean knows when he's being seduced. He lets it happen and thoroughly enjoys himself, too. Sometimes I think he deliberately chooses an issue so that I will distract him."

"Well," Claire said, "since were being refreshingly frank about men bent on seduction, perhaps someone can tell me what to do with Rhys. My mother will turn in her grave for me saying so, but were I you, Merrill, I'd be tickled pink about Nathaniel being bold enough to make advances. In two months' time, Rhys has done nothing more than hold my hand. He's so worried about my reputation and being respectful of the loss of my father that he hasn't even kissed me yet."

"Be ready for that to change tonight," I told Claire.

She narrowed her gaze. "Why is that?"

"We're serving Killdaren's spiced wine. It is rumored to

be very helpful in situations such as yours. I, at least, found it to be true.”

Andrie burst out laughing.

“Where did you hear that?” Cassie demanded. “And . . . what happened to make you think it true?” She narrowed her eyes. Darragh let out a protesting wail, then went back to nursing.

I smiled. It would be a while before Cassie realized she didn’t need to mother me anymore. “From you and Andrie, of course. Though I had a hint that something might have been amiss when father stole Aunt Lavinia’s bag of spiced wine, it wasn’t until I overheard you two talking that I realized why. Maybe someday I’ll tell you why I think it has some aphrodisiac-like qualities, but before I do, I would need to conduct a scientific study. Unfortunately, it won’t ever be possible.”

“Why not?” asked Andrie.

“Well, I’d have to have the wine and see if it made another man besides Deverell irresistible to me. I just don’t see that happening.”

“Thank God,” said Cassie. “For a moment I thought you were about to say something even more idiotic than your stowing-away plan. The truth of it is, in my opinion, the wine is just so much sweeter than any other that one consumes more than one realizes and becomes flushed and also loosens one’s sensibilities.”

“Well, that sounds like exactly what Rhys needs. I will make it a mission to see he gets an ample amount of spiced wine tonight.”

“While I make extra sure Nathaniel doesn’t drink a drop,” Merrill said. “If his constraints become any looser, he’s likely to fly apart.”

Everyone laughed, and I sent an extra prayer Merrill’s way, one for healing and one that might allow herself to

loosen some of the fearful constraints holding her captive to the past.

The next thirty minutes passed in a rush as everyone readied themselves and I was more than ready to walk down the carpeted aisle. Sean, handsome as a devil in a formal black suit with tails, and mysterious looking in his darkened spectacles, walked at my side. Pierre and Davey were overhead, and before me were my friends and family who'd gathered in a loving semicircle around Deverell. They stood in the garden beneath the warm sun with the sea distant in the horizon and the scent of salt and roses in the air. He wore his full military uniform, complete with decorated medals of honor now returned to him. He looked so formal and regal, a duke and noted officer in his bearing, so breathtakingly handsome. But I could see my rakish captain beneath the polish. It lay in the tilt of his chiseled jaw, the broadness of his shoulders, the length of his dark hair so scandalously low upon his collar, and in the burning intensity of his loving, desirous gaze.

The *Black Dragon* awaited to whisk us away on an adventure that I'm sure would start with a deserted island. But as I walked slowly toward him, moving to my future, I lost myself in the blue sea of his eyes, drowning in the deep well of love shining there. And I knew in my heart that therein was the only home I would ever want, and knowing his love was the only journey I would ever need, for I loved him completely.